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Beginnings

What Do You Expect?

1 Beginning

In the beginning was the word. Or, according to Goethe’s Faust, the deed. Or, putting both together, the word-deed – the speech act. Someone turning to someone else and saying: “Let me tell you about how …”

... how it came about that there is something, rather than nothing – myths of creation and origin: how being came out of nothing, how it divided itself into living and non-living, into people and animals, into man and woman (one notes the order: how every segmentation seems to imply a hierarchy).

Such myths try to “make sense,” in that they divide, order, rank, but even so never get round the problems surrounding the very beginning: what was, before there was anything? How can we speak about it? What was God doing all through eternity before he created the world? Didn’t he get bored? So was he, the Idea of perfection – heresy! – incomplete, imperfect, before he created the world? Did he need us? These are questions the Church Fathers raised. Luther’s answer to the question about God’s pastimes: God went into the wood and cut himself a cane to thrash people who ask questions like that. Every beginning is a **positing**. Period.

In Mallarmé’s notes about his *Livre* we read: “Un livre ne commence ni ne finit: tout au plus fait-il semblant.”¹ That is true of narratives in general: they only **pretend** to begin with the beginning, they **fake** a beginning, necessarily. This fabricated beginning is an initial rupture, an initial differentiation

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into this and that. It’s always possible to question this initial differentiation, but not to get to the bottom of it, for every time we attempt to get to the bottom of it we just fall into an infinite regress. What does the world rest on? The back of a giant elephant, says the wise Brahmin. And what is the elephant standing on? The back of a turtle. And the turtle? On the back of another turtle. And the other turtle? The Brahmin, like Luther: “You can’t fool me. It’s turtles all the way down!”

It comes down to this: you have to start somewhere. And “you can’t begin before the beginning” (Ludwig Wittgenstein). That, however, is a pragmatic reason, one not grounded in ontology or epistemology. In his Poetics, Aristotle offers this definition:

> By “beginning” I mean that which does not have a necessary connection with a preceding event, but which can itself give rise naturally to some further fact or occurrence. An “end,” by contrast, is something which naturally occurs after a preceding event, whether by necessity or as a general rule, but need not be followed by anything else. The “middle” involves causal connections with both what precedes and what ensues.2

Aristotle’s first sentence pulls the carpet from under every narrative attempt to invest what is with an aura of necessity: for every beginning is the exact opposite of necessary – it is completely contingent. And for that very reason it’s so incredibly important and fraught with consequences. It could have begun completely differently, but in fact it started like this … Much depends on the beginning – in narrative, everything depends on it.

2 Sense and Meaning

… now I’ll tell you what happened to me, or to someone – departure and return home; in between, war, adventures, peril – which only one man, full of cunning, escaped; how someone who has been away for years and gone through all that must change: no one knows him any more.

While Penelope just is, waiting, the man needs three things to prove his identity:

- the childhood scar, which his wet-nurse recognizes (i.e., sheer physical continuity);
- the unique ability to string the bow of Odysseus (i.e., a capacity that he – and only he – has);
- lastly: being able to tell the secret of the marriage bed (i.e., what he alone knows).

He is the man he was. And at the same time, of course, he is not at all the man he was. It’s his history that has made him who he is, the man people know him for. He is Odysseus – the one who was away, who wanted to come home (yeah, really?) and was again and again hindered from doing so. He is who he is “now,” after all that: only this makes him worthy of report at all – that he “has” a history. And the fact that he has a history suggests in turn that what happened to him makes sense – or at least could have made sense.

The Odyssey is, of course, no Bildungsroman. It raises the question of the meaning of life not on the level of the fulfillment of the individual (“I am the person I became …”), but in a much more general and fundamental way – against the background of the death of everyone else. What is special about this life? Odysseus is the only survivor – and thus, although plenty will still be told about him (but within this narrative he is allowed to tell his own story), he is the first ancestor of every other lone survivor who, by some compulsion, so it seems, must tell their stories. They alone are still alive, they alone can relate how it was – and their stories are perforce about how it came to be that they alone are still alive, about how that can be explained, what rhyme or reason that might have.

Robinson Crusoe, shipwrecked on an island on which he has spent 28 years, comes to conceive his fate as God’s punishment for his rebellious disobedience to his father, who had firmly advised him to remain in the country and make a decent living. At the end, Robinson reaps with full awareness the reward of his disobedience – his immense wealth. Every narrative works out its own sense and meaning, and the best allow us to recognize as well that something is being worked out – and so, mercifully, leave plenty left over for the reader.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner,” not the hero of a novel, admittedly, but an epic hero nonetheless, is an anachronistic figure even in his own time. He believes himself guilty, by a thoughtless transgression, of the death of all his mates: not in the causal sense, but, far more uncannily, in a supernatural sense. He alone survives, for the purpose (so he believes) of being able to preach this moral to others – of having to do so – and he hypnotizes his audience, who actually had other plans, through the power of his own obsession. He now lives only to tell (the inverse of Scheherazade, who tells in order to survive) – his very existence a warning.

3 A message in a bottle to that future reviewer who might think it necessary to make the shrewd remark that the Odyssey is not a novel at all, and therefore should not be brought up as an example here: granted. Cf. by the way, Gérard Genette, Narrative Discourse Revisited, trans. Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca, NY, 1988, first published in French as Nouveau discours du récit (1983). In this sequel to the earlier Narrative Discourse, Genette self-critically qualifies some of his earlier assessments, and specifically regarding the Odyssey writes (94): “It cannot […] be said that the Odyssey exhibits ‘the origins of epic narrating’; I see it, rather, and I have said so elsewhere, as the beginning of a transition, both formal and thematic, from the epic to the novel. The mists of time are a little more remote.”
Finally, there’s “Ishmael,” the narrator of *Moby-Dick* – he’s another in this line. “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee” – this quotation from the Book of Job is placed as the motto to his epilogue. Since the catastrophe, he has obsessively collected everything written about the whale – and he lays it all out in front of us. And the more we read about the whale, the stronger our impression becomes that the narrative is about everything other than whales. In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence wrote these clear-sighted words about the great white sperm whale:

> Of course he is a symbol.
> Of what?
> I doubt if even Melville knew exactly. That’s the best of it.4

But the point here is not whether Melville, as the author, knew what he wanted to tell us with this symbol. The point is that even here – precisely here – something particular is expressed, “without thinking or referring to a universal. Whoever grasps this particular in a vital way at the same time receives the universal, without becoming aware of the fact, or only becoming aware of it later.”5 That is Goethe’s definition of the “nature of poesy” – but we’ll return later to discuss symbolism in more detail. In the present context only this seems important: as a matter of course in the novel and in any narrative, something is said concretely and something else is implied at the same time.

At the beginning of his existentialist novel *La Peste* (1947), Albert Camus quotes as follows from, of all writers, that progenitor of middle-class realism, Daniel Defoe: “It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent something that really exists by that which exists not.” In *both* cases mentioned by Defoe, narrative works with *replacement*. In other words: in *both* instances the subject of narrative is “actually” not what it directly says, but always what it *points to*, what it promises (in this sense, narrative is also non-literal speech). And what does every narrative make? Sense, hopefully. What does the reader expect to find? Meaning(s).

When a narrative tells how somebody acted and was acted upon, it first of all assumes their identity. At the same time, however, it assumes that something fundamental occurs with respect to them, or has changed them – that’s what makes the story worth relating at all. Every narrative of this kind thus unfolds differences – thematizes the unity of continuity and discontinuity (and that’s only possible in *time*) – and claims *through its mere*

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existence that it makes sense. Otherwise, why tell it? That is what the reader, fairly enough, expects: sense and meaning.

Yet the idea that something makes sense is only conceivable against the backdrop that, theoretically, it could have been meaningless. To narrate is to claim that something makes sense – and it’s this sense that the narration is to bring out. Narration is the endowment of sense against the possibility of the absurd. This is of course also – and especially – the case when a narration addresses this possibility, where this boundary, the failure of the attempt, is taken into account. That’s true even if the attempt to make sense proves senseless and fails, since that can itself only be perceived against a horizon of meaningfulness.

Narration is the self-pledged obligation of one who is (still) alive towards the others. Even if the narrative is not that of an “only survivor.” The listener or reader fairly enough expects sense and meaning from narratives – not because there is any meaning in the first place, but because narratives are there to produce it.

### 3 Rules of the Game

“Have you heard the one about …?” Or: “Once upon a time …” As members of a common culture we’re able to differentiate different types of narrative, even before the first “real” sentence is completed, and to decode them accordingly. We anticipate what’s coming, because without needing to reflect too much we’ve already identified the type of narrative, and bring to it a prior knowledge of the rules that apply. We know the rules of the game, both general and particular.

In a fairy tale, for instance, we are not surprised to encounter giants and elves, wizards and witches, animals who speak, dragons and unicorns – they belong to the customary inventory for texts of this kind; we almost include them in our conception of what a fairy tale is. And because we know that, we have no problem in believing in the existence of such beings within a narrative of this type, even if we naturally know that “there are no such things.”

That is a phenomenon of framing, and the rules that apply within a frame, but not outside it. The chessboard has only 64 squares, and the pieces may only be moved there, and only there do their moves make sense. That isn’t actually a problem, because everyone spontaneously (though of course this spontaneity is – does it have to be said? – socioculturally learnt) practices what the English Romantic writer Coleridge (in only a slightly different context) called “the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment.”

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*the duration of our reading* we put aside our disbelief, and we do so with complete willingness. For we know that a fundamental skepticism, while fully appropriate with regard to extra-textual reality, i.e., in the case of a *referential* text, would be absolutely out of place and counterproductive here, in the present case of a non-referential, fictional text. We’d spoil the game and the fun for ourselves. Indeed, to insist on the supposed referentiality of a statement and its evident falsity (“but there’s no such thing as a unicorn!”) would only show that this know-all had completely misunderstood and missed the point. They’d be committing a category mistake, falling foul of a very fundamental misreading.

To be sure, that happens only very rarely with fairy tales; more often, though, with realistic novels, and probably more often than one imagines with texts that serve our fantasies or play on our fears or needs – romances, horror stories, pornographic or erotic literature. An equally serious mistake is made by readers who mistake what they read for true (or just probable) and by those who criticize these texts for their lack of realism, considering that the very *raison d’être* of these texts consists precisely in their distance from reality.

The conventions of the different types of narrative are socioculturally prescribed (albeit always liable to change). This means that, in practice, logical problems about propositions hardly ever arise in the form in which philosophy has tended to construct them – has *had* to construct them, since they’re almost never to be met with in the wild: “Sherlock Holmes lived at 221b Baker Street.” Is this statement true or false? Well, it all depends. Within the fictional world that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle drew up, this statement is accurate – that is the address specified in the tales about the master detective. So: true. Outside this fictional world the statement is false or, to put it more precisely, meaningless, since Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character who cannot possibly have lived in Baker Street, which really exists in the West End of London.7 So: false. The truth-content of the proposition thus varies, and depends completely on the frame of reference – relating to which set of facts is it true or not?

Not that such distinctions are unimportant. Quite the contrary: if someone tells us “their side of the story,” the truth-criteria are completely different from those that would operate if they were telling us a fantastic tale. And we’d be justifiably put out if they told us a tall story when we’d expected the truth. I’m just saying that, as a rule, we get on with these distinctions smoothly and unproblematically in daily life. (Just as, by the way, the vast majority of adults can get on with the “framing” of a dramatic scene on the

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7 And that’s not due to the fact that at the time the Sherlock Holmes stories are set, there was no such house number in Baker Street (it was introduced later to keep curious tourists happy). Even if this house number had existed at that time, Sherlock Holmes wouldn’t have lived there.
stage: what happens is “real” within the frame of the play, although obviously if you think of the frame at the same time, it’s only “acted.”) This kind of double perspective doesn’t cause us any problems at all: it’s part of our basic cultural equipment.

However, if the conventions of the various types of narrative text are socially and culturally prescribed, then from the word go there is always the possibility of playing with them. A text can play around with fundamental distinctions, cover them up, teasingly leave readers or listeners in the dark, or lead them astray. In an illusion-based art, the art of illusion can’t be something questionable. Many realistic novels pretend to be relations of fact rather than fiction, and that is true not just for the first modern novels (which will be considered in detail later), but continues into the present. In 1981 Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s *Marbot: Eine Biographie* came out. The book’s blurb begins like this:

Sir Andrew Marbot, the hero of this biography, is as good as woven into the cultural history of the early nineteenth century. He had contact with Goethe, Schopenhauer, Platen, Byron, Baron von Rumohr, Leopardi and others, kept track of their writings and liberally expressed his approval, reservations and criticism. His principal field of research, however, was painting, which he undertook to analyze from the perspective of the artist’s spiritual condition. Thus he became the first exponent of a psychoanalytically based aesthetic in the fine arts, making essential contributions to this field. He was the first to recognize that an overflow of creativity is a deviation from “normal” psychological mechanisms, that genius can never “conform.” To be sure, he was eminently adapted – not to say predestined – to recognize such phenomena, for his own private life was anomalous in a truly unique respect.

It is thus suggested – and is maintained throughout the whole book – that there really was such a person as Sir Andrew Marbot, as a historical figure (which isn’t true), and so that we are reading a work of scholarship rather than a “mere invention.” Hildesheimer began *Marbot* after completing his great biography of Mozart: working on the latter had made it clear to him how much imagination was needed to make a life story out of the “facts” of a life. *Marbot*, then, was the logical consequence of this experience: a completely imaginary biography, the novel as complete mimicry.

Wolfgang Hildesheimer wasn’t the first to have had this idea (which is no disparagement of his work). In 1958 the fictional biography *Jusep Torres Campalans*, by Max Aub, was published in Mexico:

Max Aub’s voluminous monograph about “a forgotten companion of Picasso” was, as a book, designed fully in the serious style of the world-famous art monographs of the Swiss publisher Skira. It looked similar enough to be confused with one of them; and for the book launch a gallery in Mexico City
displayed the originals of some of the pictures of Jusep Torres Campalan reproduced in the book (as was also done later in New York).8

There were plenty of connivers at this fake: Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes, the painter Siqueiros, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, and the life partner of the anarchist Victor Serge. That Picasso himself was deliciously amused by the farce, though, is (probably) apocryphal.

When Marbot was published, I witnessed (but in this context, can I expect to be believed without evidence?) a customer in a bookshop asking, incredulous and unsure of herself, whether it was true that – as she had heard – Marbot wasn’t a “real” biography, but an “invented” one, in other words, a novel. The question seemed to me sensible: the lady wanted to know how to read the book, whether “Marbot” has or had a referent in extra-linguistic, historical reality or not. For if not, the topic of the book would have been (as indeed it was) a completely different one, albeit not so easy to pin down. She wanted to know – her entitlement as a customer – what to expect, but also what was expected from her as a reader. That is a question about how to “file” a text, not about its “substance,” its “essence,” its “character,” or whatever. The joke is that the text itself doesn’t disclose this. It’s disclosed by “settings” that are given beforehand. We produce the text by approaching it in a certain way.

This is familiar from other literary genres. Peter Handke’s “The line-up of FC Nürnberg on 27 January 1968” in The Innerworld of the Outerworld of the Innerworld (1969) should be read differently in the context of his book than, say, in the context of the sports pages (another phenomenon of framing); except that in Handke’s case the context itself discloses the displacement, whereas in Marbot the whole artefact – i.e., the book as a physical object – participated in the illusion.

When authors do not want to create a witty illusion à la Hildesheimer, but rather to make sure that their text is appropriately or “correctly” received, they too can, of course, have the content spelt out on the cover (even if the same isn’t true the other way round, that only when the word “novel” is on the cover must the book be a novel). When Bruce Chatwin’s The Songlines (1987) appeared in German under the title Traumzeit, the genre specification “novel” was prominently displayed on the dust jacket. This was done to comply with the author’s wish. The original English edition did not have this feature, and Chatwin found the consequent confusion and uncertainty unpleasant:

Within Jonathan Cape [his English publisher], there had been confusion over how to market the book. Bruce was adamant: he did not wish to be regarded

as a travel-writer. If *The Songlines* was marketed as a travel book, it would be slotted in the travel-section beside “the Cyclades on $5 a day.” On the other hand, “in literature it would be beside Chaucer.”

This reasoning might sound coquettish, but Chatwin certainly took the differentiation seriously. When *The Songlines* was nominated for the Thomas Cook Travel Award, the renowned prize for travel literature, the author gave the following statement: “The journey it [the book] describes is an invented journey, it is not a travel book in the generally accepted sense. To avoid any possible confusion, I must ask to withdraw it from the shortlist.”

Correctly categorizing the book as *fiction* was more important to him than the almost certain distinction of book of the year in the wrong category. *The Songlines* should be regarded and read *like this, as a novel*. The specification of the genre functions like a musical clef, regulating both the reader’s expectations and the process of decoding. That’s after all what codes are there for.

Other texts appeal to the privileged status that follows from the basic human right of the freedom of the arts: we’re only fiction, they say (“The characters and action in this book are invented. Any similarity to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.”), and at the same time they count on not being read as fiction in certain parts: a *roman à clef*. The *roman à clef* puts the person it portrays in an almost helpless no-win situation. If they don’t speak up, the novel’s presentations and claims remain uncontradicted out in the world; if they protest, or if the trustees of their estate do so – as the actor and producer Gustav Gründgens did about Klaus Mann’s novel *Mephisto* (1935), the publication of which in West Germany was successfully hindered for years – they paradoxically “out” themselves, by saying: “That’s not me, but it could be. Although this and that isn’t true, it’s obviously me who’s meant – and I protest, because this or that isn’t true or disparages and insults me.”

Thus the duplicity of the *roman à clef* crosses the Marbot-line from the other side: it deliberately provokes scandal, using a (time-honored) camouflage of categories (that the *roman à clef* has a great deal more to offer is shown for instance by Martin Walser’s *Tod eines Kritikers* [*Death of a Critic*], 2002). The *roman à clef* lures with promises that, at the same time, ascribe a stooped position to its readers – peering, as they must, through the keyhole. It performs a transgression of the rules, hoping on the quiet that the victim will keep to the rules – and so lose; or not keep to the rules – and so lose anyway.

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10 Shakespeare, *Chatwin*, 487.
4 Links and Connections

We can speak of “narration” when at least two events are linked together by language. One single reported event (e.g., “It was raining”) does not yet constitute a narrative; nor do two unconnected events (“It was raining, Krakatowa erupted in 1883”). Narrative is the linguistic and mental linking of events.

That’s the case not just with everyday accounts and novels, comic strips and films, but also in the writing of history. One isolated fact per se has no meaning at all. It attains meaning only through narrative embedding, through the narrative connection with other facts,11 as Benedetto Croce remarked: “Where there is no narrative, there is no history.”12

However, since it is possible for a narrative to link events and facts in substantially different ways, we’re no longer talking about one (hi)story, but a whole collection of (hi)stories. That doesn’t have to mean that we doubt or even deny the “reality” of the facts themselves (although some would make this radical claim). As a disconnected fact, the event can remain uncontroversial and constant. Its meaning, however, varies according to the narrative in which it is embedded. But just a moment: what is a fact without meaning? Meaningless?

The next question might be whether merely putting two events in a temporal relationship (“first this, then that” or “and then and then and then”) counts as making a connection, or whether a stronger emphasis of the “actual” relation is required, in terms of sequential logic (“first this, and then, therefore, that”). In his informal – and so too easily underestimated – little book Aspects of the Novel, E. M. Forster is convinced that he can give a clear account of the difference between story and plot based on these two types of connection. (Chapter 3 in the present volume is dedicated to this fundamental differentiation in narrative theory, which also offers us small but significant, fine-tuned distinctions between fabula and sjuzet, histoire and discours, history and narrative.) Forster:

Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. “The king died and then the queen died” is a story. “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved,

12 Quoted in White, The Content of the Form, 28.
but the sense of causality overshadows it. [...] Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: “And then?” If it is in a plot we ask: “Why?”13

The more you think about it, the clearer it becomes that Forster’s distinction between merely temporal connection on the one hand, and causal connection on the other can’t really be sustained so easily. (And not just because, at least since David Hume, we have known that “causality” is anyway an idea based only on the association of representations. The idea of causality arises when we observe one event following upon another with sufficient frequency: it’s basically an imaginative reinforcement of purely temporal connections, with no compelling claim to be considered as a law.)

In the example chosen by Forster, even a minimal alteration could produce a decisive change: “The king died, and just a few days later the queen died too.” Although “just a few days later” is a purely temporal modification, attentive readers may not need any further explanation to understand it as a causal motivation as well – as discreetly implying that she died of grief at the death of her husband.

That means, however, that the causal connections between the events need not be explicitly stated at all: it’s enough for them to be implicit and plausible, simply possible. That is extremely important, since it suggests that a large part of the essential narrative work of connecting can be carried out by the reader, who will clearly respond even to the smallest signal. (The lifeblood of a whole genre of short prose, the joke, consists in using such signals to send readers or listeners off in the wrong direction, in order to demonstrate at the end that the information they’d been given could have been construed differently: as a rule, the playful frustration of our expectations triggers a more or less powerful release of tension through laughter.)

So strong, in fact, is the impulse of the reader or listener to create coherence through connections that it was far from easy for me just now to think of an example of two events described in successive sentences that, apart from this chance juxtaposition, don’t have any further linguistic connection with each other. “It was raining. The *Titanic* sank with thousands on board.” Doesn’t that suppose a colossal amount of precipitation? “It was raining. FC Bayern lost the game.” So it was all to do with the turf? The wrong studs? As we are conditioned to do, we seek possible links, patterns – meaning.

This means that gifted readers can read even mere lists or chronicles of events as narratives: they themselves make the essential connections, provided the list gives them sufficient occasion. Julian Barnes’ novel *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984) is about the widowed country doctor Geoffrey Braithwaite. After the death of his unfaithful wife, he develops an obsessive interest in Gustave Flaubert, the author of *Madame Bovary* (1857), that novel about the unfaithful wife of a

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country doctor, which ends in her suicide. Barnes’ book, which presents Geoffrey Braithwaite as the writer of the text, contains a whole collection of curious chapters. One, for instance, is called “Flaubert’s Bestiary” (an annotated catalogue of all the animals of any significance in Flaubert’s life and work); another takes the form of an exam paper; another is modeled on Flaubert’s Dictionnaire des idées reçues (published posthumously in 1881). The second chapter of Flaubert’s Parrot is entitled “Chronologies” and offers three chronological tables of Flaubert’s life. Here is the beginning of the first one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>Birth of Gustave Flaubert, second son of Achille-Cléophas Flaubert, head surgeon at the Hôtel-Dieu, Rouen, and of Anne-Justine-Caroline Flaubert, née Fleuriot. The family belongs to the successful professional middle class, and owns several properties in the vicinity of Rouen. A stable, enlightened, encouraging and normally ambitious background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825</td>
<td>Entry into service with the Flaubert family of Julie, Gustave’s nurse, who remains with them until the writer’s death fifty-five years later. Few servant problems will trouble his life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1830</td>
<td>Meets Ernest Chevalier, his first close friend. A succession of intense, loyal and fertile friendships will sustain Flaubert throughout his life: of particular note are those with Alfred le Poittevin, Maxime du Camp, Louis Bouilhet and George Sand. Gustave inspires friendship easily, and fosters it with a teasing affectionate manner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And here is the beginning of the second chronology:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1817</td>
<td>Death of Caroline Flaubert (aged twenty months), the second child of Achille-Cléophas Flaubert and Anne-Justine-Caroline Flaubert.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819</td>
<td>Death of Emile-Cléophas Flaubert (aged eight months), their third child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>Birth of Gustave Flaubert, their fifth child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td>Death of Jules Alfred Flaubert (aged three years and five months), their fourth child. His brother Gustave, born entre deux morts, is delicate and not expected to live long. Dr. Flaubert buys a family plot at the Cimetière Monumental and has a small grave dug in preparation for Gustave. Surprisingly, he survives. He proves a slow child, content to sit for hours with his finger in his mouth and an “almost stupid” expression on his face. For Sartre, he is “the family idiot.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There’s no need to quote both tables right up until Flaubert’s death in 1880; perhaps just the two entries for the year of his death:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>Full of honour, widely loved, and still working hard to the end, Gustave Flaubert dies at Croisset.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Impoverished, lonely and exhausted, Gustave Flaubert dies. Zola, in his obituary notice, comments that he was unknown to four-fifths of Rouen, and detested by the other fifth. He leaves *Bouvard et Pécuchet* unfinished. Some say the labour of the novel killed him; Turgenev told him before he started that it would be better as a short story. After the funeral a group of mourners, including the poets François Coppée and Théodore de Banville, have dinner in Rouen to honour the departed writer. They discover, on sitting down to table, that they are thirteen. The superstitious Banville insists that another guest be found, and Gautier’s son-in-law Émile Bergerat is sent to scour the streets. After several rebuffs he returns with a private on leave. The soldier has never heard of Flaubert, but is longing to meet Coppée.

It’s easy to recognize that the first case tells a story of unequalled success; the second, a depressing story of permanent failure. The thing is: all the biographical facts are, as far as one can see, true. So on that level we can’t accuse the compiler of error or deception.

Rather, the decisive point is the *selection* from all the available facts, which follows a *preexistent* type of narrative (success story or failure). This pattern is so clearly present in the arrangement which the reader soon – perhaps after roughly the third entry? – recognizes as the mode of connection and uses to understand or to produce the tale of the chronology. This happens without, to repeat, the list itself explicitly spelling out these connections. Hayden White writes about the way form thus supports meaning in historiography:

> When the reader recognizes the story being told in a historical narrative as a specific kind of story – for example, as an epic, romance, tragedy, comedy, or farce – he can be said to have comprehended the meaning produced by the discourse. This comprehension is nothing other than the recognition of the form of the narrative.

> The production of meaning in this case can be regarded as a performance, because any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories. Since no given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning.\(^{14}\)

However, it is through such mediated invitations to meaning that the historian (and not only the historian) constantly works: *we ask for something like that to be there* – at the slightest opportunity we help to provide connections and to interpret patterns that we ourselves have collaborated to create.

\(^{14}\) White, *The Content of the Form*, 43–44.
By the way, the most interesting chronology in *Flaubert’s Parrot* is the third one. It consists without exception of quotations from Flaubert, arranged by year. The selection discloses no obvious pattern, no narration, at least not at first glance. Perhaps that’s why this chronology, after the transparent arrangements of chronological tables 1 and 2, strikes us as the most attractive. It stimulates the reader more strongly than the first two; and precisely because of its shapelessness, it has the appearance of being closer to reality – assuming we don’t believe that life is something that has an order from the beginning, and that sense and meaning are something “given.”

That brings us to a paradox. Narrative should produce meaning (that’s what we’d like), but not in such a way as to give us the impression of strain and coercion. We clearly prefer to receive it carefully prepared and laid out as a buffet, from which we can freely choose. To change the metaphors: the statue which, according to Michelangelo, is always concealed in the block of marble, needs – and this takes effort – to be freed from everything it is encumbered with: only then will it become visible. That is of course – in the case of sculpture we appreciate this more easily – a fabrication. Or true only insofar as the master “sees” what can be made out of a material, which may be the material of one’s own life.

5 I

The hermeneutist and theoretical founder of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, Wilhelm Dilthey, wrote that in autobiography “a life-course stands as an external phenomenon from which understanding seeks to discover what produced it within a particular environment.” He considered it the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life, for “the person who understands it is the same as the one who created it. This results in a particular intimacy of understanding.”

What exactly does “understanding” mean here?

When we look back through memory, we see the nexus of the past parts of a life-course in terms of the category of meaning. When we live in the present, the positive or negative value of the realities that fill it are experienced through feeling. And when we face the future, the category of purpose arises through a projective attitude. We interpret life as the actualization of some overriding

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purpose to which all particular purposes are subordinated, that is, as the realization of a highest good.\textsuperscript{16}

We can thus speak of a sense of the whole only if each part can be integrated purposefully through a \textit{network of meaning}:

The sense of life lies in giving shape to things and in development; on its basis the meaning of the moments of life is determined in a distinctive way; it is both the experienced, intrinsic, value of the moment and its productive force.

Each life has its own sense. It consists in a meaning-context in which every remembered present possesses an intrinsic value, and yet, through the nexus of memory, it is also related to the sense of the whole.\textsuperscript{17}

Therefore, according to Dilthey, meaning is not just the basic category of human understanding, but of the understanding of all objects of \textit{historical} (as opposed to scientific) knowledge as such:

The category of purpose, or of the good, which considers life as it is directed toward the future, presupposes that of value. But this category too cannot bring out the connectedness of the life-nexus, for the relations of purpose to each other are only those of possibility, choice, and subordination. Only the category of meaning overcomes the mere juxtaposition or subordination of the parts of life to each other. As history is memory and as the category of meaning belongs to memory, this is the most distinctive category of historical thought.\textsuperscript{18}

Now, Lichtenberg once caustically remarked that some people have begun to lie as soon as they say “I.” But that only underlines how right Dilthey was: autobiography is the attempt to demonstrate that we are justified in saying “I” – that we have our own history. The “I” should be able to say at the end: I have grasped how it was that I became who I am now. I have understood myself and have therefore arrived at my end, my goal, my purpose. To some extent every autobiography follows the pattern of Hegel’s \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}: when the world-spirit (\textit{Weltgeist}) has apprehended itself in terms of concepts, it has come to itself, and dialectic and development have a (putative) end.

That also explains why the category of purpose, which in actual life belongs to the future, is displaced, as it were, onto the dimension of the past: in narrating the past, the autobiographer is no longer working towards a future, but begins at the sources and follows the course of the

\textsuperscript{16} Dilthey, “Drafts,” 222–223.
\textsuperscript{17} Dilthey, “Drafts,” 221.
\textsuperscript{18} Dilthey, “Drafts,” 223.
brook, then of the river, until the present moment – the rest is twilight, oceanic feelings, the great beyond.

The end and purpose of narration must, however, be developed consistently from its beginning, otherwise it won’t look coherent. It must be possible to make the end plausible as the fulfillment of a purpose.

In my beginning is my end.

(T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” first line)

In my end is my beginning.

(T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” last line)

But such a plausibility does not arise on its own, and every narrative of a life labors under a suspicion: it may have submitted the past to “the violence of a retrospective interpretation,”¹⁹ it may have used it for a purpose, namely to fabricate a telos for its life. Every autobiography makes a final plea for the coherence of the life it describes. Every fictional first-person narration does the same thing (or thematizes this attempt, or fails), and also finds itself faced with the task of creating meaning by making connections. It must be possible for everything to follow from the beginning – at least retrospectively it must make sense, including – and especially – when one hadn’t grasped it at the time.

It is essential for the production of sense and the generation of meaning that there must actually be no coincidences, seen from the end of the day. Of course, it is generally recognized that there is such a thing as coincidence, but in narrative coincidences are retrospectively transformed into a chain of causes and effects, giving rise to the illusion of fate and predestination. “It had to happen, because . . .”; or “If I hadn’t missed the bus, we’d never have run into each other.” The basic model for this kind of narrative of meaningfulness and fated inevitability (born from coincidences) with regard to one’s own story is the love story (“Do you remember . . .?”). Lovers, reassuring each other, tell this story back and forth, again and again – converting contingency into necessity (“only because I’d forgotten my mobile phone and had to go back again . . .”) in order to convince themselves that their being together now was inevitable. This love had to be – nobody else could lie here beside me.

The basis of such narratives, which follow causal threads backwards in order to present the present as the logically necessary consequence of everything that went before, is of course the principle of causality (no effect without a cause, no cause without an effect), in its exaggerated form: determinism. Characteristic of determinism, however, is that its effects can only be

¹⁹ Jürgen Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, Frankfurt am Main, 1979 [1968], 192.
identified retrospectively, after something has occurred, but never in advance – otherwise everyone would be able to predict the future. Tristram Shandy emphasizes repeatedly how convenient he finds it that none of his readers could ever guess, let alone know, what’s going to happen next. The continuation of the story has to be unpredictable: that’s what makes it interesting and exciting. Looking forwards, narrative faces contingency. In this very quality of unpredictability, narratives – even unrealistic ones – imitate life. As soon as a possibility has crystallized in the present, however, it can be passed off as the consequence of the one previous event or encounter (or of a causal chain) that has proved decisive, the prime factor among the abundance of prior conditions. Realistic novels tend to hide this retrospective choice by relating an abundance of details and circumstances whose relevance to the narrative is not always equally evident, but which in their very accumulation can produce a sense of proximity to reality. In other words, while selection intimates necessary connection, a “surplus” of circumstances gives the impression of reality. The relation of both these constituent factors to each other varies.

Gottfried Keller, for example, begins Green Henry (written 1846–1859, published 1854/55, considerably revised much later [1879/80]) with a chapter entitled “In Praise of my Origin,” which begins like this (trans. A. M. Holt, 1960):

> My father belonged to the peasantry of an ancient Alemannic village which derived its name from the man who, when the land was divided up, stuck his spear in the ground and built a house there. When, in the passing of the centuries, the race that had given its name to the village died out, a feudal lord adopted the name as his title and built a castle. Nobody knows now where it stood, nor when the last scion of that race died. But the village stands there still, populous and more alive than ever.

We can’t do much with that – yet. We can’t recognize any organization of the elements of the circumstantial situation that might produce meaning, except for a certain accumulation of incidents of disappearance and forgetting. In contrast, the following beginning (Josef von Eichendorff, From the Life of a Good-for-Nothing, 1826; trans. J. G. Nichols, 2002) is larded with parallels and oppositions, which splendidly generate meanings:

> My father’s mill-wheel was once more rumbling and splashing away, the snow was dripping industriously from the roof, and the sparrows were twittering and playing about. And I was sitting on the doorstep and rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, feeling very comfortable in the warm sunshine. Then my father, who had been bustling about in the mill since daybreak, came out of doors with his nightcap on askew and said to me, “You good for nothing! There you are sunning yourself again and stretching your weary limbs and leaving me to
do all the work by myself. I can’t go on feeding you any longer. Spring is coming. So out into the wide world with you and earn your own living for once.”

The *rumbling* wheel, the *playing* birds – the sitting boy; the *industriously* dripping *snow* – the warm *sunshine*; daybreak – *spring*; house – *world*; the *busy father* – the *idle son*; *sleep* in the eyes – the father’s displaced *nightcap*; further: the *threshold* – that’s perhaps even a bit too closely organized.

The beginning of *Robinson Crusoe* (1790) – from which so much can be drawn that it will serve as an example many times over – achieves a happy medium:

I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, tho’ not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull. He got a good estate by merchandise, and leaving off his trade lived afterward at York, form whence he had married my mother, whose relations were named Robinson, a very good family in that country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutznaer; but by the usual corruption of words in England, we are now called, nay, we call our selves and write our name, Crusoe, and so my companions always called me.

I had two elder brothers, one of which was lieutenant collonel to an English regiment of foot in Flanders, formerly commanded by the famous Coll. Lockhart, and was killed at the battle near Dunkirk against the Spaniards. What became of my second brother I never knew any more than my father or mother did know what was become of me.

The “I” – the first word of this paradigmatically modern novel – is here situated firmly in the historical and geographical reality of seventeenth-century England. Everything is historical, no longer consigned romance-like to a never-never land. Even his name has a history (Kreutznaer > Crusoe). Both brothers – the first deceased, the second lost without trace – are merely named, never to be mentioned again, for the sake of completeness. Further, the death of one brother in a historical battle anchors the fictional story, which presents itself as a factual account and not as a novel, in the real world of the reader.

But as even the first paragraph makes clear, every narration that sets great store on causality and necessary connection has a tendency to infinite regression: the cause of the effect is effect of another cause, and that came about like this, etc., etc. ... That is carried out to excess in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67): for the formalist Viktor Shklovsky the archetypal novel of world literature,20 because it so intelligently and playfully lays

bare the *devices* of the novel, with its conspicuous foregrounding. Tristram, who sets out to narrate his life, is famously only born in the third of nine books – really not just because of the distractedness to which he is fated, but because he wants to present his story nicely and fully and with unbroken causality, a task that constantly forces him to go further back in the narrative, in order to explain how it happened in turn that …

In this world of coincidences and accidents there will be, retrospectively considered and when the work of narrative is done, no coincidences left, but only chains of causes and effects, and this means one can’t be too careful. What you do or don’t do has incalculable consequences. Really incalculable? In that case human beings, though equipped with reason, would be released from responsibility – released, at the same time, into a world of chaos. Here is Tristram’s first sentence in his struggle for order:

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost:——Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,—I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me.—

*It could* all have turned out differently. Since it turned out as it has, it can now be demonstrated why it *had* to turn out thus. The narrator suspends himself between these two poles, so that by the end he emerges as the hero, if not of his life (in which he was mostly passive), then at least of his narrative: as one who simultaneously witnessed and produced himself in narrative.

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.

So begins *David Copperfield* (1849/50) by Charles Dickens, and since “life” can also mean “biography,” the distinction introduced just now by *Tristram Shandy* is cleverly blurred by ambiguity. Whether the first-person narrator finally emerges as the hero of his own life story must in fact be shown by the narrative he has presented, his text. That the person who is writing, however, is by no means still identical with the person whose life he is describing, would be clear even if Dickens’ first chapter were not entitled (as it is) “Chapter I: I am born.”
Writing one’s own story, whether as autobiography or fiction, always involves an awareness of previous models and some way of relating to them (think of Augustine’s *Confessions* [ca. 400 AD] – Rousseau’s *Confessions* [written 1765–70, published 1782–89] – Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* [begun in 1798, published 1850] – through to William Boyd’s *The New Confessions* [1987]). Or, equally likely, there can occur a rejection of a model: this should be *my own* story that doesn’t follow any pattern, that cannot possibly be derivative if it is to be both authentic and worth telling:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it. (J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951)

The next step would be the rejection of an identity that others ascribe to the narrator, but with which he doesn’t want to be “identified”: “I am not Stiller.” (Max Frisch, *Stiller*, 1954) – so begin the memoirs of one Jim Larking White. He is sitting in custody because he is suspected of being the sculptor Stiller, who has vanished. “White” ultimately finds himself forced to accept the “Stiller” identity, although he believes himself – with justification, in his view – to be someone else. The novel offers a (specious) answer, in that in the brief second part, the “public prosecutor’s epilogue,” it introduces a second viewpoint, that of an observer of the first observer Stiller/White.

“Call me Ishmael.” So begins Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851). And this is not by way of throwing his arm around the reader’s shoulders and getting on first-name terms, but rather hides what is most deeply his – his name – behind a cipher. The cipher can be read, with the aid of an encyclopedia of Judaeo-Christian culture, or a learned footnote explaining the significant connection.21

The name functions as a mask; the mask reveals a type: the loner. As the only survivor, he will tell how it came about that he alone is still alive. He will see the world only *sub specie cetacearum* – and since he links *everything* with whales, he makes both the whales and his own history into an allegory of everything: an allegory in the form of a life story in the form of a whale-encyclopedia – it’s all a question of how the connections are made.

That is why conjunctions are so important:

Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital; my keeper is watching me, he never lets me out of his sight; there’s a peephole in the door, and my keeper’s eye is the

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21 Ishmael is Abraham’s oldest son. His mother Hagar, an Egyptian, had to flee into the desert, where an angel revealed to her that she was pregnant – she was to call the child Ishmael. He will be “a wild man” whose “hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him” (Genesis 16.12).
shade of brown that can never see through a blue-eyed type like me. (Günther Grass, *The Tin Drum*, 1959; trans. Ralph Mannheim, 1999; emphasis added)

The reader might be irritated: the narrator’s presentation of himself as possibly unreliable (“Granted”) might still be welcomed as a sign of his sincerity. But the italicized *and* brings us up short: leaving aside the fact that the connection between eye-color and the ability to see through someone whose eyes are a different color seems to need some explanation, you’d surely expect the conjunction *but* – wouldn’t you? And so we read on, hoping to be enlightened. That just goes to prove that the universal maxim of an experienced novelist – write the first sentence in such a way that the reader can’t resist reading the second – can even be fulfilled like that. But that’s another story.

6 First Sentences: Enticements

“It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents …” – undeterred, the ambitious young author Snoopy (from *Peanuts*), sitting on the roof of his kennel, hammers out on the keys of his typewriter this novel-opening from Edward Bulwer-Lytton (*Paul Clifford*, 1830). Snoopy is either an unoriginal epigone (or even plagiarist), or a cunning, craftily postmodern disciple of Borges’s “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*.” Bulwer-Lytton was much acclaimed in his time. Nowadays this novel-opening serves as a motto on the homepage of the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, which identifies the most pathetic novelists. How could it have come to this? Was it unavoidable? Is a cliché a cliché at birth? Or does it become a cliché in time?

Successful novel-openings don’t necessarily shy away from the lurid; these for instance:

It might be most dramatically effective to begin the tale at the moment when Arnold Baffin rang me up and said, “Bradley, could you come round here please, I think that I have just killed my wife.” (Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince*, 1973)

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22 Granted: this is, unfortunately, not a real novel-opening, but to some extent a fake one: two forewords are inserted previously, which form part of the fiction. Unfortunately, in this sense one of the greatest openings of all doesn’t count as an opening either:


She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. (Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, 1955)

These captivating sentences (best read aloud) are prefaced by a foreword from one Dr. John Ray. This is not the only respect in which *The Black Prince* imitates *Lolita.*
It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me. (Anthony Burgess, *Earthly Powers*, 1980)

But they don’t have to be like this. The reader can be drawn in (not to say captivated) just as well by an apparently paradoxical contrast:

For forty-two years, Lewis and Benjamin Jones slept side by side, in their parents’ bed, at their farm which was known as “The Vision.” (Bruce Chatwin, *On the Black Hill*, 1982)

Or it can be done with a value judgment, to which the reader can (or must) react in this or that way. William Golding recalls the first sentence of his first novel, which he wrote at the age of twelve (and unfortunately didn’t publish): “I was born in the Duchy of Cornwall on the eleventh of October, 1792, of rich but honest parents.”23 Golding had, he said, tried all through his life to keep up this level. “Rich but honest” – what a searing insight that gives into the precocious boy’s whole worldview and open-eyed critique of society … that’s the stuff future Nobel prizewinners are made of.

The implicating of the reader in an *evaluative* perspective is perhaps rarely more economically achieved than in Jane Austen’s ironic opening of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) –

> It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man of good fortune must be in want of a wife.

– where it is obvious that this can only be the view of families who have nubile daughters and know precisely what a rich young bachelor really needs, regardless of whether he is himself conscious of these necessities or not.

Compare that winking beginning, which works through silent complicity – and successfully! – with the apodictic opening of Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1875/76):

> All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

I always thought this sentence would make no less sense in reverse (an opinion I found perfectly confirmed by the beginning of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, 1969), despite my admiration for the author. I could still save Tolstoy for myself by reflecting that in fiction, *every* sentence is to be read not as a referential statement, but as a semi-proposition

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with no more truth claim than is required to contribute to the characterization of the narrator. The continuation, though –

All was confusion in the Oblonskys’ house. The wife had found out that the husband was having an affair with their former French governess, and had announced to the husband that she could not live in the same house with him. This situation had continued for three days now, and was painfully felt by the couple themselves, as well as by all the members of the family and household. (Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, 2003)

– informs us that the narrator of *Anna Karenina* might have meant something different: unhappiness is much easier to tell – indeed, is more interesting than happiness. And that is easy to understand.

But whether a narrative opens with a portrayal of a harmonious status quo or with the disturbance of this situation, the beginning must be a “disturbance,” an interruption (“Tom!”) of normalcy. The more radically this intrudes on everyday life, the more ominous the effect:

Someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning. (Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, 1925; trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, 1937)

Here, conjecture about the reason for the outrage is given precedence over the onset of the horror, which right until the end never loses its mysteriousness, since the minute tracing of the “what” – the trial itself – can never be a substitute for the missing answer to the question “why?”

If the conjecture about the meaning of an incident, an action, or the whole plot is shifted onto the protagonist, then the latter feels constantly compelled to explain and interpret, and only an observer of his observations can determine possible misinterpretations:

The construction worker Josef Bloch, who had previously been a famous goalkeeper, was told when he went to work in the morning that his services were no longer required. At least, Bloch interpreted the fact that when he appeared at the door of the site hut where the workers were hanging around, only the foreman glanced up from his snack, as being such a message, and left the construction site. (Peter Handke, *The Goalkeeper’s Fear at the Penalty Kick*, 1970)

An interpretation like this is also always a speculation about others’ expectations. As goalkeeper I know that the penalty-taker usually shoots into the left-hand corner – so I’ll throw myself that way. But since the penalty-taker also knows that I know that he always shoots left, he’ll now choose the right-hand corner. But since I know … If we orient ourselves according to others’ expectations, we fall into insoluble problems.
Thus the presence of a third, who merely observes events and interpretations (as events), seems to guarantee a higher level of truth to reality:

The journey of Mercier and Camier is one I can tell, if I will, for I was with them all the time. (Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, 1970/74)

When it subsequently comes to light, however, that most of the time the two protagonists Mercier and Camier were alone, we recognize that we have fallen for a metafictional ploy on the narrator’s part: he was there the whole time, not because he shared a world and a life with them – no, but because they are *fictional* figures. The narrator can pledge himself for the truth of the narrative because it’s entirely his: a fictional narrative – nothing more. He wasn’t stretching the truth in his first sentence: we are the ones who have once again confused life and literature.

Beckett’s debased tramps, with their dreams, projects, and endless preparations, recall something of Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Péchoumet* (1881). The real ancestor, though, is Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (1796). This, too, is a largely dialogic novel, which right at the beginning grumpily overturns the reader’s expectation of a realistic narrative situation:

How did they meet? By chance like everybody else. What were their names? What’s that got to do with you? Where were they coming from? From the nearest place. Where were they going to? Does anyone ever really know where they are going to? What were they saying? The master wasn’t saying anything and Jacques was saying that his Captain used to say that everything which happens to us here below, both good and bad, is written up above. (Denis Diderot, *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master*, 1796; trans. Michael Henry, 1986)

We see the usual suspects: how did it happen? By chance – and so we already have a fundamental opposition to the worldview of Jacques, the fatalist and determinist, according to which *everything* is preordained (Diderot greatly admired Laurence Sterne for his *Tristram Shandy*, and knew exactly why). But this worldview, according to which the modern novel *must* function, is the machine that transforms coincidence into necessity, chaos into meaning. Further: the names? What’s it to you? Yes, indeed, what’s in a name? And sure, you always come from wherever you just were and want to go on – but *ultimately* where? – that’s a metaphysical question. Whatever (hi)story lies there is entirely up to the conversation of this unequal pair. The self-enlightenment of pre-revolutionary society has to occur in conversation, in discourse, since after the Enlightenment no truth can any longer be imagined as lying outside discourse; even if, admittedly, distinctions will be introduced into discursively produced truth:
There was a depression over the Atlantic. It was travelling eastwards, towards an area of high pressure over Russia, and still showed no tendency to move northwards around it. The isotherms and isotheres were fulfilling their functions. The atmospheric temperature was in proper relation to the average annual temperature, the temperature of the coldest as well as of the hottest month, and the a-periodic monthly variation in temperature. The rising and setting of the sun and of the moon, the phases of the moon, Venus and Saturn’s rings, and many other important phenomena, were in accordance with the forecasts in the astronomical yearbooks. The vapour in the air was at its highest tension, and the moisture in the air was at its lowest. In short, to use an expression that describes the facts pretty satisfactorily, even though it is somewhat old-fashioned: it was a fine August day in the year 1913. (Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 1930–1952; trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, 1980)

Not a bad beginning for a novel which, however ironically, stands up for humanity, which has become marginal, against the superior strength of what humankind produced in the first place but has now become dominant (something “beautiful” is by definition not measurable), and at last tries to find salvation in a “different state.”

 Appropriation of previous beginnings always seems to imply diminution (compare Dickens–Salinger, above). The sun on Musil’s pleasant August day continues to shine in Beckett’s *Murphy* (1938) on what is proverbially (i.e., since long before the start of the modern novel) beneath it: nothing new. “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.” Yet nevertheless – there’s no thwarting narrative tradition – even that happens necessarily, without alternative.

When Helmut Heißenbüttel intertextually weaves in a quotation from Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* –

Eduard – let that be the name we give to a radio journalist in the best years of his life – Eduard had spent the loveliest hours of a July afternoon in the fast train from Munich to Hamburg (arrival time at the main station 21.19) and surveyed the scenery between Lüneburg and Hamburg with pleasure. (Helmut Heißenbüttel, *Projekt Nr. 1. D’Alemberts Ende*, 1970)

Eduard – let that be the name we give to a wealthy baron in the best years of his life – Eduard had spent the loveliest hours of an April afternoon in his nursery grafting young trees with shoots newly arrived for him. (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, 1809; trans. David Constantine, 1999) –

– it is nevertheless hard to determine whether the irony cuts the earlier, classical text or the object of the recent narrative. One fears – both (the time is stretched out [hours instead of hour] and specified with two sets of numbers; the tempo is faster, but only technically – the man himself is no longer responsible for his movement, but rather is moved).
Every beginning, however, presupposes a world about which we can ask—regardless of “willing suspension of disbelief”—whether it can still be taken for granted in this way. Attacking the Surrealist André Breton, the Christian-conservative Paul Valéry once stated that he personally would refuse to begin a novel with the sentence “La marquise sortit à cinq heures.” [The Marquise went out at five o’clock.]—that kind of thing just wasn’t done any more. And when Claude Mauriac did exactly that, in order to refute Valéry and show him that you could indeed still do that kind of thing, he did not, of course, succeed in his refutation at all. For what Valéry meant was not that it can’t be done, but that it no longer should be done by a writer who wanted to be taken seriously—as someone in the philosophical and artistic vanguard of the time, and on top of their material. None of the elements in the sentence “La marquise sortit à cinq heures” can any longer be uttered, because all its decisive parameters have come into question. Something like this can no longer be narrated.

Valéry’s admonition is well worth reflecting on (and the fact that others just continue to write as if nothing had happened makes no difference to his point). The modern novel is, in common with other literary genres, a historical phenomenon through and through—with a beginning, a middle, and indeed an end, too. It is unique among the major literary genres only in this respect: that it arose after the invention of printing and contemporaneously with the advent of the book trade. It’s a profitable genre. It is the youngest and most successful literary genre in human history. Part of its success certainly stems from the fact that it narrates. It took over this role from epic poetry, which has since persisted only very sporadically—a successful displacement. The novel’s take-over of the role or function of narrative was so eminently successful because to read a narration in a (somehow) realistic novel you don’t need any particular cultural or literary background knowledge—you just read it.

But could it be that the function of narrative has meanwhile migrated not just to another genre, but even to a completely different medium? B. S. Johnson, the great experimenter among English novelists of the 1960s, argued in this way when he wrote:

It is a fact of crucial significance in the history of the novel this century that James Joyce opened the first cinema in Dublin in 1909. Joyce saw very early on that film must usurp some of the prerogatives which until then had belonged almost exclusively to the novelist. Film could tell a story more directly, in less time and with more concrete detail than a novel; certain aspects of character could be more easily delineated and kept constantly before the audience (for example, physical characteristics like a limp, a scar, particular ugliness or

beauty); no novelist’s description of a battle squadron at sea in a gale could really hope to compete with that in a well-shot film; and why should anyone who simply wanted to be told a story spend all his spare time for a week or weeks reading a book when he could experience the same thing in a version in some ways superior at his local cinema in only one evening?

It was not the first time that storytelling had passed from one medium to another. Originally it had been the chief concern of poetry, and long narrative poems were bestsellers right up to the works of Walter Scott and Byron. The latter supplanted the former in the favours of the public, and Scott adroitly turned from narrative poems to narrative novels and continued to be a best-seller. You will agree it would be perversely anachronistic to write a long narrative poem today? People still do, of course; but such works are rarely published, and, if they are, the writer is thought of as a literary flat-earther.

[…]

That corresponds to the view of those who believe that twentieth-century painting entered the realm of abstraction because its natural territory, mimetic depiction, was so efficiently usurped by the new invention of photography: when such a thing happens, you get out of the core business and do something else. The question is whether mimetic depiction ever was the core business of painting. Or whether the portrayal of observable things ever was the core business of the novel. If not, there must be other reasons for the development of the modernist and postmodern novel apart from the technological one proposed by Johnson: reasons that could also explain the incontestable (and enormously successful) continued existence of types of novel which, according to Valéry and B. S. Johnson, should have long since historically and aesthetically worn themselves out. How about if the function of the novel was instead to do something like this: to produce exemplary meaning by transforming contingency into (narratively charged) necessity? Or: literally to make sense – to show forms of sense-making and meaning-production in process? Or: to say one thing and mean another, while letting the reader participate in this translation – inviting us, in fact, to undertake it ourselves using what is given, i.e., the data.

The function of the modern novel can only be ascertained historically. So we must go back to the beginning – to which all we have just discussed applies, for the history of the novel itself is nothing other than a narrative.

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