

Reading 15-21 September 2013

First Sentences

A Week of Reading from . . .

William Eaton, *Zeteo* Executive Editor

15 September 2013: K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*

As this is a season for reading manuscripts that are being submitted for *Zeteo*'s Fall 2013 issue [see current [Call for Papers](#)], I have become interested in first sentences and what one can learn from them. So I want to spend this week looking at first sentences in some of the already published works that I have been reading. My attachment to books and words being what it is, I will also add, after each first sentence and my quick "look" at it, a second extract, offering a peek at the riches of each work as a whole.

I begin with Kenneth Dover's [Greek Homosexuality](#) (Harvard University Press, 1978), a book that was highly regarded and influential (to include on Foucault), and which I have been reading as part of work on an essay about Plato's *Lysis*. The first sentence of the preface:

This book has a modest and limited aim: to describe those phenomena of homosexual behavior and sentiment which are to be found in Greek art and literature between the eighth and second centuries B.C., and so to provide a basis for more detailed and specialized exploration (which I leave to others) of the sexual aspects of Greek art, society and morality.

What is the feeling exuded by this sentence? Mastery? Quiet confidence? A sense of a person completely integrated into his field and little disturbed by the storms of life? A person to be

trusted? In fact I think that Dover's conclusions could be complete hogwash and it would still be difficult to reject them because of the tone of his writing and all the careful and thorough scholarship that appears to underlie it.

Among the other treats on offer in Dover's text are his occasional observations about more modern society, made ostensibly to put ancient practices in perspective. For example, from a brief discussion of "respectable British [heterosexual] society in the literature of the nineteenth century:

The good woman, in this literature, does not desire or seek sexual intercourse. She does not even desire marriage; but if a man of good character and ability asks her to marry him, obtains her father's consent, displays patience, tact and modesty in all his dealings with her, and participates with her in a prolonged and complicated ritual of which the essential element is the utterance of formulae and responses in a church, thereafter she has sexual intercourse with him whenever he wishes. He has not at any time alluded directly to this aspect of marriage. She does not enjoy it or take the initiative in it; she accepts it because she loves him and because it is her duty. She does not speak to her friends of what she and her husband do in bed; nor does he, if he is a gentleman, speak of it to his. A woman who seeks sexual intercourse outside the sequence of courtship and marriage as just described, whether because she likes it or because she needs to earn money, is excluded from association with those who have obeyed the rules, . . . The analogy with Greek homosexual eros is not complete [e.g. the heterosexual relationships might have produced and reared children] . . . but the common ingredients are not negligible.

Note: In this passage Dover cites as a source Eric Trudgill, **Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes** (Holmes & Meier, 1975).

16 September 2013: Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

The first sentence of Chapter 1, here in James Strachey's 1955 translation:

In the pages that follow I shall bring forward proof that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams, and that, if that procedure is employed, every dream reveals itself as a psychical structure which has a meaning and which can be inserted at an assignable point in the mental activities of waking life.

Perhaps influenced by his interest in hypnosis, which was not only a therapeutic technique but also a kind of magic trick offered to theater audiences, Freud here (in translation!) sounds a bit like a magician announcing to the audience the next great trick he is going to

do. At the least we might say that his drumming up business fell on deaf ears; it took many years for the first edition, of 600 copies, to sell out. In a 1900 letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, he wrote, “Do you suppose that some day a marble tablet will be placed on the house [a summer place near Grinzing, Austria], inscribed with these words: ‘In this house on July 24th, 1895, the secret of dreams was revealed to Dr. Sigm. Freud’? At the moment I see little prospect of it.”

At the same time, there are a few moments in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that are breathtaking because now, more than a century later, we can appreciate how earth- or consciousness-shattering some of Freud’s discoveries were. For example, as regards the unconscious and the idea of an internal censor, there is this from Chapter IV (“Distortion in Dreams”):

The fact that the phenomena of censorship [e.g. of journalism or of soldiers’ letters] and dream-distortion correspond down to their smallest details justifies us in presuming that they are similarly determined. We may therefore suppose that dreams are given their shape in individual human beings by the operation of two psychical forces . . . ; and that one of these forces constructs the wish which is expressed by the dream, while the other exercises a censorship upon this dream-wish and, by the use of that censorship, forcibly brings about a distortion in the expression of the wish. . . . It seems plausible to suppose that the privilege enjoyed by the second agency is that of permitting thoughts to enter consciousness. Nothing, it would seem, can reach consciousness from the first system without passing the second agency; and the second agency allows nothing to pass without exercising its rights and making such modifications as it thinks fit in the thought which is seeking admission to consciousness.

17 September 2013: William Hogeland, *Founding Finance*

On the first day of the meeting that would become known as the United States Constitutional Convention, Edmund Randolph of Virginia kicked off the proceedings.

I came to the book after reading an engaging interview with the author. This helped me get past this first sentence which suggests (somewhat gently) a type of history that I personally do not care for: history as novel. To adapt one of my favorite lines from Emerson (“Self-Reliance”), it seems to me that a result of the effort at re-creation and dramatization leads to a book’s every truth being not quite true; every word chagrins. In the present case, Hogeland’s book, this becomes a reminder that first impressions can be deceiving and that we may at times be mistaken in paying too much attention to them.

Further on, Chapter 5 (“History on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown”), Hogeland’s book heads daringly down quite another path, and re-begins much more engagingly: “I’m untrained. When it comes, for example, to the turning point resolution passed by the Continental Congress on May 10, 1776, . . . I learned about it for the first time, and not so many years ago either, while sitting at a long table in the reading room of the New York Public Library’s main branch.”

This is disarmingly and engagingly honest and direct, and leads to a vigorous critique of the work of other historians of the American Revolution period, to include of the work of the distinguished historian Gordon Wood. I quote Hogeland:

[Wood] ignores or plays down the many other quotations, easily found, in which people of various social strata, on all sides of the founding economic conflicts, did define those conflicts in terms of a war between labor and business enterprise, between small business and big business, between small farmers and artisans on the one hand and diversified commercial farmers and factory owners on the other, between American creditors and American debtors, and between those barred from the franchise and those using the right of the franchise to crush ordinary Americans economically.

Super!

Link

William Hogeland, [**Founding Finance: How Debt, Speculation, Foreclosures, Protests, and Crackdowns Made Us a Nation**](#) (University of Texas Press, 2012)

18 September 2013: Robert E. Page, Jr., *The Spirit of the Hive*

Social insects have fascinated natural historians and philosophers since Aristotle and continue to fascinate us today with their self-sacrificing altruism, complex nest architecture, untiring industry, and division of labor.

This is straightforward, no-nonsense, and evidences an ability and desire to classify, to establish boxes and put things in them. We might say that it is not surprising that such a person was interested in bees, with their honey combs and extraordinary ability to have different tasks—foraging, nursing, undertaking, guarding, inseminating—seemingly seamlessly performed by different groupings of bees, and this without any obvious ruler or government structure. (The queen is not a ruler, but rather—like a Victorian Era wife—enslaved to the task of reproduction.)

This brings us to the central conclusions of Page's work:

[T]he coordinated behavior long observed and admired emerges from a simple logic of self-organization and requires only that worker honey bees respond to stimuli they encounter; when they respond, they change the amount of stimulus at that location and thereby affect the local behavior of their nestmates.

I would note also that Page's careful approach and long study of bees allows him, toward the end of his book, to offer some sage advice regarding what we might call the current rage for genomics:

Genomics is still in an infant stage. The genome is hugely complex and interactive. Too often we try to reduce it [or individual traits or behaviors, I will add] to "a gene for X" when it clearly doesn't work that way. We have not figured out how to incorporate a view of the genome as part of the ecology of the gene, where the expression of genes and gene regulatory networks of the entire genome, combined with the internal physiology and external environment of the organism, are part of the effect of an individual gene. . . . I am certain that what we think we know today will be wrong tomorrow, . . .

Link

Robert E. Page, Jr., [**The Spirit of the Hive: The Mechanisms of Social Evolution**](#) (Harvard University Press, 2013)

19 September 2013: Michel Onfray, *Le Songe d'Eichmann*

Although the front cover of his *Atheist Manifesto* (*Traité d'Athéologie*, 2005) broadcasts "international bestseller" and includes a blurb from Stephen Colbert, the French philosopher Michel Onfray remains better known on "the continent" than in the United States. In Paris he has in recent years been *the* best-selling anti-establishment and easy-to-read philosophical voice—promoting atheism, anarchism and a hedonistic philosophy of the senses, and speaking out against the dominance of the rigorous philosophical tradition that in France leads from Plato and the Gospels through Kant and Hegel to Sartre and Levinas. Not surprisingly, he is a champion of Nietzsche.

Onfray's *Le Songe d'Eichmann* (Galilée, 2008) has two distinct parts. The first is an essay which, quite usefully, notes the connections between Nazism and Kant's thinking (as opposed to Nietzsche's). The second part is an invented dialogue between Kant, Nietzsche and the Nazi official, Adolph Eichmann. The latter, well before Onfray's invention, told the Israel court that was trying him for crimes against humanity (among other things) that he

was a great reader of Kant's work. He testified: "I placed my life, as far as I could, in the service—I would put it this way—of this Kantian demand." The demand was Kant's "categorical imperative": "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law."

My translation of the first two sentences of Onfray's essay, which begins *Le Songe d'Eichmann* (Eichmann's Dream):

The standard, popular reflex connects "Nazism" and Nietzsche. For the so-called well-educated, along with the neoliberal and Catholic post-modern philosophers who violently opposed the Mai 68 movement [i.e. the student uprisings], and including, too, others falsely enlightened and truly misled: the author of *Beyond Good and Evil* was behind the swastika, the Reichstag fire, the Night of the Long Knives, the Fuhrer's mustache, the death camps, gas chambers and the whole European conflagration.

On the negative side, reading the second sentence I was reminded of one of the formulae for being "a hip European philosopher" that have been proposed by the American critic Carlin Romano: "Be prolific, even if you don't have much to say, because regularly pumping out books indicates that you do have much to say."

On the positive side, Onfray's essay is a quick read and I very much appreciated his pointing out that Eichmann's Kantianism made all too much sense and was not absurd (as Hannah Arendt had suggested in her work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*). At one point Onfray quotes from Kant's short essay "What is Enlightenment?" wherein Kant proposes that we have a double duty: to think freely on our own ("*Sapere aude!*" Dare to be wise!), and to obey existing authority as we perform our tasks as civil servants or citizens. I have argued elsewhere that Kant was proposing a deal between professors (who in Prussia were civil servants) and the state, or the public more generally. Let us think freely in the privacy of our homes and purely academic (hard to read and little read) publications, and we will serve the interests of the state in our more public roles.

For his part Onfray takes hold of this line from Kant's essay: "It would be ruinous for an officer in service to debate about the suitability or utility of a command given to him by his superior; he must obey." Onfray's comment is that these words could have been adapted and used by Eichmann's boss, Heinrich Müller, the chief of the Gestapo, and by Hitler himself.

Notes

- Romano's "formula to be a hip European philosopher" appeared in "[Slippery Sloterdijk: the Edgy European Philosopher, Circa 2012](#)," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 5 2012.

- My thoughts about Eichmann and Margarethe von Trotta's movie *Hannah Arendt* appeared in *Zeteo* this past June. Click for [link](#).
- Portions of the Eichmann trial are now available via YouTube and the transcript ("Record of Proceedings in the District Court of Jerusalem") has been put online by [The Nizkor Project](#). (Nizkor is a Hebrew word which means "We will remember.") The session during which Eichmann, infamously, discussed Kant's categorical imperative is Session 105 (20 July 1961). Click for [transcript](#) or [video](#).

20 September 2013: Jackson Burgess, *Pillar of Cloud*

My interest in first lines might be said to have begun in 1975 in a classroom in Wheeler Hall on the University of California at Berkeley campus where the late Jackson Burgess was teaching fiction writing. Professor Burgess believed that all novels had one character, the authorial voice, and that we could become quite acquainted with this character by paying close attention to the first paragraph. It may also be that he had learned that this way of thinking simplified teaching, as, instead of having to give a close read to all the many pages of we students' primitive stories and novel chapters, he could focus on just the first paragraphs. This approach can be useful, too, for those who are evaluating multiple submissions to a journal. For the moment, however, it seems only fitting to look at a first sentence from one of Burgess's novels. Here from *Pillar of Cloud*, a historical novel which I believe was his first published book:

When I came West, in 1858, Whitaker, Kansas Territory, looked to me like the end of the world.

There is something in Burgess's first 18 words that tell us that *Pillar of Cloud* is a coming-of-age novel, and that our young narrator will be wiser/more jaded at the end. Indeed hardly had I read this first sentence than I was thinking of another 22-year-old narrator—the most famous narrator in American literature—Nick Carraway, who instead of going West in the nineteenth century, to seek his fortune settling what had been Indian lands, decided, in the twentieth century, "to go East and learn the bond business." This is also to say that Burgess's novel is hard to read just for itself, without hearing the echoes of *Gatsby*, *Moby Dick*, . . . And now, in 2013, more than a half century after *Pillar of Cloud* was published, one might hear echoes of many later fictions—*The Devil Wears Prada* came to mind.

A few days before reading *Pillar of Cloud*, I attended a program at New York's [Pearl Theatre](#), a program where two theater directors, Jack O'Brien and David Leveaux, spoke about directing Shakespeare. One of the two, Mr. Leveaux, I believe it was, called attention to the fact that a number of Shakespeare plays begin with a man trying to create a kind of perfect world, and the collapse of this effort is the story of the play. (*Lear* jumps to mind,

and in a sense this describes *The Tempest* and *Macbeth* as well.) Some combination of this and *Pillar of Cloud*, its echoes included, led me to think that American coming-of-age novels typically involve a young person who thinks of himself or herself as quite normal, even virtuous, and who enters an adult world which the young person sees as dominated by demon-possessed and often oppressive people (Tom Buchanan, Ahab, *Prada's* fashion magazine editor, Miranda Priestly, and Gatsby too). The young person comes to think of her or his task as involving learning to cope with, and not be made crazy by, these others. (It has been said that the worst day of an American's life is the first day at the first job, and there is a sense in which these novels are about this: starting working, be it on Wall Street, on a whaling ship, in the fashion industry, or on the Kansas prairie.)

“It occurred to me that there was no difference between men, in intelligence or race, so profound as the difference between the sick and the well” is one of Nick Carraway's most famous conclusions. Burgess's narrator, Garvin Cooper, concludes:

I had come across into the West. I had lost my friend, and my guide, and I had lost the certainties of boyhood; but I was lucky. The frontier had stripped me without breaking me. Now I could start fresh at the making of a man, and if I made a good man I might then make a good judge. Drum [the guide, one of the demonic, the friend being the other] had said that a man needs three things: knowledge, his reputation, and a good horse. I had the horse, at least. And I had knowledge of my own ignorance—which is the beginning of wisdom.

Note

I have ordered a copy of *Pillar of Cloud* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1957) for my 13-year-old son, who I think will like it—the story of a young man overcoming physical and psychological challenges. Copies are best found at libraries or via [AbeBooks](#).

21 September 2013: Plato, the *Lysis*

I have found Professor Burgess's technique particularly of use when reading Plato's dialogues. My current practice, before forging ahead into the arguments, is to read the openings over and over again, and to read some scholarly commentary on the openings, until I feel that I have a solid understanding of who (what kind of person) is telling the story and with what intentions. Thus, for a prime example, the *Lysis* begins with Socrates recounting, as if to the writer, Plato, or to no one at all:

I was on my way from the Academy, making straight for the Lyceum, along the road that runs outside the city wall, close under the wall itself. At the little gate by the spring of Panops, I . . .

As there was no punctuation in Plato's day, defining a first sentence is a bit arbitrary. The point here is that Socrates *says* he was going from one leading gymnasium to the other, and gymnasiums were where well-to-do pubescent boys could be found, to include found wrestling naked. (The Greek word "gymnasium" is formed from the Greek for nude: *gymnos*.) So there is a sense in which Socrates is, unabashedly, telling his listener(s) that he was "cruising." Not quite for sex; Plato's Socrates never has sex with the good-looking boys he accosts; the erotic impulse gets diverted or sublimated into dialectic, intellectual explorations.

The Plato scholar Christopher Planeaux has also proposed that Socrates's "making straight" is blatantly contradicted by Socrates's own description of his route, which, as Athenians of Plato's time would have recognized, was not direct at all. It might be that in this way Plato is bringing to life an idea of indirection, which is central to his project. We might also say that he is presenting Socrates as an unreliable narrator. Assuming that there are texts with relatively reliable narrators, we can wonder if the *Lysis* could be the first text in Western history to make use of a narrator whose unreliability was a deliberate creation of its author. This would lead to asking why Plato would have decided to take, or explore, this approach in this particular text about friendship? Was he wishing to call attention to how in friendship we are always dealing with people who misrepresent or misunderstand themselves, and so how can we indeed become friends, and with whom—with which of these mirages—would we be becoming friends? (And, as Aristotle argues, our best friend is, or should be, ourselves—another veteran deceiver.)

Such thoughts might be said to lead with a certain inevitability to the "aporetic" (empty) conclusion of the *Lysis*, which has frustrated any number of modern scholars:

O Menexenus and Lysis, how ridiculous that you two boys, and I, an old boy, who would like to be one of you, should imagine ourselves to be friends, . . . and yet we have not been able to discover what a friend is.

Note

Article mentioned above was Christopher Planeaux, "Socrates, an Unreliable Narrator? The Dramatic Setting of 'Lysis,'" *Classical Philology* 96, no. 1 (January 2001).

Afterword: *50 Shades of Grey*

A colleague who became intrigued by this week of reading and ruminating about first lines complained that my texts were too obscure and intellectual. What about a Dan Brown novel? he asked. Or, *50 Shades of Grey*.

“I scowl with frustration at myself in the mirror.” That’s the first sentence of *50 Shades*. One thinks immediately of the Queen in *Snow White* and perhaps of Narcissus as well, though he was not so displeased by what he saw. This is a narrator with a morbid fascination with herself. Does the novel tell how she escapes this fascination or is caught up in it?

Not having read the book, I cannot answer. Thanks to the Web, however, I was able to find the “**14 Naughtiest Bits**,” at least as identified by journalist Lizzie Crocker for *The Daily Beast*. My favorite of these is:

He drags the hair tie painfully out of my hair, but I don’t care. He needs me, for whatever reason, at this point in time, and I have never felt so desired and coveted.

I begin to get the sense that commentators have misunderstood and given a false impression of what this book is about. Spanking would seem to come a distant second to hair. To provide further evidence for this re-interpretation, and keeping in mind that Professor Burgess would have us focus not just on first lines but on first paragraphs, I close this week with rest of *50 Shades*’ first paragraph:

Damn my hair—it just won’t behave, and damn Katherine Kavanagh for being ill and subjecting me to this ordeal. I should be studying for my final exams, which are next week, yet here I am trying to brush my hair into submission. I must not sleep with it wet. I must not sleep with it wet. Reciting this mantra several times, I attempt, once more, to bring it under control with the brush. I roll my eyes in exasperation and gaze at the pale, brown-haired girl with blue eyes too big for her face staring back at me, and give up. My only option is to restrain my wayward hair in a ponytail and hope that I look semi-presentable.

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