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The Assessment of the First Sentence in English Narrative Literature

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P.E.

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I. The Literary Assessment of the First Sentence[1]

The *incipit* in criticism

The study of literary beginning in narrative art seems to have sprung from the larger background of French *explication de texte*, the close stylistic analysis of works of literary art.[2] It would also seem that French experimental writers of the first half of the 20th century gave particular interest to these *incipits*:

> The Surrealists were fond of invoking the *phrase de réveil*, that galvanizing opening and revelatory sentence. Revelatory, because the *incipit* meant the initial incantation as well as the first signal of the initiation.[3]

The term *incipit* was obviously championed by Louis Aragon which he used "avec insistance . . . pour designer ce déclic initial, cet 'introït' de l'oevre littéraire."[4]

By extension from this outstart a number of studies in beginnings in works of English literature came to be made. These also widened the critical terminology of the subject, making e.g. a difference between grand openings and plain openings and speaking of the "poetics of first lines".[5] Textual linguistics tell us that the beginning of a work of art holds many consequential signals that create expectations that the subsequent text responds to in the way of *sequitur*. The first sentence may be said to crystallise such information or to build on to them.[6] In its capacity of the "first words in a work of literature", it "bear[s] a uniquely demanding responsibility . . ." together with its immediate context. The "opening lines [thus] perform a representational function."[7] The first words of a work of art partake of the exceptional nature of the "Romananfang" and of the "Mikrokosmos" that it constitutes as a prefiguration of the "Makrokosmos" which is the whole work.[8] Criticism has also attributed to the first sentence "eine kaum

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1 The theoretical assessment of this subject appeared in a separate study in similar form in *Anglistik* 22·2·2011 (eds. Rüdiger Ahrens and Heinz Antor), Heidelberg, 107-118.

2 This is Ian Watt's quite correct assumption in "The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*: An Explication," *Essays in Criticism* 3 (1960), 250.

3 Victor Brombert, "Opening Signals in Narrative," *New Literary History* 11 (1979/80), 489.

4 Raymond Jean, "Ouvertures, Phrases-Seuils," *Critique* 288, (1971), 422.

5 Steven G. Kellman, "Grand Openings and Plain: The Poetics of First Lines," *Sub-Stance* 17 (1977), 139. See also my monograph *Theorie und Praxis des Romaneingangs* (Heidelberg, 1990), Form und Funktion des ersten Satzes, 60-62. Robie Macauley and George Lanning, *Technique in Fiction* (New York, 1964), 30, distinguish between "high beginning" and "low beginning". See also Erlebach, 50.

6 Erlebach, 60.

7 Kellman, 139. As Victor Hugo said, they are "inexorable revealers" (Brombert, 501).

8 Norbert Miller (ed.), *Romananfänge. Versuch zu einer Poetik des Romans* (Berlin, 1965), speaks of "jene[r] exzeptionelle[n] Stellung" of the *incipit* (8).

zu ermessende Bedeutung".[9] Criticism has also drawn attention to the "pouvoir moteur, générateur de la première phrase".[10] The opinion has also been voiced that in this first beginning "the textual landscape" starts to be unfolded or that creative writing sets in "à partir d'une phrase, d'une image".[11] Raymond Roussel has obviously believed "plus que personne au pouvoir moteur, générateur de la première phrase."[12] It is thus not amazing that men of letters like Paul Valéry and Henry Breton were convinced that a poetics of the *incipit* means at the same time a poetics of the novel.[13] To some extent this verdict applies also to the poetics of the first sentence.

Criticism and literary practice have both stressed the intimate relation between the beginning and the ending of a work of art. Samuel Beckett was noted to have said "The end is in the beginning . . ."[14] T.S. Eliot begins the second of the *Four Quartets* with this sentence: "In my beginning is my end." This relationship uses the rhetorical figure of *cyclus* in a particular manner. Frank Kermode defines fiction primarily as "end-determined", in which "the end is in harmony with the beginning" with the beginning catering for man's "forward memory".[15] In its most radical form, James Joyce subscribes to this relationship of beginning and ending in *Finnegans Wake* in which the ending has its syntactic continuation in the beginning, the supposed, but incomplete first sentence. The meaning of the word *incipit* is thus taken to an extreme form since the beginning "is as much an opening as a completion of the last sentence in the book."[16]

The more recent concept of modernity on the way to postmodernism aims at subverting both temporal order and referentiality and does so of course also in the *incipit* and its signals.[17] In comparison with the role of the traditional beginning in both novel and first sentence such modernist openings appear weak and arbitrary.[18] They may be

9 Gerhard Schmidt-Henkel, "Anfang und Wiederkehr," *Romananfänge*, ed. Norbert Miller, 93.

10 Jean, 423.

11 Brombert, 489, referring to Louis Aragon. Before Brombert quotes Aragon as saying "On pense à partir de ce qu'on écrit," which he understands as "referring to a supposedly dynamic point of origin." (ibid.)

12 Jean, 423.

13 Norbert Miller, "Die Rolle des Erzählers," *Romananfänge* (ed. Norbert Miller), 40.

14 Brombert, 490, who used this phrase as the motto of his essay. He understands Beckett as saying that "the last words come first" (ibid.).

15 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York, 1967) and Brombert, 490.

16 Kellman, 147.

17 Brombert, 497.

18 A.D. Nuttal, *Openings. Narrative Beginnings from the Epic to the Novel* (Oxford, 1992), 207-208.

called deceptive beginnings,[19] because they contain several items subscribing to the phenomenon of *non sequitur*. The offer of alternative beginnings in the novel that some writers make is probably inspired by the conviction that literary form, "like life, is seen as a process, and [that] it is arbitrary where we decide to join the flow."[20] However, such unusual opening 'strategies' seem to have had an ephemeral life and never rose to the reputation that their counterpart, the offer of different endings as in John Fowles', *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, came to acquire and retain for a certain period of time.

The emergence of 'le roman nouveau', new French and American theory and its gradual reception into English literary thought[21] obviously led to two important studies in *incipits* on the basis of analysis in style and meaning: Ian Watt's study of the beginning of Henry James's *The Ambassadors* in "*The First Paragraph of The Ambassadors*" (1960) and Frank Kermode's analogous investigation into Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1974) in "Novels: Recognition and Deception".[22] Both investigations vindicate the *explication de texte* in a more extentended form of literary analysis and kindled new interest in the study of literary beginnings.

The function of the first sentence

The first sentence of a work of art has been called "an initial incantation" or an "initiation".[23] It serves "as a bridge to a supposed reality . . . [and] at the same time to create an illusion of realism."[24] It is also the place in which the narrator has to captivate the reader's attention by overcoming "den ersten und stärksten Widerstand des außenstehenden Lesers," thus, "ihn teilnehmend in die Welt der Fiktion hineinzuziehen."[25] This commitment of the reader's attention proceeds often from hints at amazing or unusual phenomena that produce a startling effect and demand further information.[26] Ford Madox Ford begins his impressionistic novel *The Good Soldier* in such a manner:

19 Kellman, referring to Alain Robbe-Grillet, describes such *incipits* as "false starts" (147).

20 Kellman, ibid.

21 E.g. in Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau Roman* (London, 1972).

22 *Critical Inquiry* 1, No. 1 (Sept. 1974), 106-111.

23 Brombert, 489.

24 Brombert, 498. The first sentence has also been called a "threshold phrase" (493f.), an image that suggests crossing a borderline as does the threshold when one enters a house. See also Jean's title "Ouvertures. Phrases-Seuils."

25 Miller, 9.

26 Kellman compares this situation with making the reader swallow a "bait" (143). He hints at beginnings such as "A funny thing happened to me on the way to . . ." or "You're not going to believe this but . . ." (144).

"This is the saddest story I have ever heard."[27] William Godwin begins his novel *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* with this sentence: "My life has for several years been a theatre of calamity."

Apart from its semantic denotation the first sentence often carries a number of connotations. These connotations are implied in the denotation or are part of it. In the communicative process that the first sentence commands, the connotations are as important as the denotations since they commit imagination and intuitive responses beyond the mere information of the facts. The signals implied or suggested in the information beyond the mere formal expression or the primary literal meaning are important in a literary context. Their forms and means attach themselves to the kinds of sentences selected for these communications, the figures of speech, the rhetorical devices, the configuration, the mode of narration, the commitment of the narrator and various insinuations connected with them.

The first sentence frequently provides a statement holding a declarative utterance in many potential syntactic forms. Such statements may draw attention to implied or suggested meanings as part of the formal, syntactic or literal meaning expressed in the statement. Indeed in many cases such forms of expression are not positively uttered nor objectifiably entailed. Such implications are very often the vehicles of continuation (e.g. by means of sequence signals or logical contradictions). However, implications are wider and more manifold in their psychological appeal. That is why implicature, the comparatively recent discipline of implication analysis,[28] proves a useful tool in understanding the full scope of linguistic utterances. The *incipit* in narrative art is the quite natural locus in which targeted language of the kind, at its very inception, proves its rich capacity.

The aesthetic value of *sequitur* and *non sequitur* structures in the first sentence depends on the historical context in which the work in question comes to be written. Older texts of narrative art usually take the reader gradually to the matter in hand by providing the coordinates of time, place and personal circumstances, as rhetoric recommends. Critics have called this procedure the funnel technique which mostly overlaps with the beginning *ab ovo*. Modernism has preferred abrupt beginnings with many things left as yet open and has then provided a gradual revelation of all the circumstances. This is in principle the *in medias res* procedure which was considered particularly inventive by classical and Renaissance epics (in particular in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*). The aim of most narrative beginnings in the classical English novel of the 18th century was the reader's gradual accommodation and acculturation. This was best achieved by the uncontested authority of the narrator. However, starting from modernism, the narrator is seen to identify so much with the central figure, to the ex-

27 See Kermode's analysis of this beginning, "Novels: Recognition and Deception," 107ff. The title of Ford's novel in its serialised form of 1914 was *The Saddest Story*.

28 See also Randolph Quirk et al., *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Harlow, 1999), 806.