

Aleph and the Ox

Announcing this new venture, Chapter One, I naturally think a lot about beginnings. First words. Alphabets. In Hebrew, the first letter of the alphabet in biblical texts, read as is Arabic, from right to left, is

Aleph or א

In Arabic, this same letter is Alif:

ا

Both share the common Phoenician root, "alp," referring to the ox and the condition of being



trained, tamed, or familiar, being intimate with. The first word of the tablets of the Law that Moses brought down from the mountainside also begins with Aleph:

In the beginning...

אֵלֶּף

Much later than the Pentateuch, the Gospel of John 1:1 in the Christian New Testament declared "*In the beginning was the Word....*"

I am not theological. Nor will we be soliciting exegeses of sacred texts. However, we "people of the book"—or at least of the *cultures* so profoundly shaped by the people of the book—we are not off to say that writing marks a special beginning, at the least, bringing order out of chaos, taming that enormous, implacable creature, the ox. The word.

If, as early 20th century sports journalist Red Smith said, writing is easy—all you have to do is sit down at the typewriter, open a vein, and bleed—why do we labor over our beginnings so much? Obviously, Smith, who putatively uttered that formula, was saying it tongue in cheek. *It* isn't easy. Sometimes we struggle just to start, to goad our lumbering creature forward. The best teamsters, as the drivers of oxen are called, do it all with words; and while we may not have known this about ox-driving, we are painfully aware of it with respect to our fiction. All we have are words. Now, how do we begin? The great medieval Sephardic scholar, Moses Maimonides,

insisted that there was no thought without simile, without metaphor; it is thus that we are able to speak of the unspeakable.

Consider the opening words of Jess B. Simple (from my edition of Langston Hughes' *The Best of Simple*):

"If you want to know about my life," said Simple, blowing the foam from the top of the newly filled glass the bartender put before him..Look at my feet.."

Simple uses, technically speaking, a synecdoche to signify so much of where he has been, and who he is. A simile. My life is like my feet. Then Hughes marshals an ancient device, that of one character in a series of interlocking stories. Scheherazade, many millennia before him, used the same strategy with different characters, to save her royal derrière. Carlos Fuentes introduces his *Burnt Water*, with a beginning that, honestly, I would kill for: "I own an imaginary apartment house in the center of Mexico City." Oh God.

But if you are not weaving individual stories or episodes together, what is your strategy? What, for that matter, determines what a "chapter" is? Riffing off the more drab prescription, one wag has said that a story must have "a beginning, a muddle, and an end" (variously ascribed to Philipp Larkin, Peter deVries, and a cast of luminous thousands.) I wonder if that applies to a chapter as well?

In particular, like my ox, the novel is an unwieldy thing. For a novel requires quite a few words. A lot more than *Giddyap*! You must begin, and not just with the well-honed and flashy first sentence; for you would hope not to have an inquisitive mutt pull aside the curtain to reveal that the Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz is just a short, overblown shyster. That being said, it is no accident that our first chapters are often the most polished part of our manuscript, sent out to show off the entire work. We hover over it like our firstborn, polish, rework, revise, read it over again, when going on to Chapter Two, Three, and so on.

Beyond the preening and pruning that such a process often entails, have you called up a world?

Have you let the reader peek through a keyhole, peer around a crack in a barely open door, into a world that he or she cannot resist? Have you gotten your beast moving, ready and able to carry the burden of your imagination, and, let's not forget, your ideas—and the reader's?

