

Zeitschrift: Bulletin CILA : organe de la Commission interuniversitaire suisse de linguistique appliquée

Herausgeber: Commission interuniversitaire suisse de linguistique appliquée

Band: - (1988)

Heft: 48: Linguistik und literarischer Text = Linguistique et texte littéraire

Artikel: How to create a world : beginnings in fiction

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-978010>

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How to Create a World: Beginnings in Fiction

This essay, in a sense, is not a beginning, but a continuation of another one, entitled «Context-Free and Context-Sensitive Literature: Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and James Joyce's *Dubliners*» (FISCHER 1988). There I asked myself what possibilities a writer has to create a context of understanding at the beginning of a work of fiction, what strategies he has at his disposal to situate his work (i.e. the world he is creating) in a textual and extra-textual context. In answer to that question I suggested two different types of beginning, calling one context-free or autonomous, the other one context-sensitive or non-autonomous. Put very briefly, the first type of beginning is the expository one that apparently takes no prior knowledge for granted, that introduces the reader to the setting, the characters and the beginning of a plot in a step-by-step fashion, taking care that every bit of new information is introduced in its proper place. The other, non-autonomous type of beginning is the one that starts *in medias res*, that confronts the reader with a story that appears to be in progress already and that works on the pretense that he is familiar with the context in which the action takes place. The texts I used for purposes of illustration were «Hands», the first story in Sherwood Anderson's collection *Winesburg, Ohio* (autonomous) and «The Sisters», the first story in Joyce's *Dubliners* (non-autonomous). The approach chosen yielded some insight not only into the two stories, but also into the two collections as a whole. However, I now feel that it has to be extended in two directions. First, it created the impression that non-autonomous beginnings (which are typical of, but not confined to, modernist texts) were somehow more complex, more challenging, more interesting than autonomous ones (which are typical of texts written in the tradition of classic realism). Secondly, it relied too heavily on just the text as such and did not sufficiently take into account the reader's role in the process of interpretation. Here, therefore, I want to concentrate on autonomous beginnings in order to bring out their complexity, and I will look at them with the help of a model which does justice to the multidimensionality of a text and its interaction with the reader.

The bold title of this essay by implication draws an analogy between the archetypal act of creation, God's creation of *the* world as we find it described in the Book of Genesis, and a writer's creation of *a* fictional world. God, one might argue, had absolute freedom when he created the world: he did not have to model it on anything else (in fact, there was nothing else), he did not create it for anybody (except himself), and his act of

creation was unmediated and direct.¹ A writer's freedom when he sets out to create a work of fiction, by contrast, is a limited one; limited by the fact that he is writing in a world already created, that he is writing for a reader and that his creation is an indirect, mediated one, namely a recreation of a fictional world in and through the medium of language rather than a creation. In thus outlining God's freedom and a writer's limitations I have made use of a tripartite division that has proved a powerful critical tool in the last half-century. I am referring to semiotics and its three basic dimensions as put forward by Charles W. MORRIS (1938: 6) in his *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, namely semantics, pragmatics and syntactics, the first dealing with «the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable,» the second with «the relation of signs to interpreters» and the third with «the formal relation of signs to one another.» If we take a work of fiction to be a sign in MORRIS's sense (itself composed of other signs) then it is determined semantically by the fact that it may refer to the real world around it (or rather that it may stand for a world somehow related to the real one), it is determined pragmatically by the communicative situation of a writer (i.e. producer) addressing a reader (i.e. interpreter), and it is determined syntactically by the writer's use of language as a medium. With regard to fiction syntax actually has two dimensions: the relation of linguistic signs to one another within a work of fiction and the relation of texts as complex signs to other texts.²

A very similar tripartite scheme has been suggested by Michael A.K. HALLIDAY (1970: 143), who distinguishes three functions of language, namely the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. In its ideational function «[l]anguage serves for the expression of 'content': that is, of the speaker's experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness. [. . .] In serving this function, language also gives structure to experience, and helps to determine our way of looking at things, so that it requires some intellectual effort to see them in any other way than that which our language suggests to us.» In its interpersonal function «[l]anguage serves to establish and maintain social relations: for the expression of social roles, which include the communication roles created by language itself [. . .].» In its textual function, «[f]inally, language has to provide for making links with itself and with features of the situation in which it is

1 My statements on God's creation of the world are made purely for the sake of the analogy with a writer's creation of a fictional world. I realize that theologians may find them naive as well as misguided. Perhaps one should also remember in this connection the beginning of the Gospel According to St. John.

2 Confirming myself to isolated passages from very different works of fiction I shall not discuss this latter aspect in my essay at all.

used. We may call this the *textual* function, since this is what enables the speaker or writer to construct ‘texts’, or connected passages of discourse that is situationally relevant; and enables the listener or reader to distinguish a text from a random set of sentences.»³

Similar terminologies have been used by others such as Roger FOWLER (1977: 45–48), who combines a transformationalist view of the elements of sentence structure with a HALLIDAY-inspired view of textual structure. These are the three schemes:

MORRIS (1938)	HALLIDAY (1970)	FOWLER (1977)	
aspects of	functions of	elements of sentence	
semiotics	language	structure	textual structure
semantics	ideational	proposition	content
pragmatics	interpersonal	modality	discourse
syntactics	textual	surface structure	text

Clear as they may be in theory, all the above schemes prove to be somewhat fuzzy-edged in practice, and by putting them next to each other I do not suggest that they are identical. However, that a tripartite scheme is persuasive and has some explanatory power is shown by the fact that many recent publications on stylistics make use of it in one form or another. PLETT (1979) and ENKVIST (1988), for example, work with the distinctions established by MORRIS, whereas LEECH and SHORT (1981), like FOWLER (1977), use some of HALLIDAY’s ideas. In the following I shall use MORRIS’ terminology, but shall sometimes replace «syntactic» by «textual» to avoid confusion with syntax in the narrow, linguistic sense of the word.

In the analogy I drew at the beginning between God’s and a writer’s act of creation I claimed that God had absolute freedom when he created the world, but I would now like to restrict this in one respect. Although God himself may be thought of as existing outside of time, his creation of the world was a linear process in time⁴ involving decisions which, in turn, determined subsequent decisions. Every step taken excluded others and thus limited the steps that could follow. Having separated the firmament from the waters, and the waters from dry land, God had limited his options, and when it came to the creation of animals they had to be creatures of the sky, the water and the earth respectively. The same is true for fiction. A text is a linear sequence of signs and, in ENKVIST’s (1988) words,

3 Perhaps it should be pointed out that HALLIDAY has in mind language in everyday use rather than literary language.

4 In this sense time is also a result of the act of creation.

«a text producer must order his text according to the sequence in which he wants to eliminate alternatives, and in which he wishes incrementally to specify the text world». Incremental text production on the part of the writer, of course, goes hand in hand with incremental text comprehension or interpretation on the part of the reader. ENKVIST (1988) again:

Thus when we [as readers] are exposed to an emerging text, certain elements and their collocations in the text activate references to a semantic universe of discourse, definable as a conceptually organized and retrievable system of models of reality, and suggest a specific text world characterized by a highly constrained, specific state of affairs. Initially the receptor of an uncontextualized text must go from text to universe and world: the process might be characterized as bottom-up or text-driven. But then his knowledge of universes is brought to bear on the text and its world through top-down, knowledge-driven processing, which enables the receptor to infer matters not explicitly mentioned in the text and to anticipate ways in which the text might go on. [. . .] Text comprehension and interpretation can thus be seen as a highly complex, incremental process involving the interplay of bottom-up and top-down processing, as well as zig-zagging between the text, the universe of discourse meaning the universe at large within which the text can be placed, and the specific world of the text with its specific, usually highly constrained states of affairs.

In the following I am going to look at three beginnings in the light of, on the one hand, semantics, pragmatics and syntax and, on the other, linear, incremental text processing, but first I have some preliminary remarks on the notion of beginnings.

(1) I have chosen beginnings rather than passages from somewhere in the middle of a text (which would also be possible, of course), because beginnings by definition have no other text preceding them and must therefore be studied entirely on their own merit.

(2) I have also chosen beginnings because it is my contention that very many beginnings are programmatic, that an author uses them very deliberately to establish the semantic, pragmatic and syntactic parameters of the work as a whole. This is no more than a general principle, however, and I readily grant that there are other kinds of beginnings, for example beginnings that function as preludes or overtures, revealing relatively little of the work as such, or beginnings that function on the principle of contrast, setting up a frame of expectation which the text later on subverts.

(3) For a while now I have referred to beginnings of fiction without ever defining the term. In fact I believe that there is no one definition of a beginning that will cover all extant and potential texts. Applying semantic criteria one could postulate that a beginning is constituted by a first theme, and that it ends when another theme is introduced. According to pragmatic criteria one could postulate that a beginning is marked by a mode of dis-

course of its own, for example background description followed by the report of an action, or narratorial comment followed by characters' speech.⁵ From the syntactic point of view, finally, a beginning may be defined variously as the first sentence, first paragraph or first chapter, or else as a passage of text that is set off from what follows through a break in the texture, in the cohesive patterning of the text. It would have been awkward and artificial had I tried to impose just one of these definitions on the texts I have studied. I have therefore applied different combinations of criteria plus a pinch of common sense, but will always explain and justify my decision.

(4) The texts I have chosen for discussion are works, as stated at the beginning, which are written in the «mode of classic realism, with its concern for coherence and causality in narrative structure» (LODGE 1984: 90) and containing a section that one might call a beginning or exposition. I shall first take a second look at Sherwood ANDERSON's short story «Hands» from *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and shall then discuss the beginnings of two novels, namely Jane AUSTEN's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Aldous HUXLEY's *Brave New World* (1932). Not the least attraction of these three beginnings is their brevity, which will enable me to discuss them in some detail.

Sherwood Anderson: *Winesburg, Ohio*

HANDS

Upon the half decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio, a fat little old man walked nervously up and down. Across a long field that had been seeded for clover but that had produced only a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds, he could see the public highway along which went a wagon filled with berry pickers returning from the fields. The berry pickers, youths and maidens, laughed and shouted boisterously. A boy clad in a blue shirt leaped from the wagon and attempted to drag after him one of the maidens, who screamed and protested shrilly. The feet of the boy in the road kicked up a cloud of dust that floated across the face of the departing sun. Over the long field came a thin girlish voice. «Oh, you Wing Biddlebaum, comb your hair, it's falling into your eyes,» commanded the voice to the man, who was bald and whose nervous little hands fiddled about the bare white forehead as though arranging a mass of tangled locks.

Wing Biddlebaum, forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years. Among all the people of Winesburg but one had come close to him.

⁵ BONHEIM (1982) categorizes expositions of short stories according to his own theory of the four narrative modes, namely comment and description (static) together with report and speech (dynamic). I make use of this distinction when discussing the pragmatic aspects of beginnings.

With George Willard, son of Tom Willard, the proprietor of the New Willard House, he had formed something like a friendship. George Willard was the reporter on the *Winesburg Eagle* and sometimes in the evenings he walked out along the highway to Wing Biddlebaum's house. Now as the old man walked up and down on the veranda, his hands moving nervously about, he was hoping that George Willard would come and spend the evening with him. After the wagon containing the berry pickers had passed, he went across the field through the tall mustard weeds and climbing a rail fence peered anxiously along the road to the town. For a moment he stood thus, rubbing his hands together and looking up and down the road, and then, fear overcoming him, ran back to walk again upon the porch on his own house.

Anderson's short story «Hands» is a curious mixture of description, commentary and report throughout, and it is not easy to isolate a part of the text that could properly be called its beginning. Textually the story is extremely cohesive and, if we disregard the primarily visual separation into paragraphs, there are no breaks in its texture. From the point of view of pragmatics, however, we note two breaks: after the first paragraph the text changes from description mixed with report to comment, but switches back to report in the middle of the second paragraph (with the deictic «now» as a textual signal). Semantically, on the other hand, it is the first two paragraphs that constitute something like an entity since they contain a small, self-contained scene that ends with the second paragraph and is not taken up later in the story. It is the scene of the «wagon filled with berry pickers» passing by and the protagonist's reaction to it. It is mainly on semantic grounds, then, that I am treating the first two paragraphs of «Hands» as its beginning.

I would like to begin my discussion of these two paragraphs with a look at two textual features found at the very beginning, namely the title and first sentence. Titles, foregrounded through their prominent position and through the reader's knowledge that they mean something, raise expectations, start a process of progressive inferencing. In this case the reader does not have to wait long, since the hands of the title (or so he infers) reappear as Wing Biddlebaum's «nervous little hands» with which he fiddles about his forehead at the end of the first paragraph, and then twice again in the second («his hands moving nervously about» and «rubbing his hands together»). The reason for the narrator's insistence on this detail is not altogether clear at this point, but the reader may easily infer from it that Wing Biddlebaum's «nervous hands» must be one if not *the* clue to the story. Textually, we could regard this as a rhetorical figure, as the scheme of (lexical) repetition, whose function among others is to foreground the word and to provide lexical cohesion. From the pragmatic point of view the title «Hands» and its repetition are interesting because they set up a kind of mystery: the reader wonders why they are mentioned so frequently

(GRICE's maxim of quantity) and what they mean (GRICE's maxim of relevance). In other words, they create suspense. Semantically the hands are an external sign of Wing Biddlebaum's strange behaviour, but this is no more than hinted at in these first two paragraphs.

The first sentence of the story is a model of clarity, explicitness and coherence, and probably does not strike the cursory reader as in any way extraordinary. The attentive reader, however, will notice that Anderson might have written: «A fat little old man walked nervously up and down [upon] the half decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio.» In other words, he could have put the long adverbial of place at the end rather than at the beginning of the sentence. What is the effect of the arrangement chosen by Anderson? For one thing, through the principle variously known as climax, end-focus, end-weight or «last is most important» it puts the emphasis on a character and his actions (the fat little old man and his nervous walking) rather than on the setting. It also has a second effect, however: as a linear sequence the sentence begins on the veranda, moves towards (but not into) the town of Winesburg and then returns to the old man on the veranda. On the level of plot (semantics) Wing Biddlebaum later does exactly the same thing, when he goes across the field, peers «anxiously along the road to the town,» but then, «fear overcoming him,» runs back to the porch. From the textual point of view the first sentence is thus an iconic anticipation of Wing Biddlebaum's movement at the end of the second paragraph: out towards Winesburg and back again out of anxiety and fear. (In passing we also note that the plot has more such spatial movements: the wagon of berry pickers passing by, and Wing Biddlebaum walking to and fro on his porch.)

I have already commented on one pragmatic feature of narrative strategy in this beginning, namely the short passage of comment at the beginning of the second paragraph, which provides the reader with insight into Wing Biddlebaum's character, his fears, his «ghostly band of doubts,» his separation from «the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years». Placed in the middle of the beginning it is a signpost to interpretation, illuminating retrospectively the first paragraph and prospectively the end of the second and, of course, the rest of the story. It goes without saying that like the repeated word «hands» it provides only partial illumination, for the reader does not learn the ultimate reason for Wing Biddlebaum's fears, doubts and loneliness until later in the story.

The beginning of «Hands» does not seem to offer much of a semantic challenge, since through report mixed with description it builds up a fairly explicit, coherent and self-contained picture of a specific text-world,

namely a small town in the Middle West whose main occupation appears to be agriculture. A field «seeded for clover» is mentioned early on and so are «berry pickers returning from the fields». Is this nothing but the establishment of an almost picturesque setting? The reader may indeed think so for a while until he reaches the little bit of direct speech and is puzzled by it. Why should Wing Biddlebaum be exhorted to comb his hair if, as one is told immediately afterwards, he is completely bald? The exhortation thus turns out to be a taunt; Wing Biddlebaum is being mocked. Here, or at the latest with the beginning of the second paragraph, retrospective interpretation must set in. Wing Biddlebaum, an obviously lonely man, is mocked by a group of boys and girls engaged in horseplay with sexual overtones. He is exhorted not by a girl, but by a disembodied «thin girlish voice»: does it come from a girl or from a man imitating a girl's voice? Boys and girls together imply sexuality and, as fruit pickers, fertility: is it coincidence that the field in front of Wing Biddlebaum's house «had been seeded for clover but [. . .] had produced only a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds» that the field is infertile? Is it coincidence, finally, that Wing Biddlebaum's house stands near the edge of a ravine or does the ravine symbolise the chasm that separates him from the people of Winesburg, Ohio? Combining the information gleaned from the text and his inferences the reader can interpret as he goes along. If his inference is right that Wing Biddlebaum has homosexual leanings, then perhaps it is no coincidence that the only inhabitant of the town that «had come close to him» is a young man. This also explains his anxiety and fear at the end of the second paragraph: it is the anxiety of the lonely old man that his only friend might not come and it is the fear that somebody else, that the wrong people might come.

I have tried to show how in this short beginning textual, pragmatic and semantic factors interact dynamically, how information contained in the text together with the reader's inferencing, how bottom-up and top-down text processing lead to an interpretation of the world created by Anderson. For readers with eyes to see the stage is set.

«Hands» is «only» a short story, however, and one may object that the beginning of a short story must, by necessity, be more informative and more condensed than that of a novel. I do not think that this is necessarily the case and hope to demonstrate it with an analysis of the beginnings of two novels.

Chapter I

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

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families,

5 that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

«My dear Mr. Bennet,» said his lady to him one day, «have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?»

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

10 «But it is,» returned she; «for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.»

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

«Do not you want to know who has taken it?» cried his wife impatiently.

«You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.»

This was invitation enough.

15 «Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week.»

20 «What is his name?»

«Bingley.»

«Is he married or single?»

«Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!»

The bulk of Chapter I of *Pride and Prejudice* consists of an extended conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, preceded and rounded off by a few lines of comment. There is thus a clear pragmatic break after the first two sentences justifying us in treating them as the exposition, but in the following I shall also include the first few lines of the marital conversation in what I call the beginning in order to show the devices that link exposition with conversation.

On the level of semantics, the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* takes the reader from the most general to the most specific, from a truth which is «universally acknowledged», i.e. claimed as valid throughout the world, to a «neighbourhood» and to «Mr. Bennet [and] his lady». It first establishes a rational «universe of discourse», then places a «specific text world» in it and then peoples this text world with two named characters. We can observe this «funnel-like» progression from the general to the specific with regard to a number of semantic features. There is place: the first paragraph is not localized (the word «universally» excluding a specific location), the second introduces vague localizing elements such as «a neighbourhood»

and «the surrounding families», the third mentions a specific place, namely «Netherfield Park». There is time: the first paragraph is timeless, the second introduces the notion of time through an ordinal number («on his first entering a neighbourhood»), the third is more specific still with «one day». Finally, there are characters: the first paragraph mentions «a single man» and «a wife», a kind of archetypal couple, the second particularizes by introducing «such a man» and «families [with] their daughters», the third focuses on specific characters, namely Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. So far the semantic interpretation is entirely bottom-up or text-driven, but as we have seen, the reader's «knowledge of universes is brought to bear on the text and its world through top-down, knowledge-driven processing, which enables the receptor to infer matters not explicitly mentioned in the text». This world knowledge, for instance, tells the reader that the truth proclaimed in the first paragraph is not as universally acknowledged as the text would have it, that it is only held by certain people in certain socio-historical circumstances such as the «families» of the second paragraph, i.e. (and here the reader's familiarity with Jane Austen and her world may help) the land-owning bourgeoisie in late 18th, early 19th century England. The conversation beginning with the third paragraph (and here we are back to text-driven interpretation) further establishes that Mrs. Bennet believes in that truth far more than her rather indifferent husband.

On the level of pragmatics we might ask ourselves what kind of point of view we find in the comment at the beginning or, in other words, what kind of relationship the narrator tries to establish between himself (herself?) and the reader. The assertion of the first paragraph is strong and all-encompassing, so all-encompassing, in fact, that the reader's reaction will be one of rejection, one of «Wait a minute, who is saying that I also hold this truth?» Ironic distance is established, which is widened as the text progresses and as it is made clear by the narrator's voice that the «truth», far from being a universal one, is one held by certain «families with daughters» only, and, more particularly, by the ladies, the Mrs. Bennets, in those families. Thus the movement, on the semantic level, from the very general to the very specific, is paralleled, on the pragmatic level, by a movement from a seemingly general truth to the ironisation of that truth. What masks as truth is unmasked pragmatically as a narrow, rather selfish opinion, as a prejudice in other words. Just as the title of the novel, by stating two negative traits of character, pride and prejudice, implies their opposites, namely humility and reasoned judgement, so the specious universal truth of the first sentence implies its own negation. One might also analyze the pragmatic effect of these first three paragraphs by invoking some GRICEAN maxims. The first sentence, one might say, very obviously

flouts the maxim of quality by stating as a universal truth something which obviously is not, and it observes the maxim of manner (be brief, be orderly) rather too well by moving so very quickly from a universal truth to Mrs. Bennet's maternal worries.

On the textual level, finally, we observe, first of all, the quick change of diction from the formal, elevated language of the first sentence to the Bennet's easy conversational tone (which again parallels the semantic change from the general to the specific). Moreover, the formal language of the first sentence is deployed with great care. It is characterized, on the one hand, by an extrapolated clausal subject («It is a truth that . . .» rather than «That . . . is a truth/true») plus a postpositive adjective («a truth universally acknowledged» rather than «a universally acknowledged truth»), both of which serve to make the sentence top-heavy and to put «a truth universally acknowledged» into its prominent if not over-prominent position. This highly marked beginning of the sentence, on the other hand, is counter-balanced through constructions which, according to the principle of end-focus, place other key words at the end of the noun and the verb phrase respectively («a single man in possession of a good *fortune*, must be in want of a *wife*»). It does not come as a surprise, then, that it is these very words that provide the lexical cohesion of this first page: «truth» reoccurs in 1. 4, «(good) fortune» in 1. 16 and 23, whereas «wife» (together with «single») is taken up by «married or single» in 1. 23. (One may further note the play on «possession» and its near-synonyms: «in possession of [a good fortune]» 1. 1/2, «the rightful property of [some one or other of their daughters]» 1. 5, «to take possession [of Netherfield]» 1. 18). I should like to mention a final textual feature which one might call retardation. I have stressed the rapid and orderly progression from the first to the second to the third paragraph, but I have also pointed out the break between the second and the third, which is constituted by the change from comment to dialogue. Moreover, there is no immediate syntactic or lexical cohesion, and the abrupt conversational beginning («My dear Mr. Bennet . . .») may look like a completely new start at first. Very soon, however, it becomes clear that the letting of Netherfield Park has to do with a single man's entering the neighbourhood, and thus after what I have called a moment of retardation the Bennet's conversation ties in with the exposition both semantically and textually.

To summarize, we observe a tight working together of semantic, pragmatic and textual strategies in this beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*. Semantically we have a movement from the general to the specific, pragmatically we find an ironic distancing from the general truth of the beginning on the part of narrator and reader, and textually we have syntactic

foregrounding and repetition of key words plus retardation after the second paragraph that makes the unfolding of the conversation between the Bennets (which is the beginning of the actual plot) all the more delightful.

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

Chapter One

A squat grey building of only thirty-four storeys. Over the main entrance the words, *Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre*, and, in a shield, the World State's motto, *Community, Identity, Stability*.

5 The enormous room on the ground floor faced towards the north. Cold for all the summer beyond the panes, for all the tropical heat of the room itself, a harsh thin light glared through the windows, hungrily seeking some draped lay figure, some pallid shape of academic goose-flesh, but finding only the glass and nickel and bleakly shining porcelain of a laboratory. Wintriness responded to wintriness. The overalls of the workers were white, their hands gloved with a pale corpse-coloured rubber. The light
10 was frozen, dead, a ghost. Only from the yellow barrels of the microscopes did it borrow a certain rich and living substance, lying along the polished tubes like butter, streak after luscious streak in long recession down the work tables.

«And this», said the Director opening the door, «is the Fertilizing Room».

15 Bent over their instruments, three hundred Fertilizers were plunged, as the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning entered the room, in the scarcely breathing silence, the absent-minded soliloquizing hum or whistle, of absorbed concentration. A troop of newly arrived students, very young, pink and callow, followed nervously, rather abjectly, at the Director's heels. Each of them carried a note-book, in which, whenever the great man spoke, he desperately scribbled. Straight from the horse's mouth. It
20 was a rare privilege. The D. H. C. for Central London always made a point of personally conducting his new students round the various departments.

For the beginning of *Brave New World* I would like to use the same criteria as for that of *Pride and Prejudice*. In l. 13, after some description, we find a short piece of direct speech, which may be said to inaugurate the plot (although description continues): the bulk of Chapter 1 describes a guided tour through a facility by its «Director», who is introduced at this point. Thus the first twelve lines of text may be said to constitute the beginning, but again I shall also look at the paragraph that follows in order to observe what happens at the point of transition.

Let me begin again by looking at the semantic level. *Brave New World*, like *Hands*, but unlike *Pride and Prejudice*, begins with a very concrete, specific setting («A squat grey building . . .») making the reader expect a familiar universe of discourse, were it not for the word «only» which suggests that a building of thirty-four storeys is unusually small. How can the reader interpret this «only»? He may conclude that the building belongs to a very specific text world such as, for example, 20th century Manhattan,

or else that it belongs to a completely different universe of discourse, i.e. a world where nearly all buildings are high-rises. The ambiguity is resolved already in the second sentence where the phrase «World State» establishes for good that the semantic universe of this text does not correspond to the world as we know it (note that «London» provides a link, however!). The text progresses locally by moving from a view of the whole building to its entrance and then to an «enormous room on the ground floor» whose description takes up the whole second paragraph. Whereas the building and its entrance are seen from the outside, the «enormous room» appears to be presented from the inside, as is suggested, for example, by the deictic «beyond» in «cold for all the summer beyond [i.e. on the other side, outside of] the panes». The reader seems to have moved into the building and into the room, but this interpretation is shaken by the third paragraph, when the Director is described as «opening the door», followed by a «troop of newly arrived students». The description of the room begins anew as if the reader had not encountered it before, thus in effect making him one of the students. (This pattern of the guided tour, by the way, is characteristic of the rest of the chapter, since the reader follows the Director from the Fertilizing Room to the Incubators, to the Bottling Room and so on to the Decanting Room.) The local orientation of this beginning thus remains strangely indeterminate with regard to «in» and «out». More could be said about the description of the «enormous room», but I shall do this when discussing the syntactic features of the text. To sum up: Semantically, the beginning of *Brave New World* foregrounds the setting by moving from the outside of a building into one of its rooms. It also quickly establishes the semantic universe of the novel as a deviant one, as – one may infer – the «Brave New World» of the title.

When discussing semantic aspects just now I also mentioned pragmatic ones. The reader, as we have seen, is introduced to the «new» world by an impersonal narrator, but both narrator and reader are somehow suspended between an inside and an outside perspective: being in the room and yet outside it, being one of the students and, at the same time, outside observers. This narratorial sitting on the fence also becomes evident when the narrative, in the fourth paragraph, briefly moves from report to free indirect thought: «Each [of the students] carried a note-book, in which, whenever the great man spoke, he desperately scribbled. Straight from the horse's mouth. It was a rare privilege.» The last sentence could be a representation of one of the admiring students' thoughts («It is a rare privilege for me to be allowed to listen to the great man!»), but it could just as well be a representation of the narrator's thoughts («The students, young, pink and callow as they are, think that it is . . .») and could thus

be part of his slightly ironical stance (cf. also «the *great* man», «he *desperately* scribbled», «straight *from the horse's mouth*»). Narrator and reader thus move between familiarity and distance, between interest and ironical scepticism. As we shall see presently, this is emphasized by word choice as well, especially in the second paragraph.

One of the first things the reader may notice from the textual point of view is the complete absence of verbs from the first two sentences. This has two effects: on the one hand it makes for the impression of a brisk presentation that focuses on essentials only (ENKVIST 1988 calls this the Crucial Information Only (CIO) strategy); on the other hand it makes the reader pay more attention to the verbs when they finally do appear, i.e. in the second paragraph. The reader will then notice constructions like «the room faced towards the north», «a harsh thin light glared through the windows, hungrily seeking . . . but finding only», «wintriness responded to wintriness», «only from the yellow barrels did it [the light] borrow a certain rich and living substance». In all these sentences we have inanimate subjects that are construed with verbs like «face, glare, seek, find, respond, borrow», i.e. verbs that usually or often take animate subjects. It is then that we notice that there are, in fact, no animate subjects in this whole paragraph, although people, «workers», are present in the room: linguistically they are backgrounded to possessive construction («the overalls *of the workers* . . . *their* hands»). The effect of this syntactic strategy is that we encounter a world in which the inanimate is dominant, in which human beings hardly seem to matter at all. Two further observations support this claim: First, the light «glaring . . . through the window», it seems, hopes to find an artist's studio or a university lecture room, but instead of looking for graceful models and interested students, i.e. signs of life, it is «hungrily seeking some draped lay figure, some pallid shape of academic goose-flesh», i.e. signs of lifelessness. Second, human beings are backgrounded so much in this text that we appear to meet the «three hundred fertilizers» for the first time in the fourth paragraph, although they are actually present as «workers» in the second. It may further be significant that these «fertilizers» are introduced through a passive rather than an active construction: «Bent over their instruments three hundred fertilizers were plunged . . .» rather than «Three hundred fertilizers leaned over their instruments . . .» (Note, however, that another, clearly more active, human element is introduced with the director and his students.) This general atmosphere of inhumanity, of the inanimate dominating over the animate is further emphasized by the adjectives found in the second paragraph. They are adjectives of colour («pallid, bleak, white, pale, corpse-coloured») and of temperature («cold, wintri[ness], frozen»), and their effect is heightened

rather than levelled by the presence of their opposites: «cold for all the summer, for all the tropical heat», and «the light was frozen, dead, a ghost. Only from the yellow barrels of the microscope did it borrow a certain substance.»

To summarize: Semantically we have a movement from the outside of a building into one of its rooms, where the inanimate seems to dominate over the animate. Pragmatically the reader is guided in his judgement by the narratorial voice to some extent, but is left in an in-between position: Is he in the room or not? Is he part of the director's group of students or not? Is he impressed by what he sees or not? There is careful distancing, even some irony, but the ironic mode is far less dominant than in *Pride and Prejudice*. Textually the reader is struck above all by the verbs and the adjectives: the verbs are missing in the first paragraph and are construed exclusively with inanimate subjects in the second, the adjectives of colour emphasize colourlessness, those of temperature the cold. The plot as such is hardly introduced in this beginning, but the stage on which it will be acted out is set. The world of *Brave New World* has been created.

It has been the aim of this essay to demonstrate the dynamic interplay of semantic, pragmatic and textual strategies at the beginning of works of fiction. The methods employed by Anderson, Jane Austen and Huxley and the worlds created by them differ so much, however, that no general conclusion can be drawn. I therefore leave the final word to a creator of poetic worlds (in this case T.S. Eliot in «East Coker»):

In my beginning is my end. [. . .]
[. . .] In my end is my beginning.

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