

The
CLASSROOM
Encounter *and* Engagement



Alan A. Block



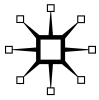
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To Dan, whose conversation led me to and through
this writing; to the many students with whom I have had
the privilege to learn; and to Emma and Anna Rose,
whose love has sustained me.

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CHAPTER 1

ON THE BEGINNINGS OF ENDS AND THE ENDS OF BEGINNINGS

A FIRST STEP: (ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF THIS PREFACE TO A SERIES OF PREFACES)

I HAD SET AS MY SABBATICAL PROJECT TO WRITE A SERIES OF PREFACES. I had originally planned to write prefaces for books I would never have the opportunity or the time to write. In this endeavor, I thought, I might design where I was going and see, perhaps, where I had been. These planned and forever-to-be-unwritten books represented life-long concerns that had been left behind on the road to somewhere else. Nevertheless, I believed that these prefaces would serve as appropriate markers where once I had considered pausing before traveling on to seek the Wizard in the Emerald City. After all, I considered, what else were prefaces but summaries of anticipated adventures? What else would a preface be but a road map for an anticipated undertaking?

But from the outset I was beset by problems and contradictions. I understood that I was attempting to introduce where I was going as if I had been already there; I realized that my task

compelled me to describe the path on which I would venture before I had taken more than a single step. I was going to construct a preface for material I had not yet learned. My prefaces were travel plans without the anticipation of travel; I was arranging lists no bucket would ever hold. I felt confounded by the contradictions.

Fortunately, I had learned in my previous studies that I was not obligated to solve these contradictions so much as to continue to struggle with them; I need not resolve the contradictions so much as explain why these seeming contradictions were not illogicalities at all! I was learning that I couldn't write a preface for a book I had not written because, as I attempted to do so, I came to understand that the function of the preface was to describe not where I was going but, rather, where I had been. What I had originally thought of as a preface turned out to be, in fact, more like an afterword. But I hadn't yet been anywhere! Even this preface to a series of prefaces might be considered a starting point, but where it might lead remained unknown. And I understood that it was this uncertainty that provided all the excitement of the journey. I *shouldn't* know exactly where I was going if I was going to learn anything along the way: I couldn't write a preface until the end of the journey. But I had taken no journey; I couldn't write a preface.

In education it is taught that the statement of aim—the stated objective—is essential to the classroom; without this aim the classroom is deemed without direction, rudderless, without purpose. The objective—a preface in a classroom setting?—is a statement written by the teacher (or a textbook author) defining exactly what the student will learn during this particular class period, even as I considered a preface to be the destination toward which a reader might be directed. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries these educational objectives have taken on an importance of biblical dimensions: without them, it is claimed, there is no lesson and can be no learning. But like my prefaces, these objectives for the student were accounts not of the journey but of the destination, and the existence of such objectives precluded

adventure *and* learning. John Dewey (1910/1991, 208) remarks, “If the statement of the aim is taken too seriously by the instructor, as meaning more than a signal to attention, its probable result is forestalling the pupil’s own reaction, relieving him of the responsibility of developing a problem and thus arresting his mental initiative.” An objective defines what is to be learned, and all of the remainder of activity and learning is irrelevant. The presence of objectives suggests that there should be no adventure in education. In fact, I thought, objectives obstruct the educational journey rather than facilitate it: they keep asleep the curiosity so essential to learning. No wonder students suffer such boredom in the classroom!

My anticipated prefaces would be like those objectives: they would define the ending without having to engage in any beginning. My prefaces would make any journey irrelevant because the destination was already present at the outset: in these prefaces my gaze would be fixed on some end without any thought of means. And I came to understand that it wasn’t prefaces I could write because, really, I didn’t know where I was going. Nor was it objectives I wanted to construct. Rather, it was in huckleberrying I wished to engage with the classroom—in which I have spent most of my life—as my beginning, my means, and my destination. My anticipated prefaces became transformed into pedagogical journeys in the classroom where existed my uncertain past, my pleasantly confused present, and the voyages I would now undertake. What I would know at the end was in the present unknown to me. Who I would be at the end was not who was now writing. I had some starting points but I did not know where they might lead. I considered this lack of objective the interesting point. How could I have ever thought of writing a preface for what I had not yet written?

But I did want to consider some things in which I had taken some interest during my life in the light of my present life both in and out of the classroom. Bob Dylan says in “Mississippi,”

“You can always come back, but you can’t come back all the way.” Well, if you can’t come back all the way, then you can’t really come back at all. These prefaces I couldn’t write had to be conceptualized as something else. I considered: if I had continued to write about the topic I had earlier passed by, then when I was all finished I might have created for this teacher a self-portrait in mosaic, a memoir in the form perhaps of graffiti, a travel book that recounted some of my journeying. And perhaps for *that* project I could use a preface. Thus, I offer here a rationalization for the appearance of *this* preface that is not exactly a preface: rather, it is a rationale that attempts to explain where in my failure I found success.

A SECOND STEP: ON AN END TO BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

Of its origins as a word—and therefore a concept—I looked into my trusty Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and read that *preface* was a noun (*a* preface, late fourteenth century) before it became a verb (*to* preface, late seventeenth century), and originally the word had both a liturgical and secular meaning. In 1387, *a* preface referred to the introduction or prelude to the central part of the Eucharistic service and was comprised of an exhortation to thanksgiving and an offering of praise and glory to God; the preface concluded with the sanctus. A preface prepared the celebrant—made her spiritually ready—to partake in the sacred rite of the last supper that Jesus allowed would substitute for himself: “Here, this is my blood. Here this is my body.” The preface prepared one to receive divinity. Now, I certainly respect my writing, but I never imagined it would lead anyone to any form of holiness.

For Jews, liturgically the P’sukei d’zimrah serves as a preface, though this service is not named so, as it is by Catholics. P’sukei d’zimrah are prayers of praise that precede the formal service; this

particular preface ends with a formal call to communal prayer. For Jews, this preface represents an engagement in prayer to make prayer possible. In both Christian and Jewish senses, a preface serves as preparation for the main event. My preface to a series of prefaces would not *introduce* the book but would make the book—the sacred act—possible. It is always best to start at the beginning. I wrote, “I had set as my sabbatical project to write a series of prefaces.” But now I was stuck. I had in mind only prefaces and no book. My preface prefaced nothing because I intended my prefaces as the main event! I continued to read in the OED.

In the previous year (1386), the word *preface* was attributed to Geoffrey Chaucer and referred to an introduction to a literary work; the preface usually contained some explanation of the work’s subject, purpose, and scope, and provided some explanation of the method of treatment. It would seem that at one time the preface served the function of what today we might refer to as an introduction. However, today books sometimes contain both prefaces *and* introductions, and so I wondered about the actual nature of the prefaces that I had intended to write. My well-worn Thrall and Hibbard (thank you, Dr. Wise!) adds that a preface often “points out difficulties and uncertainties in connection with the writing of the book, and in general, informs the reader of such facts as [the author] thinks pertinent to a reading of the text” (1960, 374). Here the preface addresses the intent of the author more than it does the content of the book. The preface presents not the substance of the book but offers the reader insight into the process of its creation. Hence, the first words of the preface may note *its* beginning, but in fact the preface truly begins after the book ends. If the preface elaborates on the process undertaken in order to write the book, then the preface must be written last, after the book is finished.

But in the work that I had intended this to be, there was to be no book for which the preface would serve as preface, and hence, I could not say that *this* preface—that was originally meant to be

a preface to a *series of prefaces*—begins or ends anything, except perhaps itself. And the failure of this preface suggested the necessary failure of the prefaces with which I intended to follow this preface: it and they would exist *sans* book. And so I considered: if I had no book for which *this* preface would serve as preface, then either I had no book at all or the book of a series of prefaces did not have to have either a beginning or an ending. This preface to what once was to have been a series of prefaces came into existence *in medias res*: it entered in the midst of my life that is thankfully not over; and the prefaces, now no longer prefaces because there was no book that would follow them, had become a series of not necessarily connected but certainly related explorations along some meandering brook that might at some point offer someone (even myself) opportunities for further exploration into education and the classroom (which are not necessarily identical) for as long as we breathe and think; and that what would connect these divergent and even disparate pieces would derive from the very life in the classroom that they revealed. The chapters that follow, then, represent some of the markers at which I have paused for various amounts of reason and time throughout my life, but from which, for any number of reasons and time, I have also moved. The book that follows this introductory piece represents a series of beginnings, but, unlike a preface, the book exists neither as nor at an end. The chapters will speak for themselves as beginnings, but since they are only beginnings with no book to follow, then they are also ends. This book is constituted as beginnings without ends and as endings without beginnings. This book, like me, enters *in media res*. I did not enter at the beginning but I was a beginning. Perhaps this book I write now begins as a book concerning endings and beginnings. It is a book about education! This preface is a beginning but it cannot tell you what it begins. Hence this preface is also an end because what follows doesn't belong to it. Let's say it's just part of the conversation.

The Good Witch Glinda has said that it is always best to start at the beginning, but the beginnings of any book are problematic. The idea of prefaces led me to consider the artificiality and arbitrariness of endings and beginnings: they do not, in fact, exist but are expediently created. The narrator in Anthony Trollope's novel *Barchester Towers* (1857, 2005) concludes his already lengthy story with the following extended apology:

These leave takings in novels are as disagreeable as they are in real life; not so sad, indeed, for they want the reality of sadness, but quite as perplexing, and generally less satisfactory. What novelist . . . can impart an interest to the last chapter of his fictitious history? Promises of two children and superhuman happiness are of no avail nor assurance of extreme respectability carried to an age far exceeding that usually allotted to mortals. The sorrow of our heroes and heroines, they are your delight, oh public! Their sorrows, or their sins, or their absurdities; not their virtues, good sense, and consequent rewards. When we begin to tint our final pages with couleur de rose, as in accordance with fixed rule we must do, we altogether extinguish our own powers of pleasing. When we become dull we offend our intellect; and we must become dull or we should offend your taste . . . And who can apportion out and dovertail his incidents, dialogues, characters, and descriptive morsels, so as to fit them all exactly into 567 pages, without either compressing them unnaturally, or extending them artificially at the end of his labour? Do I not myself know that I am at this moment in want of a dozen pages, and that I am sick with cudgeling my brains to find them. And then when everything is done, the kindest-hearted critic of them all invariably twits us with the incompetency and lameness of our conclusion (p. 493).

Endings are impossible, Trollope says, because they put the quietus to events that really do not end: our lives may end, indeed, but not the events we have begun in our lives. Though death ends

a life, it does not end Life; for the most part, we keep on keeping on. Thus, endings in novels are all artifice: we read to the end to learn how things turn out, but on the day following the novel's end everything might be changed. Indeed, it is often the reader's hope that they will have done so, and it is also true that this wished-for change may not necessarily be for the better. Often, Trollope says, we are dissatisfied with happy endings; readers prefer to read about sorrow and unhappiness because they make us feel better about our own lives. We prefer in our reading to keep company with those whose misery gives us comfort, and not with those whose good fortunes reveal us as the inadequate, unfortunate creatures we truly are. Writers write endings that satisfy our biddings. Endings that promise future delight remain unsatisfactory and inconclusive: we know from our pasts that things rarely, if ever, turn out the way we had planned. And when the novelist imposes the rose-colored filter over his narrative, the story pales.

In fact, endings are impossible and certainly unsatisfactory. For example, the last day of classes always makes me uncomfortable as I contemplate all that has not been finished; I am often troubled by how ineffectively I have even begun my task much less finished with it. The end of the class ought to be a beginning, but the final grade means to put an end to that beginning; if I have been truly effective in our work then at the end we teachers should have only just begun. Where is the end and where the beginning? Who can tell the dancer from the dance? There need be no preface because, Watson, the game is yet afoot.

I think that as endings are artifice, so too do beginnings lack credibility. Beginnings are defined mostly in retrospect and always arbitrarily. One enters Trollope's novel *in media res*: the action has long ago begun. Such is also the case with Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1980). The novel begins: "I wish my father or my mother, or indeed, both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they got me; had they duly consider'd how much depended on what they were

doing” (p. 1). Tristram refers to the event of his conception, his ostensible beginning, and what is to my mind the most well-known instance of interrupted coitus: in the middle of the event Mrs. Shandy wondered to Mr. Shandy if he had remembered to wind the clock, an event that always coincided with the monthly fulfillment of his conjugal duties. As his wife knew the confluence of his ideas, in the midst of coitus she interrupted Mr. Shandy with the question concerning the winding of the clock! In such an environment was Tristram conceived, and that occasion, he avers, has made all the difference. Things are put in motion often by actions (or non-actions) over which we have no control, and we can never know where they might lead; the existence of a beginning is defined by the outcome, interestingly enough, by the arbitrary assignment of an ending. But my preface was going to serve as a beginning for which there would be no ending; or my preface was an end for which there had been no beginning. Beginnings are merely a step into the dark and we don’t truly know where it is we stand. And though Tristram intends to narrate the story of his life starting from its auspicious beginnings, in fact he is not born until almost two hundred pages into the novel! A great deal occurs before his life begins.

Thus it is in the classroom. We all pretend that there are in them beginnings: the new year, or the new semester, a new class, a new unit, or even a new week promises to start all afresh. But, in fact, no one comes innocent into these spaces. The only blank slates to be written upon in these classrooms are the white chalk or smart boards that line the otherwise bare walls. The occupants of these places are already complex texts—neither beginnings nor endings—reluctant or willing participants in a complex continuing conversation for which no preface need be or even could be written. Today already contains yesterday and will be constructed with it; how will we tell the dancer from the dance? In the classroom, when did yesterday end and today begin? Here, when will today end and tomorrow begin? We call up background knowledge

as preface to the presentation of new material, but what is called up, in fact, is only the teacher's agenda and wishes. Dewey notes: "Thinking is specific, in that different things suggest their own appropriate meanings, tell their own unique stories, and in that they do this in very different ways with different persons" (1910/1991, 39). How could one ever write a preface for such a diversity? Though, I regretfully acknowledge, it is true today that in schools, for the sake of efficiency and test scores, we make certain all are literally on the same page. Everyday must have its preface because everyone must know what the end of each day will be.

To continue with these speculations: I posit that the author composes the preface (a beginning) last but places it geographically and thematically first, making it an ending at the beginning. Paradoxically, the preface (a beginning) appears to be the end of a writer's work, though it does mark the beginning of the reader's engagement with it. The preface does not present an overview of the book—that apparently has become the function of the introduction—but informs the reader of the manner and the difficulty of the journey in which the writer has engaged in the writing and first reading of the very book the reader now holds and prepares to begin. Actually, the preface prepares the reader to read the book not by disclosing its subject but by introducing the presence of the author in the work. Neither beginning nor ending, the preface becomes an accompaniment or guide. Perhaps by mentioning the problems that the author overcame in the writing of the book, the writer imposes an implicit demand upon the reader that greater attention to the text be paid given the difficulties and extra effort the author undertook in the writing of it. Thus, like the teacher, the writer sets the objectives. The preface acknowledges the author's presence as celebrant and supplicant. I think that the stance I take in the classroom assumes that of a preface: participant and aspirant.

Now, not all books have prefaces though they all do begin nonetheless. Obviously, Chaucer knew about prefaces because the

OED attributes the introduction into the language of the word (and concept) officially to him, but I do not think he appended a preface onto the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's *prologue* serves the purpose of a *preface*: sets the frame for the tales that will follow, though it does not refer to the composition of the tales themselves by a certain Geoffrey Chaucer. Rather, the prologue serves as an integral element in the text itself: it is meaningless without the tales even as the tales are adrift without the prologue. The prologue becomes part of the action. It is neither beginning nor ending though certainly it appears at the outset as rationale for the appearance of the text; the text can appear without the prologue and the prologue without the text but neither is complete without the other.

Neither did Henry David Thoreau provide a preface to his *Walden*, the book itself, I think, constituting a preface, informing the reader of the manner and the difficulty of the journey in which the writer has engaged in the writing and first reading of the book the reader now holds and prepares to begin. *Walden* itself recounts the book's subject, purpose, scope, and method of treatment. All of *Walden* appears to be a preface, and the chapter "Reading" serves specifically for direction to how Thoreau's text ought to be read by addressing the author's own engagement in his reading of texts. And Walt Whitman, ever the iconoclast, in his preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* may have stylistically prepared the reader for the poems that followed but he certainly did not use his preface to thematically introduce the book or recount the difficulties he experienced in its writing. Whitman's preface actually celebrates the ideal American poet whom we might assume to be the author of *Leaves of Grass*, but the pronoun "I" does not appear in the entire preface nor is there mention made in the preface of the poems that follow it. Whitman's *preface* is more a manifesto than a beginning or an ending, and it might certainly be understood as a classical instance of hiding in plain sight. Most novels contain neither preface nor introduction, though

Henry James wrote long introductions to his revised works presenting in them his theories of fiction that would serve as guides for the reader.

Indeed, it strikes me now that only in *written* literature are prefaces prevalent. One might study *how* to look at a painting or listen to a particular piece of music, but the musician or artist does not offer, as part of the public presentation for any particular work, the context or conflict contained in its production as part of the work's presentation! Nor, I now consider, does one ever learn in school how to read a preface. All one is taught is that one must always start at the beginning, and then just follow the Yellow Brick Road!

But, as prefaces might be understood as advertisements for the author, then it might be fair to say that prefaces are autobiographies in disguise. They invite the reader into the text-proper by informing the reader of the book's features that the author has realized in its writing. Prefaces are not about the book but about the writer. They are essays: What else could an essay be but the author's exposure of his predilections? Wendy Leeser (1993, ix) describes an essay appropriate to the *Threepenny Review*: "as a piece of nonfiction prose that, while talking about something in the world at large, discusses and reveals the author's own personality as well . . . with the delicate evasiveness of a story." I had originally planned this book as a series of prefaces, but since I had not finished writing the book for which the writing was to have served as preface—indeed, I hadn't even started it!—then the existence of the preface became impractical if not impossible. Nonetheless, the topics of the proposed book for which I was supposed to be writing the prefaces were so intertwined in my life that the prefaces I had planned ceased to be so and became the main event and were transformed into essays that dealt as much with myself as with the subject. I found myself hiding in plain sight! Czeslaw Milosz (2002, 4), in the Introduction (a preface) to his autobiographical *Native Realm*, says, ". . . one can get at man only obliquely; only through the masquerade that is the extension of himself at a given