

TERRY EAGLETON

How to

READ LITERATURE



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TERRY EAGLETON**

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In memory of
Adrian and Angela Cunningham

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Preface

Like clog dancing, the art of analysing works of literature is almost dead on its feet. A whole tradition of what Nietzsche called 'slow reading' is in danger of sinking without trace. By paying close attention to literary form and technique, this book tries to play a modest part in riding to its rescue. It is mainly intended as a guide for beginners, but I hope it will also prove useful to those already engaged in literary studies, or those who simply enjoy reading poems, plays and novels in their spare time. I try to shed some light on such questions as narrative, plot, character, literary language, the nature of fiction, problems of critical interpretation, the role of the reader and the question of value judgements. The book also puts forward some ideas about individual authors, as well as about such literary currents as classicism, romanticism, modernism and realism, for those who might feel in need of them.

I am, I suppose, best known as a literary theorist and political critic, and some readers might wonder what has become of these interests in this book. The answer is that one cannot raise political or theoretical questions about literary texts without a degree of sensitivity to their language. My concern here is to provide readers and students with some of the basic tools of the critical tradition without which they are unlikely to be able to move on to other matters. I hope to show in the process that critical analysis can be fun, and in doing so help to demolish the myth that analysis is the enemy of enjoyment.

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Openings

Imagine that you are listening to a group of students around a seminar table discussing Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*. The conversation might go something like this:

Student A: I can't see what's so great about Catherine's relationship with Heathcliff. They're just a couple of squabbling brats.

Student B: Well, it's not really a *relationship* at all, is it? It's more like a mystical unity of selves. You can't talk about it in everyday language.

Student C: Why not? Heathcliff's not a mystic, he's a brute. The guy's not some kind of Byronic hero; he's vicious.

Student B: OK, so who made him like that? The people at the Heights, of course. He was fine when he was a child. They think he's not good enough to marry Catherine so he turns into a monster. At least he's not a wimp like Edgar Linton.

Student A: Sure, Linton's a bit spineless, but he treats Catherine a lot better than Heathcliff does.

What is wrong with this discussion? Some of the points made are fairly perceptive. Everybody seems to have read their way beyond page 5. Nobody seems to think that Heathcliff is a small town Kansas. The problem is that if someone who had never heard of *Wuthering Heights* were to listen on this discussion, they would find nothing to suggest that it was about a *novel*. Perhaps a listener might assume that the students were gossiping about some rather peculiar friends of theirs. Maybe Catherine is a student in the School of Business Studies, Edgar Linton is Dean of Arts and Heathcliff is a psychopathic janitor. Nothing is said about the techniques by which the novel builds up its characters. Nobody raises the question of what attitudes the book itself takes up towards these figures. Are its judgements always consistent, or might they be ambiguous? What about the novel's imagery, symbolism and narrative structure? Do they reinforce what we feel about its characters, or do they undercut it?

Of course, as the debate continued, it might become clearer that the students were arguing about a novel. Some of the time, it is hard to distinguish what literary critics say about poems and novels from talk about real life. There is no great crime in that. These days, however, this can be true for rather too much of the time. The most common mistake students of literature make is to go straight for what the poem or novel says, setting aside the way that it says it. To read like this is to set aside the 'literariness' of the work – the fact that it is a poem or play or novel, rather than an account of the incidence of soil erosion in Nebraska. Literary works are pieces of rhetoric as well as reports. They demand a peculiarly vigilant kind of reading, one which is alert to tone, mood, pace, genre, syntax, grammar, texture, rhythm, narrative structure, punctuation, ambiguity – in fact to everything that comes under the heading of 'form'. It is true that one could always read a report on soil erosion in Nebraska in this 'literary' way. It would simply mean paying close attention to the workings of its language. For some literary theorists, this would be enough to turn it into a work of literature, though probably not one to rival *King Lear*.

Part of what we mean by a 'literary' work is one in which *what* is said is to be taken in terms of *how* it is said. It is the kind of writing in which the content is inseparable from the language in which it is presented. Language is constitutive of the reality or experience, rather than simply a vehicle for it. Take a road sign reading 'Roadworks: Expect Long Delays on the Ramsbottom Bypass for the Next Twenty-Three Years'. Here, the language is simply a vehicle for a thought that could be expressed in a whole variety of ways. An enterprising local authority might even put it in verse. If they were unusu-

of how long the bypass would be out of action, they might always rhyme 'Close' with 'God knows'. 'Lillies that fester smell far worse than weeds,' by contrast, is a lot harder to paraphrase, at least without ruining the line altogether. And this is one of several things we mean by calling it poetry.

To say that we should look at what is done in a literary work in terms of how it is done is not to claim that the two always slot neatly together. You could, for example, recount the life-history of a field mouse in Miltonic blank verse. Or you could write about your yearning to be free in a strict, straitjacketing kind of metre. In cases like this, the form would be interestingly at odds with the content. In his novel *Animal Farm*, George Orwell casts the complex history of the Bolshevik Revolution into the form of an apparently simple fable about farmyard animals. In such cases, critics might want to talk of a tension between form and content. They might see this discrepancy as part of the meaning of the work.

The students we have just overheard wrangling have conflicting views about *Wuthering Heights*. This raises a whole series of questions, which strictly speaking belong more to literary theory than to literary criticism. What is involved in interpreting a text? Is there a right and a wrong way of doing so? Can we demonstrate that one interpretation is more valid than another? Could there be a true account of a novel that nobody has yet come up with, or that nobody ever will? Could Student A and Student B both be right about Heathcliff, even though their views of him are vigorously opposed?

Perhaps the people around the table have grappled with these questions, but a good many students these days have not. For them, the act of reading is a fairly innocent one. They are not aware of how fraught a matter it is just to say 'Heathcliff'. After all, there is a sense in which Heathcliff does not exist, so it seems strange to talk about him as though he does. It is true that there are theorists in literature who think that literary characters do exist. One of them believes that the starship *Enterprise* really does have a heat shield. Another considers that Sherlock Holmes is a creature of flesh and blood. Yet another argues that Dickens's Mr Pickwick is real, and that his servant Sam Weller can see him, even though we cannot. These people are not clinically insane, simply philosophers.

There is a connection, overlooked in the students' conversation, between their own disputes and the structure of the novel itself. *Wuthering Heights* tells its story in a way that involves a variety of viewpoints. There is no 'voice-over' or single trustworthy narrator to guide the reader's response. Instead, we have a series of reports, some probably more reliable than others, each stacked inside each other like Chinese boxes. The book interweaves one mini-narrative with another, without telling us what to make of the characters and events it portrays. It is in no hurry to let us know whether Heathcliff is hero or demon, Nelly Dean shrewd or stupid, Catherine Earnshaw tragic heroine or spoiled brat. This makes it difficult for readers to pass definitive judgements on the story, and the difficulty is increased by its garbled chronology.

We may contrast this 'complex seeing', as it has been called, with the novels of Emily's sister Charlotte. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* is narrated from one viewpoint only, that of the heroine herself, and the reader is meant to assume that what Jane says, goes. No character in the book is allowed to deliver an account of the proceedings that would seriously challenge her own. We, the readers, may suspect that what Jane has to report is not always without a touch of self-interest or the occasional hint of malice. But the novel itself does not seem to recognise this.

In *Wuthering Heights*, by contrast, the partial, biased nature of the characters' accounts is built into the structure of the book. We are alerted to it early on, as we come to realise that Lockwood, the novel's chief narrator, is hardly the brightest man in Europe. There are times when he has only a slender grasp of the Gothic events unfolding around him. Nelly Dean is a prejudiced storyteller who has her knife into Heathcliff, and whose narrative cannot wholly be trusted. How the story is seen

from the world of *Wuthering Heights* is at odds with how it is viewed from the neighbouring Thrushcross Grange. Yet there is something to be said for both of these ways of looking, even when they are at loggerheads with each other. Heathcliff may be both a brutal sadist and an abused outcast. Catherine may be both a petulant child and a grown woman in search of her fulfilment. The novel itself does not invite us to choose. Instead, it allows us to hold these conflicting versions of reality in tension. Which is not to suggest that we are necessarily to tread some sensible middle path between them. Middle paths in tragedy are in notably short supply.

It is important, then, not to confuse fiction with reality, which the students around the table seem in danger of doing. Prospero, the hero of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, comes forward at the end of the play to warn the audience against making this mistake; but he does so in a way that suggests that confusing art with the real world can diminish its effects on that world:

*Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
And what strength I have's mine own,
Which is most faint. Now, 'tis true,
I must be here confined by you,
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
Since I have my dukedom got
And pardoned the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell,
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands.*

What Prospero is doing is asking the audience to applaud. This is one thing he means by 'With the help of your good hands.' By applauding, the spectators in the theatre will acknowledge that what they have been watching is a piece of fiction. If they fail to recognise this, it is as though they and the figures on stage will remain trapped for ever inside the dramatic illusion. The actors will be unable to leave the stage, and the audience will remain frozen in the auditorium. This is why Prospero speaks of the danger of being confined to his magic island 'by your spell', meaning by the audience's reluctance to let go of the fantasy they have been enjoying. Instead, they must use their hands to clap and release him, as though he is bound fast in their imaginative fiction and unable to move. In doing so, the spectators confess that this is simply a piece of drama; but to make this confession is essential to the drama is to have real effects. Unless they applaud, abandon the theatre and return to the real world, they will be unable to put to use whatever the play has revealed to them. The spell must be broken if the magic is to work. In fact, there was a belief at the time that a magic spell could be broken by noise, which is yet another meaning of Prospero's appeal to the audience to clap.

* * *

Learning how to be a literary critic is, among other things, a matter of learning how to deploy certain techniques. Like a lot of techniques – scuba-diving, for example, or playing the trombone – these are more easily picked up in practice than in theory. All of them involve a closer attention to language than one would usually lavish on a recipe or a laundry list. In this chapter, then, I aim to provide some practical exercises in literary analysis, taking as my texts the first lines or sentences of various well-known literary works.

A word first of all about literary beginnings. Endings in art are absolute, in the sense that once

figure like Prospero vanishes he vanishes for ever. We cannot ask whether he ever really made it back to his dukedom, since he does not survive the play's final line. There is a sense in which literary openings are absolute too. This is clearly not true in every sense. Almost all literary works begin by using words that have been used countless times before, though not necessarily in this particular combination. We can grasp the meaning of these opening sentences only because we come to them with a frame of cultural reference which allows us to do so. We also approach them with some conception of what a literary work is, what is meant by a beginning, and so on. In this sense, no literary opening is ever really absolute. All reading involves a fair amount of stage setting. A lot of things must already be in place simply for a text to be intelligible. One of them is previous works of literature. Every literary work harks back, if only unconsciously, to other works. Yet the opening of a poem or novel also seems to spring out of a kind of silence, since it inaugurates a fictional world that did not exist before. Perhaps it is the closest thing we have to the act of divine Creation, as some Romantic artists believed. The difference is that we are stuck with the Creation, whereas we can always discard our copy of Catherine Cookson.

Let us begin with the opening sentences of one of the most celebrated of twentieth-century novels, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*:

Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits freely. There are no bathing-steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed there is no river front, as bazaars shut out the wide and shifting panorama of the stream. The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest ...

As with the opening of a lot of novels, there is something of a setpiece feel to this, as the author clears his throat and formally sets the scene. A writer tends to be on his or her best behaviour at the beginning of Chapter 1, eager to impress, keen to catch the fickle reader's eye, and occasionally intent on pulling out all the stops. Even so, he must beware of overdoing it, not least if he is a civilised middle-class Englishman like E.M. Forster who values reticence and indirectness. Perhaps this is one reason why the passage opens with a throwaway qualification ('Except for the Marabar Caves') rather than with a blare of verbal trumpets. It sidles into its subject-matter sideways, rather than confronting it head-on. 'The city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary, except for the Marabar Caves, and they are twenty miles off' would be far too ungraceful. It would spoil the poise of the syntax which is elegant in an unshowy kind of way. It is deftly managed and manipulated, but with quiet good manners refuses to rub this in one's face. There is no suggestion of 'fine writing', or of what is sometimes called 'purple' (excessively ornate) prose. The author's eye is too closely on the object for any such self-indulgence.

The first two clauses of the novel hold off the subject of the sentence ('the city of Chandrapore') twice over, so that the reader experiences a slight quickening of expectations before finally arriving at this phrase. One's expectations, however, are aroused only to be deflated, since we are told that the city contains nothing remarkable. More exactly, we are told rather oddly that there is nothing remarkable about the city except for the Caves, but that the Caves are not in the city. We are also informed that there are no bathing steps on the river front, but that there is no river front.

The four phrases of the first sentence are almost metrical in their rhythm and balance. In fact, it is possible to read them as trimeters, or lines of verse with three stresses each:

Except for the Marabar Caves

And *they are twenty miles off*

The city of Chandrapore

Presents *nothing extraordinary*

The same delicate equipoise crops up in the phrase 'Edged rather than washed', which is perhaps touch too fastidious. This is a writer with a keenly discriminating eye, but also a coolly distancing one. In traditional English style, he refuses to get excited or enthusiastic (the city 'presents nothing extraordinary'). The word 'presents' is significant. It makes Chandrapore sound like a show put on for the sake of a spectator, rather than a place to be lived in. 'Presents nothing extraordinary' to whom? The answer is surely to the tourist. The tone of the passage – disenchanting, slightly supercilious, touch overbred – is that of a rather snooty guidebook. It sails as close as it dares to suggesting that the city is literally a heap of garbage.

The importance of tone as an indication of attitude is made clear in the novel itself. Mrs Moore, an Englishwoman who has just arrived in colonial India and is unaware of British cultural habits there, tells her imperial-minded son Ronny about her encounter with a young Indian doctor in a temple. Ronny does not initially realise that she is talking about a 'native', and when he does so becomes instantly irritable and suspicious. 'Why hadn't she indicated by the tone of her voice that she was talking about an Indian?' he thinks to himself.

As far as the tone of this passage goes, we may note among other things the triple alliteration of the phrase 'happens not to be holy here', which trots somewhat too glibly off the tongue. It represents a wry poke at Hindu beliefs on the part of a sceptical, sophisticated outsider. The alliteration suggests 'cleverness', a discreet delight in verbal artifice, which puts a distance between the narrator and the poverty-stricken city. The same is true of the lines 'The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist ...' The syntax of this is a little too self-consciously contrived, too obviously intent on a 'literary' effect.

So far, the passage has managed to keep this shabby Indian city at arm's length without sounding too offensively superior, but the word 'ineffective' to describe the temples almost deliberately gives the game away. Though the syntax tucks it unobtrusively away in a sub-clause, it strikes the reader like a mild smack in the face. The term assumes that the temples are there not for the inhabitants to worship in, but for the observer to take pleasure in. They are ineffective in the sense that they do nothing for the artistically-minded tourist. The adjective makes them sound like flat tyres or broken radios. In fact, it does this so calculatedly that one wonders, perhaps a little too charitably, whether it is meant to be ironic. Is this narrator sending up his own high-handed manner?

It is clear enough that the narrator, who is not necessarily to be identified with the historical individual E.M. Forster, has some inside knowledge of India. He has not just stepped off the boat. He knows, for example, that the Ganges is sometimes sacred and sometimes not. Perhaps he is implicitly comparing Chandrapore to other cities in the sub-continent. There is a slightly jaded air about the extract, as though the narrator has seen too much of this country to be easily impressed. Perhaps the paragraph aims to deflate the Romantic view of India as exotic and enigmatic. The title of the book, *Passage to India*, may breed such expectations in the Western reader, which the novel then mischievously undercuts right from the outset. Maybe these lines are quietly enjoying their effect on the kind of reader who was expecting something a little more mysterious than filth and rubbish.

Speaking of filth, why is it that the dirty alleys leading to the finer houses deter all but the invited guest? Presumably because an invited guest, unlike a casual tourist, has no choice about negotiating

them. There is the ghost of a joke here: it is the most privileged people, those fortunate enough to be invited to the fine houses, who are forced to pick a path through the mud. To claim that these guests are not deterred by the garbage makes them sound commendably bold and enterprising, but the truth is that common courtesy, and perhaps the prospect of a good dinner, leaves them no alternative.

If the narrator is detached because he has seen too much, as the tone of the passage might suggest, then two contrary feelings – inside knowledge and a rather lofty remoteness – interestingly coexist. Perhaps the narrator feels that his general experience of India justifies his jaundiced view of the city, as it would not in the case of a more recent arrival from England. His distance from Chandrapore is marked by the fact that the city is seen in panorama rather than close-up. We also note that what catches the narrator's eye is its buildings, not its citizens.

This passage from a novel first published in 1924, when India was still under British colonial rule, is likely to sound unpleasantly condescending to a good many readers today. They might therefore be surprised to learn that Forster was a robust critic of imperialism. In fact, he was one of the most renowned liberal thinkers of his day, at a time when liberalism was in shorter supply than it is today. The novel as a whole is ambiguous in its attitude to imperial rule, but there is a good deal in it to make the enthusiasts of Empire feel distinctly uncomfortable. Forster himself worked for the Red Cross for three years in the Egyptian seaport of Alexandria, where he had a sexual relationship with a poor tram conductor who was later unjustly imprisoned by the British colonial regime. He denounced British power in Egypt, detested Winston Churchill, abominated all forms of nationalism and was a champion of the Islamic world. All of which goes to suggest that there is a more complex relation between an author and his or her work than we might imagine. We shall be looking into this question a little later. The narrator of these lines may express Forster's own views, or he may do so in part, or not at all. We really have no way of knowing. Nor is it all that important.

There is an enormous irony in this passage, which the reader can become aware of only as he or she reads further into the book. The novel opens with a disclaimer, one which is instantly qualified: there is nothing extraordinary in Chandrapore, except for the Marabar Caves. So the Marabar Caves are indeed extraordinary; but we are told this in a throwaway sub-clause, so that the syntax has the effect of diminishing its significance. The emphasis of the sentence falls on 'the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary', rather than 'Except for the Marabar Caves'. The Caves are more fascinating than the city, but the syntax seems to suggest the opposite. The lines also have the effect of provoking our curiosity only to frustrate it. The Caves are no sooner mentioned than whisked away, which serves only to heighten our interest in them. This, once again, is typical of the paragraph's reticence and obliquity. It would not do for it to get too vulgarly excited about this local tourist attraction. Instead, it intimates its importance in a sideways, negative kind of way.

This ambiguity – are the Caves really out of the ordinary or not? – lies at the heart of *A Passage to India*. In a shadowy way, the very core of the book is distilled in its opening words – ironically, even teasingly so, since the reader cannot possibly be aware of this yet. Literary works quite often 'know' things that the reader does not know, or does not know yet, or perhaps will never know. Nobody will ever know what was in a letter written by Milly Theale to Merton Densher at the end of Henry James's novel *The Wings of the Dove*, since another character burns it before we can learn what it contains. One might say that not even Henry James knows its contents. When Shakespeare has Macbeth remind Banquo to attend a feast he is throwing, and Banquo promises to do so, the play, but not the spectator, knows that Banquo will indeed turn up for the feast; but he will attend it as a ghost, since Macbeth had him murdered in the meantime. Shakespeare is having a little joke at the expense of his audience.

In one sense, the Marabar Caves turn out to be every bit as momentous as the opening words of the

novel would suggest. They are the site of its central action. But this action may also be a non-action. Whether anything happens in the Caves is hard to decide. There are different views on the matter in the novel itself. Caves are literally hollow, so that to say that the Marabar Caves lie at the centre of the novel is to say that there is a kind of blank or void at its heart. Like many a modernist work of Forster's time, this one turns on something shadowy and elusive. It has a kind of absent centre. If there is indeed a truth at the core of the work, it seems one that is almost impossible to pin down. So the novel's opening sentence serves as a little model of the book as a whole. It asserts the significance of the Caves while syntactically playing them down, a playing down which also serves to play them up. And in doing so it foreshadows their ambiguous role in the story.

* * *

We may turn now for a moment from fiction to drama. The first scene of *Macbeth* reads as follows:

1st witch: When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

2nd witch: When the hurly-burly's done,

When the battle's lost and won.

3rd witch: That will be ere the set of sun.

1st witch: Where the place?

2nd witch: Upon the heath.

3rd witch: There to meet with Macbeth.

1st witch: I come, Graymalkin.

2nd witch: Paddock calls.

3rd witch: Anon!

All: Fair is foul, and foul is fair,

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

There are three questions asked in these thirteen lines, two of them right at the start. So the play opens on an interrogative note. In fact, *Macbeth* as a whole is awash with questions, sometimes questions responded to by another question, which helps to generate an atmosphere of uncertainty, anxiety and paranoid suspicion. To ask a question is to demand something determinate in response, but not much in this play is that, least of all the witches. As old hags with beards, it is even difficult to say what gender they belong to. There are three of them, but they also act as one, so that in a grisly parody of the Holy Trinity it is hard to count them up as well. 'In thunder, lightning, or in rain?' also contains three items, but as the critic Frank Kermode has pointed out, the line suggests rather oddly that the kinds of weather are alternatives (there are commas between the words to point this up), whereas in fact they usually occur together in what we call a storm. So counting is a problem here too.

Questions seek for certainty and clear distinctions, but the witches confound all assured truths. They give garbled definitions and turn polarities on their head. Hence 'fair is foul, and foul is fair'. Or take the phrase 'hurly-burly', which means any boisterous form of activity. 'Hurly' sounds like 'burly' but is not the same, so the term contains an interplay of difference and identity. And this reflects the Unholy Trinity of the witches themselves. The same is true of 'When the battle's lost and won'. This presumably means 'lost by one army and won by the other', but there may also be a hint that when it comes to such military adventures, winning is really losing. What victory is there in hacking thousands of enemy soldiers to death?

Lost and won are opposites, but the 'and' between them (technically known as a copula) puts them on the same level, thus making them sound the same; so that once again we have a confusion of identity and otherness. It is as though we are forced to hold in our heads the contradiction that a thing can be both itself and something else. In the end, this will be true for Macbeth of human existence which looks vital and positive enough but is really a kind of nullity. It is 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. Nothing is, he remarks, but what is not. Nothing, and how it is only a hair's breadth away from something, is a central issue in Shakespeare. Rarely has there been so much ado about nothing in the annals of world literature.

The witches will turn out to be prophets who can foresee the future. Perhaps this is already clear from these opening lines, when the second witch declares that the three of them will meet again when the battle is over. But maybe this involves no pre-vision at all; maybe they have already arranged to meet then, and the first witch simply needs reminding of the fact. The third witch remarks that the battle will be over before sunset, but this, too, may require no precognitive powers. Battles are generally over before sunset. There is not much point in fighting an enemy you can't see. One might expect the three weird sisters, as Macbeth will later call them, to be able to predict the outcome of the contest, but they do not. 'Lost and won', which is true of almost all battles, may be a canny way of hedging their bets in this respect. So it is not clear whether the women are prophesying or not. The foretelling of the future is not to be trusted, as Macbeth will discover to his cost. Their prophetic utterances are ridden with paradox and ambiguity, but so also is the question of whether they are making such claims. Ambiguity can be enriching, as all students of literature are aware, but it can also be lethal, as the hero will discover.

Next in line is the Almighty. The first line of the Bible reads: 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' It is a magnificently resonant opening to the most celebrated text in the world, simple and authoritative at the same time. The phrase 'In the beginning' refers, of course, to the beginning of the world. Grammatically speaking, it would be possible to read it as concerning God's own beginning, meaning that creating the world was the very first thing he got up to. The Creation was the first item on the divine agenda, before God went on to organise dreadful weather for the English, and in a calamitous lapse of attention allowed Michael Jackson to slip into existence. But since God by definition has no origin, this cannot be the case. We are talking about the source of the universe, not about the genealogy of God himself. Since this statement is also the first line of the text, however, it cannot help bringing this fact to mind as well. The beginning of the Bible is about the beginning of the world. The work and the world seem for a moment to coincide.

The narrator of Genesis uses the phrase 'In the beginning' because, like 'once upon a time', it is a time-honoured way of starting a story. Roughly speaking, 'once upon a time' is how fairy tales begin, whereas 'In the beginning' is how myths of origin begin. There are many such myths among the cultures of the world, of which the first chapter of the Bible is one. A good many literary works are set in the past, but it is hard to get more backdated than the Book of Genesis. To step any further back would be to fall off the edge. The verbal gesture 'Once upon a time' pushes a fable so far off from the present into some misty mythological realm that it no longer seems to belong to human history. It deliberately avoids locating the story in a specific place or time, thus lending it an aura of timelessness and universality. We might be less enraptured by 'Little Red Riding Hood' if it were to inform us that Little Red Riding Hood had a Master's degree from Berkeley, or that the Wolf had spent some time incarcerated in a Bangkok penitentiary. 'Once upon a time' signals to the reader not to raise certain questions, such as Is this true? Where did it happen? Was it before or after the invention of cornflakes?

In a similar way, the formulaic phrase 'In the beginning' instructs us not to ask at what point in time this event took place, since it means among other things 'At the beginning of time itself', and it is difficult to see how time itself could have begun at a specific time. It is hard to imagine the universe being created at precisely 3.17 p.m. on a Wednesday. In the same way, it is odd to say, as people sometimes do, that eternity will begin when they die. Eternity cannot begin. People might move from time to eternity, but this could not be an event in eternity. There are no events in eternity.

There is, however, a problem with this splendid opening line, which tells us that God created the universe in the beginning. But how could he not have done? He can't have created it halfway through. To say that something was created in the beginning is to say that it originated at the origin. It is a kind of tautology. So the first three words of the Bible could be lopped off with no great loss of sense. Perhaps whoever wrote them imagined that time began at a certain point, and when it did so God created the universe. But we know today that there would be no time without the universe. Time and the universe sprang into being simultaneously.

The Book of Genesis sees God's act of creation as a plucking of order from chaos. At first things were dark and void, but then God lent them shape and substance. In this sense, the story reverses the usual sequence of a narrative. A good many narratives begin with some semblance of order, which is then somehow disrupted. If there were not some shake-up or dislocation, the story would never get off the ground. Without the arrival of Mr Darcy, Elizabeth Bennet of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* might have stayed perpetually unmarried. Oliver Twist might never have encountered Fagin if he hadn't asked for more, and Hamlet might have come to a less sticky end had he stuck to his studies at Wittenberg.

There is another opening sentence in the Bible which rivals the first line of Genesis for rhetorical splendour. We find it at the beginning of St John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' 'In the beginning was the Word' is an allusion to the second person of the Trinity; but because it crops up at the start of a passage of prose, we cannot help thinking of this beginning as well, which is also a matter of words. These are first words about the first Word. As with the first line of Genesis, the text and what it talks about seem momentarily to mirror one another. Note also the dramatic effect of the syntax. The sentence is an example of what is technically known as parataxis, in which a writer strings clauses together without indicating how they are to be co-ordinated with or subordinated to each other. (You find this device in a lot of subtle Hemingwayesque American writing: 'He passed Rico's bar and turned towards the square and saw that there were still a few stragglers left over from the carnival and felt the sour taste of last night's whiskey still in his mouth ...'.) Parataxis risks a certain flatness, dead-levelling the clauses of a sentence so that there is little variation of tone. St John's words, however, avoid this monotony by offering themselves as a little narrative in which we are eager to know what comes next.

As in all good narratives, there is a surprise in store for us at the end. We learn that the Word was in the beginning, then that it was with God, and then, quite unexpectedly, that the Word was God. This has something of the unsettling effect of 'Fred was with his uncle, and Fred was his uncle.' How can the Word be with God but also be God? As with the Macbeth witches, we are presented with a paradox of difference and identity. In the beginning was the paradox, the unthinkable, that which defies language – which is to say that this particular Word is beyond the grasp of merely human words. This surprise is underlined by the syntax. The phrases 'In the beginning was the Word' and 'and the Word was with God' are the same length (six words each) and have the same kind of rhythmical pattern; so we are probably anticipating another such phrase to balance them – say, 'and the Word shone forth in truth'. Instead, we get the abrupt 'and the Word was God'. It is as though the line sacrifices its

rhythmical poise to the power of this revelation. The first two flowing phrases build up to a terse, flat, emphatic announcement, one which sounds as though it is not to be argued with. Syntactically speaking, the sentence ends with a kind of let-down, undercutting our expectation of some final rhetorical flourish. Semantically speaking, however (semantics being concerned with questions of meaning), its conclusion packs a formidable punch.

One of the most renowned opening sentences in English literature reads as follows: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.' This, the first sentence of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, is generally regarded as a small masterpiece of irony, though the irony does not exactly leap from the page. It lies in the difference between what is said – that everyone agrees that rich men need wives – and what is plainly meant, which is that this assumption is mostly to be found among unmarried women in search of a well-heeled husband. In an ironic reversal, the desire which the sentence ascribes to wealthy bachelors is actually one felt by needy spinsters.

A rich man's need for a wife is presented as a universal truth, which makes it sound as unarguable as a geometrical theorem. It is presented almost as a fact of Nature. If it is indeed a fact of Nature, then unmarried women are not to be blamed for thrusting themselves forward as these men's prospective partners. It is simply the way of the world. They are merely responding to what prosperous bachelors want. Austen's scrupulously diplomatic words thus exonerate young unmarried women and their pushy mothers from the charge of greed or social climbing. They draw a veil of decorum over these disreputable motives. But the sentence also allows us to see it doing this, which is where the irony lurks. People, it suggests, feel better about their own baser desires if they can rationalise them as part of the natural order of things. There is a certain amusement to be reaped from watching them engage in this bad faith. The language of the sentence, abstract, beautifully measured, and slightly dry in Austen's familiar manner, needs this mild irony to enliven it a little. One sign that this is not modern English is the comma after 'acknowledged', which would not be thought necessary in a modern text.

Austen's irony can be tart and pointed, as can some of her moral judgements. Not many authors would suggest, as she does in *Persuasion*, that one of her characters would have been better off never being born. It is hard to get tarter than that. The irony which opens *Pride and Prejudice*, by contrast, is delightfully bland, as is the one encoded in the first lines of Geoffrey Chaucer's Prologue to his *Canterbury Tales*:

Whan that April with his showres soote
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heath
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye
That sleepen al the night with open ye –
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages –
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages ...

When spring renews the earth, men and women feel the same sap stirring in their blood, which is part of what inspires them to go on pilgrimage. There is a secret affinity between Nature's beneficent cycles and the human spirit. But people also make pilgrimages in spring because the weather is likely to be good. They might be less keen to trek all the way to Canterbury in the depths of winter. Chaucer begins his great poem, then, by paying homage to humanity at the very moment he cuts it satirical down to size. People go on pilgrimage because they are morally frail, and one sign of this frailty is that they prefer to travel at a time of year when they won't get frozen to the marrow.

If the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* is legendary, there are some equally celebrated first words in American literature: 'Call me Ishmael.' (It has been suggested that this statement could be modernised by the simple addition of a comma: 'Call me, Ishmael.')

This laconic opening sentence of Melville's *Moby-Dick* is hardly a foretaste of what is to come, since the novel as a whole is famous for its ornate, mouth-filling literary style. The sentence is also mildly ironic, since only one character in the novel ever does call the narrator Ishmael. Why, however, should he invite the reader to do so? Because it is his actual name, or because of the name's symbolic connotations? The biblical Ishmael, the son of Abraham by his Egyptian servant Hagar, was an exile, outlaw and wanderer. So perhaps Ishmael is an appropriate pseudonym for this seasoned traveller of the deep. Or is it that the narrator wants to conceal his real name from us? And if so, why? Does his apparent openness (he begins by amicably inviting us to use his first name, if indeed it is a first name) cloak a mystery?

People called Maria do not usually say 'Call me Maria.' They say 'My name is Maria.' To say 'Call me X' is generally a request to be called by a nickname, as in 'My real name is Algernon Digby Stuart, but you can call me Lulu.' One normally does this for the convenience of others. It would sound strange to say 'My real name is Doris, but you can call me Quentin Clarence Esterhazy the Third.' 'Ishmael', however, doesn't sound like much of a nickname. So one assumes that it is either the narrator's real name, or that it is a pseudonym he has chosen to signify his status as a wandering outcast. If this is the case, then he is concealing his actual name from us, and doing so just at the moment when he seems most intimate and inviting. The fact that the Western world is not exactly stuffed to the rafters with people called Ishmael, as opposed to people called Doris, seems to confirm the point.

'Call me Ishmael' is an address to the reader, and like all such addresses it gives the fictional game away. Simply to acknowledge the presence of a reader is to confess that this is a novel, which realists' novels are usually reluctant to do. They generally try to pretend that they are not novels at all but true life reports. To recognise the existence of a reader is to risk ruining their air of reality. Whether *Moby-Dick* is an unqualifiedly realist work is another question, but it is realist for enough of the time to make this opening gambit untypical of the book as a whole. For a novelist to write 'Dear reader, take pity on this poor blundering fool of a country doctor' is implicitly to admit in the phrase 'Dear reader' that there is no actual country doctor at all, blundering or otherwise – that this is a piece of verbal artifice, not a slice of rural life. In which case we might well be less inclined to pity the foolish doctor than if we knew or supposed that he was real. (Some literary theorists, incidentally, hold that you cannot really pity, admire, fear or abhor a fictional character, but can only 'fictionally' experience such emotions. People who cling white-faced to each other while watching horror movies are doing so fictionally, not genuinely, afraid. This, too, is another question.)

Since 'Ishmael' sounds more like a literary name than a real one, this may be another signal that we are in the presence of fiction. On the other hand, the name may sound fictional because it is not the narrator's real name but a pseudonym. Perhaps his real name is Fred Worm, and he has chosen the more exotic title to compensate for the fact. If he is not really called Ishmael, the reader might wonder

what his real name is. But if we are not given his real name, then he does not have one. It is not though Melville is concealing it. You cannot conceal something that does not exist. All that exists of Ishmael as a character is a set of black marks on a page. It would not make sense, for example, to claim that he has a scar on his forehead but that the novel fails to mention it. If the novel does not mention it, then it does not exist. A piece of fiction may tell us that one of its characters is concealing his or her real name under a pseudonym; but even if we are actually given the name, it is as much part of the fiction as the pseudonym itself. Charles Dickens's last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* contains a character who is clearly in disguise, and who may well be someone we have encountered elsewhere in the book. But since Dickens died before completing the work, we shall never know whose face the disguise is concealing. It is true that there is someone beneath the disguise, but not that it is anyone in particular.

* * *

Let us turn again for a while to poetry, taking the beginning of six well-known poems. The first is the opening line of John Keats's 'To Autumn': 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness'. What strikes one about the line is the sheer opulence of its sound-texture. It is as scrupulously orchestrated as a symphonic chord, full of rustling *s* sounds and murmuring *ms*. Everything is sibilant and mellifluous with scarcely any hard or sharp consonants. The *fs* of 'fruitfulness' might seem an exception, but it is softened by the *r* which is pronounced along with it. There is a rich tapestry of sound here, full of parallelisms and subtle variations. The *m* of 'mists' is reflected in the *m* of 'mellow', the *f* of 'of' is echoed in the *f* of 'fruitfulness', the *s* sounds of 'mists' is picked up again in the 'ness' of 'fruitfulness', while the *e* of 'Season', the *i* of 'mists' and the *e* of 'mellow' form an intricate pattern of sameness and difference.

The sheer packedness of the line also arrests the eye. It manages to cram in as many syllables as it can without becoming cloying or sickly sweet. This sensuous richness is meant to evoke the ripeness of autumn, so that the language seems to become part of what it speaks of. The line is plumped full of meaning, so it is not surprising that the poem goes on to discuss autumn itself in precisely the same terms:

*To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.*

Perhaps the poem, however unwittingly, is talking about itself here in the act of depicting the figure of Autumn. It itself avoids being clammy and overbrimmed, though it is prepared to run the risk of being so. Like autumn, it is poised at a point where maturity might always pass over into an oppressive surplus (of growth in the case of autumn, and language in the case of the poem). But it is held back from such distasteful excess by some inner restraint.

A later English writer, Philip Larkin, also writes about natural growth in his poem 'The Trees':

The trees are coming into leaf

This is a daringly upfront kind of image for the usually downbeat Larkin. It sees the burgeoning leaf as like words almost at the point of articulation. Yet there is a sense in which the image undoes itself. When the trees come fully into leaf, it will no longer hold true. It is not as though the trees are murmuring now and will be shouting then. We might think of a tree striving to come into blossom as akin to someone trying to say something. But we are unlikely to imagine a tree in full leaf as an articulate statement. So the simile is true now, but will cease to apply later, when the whole process is complete. One of the striking aspects of the lines is the way they make us see a tree, with its pattern of twigs, leaves and branches, as a visual image of the invisible roots of language. It is as though the processes underlying our speech are X-rayed, materialised, projected into visual terms.

An even more celebrated Larkin poem, 'The Whitsun Weddings', begins like this:

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:

Not till about

One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday

Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out ...

The first line, an iambic pentameter, is calculatedly flat, casual and colloquial. Nobody would guess that this was poetry if they were to stumble on it out of context. As though aware of this, however, the poem makes an instant counter-move. 'Not till about' is a half-line, where we were expecting complete pentameter. It represents a sudden, adroit manipulation of the metre which signals 'Yes, this is indeed poetry, although you might not have thought so a couple of seconds ago.' What else in the lines intimates this? The rhymes, which run counter to the studied ordinariness of the language and lend it some discreet shape. This is art after all, even though it is partly intent on suppressing the fact. The reserved middle-class Englishman does not put his artistry on show in the manner of some dandyish Parisian aesthete, any more than he boasts of his bank balance or sexual prowess.

Critics are always on the hunt for ambiguities, and there is a notable one in the first line of an Emily Dickinson verse: 'My life closed twice before it's close.' Dickinson writes 'it's' – a grocer's apostrophe, as we might call it today – rather than 'its' because her punctuation was somewhat erratic. She also spelt 'upon' as 'opon'. It is always reassuring to discover that great writers are as fallible as oneself. W.B. Yeats once failed to obtain an academic post in Dublin because he misspelt the word 'professor' on his application.

Tenses can play some strange tricks. Dickinson's line presumably means something like 'Before I die, I shall have had two experiences doleful and devastating enough to be comparable to death itself.' But how does she know that there will have been only two, since she is not yet dead? The verb of the statement ('closed') is in the past tense because these two moments of loss have already taken place, but the effect of this is to make the poet's death seem as though it has already taken place as well. It would be too clumsy to write 'Before my life ends, it will already have ended twice', even though that is probably what the line means. There is thus a curious sense of Dickinson addressing us from the grave. If she knows that there were only two metaphorical deaths in her life, then she must be already dead, or at least on her deathbed. The dead are those to whom nothing more can happen. They are entirely event-free. Yet writing and death are incompatible. So Dickinson cannot be dead, even though she writes as though she is.

Another stunning opening in American literature is the superb first lines of Robert Lowell's poem

‘The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket’:

*A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket
The sea was still breaking violently and night
Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,
When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,
He grappled at the net
With the coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs ...*

The first line of this is extraordinarily mouth-filling. To read it out loud, with its harsh vowels and stabbing consonants, is rather like chewing a piece of steak. The place-name ‘Madaket’ is perfect for the gritty, sinewy language of the piece. It is the kind of language that reflects the raw material of the environment it portrays. ‘The sea was still breaking violently and night’ would be a fairly regular iambic pentameter if it wasn't for the word ‘still’, which ruffles the metrical pattern. But the poet doesn't want smoothness or symmetry, as its syntax makes clear as well:

*The sea was still breaking violently and night
Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,
When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
Flashed from his matted head and marble feet ...*

There is a violent breaking in the verse here as well as in the ocean. In a bold gesture, the third line ends a sentence and begins a new one with only one word to go. I say ‘only one word to go’ because the metre dictates that the line can stretch to only one more monosyllable. So Lowell audaciously begins a new sentence with the abrupt word ‘Light’ just as he is running out of line. As a result, we have a full stop after ‘drag-net’, which signals a brief but complete pause; then ‘Light’; then we have to pause fractionally again, leaving the word ‘Light’ dangling, as we run up against the line-ending and step across to the beginning of the next line. The syntax and the metrical pattern are played off against each other to produce some memorable dramatic effects.

We may also note the curious inversion of ‘night / Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet’. It would be more conventional to speak of the fleet steaming into the night; as it is, the night is made to sound like a vessel itself, one which is perhaps about to cause a collision. (There are similar inversions in Shakespeare – ‘His coward lips did from their colour fly,’ for example, an image from *Julius Caesar* which is really too cerebral and contrived to be convincing.) ‘Hurdling’ in ‘coiled and hurdling muscles’ presumably means ‘like those of a hurdler’. But the phrase could also apply to the packed, hard, knotted language of the poem itself.

Literary beginnings are not always what they seem. Take, for example, the magnificent opening lines of John Milton's *Lycidas*, a poem written in memory of his fellow poet Edward King, who was drowned at sea and is the Lycidas of the piece:

*Yet once more, O ye laurels and once more
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,
And with forced fingers rude,
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.*

*Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
Compels me to disturb your season due;
For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer:
Who would not sing for Lycidas? He knew
Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.
He must not float upon his wat'ry bier
Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
Without the meed of some melodious tear.*

The name 'Lycidas' tolls dolefully through these lines like a funeral bell. In fact, these opening words are full of echoes and repetitions: 'Yet once more ... and once more', 'dead, dead ere his prime', 'Who would not sing ... He knew Himself to sing'. This generates a ritual or ceremonial effect, appropriately enough for a poem which is more of a public performance than a grief-stricken cry from the heart. Milton probably did not know King all that well, and there is no reason to suppose that he felt in the least agonised by his early death. In any case, King was a Royalist, while Milton himself would later become a doughty apologist for the execution of Charles I. The dead man was also training to be a cleric, whereas *Lycidas* goes on to deliver a violent attack on the established church, a perilous business at the time. No doubt this is why Milton signed the poem with his initials only.

In fact, in their coded way, these sombre lines may express a certain weary reluctance as much as melancholy. When Milton speaks of having to pluck the unripe berries of the laurel and myrtle, emblems of the poet, he means that he has been constrained to break off his spiritual preparations for becoming a great poet in order to compose this elegy. This is why the fingers that pluck the berries are forced, not free. It is also why they are rude, in the sense of not yet skilled enough at writing. In fact, the poise and authority of the lines which make this claim are more than enough to refute it. Far from being rude verse, this is highly sophisticated stuff. So weighty does Milton feel the burden of duty placed upon him that the verse makes it sound as though he is being compelled twice over, as 'bitter constraint' 'compels' him to take up his pen. The 'sad occasion dear' is, of course, the death of King, but one wonders whether Milton is not also thinking of his own frustration at having to emerge from spiritual hibernation in order to honour a colleague. It is as though he manages to turn a grumble into a tribute.

There is a parallel between King's premature death and the prematurity of the poem itself, signified by the 'berries harsh and crude'. Milton is having to fashion his lament out of materials that have not yet matured. It is as though he is projecting on to the laurel and myrtle his own sense of unripeness as a poet. Perhaps he would not be penning this masterpiece at all unless he felt he had to. It is a question of duty, not spontaneity. In this light, 'Who would not sing for Lycidas?' is solemnly disingenuous. John Milton, for one, might be a candid response. And is it really true that King, hardly the greatest bard in Christendom, did not have a peer as a poet? Once again, what about John Milton? The statements are just a standard piece of hyperbole. We are not expected to take them as burning sincerity. It is true that 'He must not float upon his wat'ry bier / Unwept, and welter to the parching wind' sounds tender enough. (Daringly, these lines get away with no fewer than four *w* sounds without one feeling that this is excessive.) But the statement might also suggest rather less tenderness that somebody is going to have to mourn for King, so Milton had better do so himself.

The image of the watery bier, incidentally, is extraordinarily powerful. As critics have pointed out, it evokes the terrible vision of a man being tossed around in water yet dying of thirst ('parching

wind'). The 'melodious tear', a bold enough image since tears do not pipe or warble, is a matter of weeping for Lycidas, bestowing a poem on him, but also of giving him water. There is something slightly odd about this last sense of the phrase, since lack of water is usually the last of a drowned man's problems. 'Meed' here means a tribute, but it can also mean a reward, which would suggest rather bizarrely that the poem is offered to King by way of recompense for his death. One assumes this is the first sense of the word that the poet has in mind.

The fact that Milton may be writing a touch reluctantly is neither here nor there. A poet can compose an authentic lament without feeling in the least distraught, just as he or she can write about love without feeling in the least amorous. Milton's lines are moving, even if the poet himself is not moved. Or not moved, at least, by King's early death. One suspects that he is more perturbed by the prospect that he himself may also be cut off in his prime, before he has a chance to become the great poet he aspires to be. Both the prematurity of King's death and the supposed immaturity of Milton as a poet are reminders of this alarming possibility. He too will be 'plucked' in the end, perhaps before his time, as he now plucks the berries to mourn the unseasonableness of his colleague's death. To pluck a plant is to inflict a kind of death on it, even if one does so in the cause of art, and thus of the living.

Milton produces *Lycidas* as one might attend the funeral service of a colleague for whom one has no particular affection. There is no hypocrisy here. On the contrary, it would be hypocritical to pretend to a grief one did not feel. In attending the funeral of an acquaintance, we are expected to feel the sentiments proper to the procedures of the ceremony itself. In a similar way, Milton's feelings in the poem are bound up with its verbal strategies. They do not consist of some heartache that lurks behind it. Post-Romantics like ourselves tend to suspect that emotion is one thing and convention another. Genuine feeling means throwing off the artifice of social forms and speaking directly from the heart. But this is probably not how Milton would have thought, or how many a non-Western culture would think today.

Nor would it have been the view of Jane Austen. For her, as for neo-classical authors in general, authentic feeling had its appropriate forms of public expression, which were regulated by social convention. To say 'convention', a word which literally means 'coming together', is to say that how we behave emotionally is not just up to me. My emotions are not my private property, as a more individualist society than Milton's or Austen's might suppose. On the contrary, there is a sense in which I learn my emotional behaviour by participating in a common culture. Syrians do not lament the same way that the Scottish do. Convention and propriety run very deep. For Austen, propriety means not just eating your banana with a knife and fork, but conducting yourself sensitively and respectfully toward others. Civility involves more than not spitting in the sherry decanter. It also means not being boorish, arrogant, selfish and conceited.

Convention does not necessarily stifle feeling. It may judge that an emotional response is too extravagant, but also that it is too meagre. Whether one believes that sentiments and conventions are bound together, or that they are at daggers drawn, is a bone of contention between Hamlet and Claudius at the start of Shakespeare's play. Hamlet holds in his individualist way that emotions like grief should disregard the social forms, whereas Claudius takes the view that feeling and form should be on more intimate terms than this. It is also part of the difference between Eleanor and Marianne Dashwood in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Poetry is a good example of how feeling and form are not necessarily at loggerheads. Form may heighten feeling as well as suppress it. *Lycidas* is not the expression of Milton's regret at the death of King. Rather, it is his regret. It is the kind of dutiful ceremonious elegy appropriate in the circumstances. There is no question of insincerity, any more than it is insincere for me to wish you good morning when I have many more pressing issues on my

mind than the kind of morning you might be about to have.

* * *

Perhaps the best-known play of the twentieth century, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, opens with the following bleak line: 'Nothing to be done.' The words are spoken by Estragon, whose companion in utter tedium and unassuaged misery is Vladimir. The most celebrated figure of that name in the twentieth century was Vladimir Lenin, who wrote a revolutionary tract entitled *What is to be Done*. This may be no more than coincidence, though not much in Beckett's writing is less than meticulous and calculated. If the allusion is intentional, then it may be that the line is handed to Estragon rather than Vladimir to make it appear less obvious. It is possible, then, that a piece of drama that is generally considered to spurn history and politics in order to portray a timeless human condition actually opens with a discreet allusion to one of the most momentous of all modern political events, the Bolshevik Revolution.

This would not, in fact, be all that astonishing, since Beckett himself was by no means a non-political figure. He fought bravely for the French Resistance during the Second World War, and was later honoured for his courage by the French government. At one point he escaped by the skin of his teeth from being captured by the Gestapo, along with his equally intrepid wife. One aspect of his work that is not quite universal is his humour, which in its bathos, poker-faced pedantry, mordant wit, dark satirical edge and surreal flights of fantasy has a distinctively Irish quality to it. When the Dublin-born Beckett was asked by a Parisian journalist whether he was English, he replied, 'On the contrary.'

Another piece of fiction to which Irishness is relevant is Flann O'Brien's great novel *The Third Policeman*. It opens with these chilling words:

Not everybody knows how I killed old Phillip Mathers, smashing his jaw in with my spade; but first it is better to speak of my friendship with John Divney because it was he who first knocked old Mathers down by giving him a great blow in the neck with a special bicycle-pump which he manufactured himself out of a hollow iron bar. Divney was a strong civil man but he was lazy and idle-minded. He was personally responsible for the whole idea in the first place. It was he who told me to bring my spade. He was the one who gave the orders on the occasion and also the explanations when they were called for.

I was born a long time ago. My father was a strong farmer and my mother owned a public house ...

If the English of this passage reads slightly strangely, it may be partly because O'Brien was a fluent Irish speaker who wrote some of his work in the Irish language. So he is not exactly writing here in his native tongue, though he spoke English at least as well as Winston Churchill. Hiberno-English, as this kind of English spoken in Ireland is known, sometimes gives an unfamiliar twist to standard English speech, and is thus a fertile medium for generating literary effects. The name 'Mathers', for example, is pronounced in Ireland as 'Ma-hers', as 'th' behaves differently in Irish than in English. 'I was born a long time ago' is an unusual way of saying 'I am old', and a wonderfully improved one at that. The phrase 'strong farmer' in Ireland means not a muscular one but one furnished with a large number of acres.

The language of these lines is as far from the opening of *A Passage to India* as one could imagine. Whereas Forster's prose is suave and civilised, O'Brien's is apparently artless and unadorned. There is a roughness about the prose, as there is about the characters it presents. The rambling first sentence, which stretches over several lines, is a case in point. It contains a number of distinct segments but only two punctuation marks, which gives the effect of a narrator who is growling or muttering his random thoughts out loud. I say 'random' because there is something oddly inconsequential about

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