A Typology for Teaching Novel Incipits

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Numerous attempts have been made to deal with incipits. Seeking to avoid aporias from hitherto existing approaches (first sentence, theory of narrative modes, hermeneutical, etc.), the author of this paper has opted for a communicative approach based on Andrea Del Lungo (1993), who distinguishes four incipit functions: 1) the codifying function, 2) the interest-stirring function, 3) the informing function, and 4) the dramatizing function. This choice was made with respect to maximum teachability: best possible clarity combined with a realistic requirement of student competence in textual analysis. The author shows that only because of the ambivalent status of the information allocated in an incipit can the functions 3) and 4) be correlated and he presents a functional graph in which to place incipits according to their type.

From a number of viewpoints, and especially for teachers of literature, novel incipits are an engrossing phenomenon. Unlike novels, of course, and most short stories, which are extremely compact in their construction, incipits are shorter and more manageable with respect to the analysis of textual parameters. Unlike course syllabi, they might instil the intrinsic motivation to read the entire novel and thus serve a pedagogical function. Didactically, they represent the easiest kind of narrative text for students with little previous knowledge in rhetoric and/or textual analysis and should therefore come first on the list of narrative genres to be worked on.

If Peter Erlebach is right, a typology based on analytic description is the only appropriate way to deal with incipits (1990: 14). Yet, typologies vary in terms of abstractness, complexity, and (graphic) clarity – which you cannot overrate when it comes to teaching. The least abstract and most ‘straight forward’ typology for teaching purposes is Andrea Del Lungo’s functional approach from 1993/2003, which largely borrows from ancient rhetoric. In

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1 In the meantime, Del Lungo’s paper “Pour une poétique de l’incipit” (1993) has been converted into a book, L’Incipit romanesque (2003). He refers to examples from 19th and 20th-century French novels. In the following, I will refer to the more concise paper from 1993.
the following, I will present (and question) the premises and give an outline of his typology. Further, I will try to make it work with more (graphic) clarity – which it is lacking in my view – especially when it is applied to individual incipits. The cardinal finding of this paper is the ambivalent status of the information given in the incipit, which varies according to the type of incipit. Del Lungo’s approach works only because of this ambivalence, a premise he does not account for but that brings about the very possibility to efficiently teach this type of approach, preferably at college or university. The advantage of a typology based on Del Lungo is that the schematization of individual items of incipit information can, as I propose in this paper, be used to make students aware of exactly this ambivalence.

To begin with, Andrea Del Lungo refers to incipits as textual “fragments” (1993: 137). As a concept, I do not find this term very useful nor completely adequate since – unlike fragments in a straight sense – incipits do not exist in themselves: their borders, or, more concretely, where they end, often are not clear and must be negotiated (see below). Considering the information it gives away, the incipit represents a base which supports the entire novalastic construct. Thus Charles Grivel (1973: 91) writes: “Every constitutive element links up with it”. Viewing the incipit as expositio, the information of the novel (l’information romanesque) is not evaluable at the beginning of a text and must spring from the decoding of the entire work. (Grivel 1973: 90)

From a hermeneutic point of view, Grivel (1973: 90) says, the meaning of a novel cannot be grasped from its beginning, since, in any case, no part of the text is capable in itself of retaining its meaning. Therefore, “the novalastic must precisely be considered as the retention of the signification it intends” (Grivel 1973: 90). Retention means to possess and hold back at the same time. In this respect, the incipit seems to be similar to a ‘fragment’, and then again it is different, since it does not possess nor give away anything from the whole. More concretely, it bears characteristic features which set it apart from the rest of the work despite the fact that it cannot be separated from it. This makes the hermeneutic status of the incipit highly ambiguous.

From an ontological point of view, the incipit represents the “passage of the threshold between silence and discourse” (Raymond Jean, quoted in Del Lungo 1993: 133), between absence and the work of art. “Threshold” and “passage”, however, are metaphorical thinking constructs introduced to avoid essentialisms of the kind ‘incipit = x’. And indeed, there is nothing ‘essential’ to be said about an incipit, which becomes even more evident once we tackle the questions: Where does the incipit (materially) end (or:

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2 All translations by myself, AH.
what is not incipit anymore)? Where or what is/are the border/s of the incipit? Del Lungo expounds on these questions in terms of a break or shift (fracture, Del Lungo 1993: 135) that allow us to separate the incipit from the rest of the text.

Considering the complexity of the modern novel in the way it codifies and orients the text and its reading, it is not enough to limit oneself to the novel’s first sentence, as certain critics (Claude Duchet, Raymond Jean) have it. (Del Lungo 1993: 135) Del Lungo, with reference to Jean-Louis Cornille, proposes a list of potential breaks or limits: rhetorical, graphic, narratological and others. To render a complex and hence difficult phenomenon even more undecidable, there can be multiple breaks, he writes, and “it is often very arbitrary to choose the principal one” (Del Lungo 1993: 136). Although partly compatible with Del Lungo, Helmut Bonheim’s approach is less undecided but more difficult to teach because it presupposes that the students are knowledgeable in rhetoric and/or discourse analysis:

an opening or exposition is both a piece with the whole of what follows and yet is also an identifiable portion of a fictional text, usually over at a particular point. The theory of narrative modes can help us to find such points, when they exist, and help us define the kinds of openings with some degree of precision. This theory has it that all narrative consists of the two static modes, comment and description, and the two dynamic modes, speech and report. The static modes bring with them an identifiable exposition: since comment and description convey no sense of time passing, the story proper begins with a ‘One day...’ or ‘It was the afternoon of the 16th of September when...’ – a deictic time reference, often accompanied by a shift from present to past. This is a signal that tells the reader that the beginning is over (Bonheim 1982: 193, my boldface).

For several reasons, students will probably have to capitulate when they tackle modern or postmodern novels, the beginnings of which are not as clear-cut as Bonheim has it. What, for example, does a student make of an incipit like the one in William Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932: 1):

Sitting beside the road, watching the wagon amount the hill toward her, Lena thinks, ‘I have come from Alabama: a fur piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking. A fur piece.’ Thinking although I have not been quite a month on the road I am already in Mississippi, further from home than I have ever been before. I am now further from Doane’s Mill than I have been since I was twelve years old

She had never been to Doane’s Mill until after her father and mother died [...].

To begin with, even for experts it is at times extremely difficult to exactly distinguish description from report, as in the above case. For students, there is another major didactic problem: from their school grammars they have learned to distinguish between static (also referred to as ‘state’ or ‘stative’)
and dynamic **verbs** – which have absolutely nothing to do with static or dynamic **modes** of narration. Although *sit* does not figure among static or state verbs, in this incipit it describes a state ("Sitting beside the road") – as opposed to *think*, which describes a process in a mentally active subject ("Lena thinks, 'I have come from Alabama [...]'"). So, is the first sentence of the Faulkner incipit report or description? To be honest, I would not want to decide for one nor the other, especially when I ponder the two kinds of thinking ("Lena thinks" plus follow-up in single inverted commas, and "Thinking" plus follow-up in italics). The case is not less intricate when I rephrase the first sentence from the Faulkner incipit according to Bonheim’s template sentence: ‘*One day* Lena was sitting beside the road thinking…’ – report or description? According to Bonheim, the incipit would be over with the sentence containing the tense shift ("She had never been [...]"), but this is not convincing when I try to account for the next five and a half pages following the above quote, which are connected to its first two sentences through a number of textual markers. Perhaps there should be other or more than two parameters to determine incipit length. So much for where the beginning ends.

To escape problems of exact demarcation, Del Lungo (1993: 137) describes the incipit as a "strategic zone" with mobile limits, whose extent can vary considerably. "Strategic" refers to a functional, communicative approach, which, it seems to me, is a reliable way out of hermeneutic or essentialist aporias. If we regard the text as a form of communication, the incipit represents the moment of establishing contact between an author and readers. This can be done in many different ways, directly or indirectly: the narrator can take the readers by the hand and arrange or design the key information – the information relevant for the actual story. Then again, the narrator may decide not to give the key information away from the start, s/he may want to play with the readers, talk to them, as if s/he wanted to establish a personal relationship, as in Italo Calvino’s novel *If on a winter’s night a traveler* (1979: 3): “You’ve set out to read the new novel *If on a winter’s night a traveler* by Italo Calvino. Relax. Gather yourself. Brush aside every other thought. Let the world around you vanish in a haze.”

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3 The paratexual elements like the novel’s title are supposed to establish contact with the historical/physical reader, i.e. “the public”, e.g. in a book shop when a potential reader gets interested in a novel (see Genette 1987: 78, 95). Anthony Nutall, interestingly, does not distinguish paratext from the actual incipit: “‘If on a winter’s night a traveller…’. These words plant certain hooks in the reader’s mind. ‘If’ implies an indefinite multitude of possible apodoses - ‘then’ clauses, which could follow; winter is more mysterious and therefore, paradoxically, more pregnant than summer; a traveller is necessarily a liminal figure, moving form this place to that as he passes from past to future. The words therefore compose an excellent opening” (Nutall 1992: Preface, vii).
When a narrator keeps the flow of information sparse – information relevant for the progression of the story – the result can be ambiguous: readers may be captivated, irritated, or bored, in the worst case. We can find a good example of such a narrator in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881: 5) by Henry James:

> Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not – some people of course never do – the situation is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime.

As if it were not enough, we may even imagine incipits in which the narrator refuses communication or even reprimands, scolds, or mocks the readers, as Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s narrator in the novel *Journey to the End of the Night* (1952: 13): “If I wasn’t as constrained, as forced to make a living, I’ll tell you right away, I would conceal everything. I wouldn’t write one more line”. In this incipit, the readers are mocked and scorned by a narrator who implies that the readers may consider themselves lucky to receive something to read at all.

So, anything can happen at the beginning of a novel. Yet, although the open genre of the novel continues to bring forth new incipit variants, we can distinguish, with Del Lungo, four basic functional features: 1) the framing or codifying function, which establishes the text; 2) the interest-stirring function, which seduces the reader; 3) the informing function, which stages the fiction; and 4) the dramatizing function, which sets the story off. (Del Lungo 1993: 138)

1) The **codifying function** installs the narrator, or a narrating voice, and other systemic structures and signals building up a horizon of expectation on the part of the reader. The narrating voice is thus given an identity. S/He may or may not be part of the story or remain anonymous. More specifically, the incipit may look like this:

> You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by

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4 Werner Wolf would count this function among “familiar framings”: “a consequence of the basic, orientating function of framings as codings of cognitive frames” (2006: 299, see also 300–303).

5 For reasons of simplicity and to avoid overlength, I decided to adopt Del Lungo’s terms. - As for the problem of demarcation, of ‘Where does the incipit end?’, it is to be anticipated that demarcations may vary according to what functional aspect we are looking at, e.g. the fiction may be staged, all necessary information given, before the readers are seduced. Thus, the demarcation problem - if we decide to stick with it - remains to be solved.
Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly – Tom’s Aunt Polly, she is – and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before.

Now the way that the book winds up is this: Tom and me found the money that the robbers hid in the cave […] (Mark Twain: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884: 3)

*Huckleberry Finn* is a good example of a text legitimizing itself through a *justificative metadiscourse* (Del Lungo 1993: 138)\(^6\) referring to an authority (Huck, the narrator-protagonist), who, with slight restrictions (“mainly he told the truth”), like a witness, confirms the authenticity of “that book”, written by the author Mark Twain. The codes displayed in this incipit are twofold: besides the justificative metadiscourse, the diction imitates the vernacular of the novel’s setting, which signals that *Huckleberry Finn* is a realistic novel.

Similarly, incipits are codified by other systemic structures, formula-like introductions or generic framings (Wolf 2006) with signal character such as *Once upon a time*, for instance, signifying the beginning of a fairy tale. In Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), the formula characteristic is not so obvious in the actual incipit (“It was five o’clock on a winter’s morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express […]”, 11), yet in combination with the reception-guiding paratexts (author’s name, title, cast of characters) it becomes inevitable to infer that a crime is going to happen and the case is going to be solved.

These examples show what Del Lungo underscores right at the beginning of his paper: that an incipit normally inscribes the work in the history of a genre – e.g. realism or detective fiction – more or less explicitly, of which the cited specimens serve as models. Moreover, the incipit inscribes the work in an intertext of famous (and therefore familiar) “first sentences” and “stereotyped forms”. (Del Lungo 1993: 131) Thus, as Jean has it, an incipit does not come out of sheer nothingness (quoted in Del Lungo 1993: 133): it is doubly connective in that it is linked with other incipits and in that it links the work with other works of literature.

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6 Prefaces, as in many renowned 18th-century novels which stage an editor, must be set apart from incipits. With reference to Genette, Del Lungo brings up the example of the *préface actoriale*, in which a character qualifies the ensuing narrative, saying that in such a preface, a “gliding inside the text […] is at work” (Del Lungo 1993: 137). Implicitly, Del Lungo suggests that such prefaces be counted among incipits when he talks about the incipit as a “zone […] of which the limits are often mobile and uncertain”. (Del Lungo 1993: 137)
2) The **interest-stirring function** goes back to the *captatio benevolentiae* in ancient rhetoric, which was supposed to invoke the goodwill of the audience right at the beginning (*exordium*) of a public discourse. In modern times, of course, the *captatio* is further meant to seduce the readers, to draw them into the happenings of the story. To name concrete strategies to seduce readers: there is *anticipation* alluding to happenings of the future events in the story. Agatha Christie’s incipit is, interestingly enough, preceded by a “Cast of Characters”\(^7\) in which the “sleuth”, the detective, is presented as “Hercule Poirot – The Belgian sleuth [who] illustrates the efficacy of his methods when he comes face to face with a murderer on an international express”, or “Cyrus Hardman – An American commercial traveler who knows more than he tells and tells more than he knows.” (7–8) In more than only Poirot’s and Hardman’s case, the “Cast of Characters” anticipates their roles and qualities, which will be relevant in the future solution of the murder case and thereby gets the readers interested.\(^8\)

Further, narrators sometimes alienate readers with a riddle (as you will see later in Henry James), or they may allude to uncertainty, alleging that an event might or might not happen or that something is or is not the case (“knows more than he tells and tells more than he knows”) and so forth. Del Lungo interprets the *medias in res* incipit as another strategy to stir interest in that it immediately draws the readers into the middle of the action and thus poses a preliminary riddle about the previous history of events – preliminary to the extent that the riddle will be solved relatively quickly as the narrative unfolds (Del Lungo 1993: 141). It goes without saying that there is an overlap between the riddle and uncertainty, the latter being the direct result of the former.

3) The **informing function** goes back to the rhetorical *inventio*, precisely to the underlying questions **Who**, **What**, **Where**, **By Whose aid**, **Why**, **How**, and **When** (Del Lungo 1993: 143), which would structure the outline of the subject in a public discourse.

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7 Dietrich Scholler, whom I owe particular thanks for introducing me to Del Lungo, critically elaborates on Del Lungo and applied his schema to modern French and German novels. He analyzes a “Cast” different in effect in Eckhard Henscheid’s novel *Die Vollidioten [The Complete Jerks]* (1978) (2001: 276–277).

8 According to Genette, we would have to count a “Cast of Characters” among paratexts (Genette 1987: 7–8) since it is something apart from the incipit. Del Lungo argues that there are some paratexts (like the *préface actoriale*) which are very closely connected to the incipit, “in which a sliding inside the text […] is at work” (Del Lungo 1993: 137).
To know what this means in modern times, have a look at an extended version of Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* incipit:

1. AN IMPORTANT PASSENGER ON THE TAURUS EXPRESS
It was five o’clock on a winter’s morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express. It consisted of a kitchen and dining-car, a sleeping-car and two local coaches.

By the step leading up into the sleeping-car stood a young French lieutenant, resplendent in uniform, conversing with a small man muffled up to the ears […]

It was freezing cold, and this job of seeing off a distinguished stranger was not one to be envied, but Lieutenant Dubosc performed his part manfully […] there had come this Belgian stranger – all the way from England, it seemed.

Here, the readers at first are given thematic information about the setting of the story: five o’clock on a winter morning, the country (Syria), the historical city (Aleppo), the locus of the crime (Taurus Express, the different train wagons), weather and outside temperature. In addition, we read about an “important passenger” and protagonist (Hercule Poirot), the master mind, a “distinguished stranger”, as it is indicated in the chapter heading. Through these items plus the mentioning of the Belgian detective in the “Cast of Characters” it is clear that on this train a murder will soon be committed and that detective Poirot will solve the case.

These bits of information add up to a sum total that one can chart on the following axis:

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scarcity of information (-) ←----------------→ information saturation (+)
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As for the Christie incipit, one can establish a relatively high information saturation on the right end of the axis with regard to the subject and the further course of the narrative, whereas for James’ *Portrait* incipit (see above), the degree of information saturation will have to be charted on the left end. – Del Lungo concedes that “information saturation” does not mean ‘completeness’ since first, every element of the text may be potentially informative, and second, “every text shows marks of presence and absence, especially at the beginning” (Del Lungo 1993: 143).

To illustrate this in the *Portrait* incipit above: the very first sentence presents extremely abstract and therefore imprecise information (“under certain circumstances”), clad in an alleged truism (“there are...”). The readers can neither know about the nature of the “circumstances” nor can they really judge the proposition. Although the “circumstances” are taken up in the following sentence, they remain as enigmatic as before since they are not further qualified. In addition, the narrator mentions “people” who allegedly never partake of the afternoon tea, without giving neither a reason nor
an explanation of what kind of people he is referring to. Equally missing is the answer to the question why the situation would be “delightful”. – The third sentence of the Portrait incipit represents a metanarrative reference to a “simple history”, and thus qualifies the narrative that will unfold. That the story is, after all, not as simple as the narrator has it (it spreads over 600 pages) leads to the assumption that the metanarrative reference is in itself a simplification and should be taken ironically. It is evident by now that the information presented in the Portrait incipit is too abstract, if not vague, and too logically incoherent to even constitute a satisfactory piece of the fictional universe to be built. – Nevertheless, all this is not a blank, not nothing, but very probably serves a certain purpose with regard to the novel as a whole. This kind of information is meant to create an ambiance, a continuum, represent a milieu, and so forth (see Erlebach 1990: 29).

It can be guessed from my last statement in the Portrait analysis that the kind of information presented in an incipit has a strong influence on the way the action is perceived by the reader. This is why the informative function is closely connected to 4) The dramatizing function. Manfred Pfister (1977) underscored the close connection between information allocation and action in the exposition of a drama. If the “point of attack” (the point where the action sets in) comes late, the dramatic incipit situation is preceded by an extensive previous history; consequently, there is a large quantity of information to be mediated in the exposition (Del Lungo 1993: 137). The dramatizing function, to speak with Del Lungo, affects the point of attack and the intensity of the mediated action. To illustrate this, I will analyze how Henry James’ Portrait incipit (1881: 5; my boldface) continues to unfold:

The implements of the little feast had been disposed upon the lawn of an old English country-house, in what I should call the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon. Part of the afternoon had waned, but much of it was left [...] From five o’clock to eight is on certain occasions a little eternity; but on such an occasion as this the interval could be only an eternity of pleasure.

9 In 1964, long before the postmodern ‘meta-’ hype, Harald Weinrich (1964: 59) wrote that “this once [...] is not another time, but another world, “ and “the preterite tense and the other tempora of the tense group II are thus a signal that we are dealing with a narration. It is not their task to announce something past. It would be illegitimate to identify something narrated with something past” (1964: 76). Thus understood, by the sheer use of specific tenses, a narrative discourse always and already conveys an element of its own metadiscourse.

10 Finally, Del Lungo divides incipit information into two classes: A) the thematic information referring to the story (see Christie incipit) and B) information about the fiction under scrutiny: B1) the metanarrative information (presenting what the text is about, or the ‘fiction talking about its fictionality’), and B2) the constitutive information (building the fictional universe). To be exact, Del Lungo starts out with the codifying function and says that the codes referred to in the incipit also actually represent information and thus a category of its own. I find this rather confusing with respect to the categories informing and decoding function. Viewing the didactic purpose of this article, I decided to do without this distinction.
The persons concerned in it were taking their pleasure quietly [...] The shadows on the perfect lawn were straight and angular; they were the shadows of an old man sitting in a deep wicker-chair [...] 

In James’ Portrait incipit, there is scarcely any action at all. On the contrary, the atmosphere is utterly static, as if somebody froze time between 5 and 8 p.m. (see boldface). This, of course, is achieved through abounding description of which the information content is considerably redundant. One may chart the dramatic action of the Portrait incipit, similarly to the degree of information saturation, on the extreme left end of the dramatization axis:

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\text{delayed dramatization} (-) \quad \Box \quad \text{immediate dramatization} (+)
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For an example of immediate dramatization, one may refer to Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses (1988):

‘To be born again,’ sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, ‘first you have to die. Ho ji! Ho ji! To land upon the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly. Tat-Taa! Tat-Taa! (3)

Rushdie’s narrative opens with the explosion of an airplane above London: among countless objects and soon-to-die bodies, the former actor and transmuted angel Gibreel tumbles down to earth with his buddy Saladin Chamcha, starts to fly and wakes up on a snowbound English beach. This utterly dramatic incipit will be charted on the extreme right end of the dramatization axis.

To sum up: while the codifying and interest-stirring functions are not directly related to each other, the informing and dramatizing functions are closely connected. They bring forth a functional continuum resulting in four functional incipit types:

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11 Here, Del Lungo proposes a chart to illustrate the interrelatedness of the two functions (see 1993: 145). For teaching purposes, however, a graph seems distinctly clearer to me because of the increased number of ‘visual’ elements or symbols, which answers the needs of a majority of visual learner types among today’s students.
In such a graph, *Portrait of a Lady* is charted in the bottom left quadrant on the extreme left of the dramatization axis and is called a **suspensive incipit**. I find this term well chosen because it is self-explanatory: suspensive incipits create a certain kind of suspense in that they make readers wait for something to happen – which is a very likely reader reaction in this case.

To pin down the suspensiveness in the text and to find out more about the status of the information presented, we will look at a longer version of the *Portrait* incipit (James 1881: 5):

> Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not – some people of course never do – the situation is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime. The implements of the little feast had been disposed upon the lawn of an old English country-house, in what I should call the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon. Part of the afternoon had waned, but
much of it was left […] From five o’clock to eight is on certain occasions a little eternity; but on such an occasion as this the interval could be only an eternity of pleasure. The persons concerned in it were taking their pleasure quietly […]

The persons concerned in it were not of the sex …

… from five ‘o clock to eight … an eternity of pleasure.

The persons concerned in it were taking their pleasure quietly. (-)

… an old man was sitting … (-)

… two younger men strolling to and fro. (-)

… had his cup in his hand … (-)

He disposed of its contents with much circumspection, holding it for a long time close to his chin, with his face turned to the house.

Let’s now jot down the items of information relevant for the respective function in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portrait of a Lady incipit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INFORMING FUNCTION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(setting, characters, story time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… afternoon tea …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… part of the afternoon had waned, but much of it was left …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… English country-house … splendid summer afternoon …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… from five ‘o clock to eight … an eternity of pleasure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally, it must be said that anything written in a narrative is ‘information’. Therefore, we must differentiate between the different kinds of information related to the setting, characters, story time – and action. Students will
A Typology for Teaching Novel Incipits

113

certainly argue that some of the items related to and listed under “dramatization function” could as well be charted under “informing function” (see my highlighting), e.g. “old man sitting in a deep wicker chair”, because of their descriptive appearance, and the locational markers like the “wicker chair”. Also, it may be argued that the text here makes the first mention of the old man and informs the readers about the character(s) present in the scene – then again, the sitting in a wicker chair is nothing that would describe the essence of the old man and is therefore delayed action rather than information about character or setting.12 Such classificatory ambiguities are not really a problem of the typology but a general characteristic of the suspensive incipit, of which the given information is highly redundant (see Del Lungo 143). Moreover, if we focus on the time and setting, we will find out the given items are indeed too scarce, too fragmentary, to allow the readers to build a ‘complete’ picture of the scene described (a “country-house”, a “splendid” afternoon, a “low table”, a cup with a “different” pattern). Here in turn, it could be objected that the mention of the “country-house” generates a concrete enough image because it is a well-known stereotype, too often encountered in 19th-century art ( – we will find out, nonetheless, that the image to be created deviates considerably from the stereotype). If this is so, the subsequent information on tables and cups is doubly redundant since it does not really add anything to the image, which again supports my argumentation. Apart from this, the incipit introduces “persons”, i.e. characters of whom we do not know if they will be minor or major characters, plus it defines these characters ex negativo (“were not of the sex...”), creating uncertainty and vagueness – which the incipit as a whole creates on three levels: on the level of character, action (“certain circumstances”, see above), and setting. As mentioned above, this redundant information is not ‘nothing’, it has a function precisely in that it creates an atmosphere, a milieu, and expectations on the side of the (educated) readers, who will not be bored but curious to see how the fragmentary bits and pieces of the ‘picture’ assemble as the narrative unfolds. Thus, students must be taught that the typology represented in the above graph is in no way depreciatory nor indicative with respect to the quality of the novel or of James’ artistic genius.

Charts like the one above that classify information offer a great didactic advantage. Teachers of literature may present such a chart and delete, for instance, the dramatizing items (with the exception of the first one serving as an example) and have the students fill in the missing ones (or vice versa). This is certainly the easiest didactic level appropriate for students with little

12 An example of pure information of which nothing relates to dramatization is the “Cast of characters” in Christie’s Murder on the Orient Express.
previous knowledge in literary analysis since everybody who is not an expert in the field still has a more or less developed sense of ‘the dramatic’. Complexity increases when single items on either the left or the right side are deleted so that in the process of filling the gaps the different kinds of information become plausible. This, however, requires that the students know how to handle the basic tools of literary analysis (setting, story time, round and flat characters, etc.).

Students will probably remark on the ambiguous status of individual dramatizing items that could be classified as description with regard to the items on setting and story time. Teachers should always take the students up on this since this will enhance their awareness of the kinds of information used in an incipit and their relevance for interpretation. Uncertainties or riddles generated in the incipit should be reconsidered after reading the rest of the novel, or at least a certain part of it. Principally, all the items of the incipit should be reevaluated with hindsight with reference to their functions for the entire work. This is why, for example, a university course should not be limited to the incipits themselves, neither in the classroom nor in essays or term papers the students write.

I have argued that the *Portrait* incipit uses redundant information with regard to function. It does so by withholding it at first, giving it away piecemeal, by which not only inexperienced students of literature might be misled. This can be exemplified by the introduction of the *Portrait*’s first-mentioned character:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\ldots \text{an old man sitting in a wicker chair} \ldots \\
&\ldots \text{the old man had a cup in his hand} \ldots \\
&\ldots \text{he disposed of its contents} \ldots \\
&\ldots \text{his chin} \ldots \text{his face turned to the house} \ldots 
\end{align*}
\]

At first glance, the items of information seem to be rather unimportant details – which could be linked with the outspoken attitude of the first-person omniscient narrator, who claims that he only produces ‘sketches’\(^{13}\) of what he narrates: the change in steps from indefinite to definite article to pronoun to possessive pronoun suggests a move from the general to the individual/personal, yet the given items are too disconnected to form a larger consis-

\(^{13}\) *The house […] was the most characteristic object in the peculiarly English picture I have attempted to sketch. (James 6) […] One of these [men] was a remarkably well-made man of five-and-thirty, with a face as English as that of the old gentleman I have just sketched […]* (7).
tent entity. In fact, the step-by-step introduction of the old man brings the readers to expect him to be a central character – an expectation to be disappointed as the narrative unfolds14 (see below).

Such `hasty’ character construction, it has been established, is largely due to the primacy effect, a paradigm transposed from psychology to literary studies, and more specifically, to the reception and construction of literary characters. Herbert Grabes wrote as early as 1978 that under the (subconscious) use of the implicit personality theory, the very first bits of information about a character, be they as sparse and vague as they may, prevail in the readers’ imagination of a character and strongly influence the consideration of subsequent information.15 Regarding the Portrait incipit, it is by no means surprising that readers construct a concrete and ‘important’ character despite the low quantity and quality of the first ‘incoming’ items of information.

As a fact of the matter, it turns out in the following that the house is much more meaningful than the old man, the last one in a chain of owners (“a shrewd American banker”, James 1881: 6), that it bears an eventful history – Queen Elisabeth I spending a night in “a huge, magnificent, and terribly angular bed”, the house being “defaced in Cromwell’s wars, and then, under the Restoration, repaired and much enlarged” (James 1881: 6) – in comparison to all of which the old man is a bland quantity and the ongoing tea party mere nothingness. Indeed, the old man is not even signified by name (many pages later, he turns out to be Daniel Touchett, the uncle of the protagonist, Isabel Archer, and is not really important for the development of the plot). The house, however, is not just “an old English country house”, as the incipit has it. Knowing the continuation of the text, readers have to revaluate the items of information provided by the incipit – that is, what seemed to be disconnected and unimportant (the items of description of the old man) – are strategically arranged to underscore the old man’s unimportance as opposed to the historical setting, laden with happenings of weight, a witness to eventful past times. All this is underscored by the old man’s “face turned to the house”.

14 Frank Kermode (1974), analyzing the incipit of Ford M. Ford’s novel The Good Soldier (1915), calls the opening sentence outright deceptive with regard to possible reader expectations. In this context, he quotes James (from his critical essay “The New Novel”, 1914), who sees in such deceptions a feature that a novel principally ought to have and who speaks of a “baffled relation between the subject-matter and its emergence” (quoted in Kermode 1974: 109). Peter Erlebach asserts that if the incipit is overdemanding with regard to the readers’ decoding capacities and, as a consequence, with regard to meaning construction, there will be varying degrees of deception (1990: 29).

15 Grabes 1978: 413ff. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan holds that subsequently received items of information are interpreted as consistent with the first received items (quoted in Schneider 2000: 28). More recently, Ansgar Nünning used, among others, the primacy effect in combination with the thesis of a general anthromorphization of textual phenomena to shift the primacy in narratology from the diegetic to the narrative illusion (2001: 25–27).
It is clear now that incipit information is strategically selected and arranged, and has to be reevaluated after the reading of the whole novel: the static and uneventful atmosphere as well as the bland figure of the father (and the son, as it will turn out) blaze the trail for the arrival of his niece, Isabel Archer... the rest is (literary) history. To rephrase my point from above: no item of information is 'lost', 'too much', or insignificant. Students of literature must be aware that their appreciation of the information items from the incipit might be inadequate, that the novel, in stirring their interest, seduces (see Del Lungo 1993: 138 et passim, see also Scholler 2001) and misleads them (playing on the double meaning inherent in the German verführen), so that it takes a certain amount of reading experience to resist the temptation of misreading or misapprehension. Therefore, teachers must make students aware of the status of incipit information and teach them how (not) to read specific information items.

To complete my argument that the informing and dramatizing function must be comprehended as a functional continuum on the grounds of the ambivalent status of the allocated information, I will elaborate on another incipit from a novel by a contemporary writer, Monica Ali’s Brick Lane. The following analysis will show that, in contrast to the suspensive incipit (Henry James), in a progressive incipit, the dramatizing information items link up even more closely with the items representing the ‘setting of the stage’.

An hour and forty-five minutes before Nazneen’s life began — began as it would proceed for quite some time, that is to say uncertainly — her mother Rupban felt an iron fist squeeze her belly. Rupban squatted on a low three-legged stool outside the kitchen hut. She was plucking a chicken because Hamid’s cousins had arrived from Jessore and there would be a feast. ‘Cheepy-cheepy, you are old and stringy,’ she said [...] She pulled some more feathers and watched them float around her toes. ‘Aaah,’ she said. ‘Aaaah. Aaaah.’ Things occurred to her. For seven months she had been ripening, like a mango on a tree. Only seven months. She put those things that had occurred to her aside. For a while, an hour and a half, though she did not know it, until the men came in from the fields trailing dust and slapping their stomachs, Rupban clutched Cheepy-cheepy’s limp and bony neck and said only coming coming to all enquiries about the bird. The shadows of the children playing marbles and thumping each other grew long and spiky. The scent of fried cumin and cardamom drifted over the compound. The goats bleated high and thin. Rupban screamed white heat, red blood. Hamid ran from the latrine, although his business was unfinished. He ran across the vegetable plot, past the towers of rice stalk taller than the tallest building, over the dirt track that bounded the village, back to the compound and grabbed a club to kill the man who was killing his wife. He knew it was her. Who else could break glass with one screech? [...]
As opposed to the *medias in res* incipit of the *Portrait*, the *Brick Lane* incipit represents an almost classical *ab ovo* beginning. In Manfred Pfister’s terms, the point of attack comes almost immediately at the beginning so that there is no need to mediate a previous history, and the expository information allocation is reduced to a definition of the situation according to characters (“Personal”), place, and time (1977: 137). More exactly, the action is narrated from a point one hour and 45 minutes before the protagonist's birth onward. Yet, it is very similar to James in its evoking uncertainty right in the opening sentence. Let's break down the incipit into information items and juxtapose them in a chart like above:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brick Lane incipit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INFORMING FUNCTION</strong> (setting, characters, story time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An hour and forty-five minutes … … before Nazneen’s life began … as it would for quite some time, that is to say, uncertainly…</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For a while, an hour and a half …</td>
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From its sheer graphic appearance, this chart looks very different compared to the one about the *Portrait*. Here, the dramatizing information items by far
outnumber the stage-setting story items. However, many if not most of the dramatizing items also contain information about setting and characters (see highlighting). As a whole, however, the individual sentences represent actions or happenings in progress, which is underscored by the progressive form or by the dramatic use of the preterite tense (“Things occurred to her”/“men came in”/“shadows grew long”/“the goats bleated”/“Hamid ran”) in a pluperfect context.

Interjections (“Aaaah”) render the mother’s labor pains and through their repeated appearance represent the first step in the dramatization increase. The reference to the story time indicates that, for one and a half hours, Rubpan can suppress her thoughts (and worries) about giving birth. At the onset of the last quarter hour, the dramatization speed increases with the reference to the “men” coming in: this is underlined by Rubpan’s (italicized) *coming* utterances, which sonorously and semantically suggest Nazneen’s imminent birth. In contrast to the *Portrait* incipit (in which the shadows “*were* straight and angular”), the shadows, here, “*grew* long and spiky” (my italics). The dynamic verb *grew*, as opposed to the static copula *were*, connotes a further increase in dramatization as well as the “scent of fried cumin and cardamom”, which connotes that the food is frying. When Rubpan and the goats start to scream the dramatization has gathered its maximum intensity. At the same moment, her husband Hamid starts to run from the latrine, the rapidity of which is hinted at by a sequence of four adverbial clauses of place, introduced by a preposition. Dramatization has reached its peak when the midwife holds freshly born Nazneen by the ankle.

The increasing dramatization further involves a blatant change in the ratio between story time and discourse time. The passage narrating the last fifteen minutes before Nazneen’s birth is (strictly speaking) two or three times as long as the one and a half hours before. This, of course, does not imply that every such discrepancy necessitate a high degree of dramatization. What makes this incipit striking is that while the narrative is picking up dramatic speed, the readers are getting more information about the setting and the characters (e.g. about the compound and the surrounding plots Hamid must run across to join Rubpan, or Hamid’s knowing that Rubpan can “break glass with one screech”). The more dramatic the action becomes, the more the readers complete the fictional stage, including the characters, before their minds’ eyes. The results of this analysis speak in favor of my argument from above that the informing (‘stage-setting’) and the dramatizing function are interlocked. In contrast to the plurimedial drama (text), which accomplishes a non-negligible part of information allocation through extra-

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17 In fact, the *Brick Lane* incipit represents a flashback to the events happening before Nazneen’s birth, and the narration leading up to it would have to be uttered in the pluperfect. Therefore, the repeated use of the preterite tense is specifically dramatic.
linguistic devices such as stage setting, props, costumes, figure and physiognomy, gestures and facial play (Pfister 1977: 136), a novel incipit must rely on its verbal means so that in an opening like in *Brick Lane* the dramatizing information cannot really be separated from the expository information. As in the *Portrait* incipit, the status of the allocated information is ambivalent, though in a different way. – Charted in a functional graph, the *Brick Lane* incipit turns out to be progressive:

![Graph of incipit types]

This means that a high degree of information saturation goes along with (almost) immediate action (or an early point of attack). A considerable part of the incipit setting is constituted precisely through the action (and not through description). Besides the fact that static and dynamic narrative modes are often difficult to tell apart, a basic major and commonly underestimated problem for students is to generally differentiate between mediated and unmediated narration, between telling and showing. Both school teachers and professors often take this competence for granted, which is a big
mistake. However obvious mediation is marked in the text through a proper name or a personal pronoun and a verb of utterance or thought (in the broadest sense, like 'Brenda said...' or 'I believed...'), my teaching experience has shown that students often do not realize this and thus have an additional problem engaging in analyses of the above type. That is why it is recommended to teachers of literature to make sure their clientele have understood these basics.

It is the great advantage of the above charts juxtaposing the different kinds of information that they clearly demonstrate their ambivalence with regard to their informing and dramatizing functions. And only on such grounds can I legitimate the functional graph in which the two axes, information saturation and dramatization, intersect.\textsuperscript{18} This, of course, must be instrumentalized for teaching. As in the \textit{Portrait} chart, teachers can delete certain items on either side of the chart and have students fill them in. Ideally, this is done through overhead or on the laptop screen and projector. Students will certainly not fill in all the items correctly, so that the affiliation with the informing or the dramatizing function can be discussed in the plenary. Such discussions contribute, of course, to a general awareness raising on the part of the students with regard to the function and status of information in different kinds of incipits. If the ambivalence of the information stays unrecognized during the discussion, the teacher may always give the impulse, “Look at the items in the dramatizing function column. Is the information exclusively about action?” Last but not least, the students should individually place the novel in a graphic schema as above – which is not as easy as it seems since even rudimentary arithmetic formalization is not everybody’s cup of tea, and my experience has shown that students need more time to do this than I thought. If every student has a transparency, one of them might just step out and put her/his transparency on the overhead for everybody else to check, or for the plenary to discuss.

As footnoted above, I have chosen to adopt Del Lungo’s terms for the four different types of incipits as illustrated in the functional graph. It is certainly open to debate whether there are no clearer terms than “progressive” and “dynamic” or “suspensive” and “static” (if I choose to juxtapose them vertically in relation to their information content). Apart from that, and particularly for students, it is perhaps more significant to know what a static

\textsuperscript{18} Del Lungo does not supply a cogent argument to justify the interrelatedness of the two functions when he writes “qu’elles doivent répondre à la double exigence de l’incipit d’informer le lecteur et de le faire entrer dans l’histoire. Or, c’est justement à partir du croisement des deux axes représentant ces deux fonctions qu’on peut établir un classement possible des formes de début, qui se fonde sur ce qu’on pourrait appeler la ‘vitesse générale d’entrée’ dans l’histoire” (Del Lungo 1993: 145). The fact that you can draw a chart is no argument for the pertinence thereof, and the fact that they must inform the readers and introduce them to the action is evident from the start.
and a dynamic incipit looks like in ‘real’ novelesque form. As an example of a static incipit (high information saturation, delayed action), I would refer to Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), of which the very first sentence, uttered by the narrator and serial killer Patrick Bateman (as it is to be found out later) makes the entire first paragraph:

> ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner of Eleventh and First and is in print large enough to be seen from the backseat of the cab as it lurches forward in the traffic leaving Wall Street and just as Timothy Price notices the words a bus pulls up, the advertisement for *Les Misérables* on its side blocking his view, but Price who is with Pierce and Pierce and twenty-six doesn’t seem to care because he tells the driver he will give him five dollars to turn up the radio, “Be My Baby” on WYNN, and the driver, black, not American, does so. (3)

Indeed, this neurotic rendering of countless (and obviously equally weighty) bits of information – besides the highly symbolic quote from Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (“Inferno”, Canto Terzo) – is in stark contrast to what is actually happening: The first chapter of the novel (“April Fools”) consists but of an innocuous taxi ride through Manhattan to Evelyn, where Bateman and friends will have dinner, and a lot of meaningless babble accompanying or better constituting the action. For a specimen of a dynamic incipit (immediate action, low information saturation) you may look at the above quoted incipit of *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie, whose narrator recounts the fall of the archangel Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha from an exploded passenger plane above London, a considerable part of which consists in Farishta’s interjections or calls directed to Chamcha.

As the rather young history of the novel has shown, anything can happen in an incipit, and the readers are not spared extremes. By the aid of this typology, students and teachers can categorize incipits and assign them a place in a functional and illustrative construct. After reading the whole novel, it is possible (and mandatory) to reevaluate the incipit with regard to its function for the entire work: Will we read it differently the second time? Was our first reading of it a misreading? Did it send us on the wrong track, and were we surprised at a later point? Is it related to the ending of the novel? Last but not least, we may study novel incipits of one period in literary history and try to find out to what degree incipits of a certain type are representative of a period, of a certain ‘kind’ of novel of this period, or of a certain author.

References
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