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Essay

The Beginning of the Poem: The Epigraph

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Abstract: Theoretically, a poem can begin in any way. What does it mean that in practice, poems often begin in a particular way—that is, by returning to a fragment of some prior thing? We see this in the encore of John Milton's opening to *Lycidas* ('Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more'); differently, we see this in the widely used convention of the poetic epigraph (for instance, T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' begins with six lines from Dante's *Inferno*). While there is an established model for understanding the beginning as an act that invokes poetic precedent, this paper seeks to expose the beginning's logic of return to a broader sense of language that is beyond the remit of poetic tradition as such. With a focus on the epigraph, this paper thinks about the everyday existence of poems and about how this existence relates to ordinary language, asking, how do these different modes of language function together? How does ordinary language collude in the creation of poetry? In its enactment of the passage of language from one mode of existence to another, the beginning of a poem might offer some answers to these questions.

Keywords: epigraph; apostrophe; beginning; poetics; intention; difference; 20th century poetry; 21st century poetry; Derek Walcott; T. S. Eliot; M. NourbeSe Philip

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Marianne Moore liked to kick things off with a bang—

Openly, yes,
With the naturalness
    Of the hippopotamus or the alligator
    When it climbs out on the bank to experience the

Sun, I do these
Things which I do [1]

I borrow from Moore's startling beginning of a poem to say that I am interested in the things which *the beginning of poems* do, which is to say, I am interested in how poems do not simply open but rather gesture at their opening: hence Moore's operative adverb, 'openly'. In the manner of opening, then, open-like, the beginning announces itself as 'beginning-like' in a rhetorical act of self-constitution, to speak like Murray Krieger, who writes that, "the poem, in the very act of becoming successfully poetic—that is in constituting itself poetry—implicitly constitutes its own poetic" [2] (p. 263). This gesture affirms an actual decision, made elsewhere, of course, in a scene always unavailable to the reader, to begin the poem. Perhaps the gesture even virtualises that decision by enacting a choice to break the silence. Hence, the 'yes': openly, yes: *yes, openly*. Such a gesture suggests the exuberance of beginning a poem. It suggests the mess of 'climb[ing] out on the bank', the effort of it, too: in place of the single 'O' of classical apostrophe, a triplet of syllables challenges the tongue, 'o-pen-ly', followed by two asymmetrical caesurae around a breathy, and though affirmative, inconclusive 'yes'.

Over the past few years, I have been curious about the way poems begin. More specifically, I have been curious about those poems that cultivate a manneristic relationship to the act of beginning itself. eginning is their object and their beginnings *do* betray the labour of poetry; they do not collude in the fiction in which there was not one (no *in medias res*). Like Edward Said before me, and like Giambattista Vico before Said, I maintain a distinction between beginnings and origins, the latter which invoke the extraordinary (elevated, mythical realm of the gods) in a way that is of little interest or relevance to the subject of making things (in the sense that poetry, understood with reference to its etymological root, *poiesis*, appears to us as the paradigm for the made thing). The business of beginning belongs to the world of making and is, to invoke Vico, to do with the chaotic, messy, unelevated, and profoundly ordinary ways in which the existence of something like a poem gets off the ground. Such a ground would be of frogs and rocks (and hippopotami and alligators), "quite another world from Plato's realm of forms or from Descartes's clear and distinct ideas", as Said writes [3] (p. 348). I think this is true of a poem like Derek Walcott's 1990 epic poem, *Omeros*, which plays manneristically on Aimé Césaire's refrain, *le petit matin*, the 'foreday morning' refrain from *Cahier d'un retour du pays natal* [4]. This also happens to be a poem that works through the concept of beginning, a poem whose conceptual priority is precisely the grounds of its own beginning. The beginning of Walcott's poem plays on *le petit matin* with its multiple, psychedelic and importantly, *delayed* image of a sunrise. An allusion to the refrain of another poem is an interesting way to begin and gets us thinking about how a beginning of a poem might be constituted by repetition, even as it sets out to establish something different. In parallel with the delayed sunrise, *Omeros* also begins with a delayed apostrophe. A complex refraction of classical apostrophe finds form in a fisherman's shed in St. Lucia.

> O open this day with the conch's moan, Omeros,
> as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun
> gently exhaled from the palate of sunrise.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Only in you, across centuries
> of the sea's parchment atlas, can I catch the noise
> of the surf lines [4] (p. 12–13)

The poem's delayed apostrophe breaks some twelve pages of synoptic island vision; with the invocation to the muse, Omeros (Homer), the sun finally rises, and the narratorial 'I' surfaces for the first time in the poem. Is this where the poem begins? I think this is an Edward Said kind of question—it is a question that indicates a problem. This is partly a problem of location—where is the beginning?—a driving force of Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method* where beginning is read as a question of location (which location), a gesture (which gesture), as a sign of commitment (which commitment), and above all else a problem—or rather, a suite of problems—to be studied.

Walcott's muse is a planet-traversing, island-circling Homer; he appears neither as the universal foundation of Western poetry we expect to see in the referent 'Homer' nor as a god-type we expect to see in the addressable 'muse'. But even in a secular form, it has become increasingly rare in Western poetry to invoke the muse (Walcott's poem is all the more remarkable for its inclusion of the gesture). There is another beginning gesture that is worthy of interest precisely because, like the poetic invocation, it appears similarly conventional, an ordinary gesture (to speak like Wittgenstein) made in poetry that is, perhaps because of its very ordinariness, seldom remarked upon [5][1]. We may not invoke the muse much anymore, but often we see, at the top of a page of poetry, a little fragment of text taken from another poem. In the English language, this fragment is

called an 'epigraph', which surfaces as a third and most recent sense of the word, following a first designation for an inscription on a building to indicate its name, and a second, now obsolete, designation for the superscription of a letter or book [6]. The third sense given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "[a] short quotation or pithy sentence placed at the commencement of a work, a chapter, etc. to indicate the leading idea or sentiment; a motto" [7]. The widely accepted idea that the quoted text indicates or is congruent with the spirit of the work is something I will investigate in this article. Perhaps the relation between quoted text and 'proper' text is more complex and nuanced than it first seems. I will also look at the ambiguity that the inclusion of an epigraph introduces into the beginning moment of the work, an ambiguity of location that is already indicated in the *OED*'s use of 'at' in its definition, '*at* the commencement of the work [emphasis added]', an ambiguity which leaves the question of whether it appears before or as part of the poem proper unanswered.

The epigraph in the sense that is most familiar to us today came into circulation during the middle of the nineteenth century. In English, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'And write me new my future's epigraph' appeared in 1850 [8]. In French, Charles Baudelaire's "*Samuel a eu le front d'y établir pour épigraphe: Auri sacra fames!*" appeared in 1847 [9] (p. 72). The widespread meaning in use today is perhaps better captured in the Baudelaire line, which has Samuel 'daring' to use a quote from Prudentius ('Hunger for gold'), while Browning's leans toward the now more obscure sense of an epigraph as a motto. Despite this slight difference, these two examples suggest two framing concepts about the inclusion of a foreign text at the commencement of a work: first, that the practice is surprisingly modern; and second, that the paradigm for the practice was firstly poetic. Because they follow a precedent set out by poets, prose works such as novels, textbooks, trade manuals, and so forth could be thought of as drawing from poetic technique, or striving for poetic effect, in the moment they include an epigraph at their commencement.

It could be that Jonathan Culler's intervention in the critical neglect of the apostrophe, an intervention that has been generative for several decades of thinking about Western lyric poetry, could provide a useful way to think about the epigraph. We may notice that the epigraph seems to share with apostrophe a quality of *unremarkability*, a poetic figure we have become so habituated to seeing that we both expect to see it and somehow fail to see it. We are not surprised to see an epigraph at the beginning of a recent bestselling poetry collection, such as Ocean Vuong's *Time is a Mother* (the epigraph is taken from César Vallejo: "Forgive me, Lord: I've died so little") [10]. Nor are we surprised to see another epigraph appear at the beginning of one of this collection's poems, "Dear Rose" (this is taken from Roland Barthes: "I have known the body of my mother, sick and then dying") [10] (p. 71). As an ordinary, everyday kind of poetic convention, could the epigraph be thought of as the industrial age's answer to classical apostrophe? To epigraph (this verb sense has one recorded use, from 1860) is to behave poetically in the sense that poetic presence (the quoted fragment of poetry) indicates poetic pretence [11]. Culler's writing on apostrophe adds weight to the idea of this event as an act of striving to be poetic. Just as apostrophe is "perhaps always an indirect invocation of the muse [and] the O of apostrophe refers to other apostrophes and thus to the lineage and conventions of sublime poetry", perhaps an epigraph refers to other epigraphs in a virtual sense that similarly claims for the speaker, "the embodiment of poetic tradition and of the spirit of poesy" [5] (p. 63).

If self-alignment with poetic tradition were an adequate explanation of the epigraph, we would not need to explore beyond the poetic congruence it affords to understand its significance. Epigraphs provide the spirit of the work, we might say, or determine a brief preview by invoking a pertinent previous text; in so doing, they lay the ground for their own pertinence within the poetic tradition embodied by the citation. This is the dictionary sense of the epigraph, which seems to function without controversy in the empirical, everyday life of poetry. Though Baudelaire finds Samuel's claim on Prudentius audacious, we may feel less strongly about Vuong's claim on the tradition of Barthes, or indeed, T. S. Eliot's claim on the tradition of Dante. It seems there is little more to say than

this: a poetic precedent is at once established and joined. This mode of understanding is exemplified in the critical response to Eliot's epigraph for "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", taken from Dante's twenty-seventh canto of the *Inferno*. Jane Worthington anticipates some consensus when she writes that the speakers of both Dante and Eliot shared a fear of speaking: "Thus did fear of the world's judgment and utter disregard for the judgment of the dead condition the response of Guido da Montefeltro. Prufrock too was afraid to speak; he was afraid of comments, of snickers, of not being understood" [12] (p. 2). Differently, Ron Banerjee describes the poem in terms of a "self-referential paradox" that defies "critical judgment of the hero as it invites identification". The epigraph becomes a perfect embodying vehicle for such paradoxical self-reference by establishing an "esthetic distance" at the same time that it provides "an overview on Prufrock and his words" [13] (p. 963). Despite the relative complexity of his reading, Banerjee also remains within the conventional understanding of the epigraph as such, as a preview of the subject of the poem. More recently, Peter Lowe briefly turns to the epigraph in his description of Eliot's surprising affinities with Percy Shelley. Lowe reminds his reader that, "[as] always with Eliot, a study of the poem's epigraph is useful", but rather than submit the epigraph to reinvestigation, Lowe then reproduces the core of Worthington's reading: "Prufrock, then needs to talk but, fearful of being misunderstood or rejected, talks to himself, or to an imagined audience of one" [14] (p. 71). Though Eliot's link with Dante has generated much critical response, the responses have operated within the principal assumption that there is some significant coherence between the Dante fragment and the body of the poem, though what the specific coherence may be is up for debate. As a result, the guiding question asked of the epigraph is posed along the lines of what can we say about the influence of Dante within Eliot's poetics?

The operative irony is that the energy that powers this 'presumed coherent' line of questioning issues precisely from a pronounced absence of signs of coherence, the famous lack of explanation that lies between the epigraph and the poem in the poem. The opacity of the relationship between epigraph and poem is given dramatic emphasis by Eliot's decision to quote the six lines in their untranslated form. In other words, what seems to precipitate an interpretative tradition that seeks similarity is a fundamental and functional difference, maintained formally on the page by the gesture of untranslatability. But we need not stop here, at a somewhat fruitless topos of untranslatability. I would argue that the path to a different reading of the relationship between the epigraph and the 'proper poem'—one that potentially avoids our conscription to repetitive and unremarkable critical questions—begins with a simple reading of the epigraph itself.

It seems to me that the central concern of the speaker of canto twenty-seven, Guido da Montefeltro, has been misunderstood and misrepresented by many readers of "Prufrock" as a fear of speaking. This reading appears to respond to the final line of the epigraph, "*Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo*", which I translate directly as, "Without fear of infamy, I (may) reply". Readings such as Worthington's or Lowe's assume the primacy of the speaker's fear (*tema*), failing to account for the structure of the line, whose syntax outlines the conditions of addressability: the *senza tema d'infamia* is the condition for the *ti rispondo*. By accounting for the whole line, we understand that its most salient feature is that of da Montefeltro asserting the conditions of his speech. He will speak on the condition that he has no living audience. Lowe interprets these lines as suggesting "that we are listening, primarily, to a man in torment [with] a willingness to talk only when there is no chance of one's words being passed on to a larger audience" [14]. But the issue of audience in the passage impresses me as one of category rather than size; it seems da Montefeltro resists having a true audience, not a 'larger' audience. The *infamia,* implying a complex mingling of 'fame' and 'ill-repute' associated with poetry since antiquity ('*Vivam*', Ovid's final word of the *Metamorphoses*, is exemplary), completes the thought: da Montefeltro can speak only on the condition that his words will not be addressed to an audience as *poetry*. "*Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo/Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero*" certifies the speech's non-addressability—that it will not (as it seems to him) pass to an audience

from *questo fondo* is the guarantee that the speech to come will not be poetry; after all, as Culler's work on apostrophe proposes, the mode of address is an important criterion by which we apprehend poetic speech. The lines that continue in Dante's canto render these six ironic: the story is told, and da Montefeltro's words do indeed pass into the world of a living audience as lines of famous poetry. But crucially for our reading of "Prufrock", the citation breaks just before the story appears. Da Montefeltro's discourse therefore continues to operate, from the space of the epigraph, within the conditions necessary for speaking that he intended to establish. By the epigraph, the poetry of Dante is virtually withheld, and the audience is virtually deferred, suggesting to us the stunning conclusion that the quoted lines of Dante do not function as poetry.

Among the potential consequences of understanding the epigraph this way is the idea that it begins the poem with a gesture that goes beyond establishing poetic precedent. Indeed, poetic precedent seems insufficient to the task of understanding the function of these lines. If we infer from the fullness of the final line that a condition for speech was proposed, and from the severing of this line from the rest of the canto that these lines should not be understood as poetry, we may see that Eliot's poem begins with something very different to congruence with poetic tradition. In a simple way, the very first line of the first stanza, "Let us go then, you and I", might be read as a turning away from the epigraph's *not-poetry* and into poetic language. Prufrock's world is a world of audiences—even the 'muttering retreats' animate the lines with a sense of audition, of poetic reception. Seen as a tethering of poetry to its difference, its other in not-poetry, the beginning of the poem enacts a transition of language that must take place for the existence of all we nominally determine to be poetry: the transition from non-poetic to poetic language. (It is in this sense that Eliot's selection of Dante might be congruent: da Montefeltro's speech is first translated into the language of a flame, and then back, in Banerjee's Wittgensteinian phrasing, "into ordinary human language" [13] (p. 964).) Counterintuitively, in thinking about the beginning of the poem in this way, we recall the writings about the end of the poem by Giorgio Agamben, for whom the question of how to distinguish poetry and not-poetry was a technical, rather than evaluative problem. Agamben found the limit case in enjambment, the non-coincidence of sound and sense:

> All poetic institutions participate in this noncoincidence, this schism of sound and sense—rhyme no less than caesura. For what is rhyme if not a disjunction between a semiotic event (the repetition of a sound) and a semantic event, a disjunction that brings the mind to expect a meaningful analogy where it can find only homophony? Verse is the being that dwells in this schism [15] (p. 110).

Placing the question of whether poetic language can be determined by one sole criterion to one side, my focus here is the material implication proposed by Agamben that identifies a transition in language. From this, we establish an idea of poetry existing in close proximity to its other in a technical sense; indeed, its precarious existence depends on the external support of its other. Without the possibility of a passage from or back to non-poetry, there can be no poetry. This is what is implied by Agamben's reading of the end of the poem as a collapse of the poem into prose (because enjambment is no longer possible in the final line, the coincidence of sound and sense is restored). The act of epigraphing may also be more fully understood with reference to Agamben. If the verse, severed from its original, is separated from its ending, we encounter the striking possibility that the verse no longer ends. It then becomes on one hand an ultimate, virtual poetry (because it does not fall into prose in the final collapse), but precisely because of this virtuality it is no longer a poem, as it has been removed from the founding and generative tension with its other.

What is the difference? And what will we make of this difference? In what remains of this essay, I want to demonstrate how epigraphs might be productively read as a beginning's tethering to difference. I want to apply some of these general thoughts of this difference as an evocatory formula for the poem to an important twenty-first century poem. The poem I think of is *Zong!*, the 2008 book-length poem by the Trinidadian–Tobagonian–Canadian experimental poet, M. NourbeSe Philip. The book may be thought of as a reparative

(counter-)narrative, one which attempts to retrieve the lost story of some 150 enslaved Africans who were thrown overboard by the crew of the British slave ship, Zong, in 1781. At the time, this mass murder appeared in the language of maritime insurance law as a question of property loss. After the insurers of the ship refused to pay for this 'loss', the resulting court cases (*Gregson v Gilbert* (1783) 3 Doug. KB 232) held that in some circumstances, the murder of enslaved Africans was legal (technically, this could not even be described as murder because the slaves were legally property) and that insurers could be required to compensate the ship owners for the Africans they had thrown overboard. Philip's *Zong!* draws its language nearly exclusively from the two-page legal summary of the subsequent appeal—the only extant record of the lives of these Africans.

How this story may be told, or not told, has been the subject of much critical reflection. Throughout the variety of responses to this work, however, there has been one consistent assumption: that Philip has drawn exclusively from the appellate record in her language for *Zong!* to retrieve this story. But while an overwhelming number of *Zong!*'s pages derive from the original legal document, half a dozen of these pages do not. Taking these fragments of language together in order, they read as follows:

- "Though they go mad they shall be sane/Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again . . ." (Dylan Thomas).
- "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right!" (Shakespeare).
- "The sea was not a mask" (Wallace Stevens).
- "*Non enim erat tunc*/There was no then" (St. Augustine).
- "The poet is the detective and the detective the poet" (Thomas More).
- "No one bears witness for the witness" (Paul Celan).
- "There was a noise and behold, a shaking . . . and the bones came tougher, bone to his bone . . . the sinews and flesh came upon them . . . and the skin covered them above . . . and the breath came into them . . . and they lived, and stood upon their feet" (Ezekiel 37:7, 8, 9, 10).
- "*Praesens de praeteritis*/The past is ever present" (St. Augustine).

The presence of these fragments—they are, of course, the epigraphs to the book and the book's sections of poetry—indicates that there is at least one additional semantic field from which Philip draws her poetic language. The gathering of these textual statements fundamentally alters the nature of the book's outward premise as a text entirely derived from the appellate record as source text. In addition to the discourse of British law, we encounter the discursive field of Western literature.

By turning to an unacknowledged parallel source text for *Zong!*'s eight epigraphs, we encounter a linguistic relation of a different order. Unlike *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the material dimensions of the parallel source text are far less straightforward to identify and circumscribe; but like *Gregson v. Gilbert*, this source text appears before us as something both monumental and 'meagre', an enduring textual tombstone that alludes to something grand (the 'great tradition') while appearing so *small* on the page, commemorating some less definable event that has taken place in the language we call literature [16] (p. 199)[2]. What grounds does this third site provide the poem, and what is mobilised into productive tension? Does the inclusion of the epigraphs invite questions about our ongoing relationships with Western literature, which appear in the form of the epigraph so meagre and monumental?

Given that the book's driving questions include the question of what a document is, and the question of what a document does, I feel it is worth observing the full range of *Zong!*'s source documents here. (This may also be worth considering in more extensive studies of Philip, given that the use of epigraphs in her work is relatively rare [17][3].) The attempt to discern the nature of the relation between the eight epigraphs and *Zong!*'s six-part poem raises questions, I think, that also concern the nature of the epigraph in general. In the same way that Walcott's *Omeros*'s intense displacements of the act and structure of beginnings invite a reflection on the location of the beginning of the poem as such, Philip's *Zong*! standard/non-standard use of epigraphs invites broader questions

about the purpose and effects of the literary convention. To begin this line of questioning with recourse to my foundational questions about the beginning of the poem, I ask, do epigraphs 'introduce' the poem proper and as such, do they exist outside of the poem? Or are they part of the language of the poem's beginning, and as such, do they exist within the same textual space?

Philip writes in the essay "Father Tongue".

> I seldom think of myself as marginalised in the way in which the concept of marginalisation is commonly used—being outside the mainstream (often the white stream), with the often unarticulated assumption that you want to get in, or be let in. However, I do position myself on the margin in the sense of the word meaning 'frontier'. By so doing one's relationship to the dominant culture immediately changes—what was the mainstream immediately becomes hinterland with all that that connotes [17] (p. 128).

Reference to the 'great tradition' of Western writing is not something we have come to expect from Philip's writing. If the habitual understanding of an epigraph asserts pertinence as an organising theme, or an order and spirit of telling, the specific case of *Zong!* here should be read in contradiction of this habit, exposing an authorial choice to assert difference rather than coherence. This can even be said with respect to Philip's own earlier work, where the epigraphs that appear with essays in Philip's collection, *A Genealogy of Resistance*, display pointed political relevance and are often made by politically aligned, radical authors (such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Audre Lorde, and Ned Thomas). Thematic correspondence appears to be the operating principle that guides the inclusion of epigraphical text in these earlier works. For instance, the essay "Ignoring Poetry" bears an epigraph from Adrian Mitchell that reads, "Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people", a quote that performs the functional duty of introducing the idea of writing out of 'otherness' borne by the essay that follows [18]. But the use of epigraphs in *Zong!*, in contrast, represents a departure from the principle of thematic correspondence. Speaking from the mainstream—or what, as above, Philip would term the 'white stream'—the textual fragments that are included in *Zong!* appear to recentre the implied authority of the lyric voice, an authority that Philip has explicitly distrusted throughout her writing career. The *Zong!* epigraphs thus seem to—counterintuitively—represent the 'most poetry' that Mitchell quipped ignored 'most people'. Given that Philip's poetic experiments have their basis in this distrust and desire for decentring lyric authority—*She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* is exemplary of these feelings and intentions—the inclusion of Shakespeare, Wallace Stevens, Augustine, text from the Old Testament, and so on suggests a wilful perversion of the epigraph convention, and indicate here an intention to weave difference into the 'beginning place' of the poem's in *Zong!* It is a difference that redoubles the difference that the epigraph as such already has the capacity to produce [19].

What is the significance of this doubling of difference at the beginning of the poem? Perhaps the inclusion of the epigraph is meant neither to re-establish nor destroy their implied voice of literary authority, but rather to re-orient both reader and writer to the implications of that authority, either as a potentially reparative archive, or a literary "hinterland", as Philip puts it. In Philip's formulation, to situate oneself on the frontier (and therefore to be actively marginal) is to reorient oneself to the dominant culture: one writes literature not to get 'let in' to what passes for 'literature', but to expose and excavate that literature's silences. This sense of orientation could be particularly true of referencing and epigraphing. In *Poetic Intention*, Édouard Glissant writes "that [r]eference is of totality" [20] (p. 77). If we understand the epigraphs in *Zong!* as a gesture to an idea of totality, we might think of this totality as 'total literature'. In this way, we may understand the epigraph performing a rhetorical function that mobilises a sense of total literature. In this mobilisation, the poem bears witness to poetry, suggests Derrida:

> . . . by promising, in the act of its event, the foundation of a poetics. It would be a matter, then, of the poem 'constituting its own poetics', as Krieger puts it, a

> poetics that must also, *through* its generality, become, invent, institute, offer for reading, in an exemplary way, signing it, at the same time sealing and unsealing it, the possibility of *this* poem [21] (pp. 65–66).

Referencing and archiving, indexing and epigraphing, is a way to think of this totality, a way of marking one's orientation to the text. Read this way, Philip's assemblage of epigraphs asks, what is an archive of literature? Where is it held, who holds it, and what does such an archive mean to someone locked outside of it? As Jenny Sharpe writes, "[w]hat I am calling an affective relationship to the archive does not involve unearthing new historical data so much as understanding silences as the haunting limit of what was recorded" [22]. No new data are required in order to understand our relation to the past, or the past's relation to the present. Out of his reading of Fred D'Aguiar's novel, *Feeding the Ghosts*, Ian Baucom writes that "[t]he past endures *not* because a novelist . . . has paid some present attention to it but because the present from which attention is paid has been made . . . by everything else that has been" [23] (p. 331). We already have everything we need. The intention to reorient oneself in literature requires nothing new, and radical poetics can simply act on the textual fragments of works we already have on hand (Shakespeare, Stevens, Augustine).

The strangeness of epigraphs is expressed primarily, I think, in their enactment of a slipperiness between othernesses, the textual outside (the textual outside of the proper text, which itself alludes to totality, if we follow Glissant: a total literature) and the proper text at the critical site of the beginning, the opening lines. But another way to look at the tensions of this site is through the lens of intention. The epigraph conveys an act of beginning that is visibly intentional yet simultaneously veiled and unlocatable, displaced somewhere between the lines of the epigraph and the lines that follow. This ambiguity is expressed by showing the writer at one of their most intentional moments: they have consciously selected these specific lines from this specific text and decided that the epigraph should be these specific lines—so many lines and no more. Intentionality is further heightened by the gesture of self-insertion into a literary tradition: the gathering of statements and their paratactical arrangement locates the writer as an agent operating within total literature. But at the same time, what is submitted to the reader in the epigraph is a vision of the writer at the height of their uncreativity: these words are not derived from the visitation of any muse, and they did not erupt from any spontaneous, interior source; the writer has not written any of these words themselves, but has carefully extracted them following a careful course of reading, recording, and editing. Incongruously, in the epigraph, the writer is at the height of their authorial performance (intensifying the act of beginning within their immediate literature by looking upon total literature) at the same moment they are yet to present any writing of their own. In this way perhaps all epigraphs build incongruity into the poem. The epigraph may be read as marking a space of intention that forgets intention, consigning the starting point of a work into an undefinable space behind the quoted text, a space of oblivion. Was the event of the epigraph in service of forgetting the beginning? Veronica J. Austen writes that Philip "has constructed a narrative of the Zong massacre based on a representation of a hearing which is itself also distanced from the occurrence of the massacre" [24] (p. 77). Here, too, we see documentation/textual practice/representation drift away from and 'forget' the beginning point, even as it serves an intention to reconstruct just this beginning. Just as this distancing and refraction of the historical recording situates *Zong!* within a chain of portrayals, the epigraphs create a parallel chain of portrayals, giving rise to another beginning event that, if read in parallel to the historical record, may also be seen as mimetic of something forgotten. What is implied by the arrangements of the epigraphical text is that a yet unnamed event takes place somewhere in total literature and that this event bears upon the event of the *Zong!* massacre.

In the case of the epigraph, it seems that what is admissible in the poem is also fixed in the space outside of it. With its uncertain and unstable status of belonging to, or in, or, to invoke the *OED*, *at* the poem in mind, what role or value do we assign to this little

passage of text that sits at the poem's head? What is it doing here? We have already established that it does not simply provide a preview of the work to come. Nor does it simply stand in for the invocation to the muse, performing a rhetorical function that allows for the work to address itself qua literary work, authorised by its own contriving of adjacency to other literary works. How imaginable is the beginning of a poem without its epigraph? How would we imagine the beginning of "Prufrock" without its epigraph? What would it mean if another poem used the same epigraph—what kind of poem would this open? Given Eliot's heightened claim on Dante as a kind of literary property, the epigraph would seem more fundamental to "Prufrock" than extraneous. It also seems fundamental given the imaginative and interpretive possibilities opened by this instance of paratactical arrangement, where the setting of different texts beside one another might suggest a priority of adjacency over a sequence, and in this way, become expressive of an abstract sense of the poetic (as expressed by Vico and Glissant). Yet at the same time, the epigraph also insists on a systematic idea of an order of telling. Their existential basis is that they appear at *first*; by definition, an epigraph cannot appear anywhere other than the beginning of the poem. So: sequence over adjacency after all? What is fundamental in the appearance and expression of the epigraph is its priority: if it appears, it is the thing that appears first, that bit of text which bears the privilege of bearing a 'telling order' at the top of the poem, before the proper telling order of the poem begins. But why should the thing that comes first be the species of some previous text, text that comes from somewhere else, an outside text? Thinking of beginning as staging something that comes from the outside, or from the outsider, recalls Said's reading of Freud's Moses as the stranger who delivers the Jewish law to the Jewish people. Said's late Freud emerges as the exemplary cosmopolitan capable of formulating identity as that which "cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without that radical originary break or flaw which will not be repressed, because Moses was Egyptian" [25] (p. 54). Through Freud, Said proposes a circumstance of reading as the opening of oneself to text, and an opening-out of identity to the other. Through the untethering of the epigraph from its presumed congruence with the text that follows it, we are reminded of this version of Moses: the possibility that what seems to precipitate an interpretative tradition based on similarity is a fundamental difference.

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Notes

1 Jonathan Culler broke the silence on the strangeness of apostrophe—previously unremarked upon in part for its (presumed) convention and in part for its (embarrassing) symptom of poetic pretence—in the influential essay "Apostrophe".

2 This was Philip's description of the effect of viewing the appellate record. See "Notanda" in *Zong*!

3 One of the few places Philip uses epigraphs is in the essay collection, *A Genealogy of Resistance*.

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