

**THE SENSE OF A BEGINNING:
BEGINNINGS AND THEIR
CONCLUSIONS IN LITERATURE**

GERALD GUINNESS

GERALD GUINNESS, full Professor in the Department of English, was born in Puerto Rico and educated in England (Cambridge and London universities). He has written many articles on Latin-American and Caribbean literatures and is co-editor of *On Text and Context* (1980) and *Auctor Ludens: Essays on Play in Literature* (1986). His translation of José Luis González's *El país de cuatro pisos* will be published by Waterfront Press in April 1990.

Not all beginnings are good beginnings and not all literary works that begin badly continue that way. Why should not a slack beginning later develop into a work of considerable authority—assuming, that is, that the author manages to hit his proper stride in time? Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is just such a work, though its beginning could hardly be flatter:

On an evening in the latter part of May a middle-aged man was walking homeward to the village of Marlott, in the adjoining vale of Blakemore or Blackmoor.

Nothing could be less specific or less attention—claiming than this *middle-aged* man walking at *evening* in the *latter part* of May, nor does Hardy's distinction between Blakemore and Blackmoor exactly enthrall, unless the reader happens to be of the philological persuasion.

By contrast, a "good" beginning is one that from the first sentence, first paragraph, or (in exceptional cases) first 2-3 pages, claims and directs the reader's attention in a way relevant to the subsequent development of the literary work as a whole. Here is an example of just such a beginning:

He sat, in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zam-Zammeh on her brick platform opposite the old Ajaib-Gher-the Wonder House, as the natives call the Lahore Museum.

This opening sentence from Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* is not only much more specific than the opening of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (Kim sits *astride* the gun, the gun is on a *brickplat-*

form, the gun and museum are given names) but it reaches out towards the reader and claims his attention with a certain artfulness of intention. Kipling wants from the first to enrol the reader in a select company of *non-natives*, people who have been to English schools — just as Kim himself goes to an English school at the very end of the novel after his deliciously protracted excursion into forbidden territory. (To *pretend* to go native is one thing but to actually *become* a native... oh dear me, no!) Kipling's select company consists of people sophisticated enough to smile ironically, even if indulgently, at those who are so innocent that they mistake the Lahore Museum for a Wonder House. The exact blend of ironic detachment and sympathetic identification for a reading of *Kim* is thereby established from the novel's very first sentence.

Like the beginning of *Kim*, any good beginning is in a sense pre-emptive. What it does is establish a promissory obligation, mode, or module necessary for a full understanding of the work that is to follow. (I shall attempt to justify my use of the terms "promissory obligation," "mode," and "module" later in this essay.) A good beginning will pre-empt a continuation, much as a christening is sometimes intended to pre-empt the outcome of an infant's life, so that naming a boy Alexander may nudge him towards world conquest (or at least to a good position in the bank) and naming a girl María de los Angeles may serve to keep her out of trouble. Christenings and good beginnings are alike attempts to conjure fate, to announce and compel trajectories as though they were pre-ordained. For example, might we not expect from a book christened *Moby-Dick* and whose first infant cry is "Call me Ishmael" a life of heroic proportions? And mightn't we feel defrauded if in pimply adolescence the book turned voyeuristic, peeping into cabin portholes (a sort of marine *Couples*) or chronicling with a tedious insistence the captain's problems with a Jewish mother? And in similar vein, might we not expect a poem that begins "Midway life's journey I was made aware / That I had strayed into a dark forest" to be dedicated to a fateful continuation —remember, we are only midway, life's journey!—, to lead on and up from darkness into light, from enclosure in a forest to freedom among the stars, so that *stelle* appears almost the fore-ordained destination

of the poem? (Thrice over, in fact, since all three cantiche of the *Divine Comedy* end with the same word.) I shall develop this idea of beginnings that mysteriously prefigure their endings in the final pages of this essay: all I wish to insist on now is that what constitutes the excellence of a beginning for any tentative theory of beginnings is precisely that sense that in a good beginning lies latent its continuation — that as a work begins, so it shall continue.

A little earlier I used the terms "promissory obligation", "modalities", "modules": in fact these are three steps in the theory of beginnings I wish to propose. Beginnings are *promissory* when they raise expectations that the work as a whole seems bound to fulfill; they are *modal* when they postulate a dominant mode for the whole or offer a key or code necessary for the reader's full reception of that whole; and they are *modular* when they express the whole in small measure or embody the principle of growth for the whole (as the acorn is, so grows the oak). But to call these three types of beginning "steps" is perhaps to grant them too great a measure of independence so let us instead call them distinct points on a scale, which stretches from preliminary at one extreme to integral at the other. And if my readers find even this distinction more obfuscating than helpful, then let them feel free to ditch the scheme in its entirety, deducing their own Sense of a Beginning from the examples which follow.

A *promissory* beginning has been said to raise expectations that the work as a whole seems bound to fulfill. Here is an example of such a beginning from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in the village that looked across the river and the plain towards the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels.

Ford Madox Ford's introduction to the 1932 Modern Library edition of the novel gives a good description of how this beginning can be seen as promissory. "In the last paragraph," Ford writes, "I have explained the nature of my emotion when I read a year or so ago that first sentence of *A Farewell to*

Arms. It was more than excitement. It was excitement plus reassurance. The sentence was exactly the right opening for a long piece of work. To read it was like looking at an athlete setting out on a difficult and prolonged effort. You say, at the first movement of the limbs: 'It's all right. He's in form... He'll do today what he has never quite done before.' And you settle luxuriantly into your seat." (Perhaps the effect Ford here describes is akin to that instant easing of tension which occurs at the beginning of a concert, when the pianist starts playing with the calm but intense assurance that promises that all will be well and all manner of things will be well. "And you settle luxuriantly into your seat.")

Ford had a remarkably quick eye for the promissory note in good beginnings. In *Portraits from Memory* he describes how at the English Review one day a manuscript arrived on his desk for publication. It began:

A small locomotive engine, Number 4, came clanking, stumbling down from Selston with seven full waggons. It appeared around the corner with loud threats of speed but the colt that it startled from among the gorse which still flickered indistinctly in the ran afternoon, outdistanced it in a center. A woman walking up the railway line to Underwood, held her basked aside and watched the footplate of the engine advancing.

"My eyes were tired," writes Ford, "I had been reading all day so I did not go any further with the story. It was called 'Odour of Chrysanthemums.' I laid it in the basket for accepted manuscripts. My secretary looked up and said: 'You've got another genius?' I answered: 'It's a big one this time,' and went upstairs to dress." His subsequent analysis of the opening paragraph of D.H. Lawrence's "Odour of Chrysanthemums" is a masterpiece of close reading and a thoroughly convincing demonstration of how a beginning can promise great things, both for the literary work it inaugurates and for the genius ("a big one this time") of its creator.

Another way of describing promissory beginnings is metaphorical: they postulate a contract between writer and reader, as if to say: "Sign here and large quantities of the product on offer will soon arrive on your doorstep." The

contractual obligation in the following beginnings is for quantities of play:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta.

(Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*)

Showtime! Señoras y señores. Ladies and gentlemen. Muy buenas noches, damas y caballeros, tengan todos ustedes, Good-evening, ladies and gentlemen. Tropicana, el cabaret MAS fabuloso del mundo.

(G. Cabrera Infante, *Tres tristes tigres*)

Hemingway, master of the promissory note, here contracts for violence:

The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in,
("The Killers")

contract is for characteristics

And in one of the most haunting beginnings in fiction, his brand of lyrical disenchantment, copiously delivered in the story that follows:

In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more.

("In Another Country")

Finally, in an example already cited Melville's trumpet-call beginning to *Moby-Dick* ("Call me Ishmael"), with its biblical sonority and directness of attack, is a clear promise of epic seriousness or of what E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* calls prophecy. (Another well-known literary work begins "Call me Smitty", but we much doubt that this warty lad will ever put to sea, chase a white whale, or inaugurate a national literature.)

The promissory is a fairly obvious mode. A sub-category of the same, which I personally find more interesting, is what I would call the *promissory-subversive*. This mode also contains a promise, but an element of diffidence or self-conscious guile enters into it which implies misgivings or even the hint of downright treachery. Here are some examples:

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly.

(Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*)

If you really want to hear about it... but I don't fell like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

(L. D. Salinger, *Coming Through the Rye*)

Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I was very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn.

(Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*)

There were 117 psychoanalysts on the Pan Am flight to Vienna and I'd been treated by at least six of them. And married a seventh.

(Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying*)

There were ninety-seven New York advertising men in the hotel, and the way they were monopolizing the long-distance lines, the girl in 507 had to wait from noon till almost two-thirty to get her call through. She used the time, though. She read an article in a woman's pocket-size magazine, called "Sex is Fun-or Hell."

(Salinger, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish")

Surely the effect of all these beginnings is precarious: it is as though the authors had taken a step forward only immediately to take half-a-step back — or in the last two examples, sideways. In the Twain and Salinger extracts the authors are of course speaking through their respective heroes, not *in propria persona*, and yet the effect is curiously ingratiating as though the authors themselves wre attempting to establish their bona fides towards a possibly elusive audience. (Twain strikes, the same note again in his famous prefatory caution: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted..." etc.) In the Hemingway extract it is Jake Barnes who just concedes the value of a Princeton boxing title even while he intimates that he doesn't really belong to that world nor wants to belong to it, since the rich aren't really different from us, they just have more... (etc.) But by this time we are convinced that these are in fact *Hemingway's* attitudes, *Hemingway's* tone, presented to us for our approval through the agency of a thinly disguised alter ego. And the final two extracts promise the solidarity of sophistication, but they also proffer a wink which in the first case conveys the message,

"You and I know, don't we, what those psychoanalysts are like!" and in the second case intimates, "We New Yorker readers don't have to be told what sort of young woman reads articles entitled 'Sex is Fun-or Hell'." The sophistication just referred to strikes a distinctively American note and one wonders if distinctively American too is the one step forward followed by the half-step back, the assertion followed by a disclaimer, that characterizes the first three of the passages quoted above (all the passages coming from works by American authors, incidentally). And even the boldly promissory "Call me Ishmael" discussed earlier suffers and almost immediate check if we read on: "Call me Ishmael. Some years ago-never mind how long precisely...": the same bold assertion promptly qualified. On this admittedly meagre show of evidence could it be intimated that there is a distinctively American beginning, characterized, say, by an uncertainty vis-à-vis the writer's relation to his audience — an uncertainty, grounded in historical circumstances, as to whom exactly the writer is writing *for*? It is a tantalizing possibility and I do no more than mention it in passing, for some other student of beginnings to make of it what he or she will.

And now to a second type of fateful relation between beginning and its continuation, the *modal*. Modal beginnings are so called because they postulate distinctive modes for the works they introduce; what distinguishes them from the promissory type of beginnings in their emphasis on *how* a literary work is to be enjoyed. A metaphorical way of describing a modal beginning is to say that it supplies a code by means of which the reader may decipher the elaborately coded message which is the literary work as a whole. A good example of this type is the opening of Dicken's novel *Bleak House*:

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, wading like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill.

There are two ways in which this beginning provides a "mode" for what is to follow. The first is metaphoric: mud and within a few lines fog provide a dominant metaphor for the novel as a whole. It is through the mud and fog of the English legal system that the action gropes its way, it is mud and fog—in the streets, in the courts, in the social system—that bring life to a standstill. And the second modal resource of this passage is syntactic: the abrupt verbless clauses, the choppy rhythm, the sense of starting, stopping, and then having to start again: all these enact the frustrations implicit in the theme. An early novel by Dickens uncoils gradually like a snake awakening from its lair ("There once lived, in a sequestered part of the county of Devonshire, one Mr. Geoffrey Nickleby..."); a late novel imposes from the start a dominant mode embodied in a metaphor (fog in *Bleak House*, garbage in *Our Mutual Friend*, etc.) or enacted in the syntax.

Henry James is another master of the modal beginning:

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.

(*The Portrait of a Lady*)

The Prince had always liked his London, when it had come to him; he was one of the Modern Romans who find by the Thames a more convincing image of the truth of the ancient state than any they have left by the Tiber.

(*The Golden Bowl*)

Save then it happened to rain Vanderbank always walked home, but he usually took a hand when the rain was moderate and adopted the preference of the philosopher when it was heavy.

(*The Awkward Age*)

What these beginnings have in common is that they involve—and invite the reader to participate in—an act of choosing, of discrimination. James says, in effect: "Don't think that afternoon tea is *always* agreeable, or that there are *no* other hours in life *sometimes* as agreeable, or that for those dear good English this can ever be any less than a *ceremony* to which you *dedicate* yourself—but then, fond reader, you, cultured being that you are, know about such things! So too the fond reader will appreciate that, for someone of the Prince's distinction, the appreciation of London won't be the result of a vulgar

search but will happen because, so to speak, London *came* to him; nor will Vanderbank's discrimination between walking and riding fall on deaf ears. These are examples of what Ian Watt, in a remarkable essay on the first paragraph of *The Ambassadors* (*Essays in Criticism*, July 1960), has called the "multidimensional" quality of James's narration, "with its continual implication of a community of three minds—Strether's, James's, and the reader's." And when Watt draws attention to the "abundance of negatives" in the same paragraph and says that "it puts the reader into the right judicial frame of mind", he is pointing to that Jamesian habit of exacting attentiveness of discrimination as a necessary condition for the realization of his narratives, which is an important function of the type of modal beginning I have christened the *modal*.

Sometimes the imposition of a mode is so imperious and so crucial for our understanding of the whole that we can speak of a beginning as having a virtual isometric relation to what follows. It can perhaps be compared to one of those Russian doll—but in reverse: we see the smallest of the sequence to its largest unit. In other words, a beginning doesn't just supply a metaphor or a syntax for what follows but, so to speak, *is* what follows, in abbreviated form. As an example, here is the beginning of Kafka's *The Castle*:

It was late in the evening when K. arrived. The village was deep in snow. The Castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there. On the wooden bridge leading from the main road to the village, K. stood for a long time gazing into the illusory emptiness above him.

It would be beside the point here to talk about the mist, the darkness, or the "illusory emptiness" as metaphors for the content of the entire novel. What on the other hand does supply a mode for the novel is the ironic disparity between the opacity of what is seen or understood and the translucency of the registering eye as mirrored in Kafka's translucency of style, a disparity enacted in the opening lines of the book and then continued—there is *no* development!—for hundreds of pages. The mode, established in the beginning, is pervasive: K.'s existential bewilderment at seeing everything, at

apprehending nothing. This mode contrasting exact notation and unfathomable menacing significance yawns even wider in an alternative opening (which Kafka afterwards rejected) to *The Castle*:

The landlord welcomed the guest. A room on the second floor had been got ready. "The rolay apartment," the landlord said. It was a large room with two windows and glass door between them; it was distressingly large in its bareness... "Kindly don't step out on the balcony" the landlord said when the guest, after he had looked out of one of the windows into the night, approached the glass door. "The bean is slightly rotten."

It is not only the bean that is "slightly rotten" in *The Castle*! Place a foot anywhere and there is an ominous sound of woodwork about to give way. The initial uncertainty of footing on K.'s balcony is, so to speak, the innermost Russian doll of which the novel in its entirety is the outermost. In fact the reader learns to decipher the "code" of *The Castle* by the key so conveniently offered in the novel's very first paragraph.

With this example we are on the threshold indeed, may even have passed of my third and last type of beginning, which I have called the *modular*. A module is a unit of measurement by which the proportion of a building and of its smallest parts, down to the doorknobs, can be regulated. Le Corbusier called it his "modulor" and displayed it at the entrance to some of his buildings in the form of a man with cut-stretched arms modelled on da Vinci's obviously famous drawing. The module or modulor is the starting-point for the design of those buildings and it enters into every element of the detailing. A related example: in Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building on Park Avenue in New York City all the load-bearing members are sheathed in concrete to comply with the city's fire regulations. However, Mies attached un-sheathed non-load-bearing I beams to the facade as a sort of jaunty demonstration of the underlying structure. In other words, a single element proclaims the all, so that, with a building by Mies or by le Corbusier, it is the module, or gratuitously displayed non-structural member, that exemplifies the entelechy of the whole construction.

To opening chapter of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* will show this principle in action. These beautiful two-and-a-half pages describe the locales of the book in what is at first sight traditional fashion. There is the town of Chandrapore, "swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life." Above it on the hill lies the civil station, which "charms not, neither does it repel" Finally, there is the overarching sky that "settles everything — not only climates and seasons but when the earth shall be beautiful". It is the sky that unites the landscapes of muddy town and charmless civil station "because it is so strong and so enormous". It is the one constant element in a topography and cast of characters otherwise irremediably diverse and divided.

The mode of *A Passage to India* is, I suggest, dialectical: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. The thesis is the India of the Hindus with its millennial traditions; the antithesis the outside invaders, Muslim or English; and the synthesis the land itself with its extraordinary capacity to swallow and absorb alien cultures. (One symbol for this integration of alien elements, incidentally, is the humble wasp "that has no sense of an interior.") At the conceptual level the dialectic is worked out in terms of the clash of religions: the clarity and coherence of the monotheistic religions, Islam and Christianity, in part one ("Mosque"), set against the life-denying monism of higher Hinduism or what in Indian philosophy is called the way of knowledge (*jnana-yog*), in part two ("Cave"), finally fused in the love-muddle of polytheistic lower Hinduism, or way of devotion (*bhakti-yog*) in part three ("Temple"). The settings for this thesis-antithesis-synthesis are also beautifully appropriate: the Moghul garden with its rills of water and the civil station with its gruesome Club; the Caves, which say "ou-boom... Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth:" and the palace at Mau where God is worshipped under a banner reading "GOD IS LOVE". Dialectical too are the seasons of the book: winter with its flowers (Mosque), the life-annihilating heat of summer (Cave), and the refreshing rains of the monsoon: the three seasons of the Indian year. Perhaps not all this is fully explicit in the three pages of the opening chapter —indeed, how could it be!— but I would argue nonetheless that it is implicit: for example in the geographical

distribution of town, civil station and sky, and in the suggestion of climatic conditions appropriate to each one. So that, if this is granted, it seems perfectly appropriate to describe the opening three pages of *A Passage to India* as standing in a modular relation to the whole work. It is as though Forster, like Mies with his I beams on the facade of the Seagram Building in New York City, were demonstrating the integrity of his construction by drawing attention to the very principles of its structure "See, this is how it's done!" Mies and Forster both seem to be saying.

But the *syntax* of the beginning also has a modular part to play in the design of the book as a whole. The conflictiveness of the book's subject-matter is mirrored in the *syntax* of the beginning: "Except for the Marabar Caves... the city of Chandrapore was *never* large or beautiful... The civil station... provokes *no* emotion." Or take the phrase "low but indestructible," which is at once negative *and* positive. The negatives of the opening pages serve as prologue to a book in which any virtues Adela claims to find in the Marabar Caves are denied by Professor Godbole ("Oh no, oh no... No, I should not quite say that"); where Krishna neglects to come in answer to Godbole's invitation; where nothing ever gets finished (Fielding's party, the picnic, the trial) but just peters out; where every suggested name for a green bird in a tree is proved wrong; and which finishes—at least, in the poor, original pre-film version!—with the words, "No, no yet...no, not there." We are reading a book where the certainties of occidental thought are systematically negated and where a major character is snuffed out, offstage and for no good reason, as a consequence. It is a decidedly bleak book, for all its humour, and a book where nothing is decided and little learnt — except perhaps that, in a world where so much is queer and at odds, the exercise of tolerance is a prime virtue.

For my second example of a modular beginning, I wish to take the first 37 lines of the first scene of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Philo Nay, but this dotage of our general's
 O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,
 That o'er the files and musters of the war
 Have glou'd like plated Mars, non bend, non turn

The office and devotion of their view
 Upon a tawny front; his captain's heart, 5
 Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
 The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,
 And is become the bellows and the fan
 To cool a gipsy's lust.

(Enter Antony, Cleopatra, etc.)

Look where they come! 10
 Take but good note, and you shall see in him
 The triple pillar of the world transform'd
 Into a strumpet's fool. Behold and see.

Cleo If it he love indeed, tell me how much
 Ant There's begarry in the love that can be reckon'd. 15
 Cleo I'll set a bourn how far to be below'd.
 Ant Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth.

(Enter a Messenger)

Mess News, my good lord, from Rome
 Ant Creates me, the sum.

Ant Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the nide arch
 Of the rang'd empire fall! Here is my space, 35
 Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike
 Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life
 Is to do thus. (Embraces Cleopatra).

It is tempting to begin a discussion of this passage with the assertion that the entire development of *Antony and Cleopatra* is contained in that first word "Nay". No other Shakespeare play begins quite so emphatically in mid-sentence and with a contradiction. We are here dealing with a play where "Nay" is what Rome says to Egypt and what Egypt, at first rhetorically, in line 33 of this first scene ("Let Rome in Tiber melt"), and then profoundly, in Act V, replies to Rome. That debate between Rome and Egypt is implicit in Philo's metaphor of dotage "o'erflow[ing] the measure" in line 2; in this play no one but a Roman could imply that there are conceivable limits to dotage! The metaphor in fact unleashes a flood of similar metaphors throughout the play, metaphors relating to form, limit, terrestrial extent, rule, and degree as opposed to those relating to what is measureless, limitless, formless, superterrestrial, not-to-be-confined. The "files and musters" in line 3 are of course Roman units, whereas the "now bend, now turn" in line 4 is expressive of the pliancy that characterizes all things

Egyptian. (In the famous description of Cleopatra on her barge in Act II we are told her gentlewoman "tended her i' the eyes/And made their *bends* adornings.") In his days of Roman glory Antony's heart strained the buckles of his cuirass; in his Egyptian dotage his heart vibrates like a bellows and a fan, the very types of inconstant motion. (One remembers in the barge episode, the "divers-colored fans" "whose did seem/To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,/And what they undid did.") Th cuirass is what identifies a Roman soldier just as it once was a bowler hat and rolled umbrella that identified the English gentleman; any director of *Antony and Cleopatra* should note this sartorial distinction between tight and loose-fitting clothes and dress the two sides accordingly. At the end of the play, there is no armour left than can "keep/The battery from my heart", whereupon Antony tells Eros to "unarm" him, i.e. remove his high-fitting cuirass, for "The long day's task is done."

That same structural contrast between solidity and delinquency is continued in line 12 of the beginning, where "triple pillar" not only evokes the monumental solidities of Roman architecture but also the political realities of the triumvirate. Solidity and delinquency come into magnificent collision—a wave breaking against a cliff, so to speak—in lines 33 following, when, in answer to Cleopatra's teasing insistence that he receive the messenger from Rome, Antony breaks out with:

Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space,
Kingdoms are clay: our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man.

To reduce the "ranged empire" to "clay" and "dungy earth" is to depreciate the public world—what Forster in *Howards End* calls "the world of telegrams and anger"—in favor of the domestic, immediate, and palpable:

The nobleness of life
Is to do *thus*...

(like Dr. Johnson refuting Bishop Berkeley by kicking a stone). At the moment of Antony's death four acts later Cleopatra breaks out with,

The crown o'th'earth doth melt...
The soldier's pole is fall'n...

words which are at once a bitter lament for lost glory and an extraordinary celebration of Antony's transmutation into an elemental force which transcends the bitter frivolity of "pillars", "wide arch", and "soldier's pole", all rigid unyielding totems of the Roman world. That sense of the unbounded nature of intense personal experience is prefigured in Antony's words of the beginning, where, in answer to Cleopatra's mocking mimicry of Roman measure, "I'll set a bourn how far to be belov'd" he replies, "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth." The Anthony Cleopatra dreams of an Act V, scene ii is cosmic in his transcendence of earthly "bourns":

His face was as the heav'ns, and therein stuck
A sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted
The little O, th'earth.

Octavius Caesar dominates the world at the end of the play, but Antony and Cleopatra have made free with the microcosmic ("The nobleness of life/Is to do thus"), and devised an escape into the macrocosmic ("Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth"), that render Caesar's victory nugatory. It is a paradigm for that conflict between doing and being, between the active and the contemplative, between perfection in the life and in the works, that has haunted man throughout the course of history. And it is all prefigured—or rather, pre-enacted—in the first 35 lines of the beginning.

Shakespeare's mode in this play is creative unbalance: each possibility meets its corrective, its check; each expression of feeling is conditioned by a latent sense of its opposite. Rome and Egypt, virtue and pleasure, reason and passion, the public and the private: we are pitched from one to the other like sailors riding out a storm. The beginning of *Antony and Cleopatra* sets this see-saw in motion, first giving us the Roman

view, then presenting the Egyptian fantasy world, then through the arrival of a messenger reminding us of the Roman actuality... and we are still less than twenty lines into the play! It is a mode of cutting from one set of possibilities to another set that is almost cinematographic and indeed one critic has spoken of the play as "cinematic montage." The result is a fluidity, an assemblage of small discrete segments of action, a swiftness of transition from segment to segment, that are unparalleled in Shakespeare. Just as the beginning of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* announces the awakening and stretching of consciousness, just as the beginning of Dante's *Divine Comedy* announces a structure of correspondences and analogies—both wonderful examples of modular beginnings, incidentally—so the beginning of Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* enacts a dialectical movement of inconclusive critical scrutiny or what A.P. Rossiter, in his *Angels with Horns and other Shakespearean Lectures*, calls "inquisition". And by so doing the opening scene serves as a module for the whole play, in addition to announcing the play's main themes and establishing its dominant metaphors.

The last thing I wish to say about beginnings will carry this essay into uncharted—and perhaps unchartable—territory. But first let me say something about T.S. Eliot's tomb. It lies at the west end of the north nave aisle of East Coker church in Somerset, England and consists of a memorial stone with the poet's name and dates of birth and death in the center, with around it two quotations placed in a circle so that they meet. The first quotation reads, "In my beginning is my end" and the second, "In my end is my beginning." The very circularity of the conceit is itself beautifully expressive of the difficulty of distinguishing beginnings from endings or indeed of knowing whether beginnings and endings aren't, when viewed in a certain light—for the sake of convenience, let us call it the light of mysticism—, but two names for the same thing.

Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*, from whose book I have stolen the title of this essay, has much to say on this topic of beginnings and ends and in particular on endings that refer back to and make sense of middles and beginnings. However, what I am concerned with here are that refer on to,

and make sense of, the consummation of their ends. This is all something of a mystery and for help I should like to invoke the Hindu notion of *karma* whereby an end is ineluctably tied to the data of its beginning. (And let me add parenthetically that this view of beginnings was held by at least one great writer, Thomas Mann, who, as quoted by Kermode, once said of certain literary works that "in their beginning exists their middle and their end".)

Kermode relates the contemporaneity of beginning, middle, and end to a third sort of time, which lies midway between the "stream" of time, or clock time, and timeless time, the time of the mystics. On page 70 of his book he calls this third time *aevum* and the easiest way I can find to describe it is to say it is the time when we 'hear' a whole sonata movement in an instant of apprehension, or suddenly 'see' a complex painting as a unified phenomenon when in fact it took minutes to scan, or 'feel' a complex spatial arrangement that it took much walking through and conscious analysis to understand. (It is because what I describe as hearing, seeing and feeling isn't hearing, seeing and feeling in the normal—that is, sensory—sense that I have had to take refuge in a swarm of inverted commas.)

Probably literary works too have their own *aevum* and the moment when we begin a work and, remembering we have read it before, mentally recreate it in its entirety, or the moment when beginning a literary work we haven't previously read we *know*, by some mystic foreleap of understanding, that the work *has* to end in one way rather than in another—perhaps these moments are the *aevum* of which Kermode speaks in *The Sense of an Ending*. But of course it may be objected that hindsight enters into all this so that we know that a beginning leads on inexorably to a specific middle and a specific end because once upon a time we read the work in grade school. On certain occasions *aevum* may be just such a trick—but it is those other occasions, when we know that our reading of a certain work is a virgin reading and also 'know'—again the inverted commas!—that a certain conclusion is the inevitable outcome of its beginning, that provide confirming proof for this last of my terms in this terminology of beginnings.

But let us return now to the opening lines of *Antony and Cleopatra*. "Nay" has no promise in it of a wife and kids, although my readers will immediately think of half-a-dozen comedies in world literature that begin with a negative to prove me wrong. On firmer ground, it could surely be argued that there is an inexorable fate attached to a dotage that o'erflows the measure. "Dotage" has, to to speak, a timespan and by the end of Act V it must be fully cooked: by then we shall surely have learnt what is pernicious and what glorious about it. To o'erflow the measure is to put a liquid at risk, with the attendant dangers of wastage or volitization. Antony's seed and Cleopatra's lust have indeed been expanded and have reverted to Nilus' slime, but then it is their fate to rise, as a mist to heaven. "I am fire, and air; my other elements / I give to baser life", says Cleopatra on her deathbed and thereby "o'erflows the measure" most splendidly. It is as though Antony's promise in the seventeenth line of the play ("Then must thou needs find out new heav'n, new earth") could *only* have led to such a consummation, as if a tick of such resonance could *only* have led to such a consummation, as if a tick of such resonance could *only* have been answered by a tock of such sublimity.

Faced with such an extraordinary beginning, where just about everything that matters in *Antony and Cleopatra* seems latent, all talk of promises or contracts, modes or modules, finally becomes irrelevant. We need some image like Blake's "heaven in a grain of sand" to explain it: readers atuned to *ae-vum* will find their heaven and their harvest, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, in the grain of the first twenty lines of the first scene of the first act. (And any wordplay on "grain" in the foregoing trope is intentional, thrice over!)

"In my end is my beginning." There are two literary works that enact this literally, like serpents swallowing their own tails. One is Samuel Beckett's *Play*, which ends with the stage direction "Repeat play" (i.e. repeat *Play*) so that ideally one cast should succeed another as the first dorps dead in its tracks—rather like what happens in Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, still running after more than thirty years in the same theatre, except that in *Play* performances should, if Beckett's stage direction "Repeat play" be duely honored,

continue round the clock. The other literary work tha swallows its own tail is of course James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which ends:

Given! A way a love a l ast a loved a long the riverrun, past Eve
and Adam's from swerve of shore to bend of bay, bring us...

Bring us? But something's wrong. Surely Joyce means *brought us* since we've been here already, indeed inadvertently have started the novel again and are half-way through the first sentence of the "beginning". But then riversrun endlessly and so why shouldn't "by a commodius vicus of recirculation" *Finnegans Wake* do likewise? Here is a case where the end can only be completed by a beginning, but where the end *is* the beginning, just as the beginning needs before it an ending to ensure its syntactic, or any other kind of, integrity. We have returned, by a back road, to the beginning of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where there is a wood leading inexorably on to the starts and where the starts when we reach them again lead inexorably back to the wood. Remember, Dante is only "midway" through life's journey and, his vision concluded, he must return to the wood before he can renew that journey, his *real* journey this time, and so ultimately attain, one hopes, to the eternity of bliss he dreams of.

Not all beginnings are good beginnings but this one was certainly a good beginning, in every sense. "In my beginning was my end." But then I run the risk of repeating myself and of playing on, like *Play*, to the very end of time. Enough said.