Narrative Beginnings
Theories and Practices
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# Contents

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INTRODUCTION

# Narrative Beginnings

The beginning is a foundational element of any narrative, fictional or nonfictional, public or private, official or subversive. The full importance of beginnings, however, has long been neglected or misunderstood and is only recently becoming known. Currently, only a handful of studies address this surprisingly rich and elusive subject. Others, many of them represented in this volume, are now starting to give beginnings the historical, theoretical, and ideological analysis they require.

This critical and theoretical neglect is particularly surprising given the power beginnings possess for the act of reading. There is no doubt that even casual readers remember for decades salient beginning sentences, as the following memorable openings confirm: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife"; "Call me Ishmael"; "All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"; "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heur"; "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself"; "I am an invisible man"; "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins." Such a list (which could be extended considerably) attests to the conceptual and emotional power concentrated in resonant opening lines of works that move us. Or even that no longer move us: although Camus is rapidly falling out of the canon, the first words of *The Stranger* continue to reverberate: "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte."

Two key moments in the history of literature continue to resonate among narrative beginnings: one is Tristram Shandy's unfortunate conception, birth, and christening, which dooms him to be out of order for the rest of his life. This is accompanied by the nonchronological

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presentation of the rest of the story, including an array of temporally anterior episodes that threaten to undermine the possibility of establishing a fixed beginning point in the story, or *fabula*. This regressive narration is in turn paralleled by the unconventional placement of normally prefatory paratextual material throughout the text (most notoriously, the author's preface appears in the middle of the third volume). Sterne's practice would rapidly become an irresistible model for subsequent authors who played with chronology and beginnings, from Lord Byron and Alexander Pushkin to Salman Rushdie and Alasdair Gray.

The second key moment is the famous pause before the first stroke of Lily Briscoe's paintbrush in *To the Lighthouse*:

> She took her hand and raised her brush. For a moment it stayed trembling in a painful but exciting ecstasy in the air. Where to begin? that was the question; at what point to make the first mark? One line placed on the canvas committed her to innumerable risks, to frequent and irrevocable decisions. All that in idea seemed simple became in practice immediately complex; . . . Still the risk must be run; the mark made. With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke. (Woolf 157–58)

Woolf here articulates key psychological and compositional implications of beginning an artwork; intriguingly, they do not match up at all with her own inspired beginning of *To the Lighthouse* (she wrote the first twenty-two pages "straight off in less than a fortnight" [Lee 471]) but correspond better with the difficult beginning of *Mrs Dalloway*, which required several drafts.

A brief glance at the variety of beginnings that have been deployed in the history of literature will help frame the essays that follow. Examples from drama can offer a helpful vantage point to view the range of possible beginnings: a Chekhov play will begin in the most ordinary, even undramatic manner; alternatively, an audience may be plunged deeply in medias res, as in the opening lines of Webster's *The Duchess*

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*of Malfi*, where the protagonist, Bosola, walks onstage and shouts, incredulously, "Banished?!" A more or less creaky scene to provide the necessary exposition may be produced, as in the beginning of Sheridan's *The Rivals*, where one character asks the other to explain what he is doing in the town of Bath. Such artificial expositions may be parodied, as in the overly elaborate and needlessly confusing opening of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. Frame plays have introduced the main drama ever since the time of Seneca; after Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the framing characters have frequently remained onstage to watch the play their dialogue has introduced or engendered. False beginnings are also possible, as in Genet's *The Maids* or Stoppard's *The Real Thing*, where the first scene presented to the audience turns out to be a play enacted by the characters, who then resume their "real" selves. At the beginning of Lanford Wilson's *Talley's Folly*, the protagonist enters, addresses the audience, and provides expository information about the play. After a few minutes of this, he stops, goes back to the beginning, and partially repeats the material he has just narrated, presumably for the benefit of spectators who arrived a bit late to the theater. In Caryl Churchill's "Heart's Desire," the brief opening scene is reenacted onstage about a dozen times, each new version providing a partial repetition and different development of the story.

Drama has its own set of enacted paratextual devices. These include the spoken summary of Roman plays prior to their performance, the often elaborate Elizabethan induction, the Restoration and eighteenth-century prologue, the Sanskrit invocation and prologue, and the direct address to the audience at the beginning of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* or Jack Gelber's *The Connection*. And on more popular stages with potentially angry spectators, the star is routinely given a scene at the beginning so the audience knows that the actor they paid to see is indeed in the house. The printed versions of these plays contain considerably more paratextual material that is not presented onstage, most notoriously Bernard Shaw's elaborate prefaces and endless stage directions. Avant-garde and contemporary drama regularly tamper with the conditions of theatrical presentation, as Ryan Claycomb's essay in this volume demonstrates.

Similarly, a glance at typical beginning strategies during the last

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major periods of the history of the novel help to situate the studies that follow. Before the rise of modernism, most authors discursively framed the opening of the text and ensured that the first pages conveyed a sense of the beginning. The more a work aspired to a totality, the more natural and definitive the beginning would be made to appear. For a paradigmatic instance we may look at Fielding's *Tom Jones*. The first chapter is constituted by the author's address to the reader concerning the appropriate expectations of the narrative that follows. The next chapter provides salient background material concerning the earlier history of Squire Allworthy and his sister, Bridget. It is only in the third chapter that the arrival of the foundling is described. Several chapters then follow that depict the youth of Tom Jones. Every element pertinent to the origin of the story is here set forth except those key facts that will not be revealed until the conclusion of the work.

A favorite strategy of nineteenth-century realists is to begin the narrative from an entirely external perspective in which all the powers of omniscience are withheld; Turgenev's *On the Eve* (1859) begins, "In the shadow of a lofty lime, on the banks of the river Moskva, not far from Kuntsevo, on one of the hottest days in the summer of 1853, two young men were lying on the grass. One of them, who appeared to be about twenty-three years old, and was tall, swarthy, with a sharp and rather crooked nose." Often the region is described first in some detail, as if by someone who had just happened on the scene; *The Return of the Native* (1879) begins with a twelve-paragraph opening chapter devoted exclusively to a depiction of Egdon Heath; the second chapter starts, "Along the road walked an old man. He was white-headed as a mountain." Other nineteenth-century novels begin with a more direct account of the first figure depicted and thereby thrust the reader into the drama at hand: "One fine morning in the full London season, Major Arthur Pendennis came over from his lodgings, according to his custom, to breakfast at a certain club at the Pall Mall, of which he was a chief ornament." Thackeray's *Pendennis* begins with a compressed characterization of the man, his society, and the setting of the events about to unfold.

Modernist texts, by contrast, typically begin with a plunge into the middle of an action of deceptive casualness. Nothing significant seems

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to be occurring; no conflict is exposed. Marcel rolls over in his bed, Buck Mulligan jests and shaves, Mrs Dalloway decides to buy the flowers herself, Lena Grove walks down a dusty road; this tendency is exemplified by the opening of Musil's *The Man without Qualities*, as announced in the title of its first chapter, "From which, remarkably enough, nothing develops." The setting of the first page of the modernist novel corresponds to familiar diurnal or biological rhythms of morning or evening: shortly after dawn, just after waking, right around breakfast, as in *Ulysses*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Trial*, and *The Waves*, or at dusk, often just before going to sleep, as in "Heart of Darkness," *The Death of Virgil*, and *In Search of Lost Time*. Faulkner is the main exception here, preferring to begin his novels in the hot, lambent, summer afternoon in Mississippi, where nothing moves very fast. As a modernist novel continues, the careful reader soon learns the thematic, symbolic, and architectural reasons for the deceptively unremarkable opening; the first paragraphs of any modernist fiction are always dense with submerged meaning. At the same time, modernist narratives rarely pretend to begin at the beginning of a story; there is typically a "ragged edge," as Melba Cuddy-Keane points out, that stretches beyond and before the *fabula* proper. The artifice of the textual beginning is thus contrasted to the unbounded plenum of events it partially circumscribes.

Postmodern texts, by contrast, frequently foreground the first passages of the narrative, often in a stark or paradoxical manner. The first words of Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* appear in a section whose heading reads "This is Not the Beginning." We might draw many examples from Beckett—such as "Birth was the death of him" from Fizzle 4—that contest the ordinary function of the beginning, as I will discuss later in this volume. In Flann O'Brien's early proto-postmodern text, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the narrator states, "One beginning and one ending was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author" (9), and this novel has in fact four beginnings, as Brian McHale has discussed (109). Daniel Handler's *Watch Your Mouth* (2002) similarly has four beginnings, in homage to "Beethoven, whose only opera clears its throat with not one but four possible overtures" (5).

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Nabokov's *Ada* begins allusively and parodically: "'All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike,' says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel (*Anna Arkadievitch Karenina*, transfigured into English by R. G. Stonelower, Mount Tabor Ltd., 1880). That pronouncement has little if any relation to the story to be unfolded now." Alasdair Gray redeploys a number of Shandean strategies in *Lanarck*: the novel begins with book 3, which is followed, a hundred pages later, by the prologue and book 1. In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie is constantly interrogating national, individual, and novelistic beginnings, as Gaura Shankar Narayan's essay in this volume discloses, and the novel contains numerous false beginnings as well: at the beginning of the chapter 11, the narrator, Saleem Sinai, pretentiously refers to Valmiki's dictation of the *Ramayana* to the god Ganesh. He is, however, mistaken; it was in fact Vyasa who is said have dictated the *Mahabharata* to Ganesh at the beginning of that other Sanskrit epic.

Italo Calvino hardly goes beyond the beginning in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, a book mostly composed of first chapters of different novels. As the narrator states: "The romantic fascination produced in the pure state by the first sentences of the first chapter of many novels is soon lost in the continuation of the story: it is the promise of a time of reading that extends before us and can comprise all possible developments. I would like to write a book that is only an incipit, that maintains for its whole duration the potentiality of the beginning, the expectation still not focused on an object" (177).

The transformations of beginning strategies in narrative are appropriately depicted by Gertrude Stein at the start of "Composition as Explanation": "There is nothing that makes a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking" (21).

Beginnings have always been part of critical discourse, though often in a way that belied the complexities and ramifications of this deceptively rich and elusive topic. In antiquity, two statements stand out. The first is Aristotle's overly simple observation in the *Poetics* that "a beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after

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which something naturally is or comes to be" (§7.3), a claim that most authors in this volume will show to be much more problematic than Aristotle imagined. Later in the *Poetics*, Aristotle states that the drama's "complication is composed of what has happened offstage before the beginning of the action which is there described, and in part from what happens onstage" (§18.1), thereby suggesting that establishing the precise point where the narrative begins may be less simple than his earlier formulation suggests. The other famous claim from antiquity is Horace's injunction to begin the telling in the middle of the story, in medias res, rather than from the strict beginning; Homer, he notes approvingly, begins the *Iliad* with the wrath of Achilles near the end of the Trojan War, not with Leda's egg (ab ovo) from which Helen emerged. With this, the opposition between the beginning of the story (*fabula*) and the beginning of its telling (*syuzhet*) first emerges in literary criticism.

Other classical critical traditions offer additional insights. In the *Natyashastra*, Sanskrit poetician Bharata devotes several lines to the proper arrangement of the preliminary stage matter and prologues of classical Indian dramas as found in plays such as Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. This type of recessed opening entered Western drama after being incorporated into the triple beginning (dedication, prelude in the theater, prologue in heaven) of Goethe's *Faust*, as Ekbert Faas remarks (161–62). Concerning the events of the story, Bharata defines the beginning (*prarambha*) as the part of the play that creates a curiosity about the attainment of the major objective (379), in which the seed of the plot (*bija*) is created and "scattered in small measure" (381); this produces the opening (*mukha*) and provides the source of the play's many objects, events, and sentiments (384).

Up to the end of the nineteenth century, subsequent work on beginnings did not advance much beyond Aristotle's comments. In his essay "Of the Three Unities," Corneille points out that although tragedy shows only one action onstage, and that it must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, "not only are these three parts separate actions which find their conclusion in the principal one, but, moreover, each of them may contain several others with the same subordination" (219). Each part, that is, may be more variegated and autonomous than was otherwise imagined. Interestingly, John Dryden, who loved to combine

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extremely divergent elements into a single whole, reformulates this idea in his "Essay of Dramatic Poesy": "There ought to be one action, says Corneille, that is, one complete action that leaves the mind of the audience in full repose; but this cannot be brought to pass but by many imperfect actions, which conduce to it" (233).

Gustav Freytag takes up the subject in 1863 in *The Technique of the Drama*. He identifies five parts of every drama: the introduction, the rise, the climax, the fall, and the catastrophe. The introduction presents all the background information necessary for the understanding of the play: the place and time of the action, the social and personal relations of the protagonist, and the general environment of the drama. A classical prologue, detached from the drama proper, is hazardous, he asserts, since "the poet who treats it as a separate piece is compelled to give it an exposition" and divide it into segments which themselves must have "an introduction, a rise, a proportionate climax, and a conclusion" (117). Freytag also affirms that as a rule it is expedient to quickly establish a defining thematic keynote, a finished scene, and a short transition to the first moment of the rising action (121).

But it is Henry James who deserves the last word (for now) on this subject. In the preface to *Roderick Hudson* he writes: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so" (171). Here is the first articulation modern thinking about the difficulty of establishing compelling and convincing beginnings.

Finally, it must be noted that beginnings are if anything even more important in many nonfictional texts. Most institutions and every nation have an official narrative with a decisive point of origin, and where that beginning is established and what it includes will have a considerable effect on the history that follows. Edward Said is reputed to have observed that the situation of the Palestinians was harmed by their lack of a compelling story of their origins. Religion is the other great storehouse of beginning narratives; indeed, it may be a central function of religion to fabricate such stories. The exception seems to be the Inuit, who appear to be the only society that has no creation myth. This paucity is more

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than counterbalanced by Hindu conceptions, with their numerous (and often contradictory) creation myths. This cosmology is also the one that stretches furthest into the past: the period from Brahma's creation to the destruction of the world is 4,320,000,000 years; this cycle of creation and destruction is repeated 36,000 times.

The Judeo-Christian narrative of creation in Genesis notoriously juxtaposes two different and often contradictory accounts: in the first chapter, the birds and the beasts of the earth are created on different days before Adam and Eve are formed on the sixth day; in the second chapter, Adam is created first, then the fowl and beasts appear, and finally Eve is formed out of Adam's rib. In addition to this confused official version, there is another, unauthorized shadow version, which includes the episode of the creation of Lilith prior to the creation of Eve. Accounting for the origin of woman seems to have been particularly troublesome for the Bible's authors. Gnostic and Kabbalah traditions produced still other variants, such as "The Raising of Adam from the Mud by Eve." Furthermore, many of the early biblical stories have their origin in Sumerian myths that precede them by a millennium.

Different cultures will also define beginnings differently, especially when those beginnings involve alternative notions of what constitutes their subject. Thus, Native American autobiographies often begin with accounts of prior family members that far transcend the family genealogies typical of modern biography. As Hertha D. Sweet Wong notes, one Yukon Native begins the story of her life with a history of her nation, the origin myth of her people, and the histories of her mother and other relatives: "She does not even get to her own birth until page 52" (174). Similarly, Geronimo begins his autobiography with an account of the creation of the world and goes on to relate the mythic account of the origin of his people. Many of the essays that follow discuss social and ideological aspects of beginning strategies. In doing so, they disclose the cultural and political importance of official or accepted origin stories.

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