

THAT STRATEGIC OUTSET*

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یکی از نکات پر اهمیتی که در سالهای اخیر در کار داستان‌نویسی مورد توجه منتقدانی نظیر *Frank ، Edward W.Said ، Ian watt ، A.D.Nuttal* و *Kermode* دیگران قرار گرفته است شیوه و شگرد داستان‌سرایان در ارائه مدخل داستان می‌باشد؛ اغراق نیست اگر بگوئیم که یکی از دشوارترین قسمتهای کار یک داستان‌نویس گشودن داستان و تصمیماتی است که او به تناسب ساختار و موضوع داستان اتخاذ می‌کند. در مقاله حاضر کوشش شده است تا تحلیلی از اهمیت مبادی داستانها بدست داده و برخی از شیوه‌های متنوعی را که داستان‌سرایان به‌نگام نوشتن این قسمت بکار می‌گیرند بازگو نماید.

*What we call the beginning is often the end,
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.*

T.S.Eliot: Gerontion

For an author who sets himself the task of writing a novel, an infallibly arduous part is the initial paragraphs, wherein

he normally endeavors to appear, from several viewpoints, at his pink of perfection. He knows that the outset is, for an intelligent reader, very significant and he rightly believes that the success or failure of his undertaking depends largely upon how he designs this "shop-window" of the novel and how he structures the technical elements of it. Of course, to make the opening of a novel irresistibly alluring, the writer should be truly an artist and the outcome of his efforts, a work of art, indeed.

It is to be expected, therefore, that making a good start would not be a matter of a few minutes; it takes hours or even days during which time the author repeatedly writes, edits, discards, and starts anew. "How very little does the amateur", complains Robert Louis Stevenson as he opens *The Wrong Box*,

Dwelling at home at ease, comprehend the labors and perils of the author,... the vast scaffolding that was first built up and then knocked down....

Even those very prolific novelists who do not have the time nor care to edit what they write, become fastidious when they set to work at their "beginnings".

This fastidiousness of the author at the start of his work finds justification in the strategic nature of the opening in which, besides intriguing the reader, he has to consider a

number of technicalities that are pivotal in the structure of the novel.

First he sets the tone of the novel and devises the atmosphere wherein the characters are to move and the events of the plot to take place. The tone of the novel might be serious, light, playful, intimate, ironic, gloomy, etc., but whatever it is to be it has to be established as early in the novel as possible. In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville gets it done precisely in the first three words of the opening: "Call me Ishmael" , he begins abruptly and infuses the phrase with the implications that this is definitely not a soothing tale of peace and quiet, but one "full of sound and fury" and one of strife and struggle (as we later learn) between the crew of a whaling boat and a monstrous leviathan. All this is gathered from a doubt evoked, by that peculiar introduction, regarding the identity of the speaker who appears to have adopted the name merely to identify himself with "Ishmael", the son of the Biblical Abraham. Now, according to Genesis (16:12), Ishmael was, before his birth, prophesied by an angel to be "a man like the wild ass, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him". A euphemistically playful description of the speaker's mood reinforces the suspicion that a tale of violence and tumult is at hand:

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth;

whenever it is a damp drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet, and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

The ironic tone of Jane Austen in the initial statement of *Pride and Prejudice* is notorious enough, but her attitude to the major character of *Northanger Abbey* in the opening of that novel has scarcely been examined:

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine.... [Her mother] had three sons before Catherine was born; and, instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as anybody might expect, she still lived on...she [Catherine] had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without color, dark lank hair, and strong features...her abilities were quite as extraordinary. She never could learn or understand anything before she was taught, and sometimes not even then....

The propriety of Austen's facetious and sarcastic tone in the beginning of this novel which is a comedy of manners and a

travesty of the then fashionable gothic novels can only be a mark of ingenuity. Nothing could be more consonant with a tale that not only does it ridicule the genre, but also holds in derision such contemporary and popular gothic writers as Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe and Monk Lewis.

Such descriptions, incidentally, may be endearing like those of the Brooke sisters in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Gabriel Oak in Thomas Hardy's *For from the Madding Crowd*, or they may be sardonic and censorious as that of Sir Walter Elliott in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. More often, however, they are detached and objective as the ingenious depiction of Jim, a water-clerk, at the outset of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*:

He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from under stare which made you think of a charging bull.... To the captain [he was] faithful like a friend and attentive like a son, with the patience of Job, the unselfish devotion of a woman, and the jollity of a boon companion.

These attitudes of the authors are ordinarily impressed upon the reader's conscienciousness and (depending on what mode of narration the author assumes when he opens the novel) form a value system on which more often than not his judgments

of all the characters will be based. The attitude of the author toward a certain character provides the reader with a "reliable" norm against which the extent of the other characters' virtues and merits, or their wickedness, faults and failings are measured.

In view of this subtle interaction between the author and the reader it becomes highly important that the novelist establish, as early as he can, the vantage point from which he presents the actions of the story. Sometimes he poses as an all-knowing or omniscient speaker who is not restricted to time, place, or character and feels free to move and comment subjectively on anything he wishes. At times he becomes an intrusive narrator and gains access to the thoughts, inner feelings and temperamental intricacies of the characters. This is the mode employed by many great novelists. One good instance is Willa Cather's narrator in *The Professor's House*:

The moving was over and done. Professor St. peter was alone in the dismantled house where he had lived ever since his marriage, where he had worked out his career and brought up his two daughters. it was almost as ugly as it is possible for a house to be....As he walked slowly about the empty, echoing rooms on that bright September morning, the professor regarded thoughtfully the needless inconveniences he had put up with for so long....

Here the speaker's very subjective view on the ugliness of the house and his intrusion into the mind of the protagonist as well as his thorough report of the professor's past life, his marriage, his family and his career, are all consistent with the viewpoint that the author has assumed.

Sometimes the narrator is not as all-seeing as that of *The professor's House*. Instead he has a restricted access to the material of the tale and, for that reason, he is unable to report all the action, of the plot. This limited (otherwise called first-person) point of view may be given by one, two, or even three of the characters that the author has invented. Mr. Lockwood who opens *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, is, as a narrator soon dismissed, so as Nelly Dean, that has been a witness to the greater part of the actions, may take over. An author who holds a first - person viewpoint and establishes a more intimate communication with the reader, telling him, for instance, how he goes about his art of writing or how he solves the problems he encounters in his enterprise etc., is called a self-conscious narrator. Of this type the best-known is the narrator of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* whose running commentary constitutes the first full-length critique of the novel in English. This is how he sets out with a commercial image:

An author ought to consider himself, not as a gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary treat, but rather as one who keeps a public ordinary, at which all persons are welcome for their money.

Graham Greene starts *The End of the Affair* in his own authorial voice:

A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead. I say "one chooses" with the inaccurate pride of a professional writer who — when he has been seriously noted at all he has been praised for his technical ability....

So much confidence does Laurence Sterne lay in his reader that he amusingly starts his autobiographical *Tristram Shandy* from the moment of his conception:

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 consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing... 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...

Self conscious narrator places the author in an ideal

position to see to another technicality with which he is preoccupied at the beginning of his story, namely the theme of the novel. This is, of course, hardly done as crudely and straightforwardly as does Wilkie Collins in the initial statements of *The Woman in White*:

This is story of what a woman's patience can endure, and what a man's resolution can achieve. If the machinery of the law could be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry, with moderate assistance only from the lubricating influences of oil of gold, the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share of the public attention in a Court of Justice.

In this vein, some authors go to the point of epitomizing the whole novel right in the opening paragraph. "This book is," writes Edmund Gosse at the start of *Father and Son*,

The record of a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences and almost two epochs. It ended, as was inevitable, in disruption. Of the two human beings here described, one was born to fly backward, the other could not help being carried forward....

Few authors are as direct and explicit in their projection of the plots as Gosse is. James Fenimore Cooper wraps it up in a

quote, from a well-known work, on top of every chapter of his novels and Mark Twain does the same by devising his own chapter headings in *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*:

Tell the truth or trump — but get the trick -

— *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar*

Adam was but human — this explains it all. He did not want the apple for the apple's sake, he wanted it only because it was forbidden. The mistake was in not forbidding the serpent, then he would have eaten the serpent.

— *pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar*

Such technicalities of the novel-form are not the only elements that make the opening of the narrative fiction very significant. A careful examination of the "beginnings" would demonstrate diverse professional tendencies of the authors. A considerable number of them, for instance, start off with a description of either a character (already discussed) or, of the locale of the actions of the tale. "As this my story," writes Charles Kingsley in *Yeast*,

Will probably run counter to more than one fashion of the day, literary and other, it is prudent to bow to those fashions wherever I honestly can; and therefore to begin with a scrap of description.

Physical settings, irrespective of their nature, — rural, urban or otherwise — often foreshadow the ambience of the whole novel. Sometimes they are cheerful and idyllic such as *A Modern Instance* by William Dean Howells or *The Country of the Pointed Firs* by Sara Orne Jewett; and sometimes they are desolate and dismal like Egdon Heath described by Thomas Hardy in *The Return of the Native*, or the city of London in *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens.

Some novelists zoom upon a situation, a movement or a certain feature of a character's lineaments and work on it like a miniaturist on a facial expression or like an artisan upon a midget timepiece. Daphne Du Maurier goes to a length describing the grin of a character in *Mary Ann* and Robert Penn Warren expends the whole initial paragraph of *Night Rider* delineating a jolt in a railway car.

A closer examination of the novels of Warren would disclose that this miniaturism, so to say, is a stylistic trait in him and is, indeed, evident in all his writings. In *The Cave* he opens with a fascinating portrayal of a pair of worn-out boots:

They were number X-362 in the Monkey-Ward Catalogue, genuine cowhide, prime leather, expertly tanned, made to our specifications, on our special list, ten inches high, brass eyelets, top strap with brass

buckle, worn and admired by sportsmen everywhere, size 9½ B — which is not a big foot or a little one, for a man, etc.

The conscientiousness and deliberation that an author exercises at the start of his novel would inevitably characterize his stylistic peculiarities and mannerism. Sinclair Lewis's technique of playful and epithetical repetition in ***Arrowsmith*** and in ***Elmer Gantry*** are clearly traces of his individuality:

.... her father lay shrinking with fever on the floor of the wagon-box, and about him played her brothers and sisters, dirty brats, tattered brats, hilarious brats.

or

Elmer Gantry was drunk. He was eloquently drunk, lovirgly and pugnaciously drunk...

It is important to note that many other stylistic features and idiosyncracies of the authors may begin to appear in the onenings of their novels. It would, however, require a closer exploration and a more careful study to fathom the diversity of those features. For instance, Joseph Conrad's use of the jargon of sea-faring in the beginning of most of his novels is a distinctive mark of his writing tendencies; or Thomas Hardy's profusion of nature imagery, even though his country settigs may call for them, displays an aspect of his style. Obviously, the use of sensory and motor images to reinforce and ornament one's

writings is an author's stock-in-trade, but, surely, to make oneself remarkable by an abundance of sense impressions, of which *Under the Greenwood Tree* offers a good illustration, can only be the hallmark of the author's mannerism:

To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself, the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality.

Technically speaking, to shun such sensory images, and, indeed, any form of figurative language, is one of the tenets of Realism, yet the plain and lucid openings of some Realistic novels are, stylistically or thematically, made so engaging that the browser cannot help being urged to read on. The lyrical start of *The Lady of the Aroostook* by Howells, for instance, anticipates a novel that defies any presupposition of tedium which is often thought to be the cause of the decline of Realism; or the unexpected innuendos casually thrown into the plain and unsophisticated outset of Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, suggest a Blakean type of social criticism and thereby arouse the curiosity of the reader:

... he lived in a great town in the North country, where there were plenty of chimneys to sweep, and plenty of money for Tom to earn and his master to spend. He could not read nor write, and did not care to do either; and he never washed himself, for there was no water up the court where he lived.

It is worth noting that contrarily some openings are uninviting rather than alluring. There are authors who, although their works indisputably belong among the classics of the language, do not give enough time and thought to what they are doing when they start their tales. *A Rage to Live* and *The Instrument* are two admittedly good novels by John O'Hara, yet the initial paragraphs of them draw forth an echo of that well-known remark of Lady Macbeth:

*No more o'that, my lord, no more o'that:
You mar all with this starting.*

A clumsy start would, for most people, predict a mediocre novel at the most and would repel the prospective reader, hence the scruples of the author and the great amount of trouble he goes to in order to think up a well-designed "beginning" for the novel he has set himself to write.

It is generally acknowledged now that new criticism cannot afford to ignore the critical value of the openings of the novels. Their technical diversity, their multidimensional structure, their thematic variety, their multifarious prose-styles, their importance as records of the authors' professional maturation, etc., make them worth the attention of the critic. That is why we notice, nowadays, an increasing interest in the extensive treatment of the subject in some such works as ***Beginnings: Intention and Method*** (1975) by Edward W.Said and ***Openings: Narrative Beginning from the Epic to the Novel*** (1992) by A.D. Nuttal and various articles by Ian Watt, Frank Kermode, etc... .

پانوشته‌ها :

* - From Dr.Honarvar's hitherto unpublished *Cyclopedia of the Openings of the Great English Novels.*

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