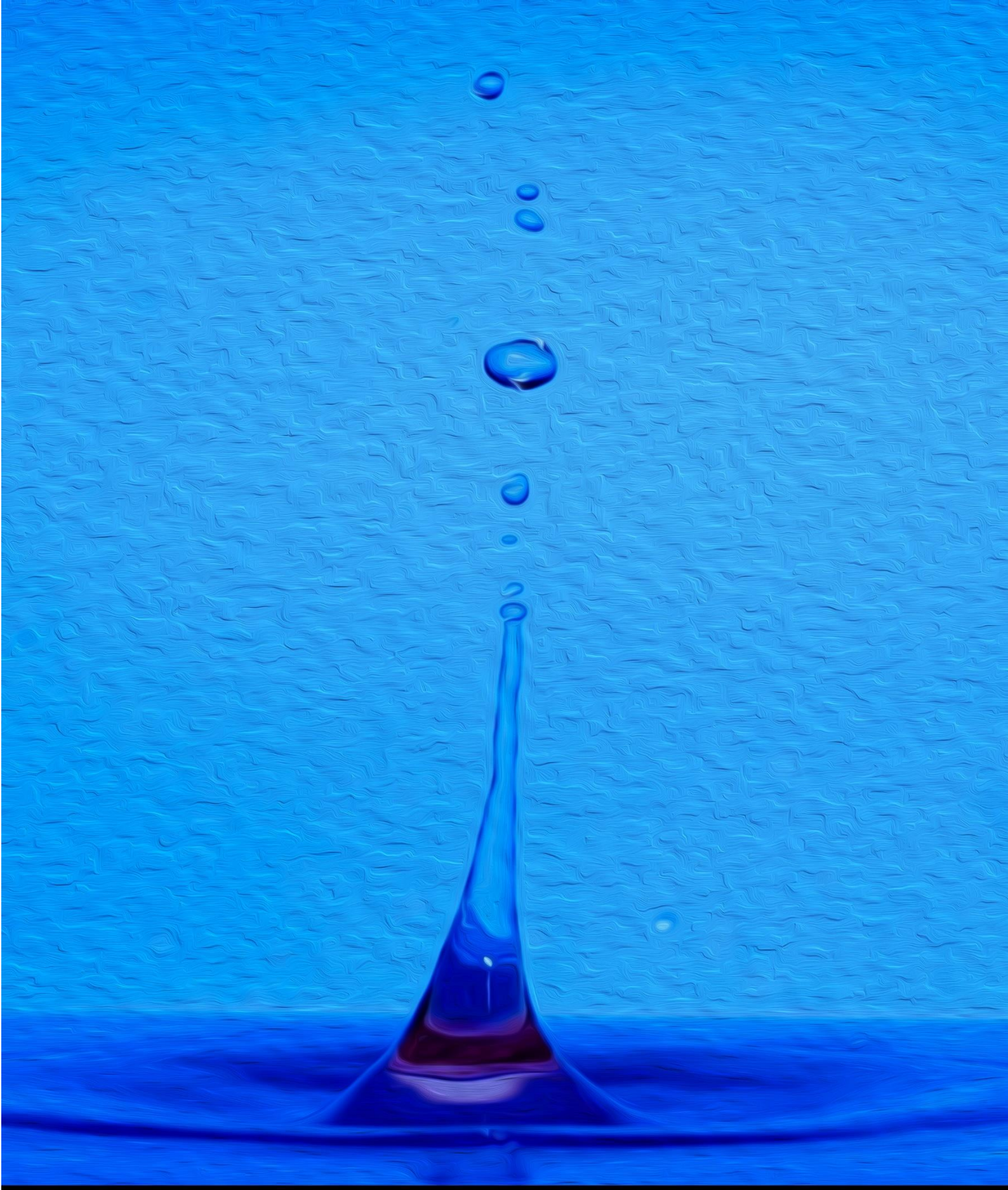

antae

L-Università ta' Malta

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Editorial

Aaron Aquilina, James Farrugia

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Editorial

Aaron Aquilina, James Farrugia

Lancaster University, University of Malta

‘Beginning is not only a kind of action;
it is also a frame of mind, a kind of work’
—Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*

How does one begin to speak of beginnings? If we are here and the beginning is thus behind us, how does one begin again? Should one attempt to, and is it up to us to choose?

On the first day there was, primarily, a beginning. Genesis multiplies this: the first day saw the beginning of light, the third gave rise to the origin of territory, the sixth birthed our very own beginnings. The seventh day—the day of rest—is when beginnings came to an end, only to begin again the morrow. What came before the beginning? That is to say, what came before the light? What lies before the preliminary, or, rather, the pre-luminary?

Already, the problem of beginnings becomes more obvious. Sometimes there is more than one beginning; other times, the beginning is only what comes later. There are even beginnings that can come only after an ending, just like the rising of a ‘phoenix’, which is how Jorge Luis Borges describes Kafka when speaking of how ‘every writer creates his own precursor’.[1] What role does the idea of the precursor play in literature, theory, philosophy, the humanities more generally? Must one always, as Harold Bloom advocates, misread them? And how does one even begin to write a poem, a novel, or a treatise? What literary works, in their origin(-)ality, began something bigger than themselves—one here thinks of *Frankenstein*, for instance—and is the entire oak tree always contained in the acorn?

We spoke of the beginnings of humankind—and so where did we come from, in spiritual, scientific, and political terms? What of our own conception, and its links with current feminist thought? Where are we now, and where are we headed? Is the idea of *trajectory*, or perhaps even *destiny*, always inherent to any idea of beginning? And, in reverse, must one necessarily dig—to unearth the origin—through archaeology, genealogy, or history? What if one were to queer the beginning, seeing not a development but a regression, a misstep, or what Jack Halberstam would call a failure?

Must one also, as Edward Said does, distinguish between the origin and the beginning?[2] In what ways? Is a beginning always something new, or always a re-presentation of something familiar? How is a beginning, then, different from repetition or a variation on a theme? Finally, is the beginning always linked to the ending, the final, and the never-again?

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[1] Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Kafka and His Precursors’, trans. by James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths* (London and New York, NY: Penguin, 2000), pp. 234-236, pp. 234, 236. Italics removed from the original.

[2] The epigraph is taken from the ‘Preface’ in Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, NY: Basic Books Inc., 1975), xi-xiii, p. xi.

The essays of this issue all, in their own way, address the myriad questions that arise when one even begins to think of beginnings. Perhaps to speak of a beginning is, in its own right, to begin something new, to create a story or myth of the origin of origins. This is the implicit idea in Yan Yang's (*Peking University*) essay on the 'Quest for the Origin of Primitive Myths: Revisiting Max Müller's Comparative Mythology'. Yang contextualises and expands on Max Müller's Victorian ideas on beginnings and thereafters 'based on [his] insights into interactions between language and thought in history, especially through religious language and religious consciousness'. In this essay, Yang revisits some pivotal ideas in Max Müller's corpus around the interrelated transformations of myth, language, and thought (in view of history, anthropology, mythography, science, and philology) in order to underscore the importance of revisiting the past—obscure, or even obscured, as it sometimes is—in order to understand the present. Furthermore, through Yang's work, one comes to understand the present as itself mythologised through an active, living past, shaping not only what we say but how we think about what we say.

This is followed by Richmond B. Adams's (*Northwestern Oklahoma State University*) essay—'"Some (Not So) New Kind": *No Country for Old Men* and Cormac McCarthy's Fiction in Post-9/11 American Culture'—which similarly views the present in light of the developments of the past. In Adams's case, this means understanding contemporary American culture, one that has been shaken by the tragedy of 9/11, through the narrative history of exceptionalism, triumphalism, and success. Adams traces how this faith in the notion of success, built up both morally and institutionally, is challenged through traumatic events, and reads the encapsulation of this tension in McCarthy's novel. Keeping religion, politics, revolution, and war in mind, Adams reads the novel in order to explore what McCarthy presents to us in terms of the confrontation of moral dilemmas, a difficult subject especially now that, as Adams writes, contemporary 'Americans […] can no longer claim an absolute sense of cultural superiority'.

The third essay deals not only with the novelty of the contemporary world but also the novel ways one may adopt to comprehend it. Dallel Sarnou (*Université Abdelhamid Ibn Badis Mostaganem*), in her essay 'On the Importance of Netnographic Research in Understanding Young People's Virtual/Real Lives', first extrapolates what one means by "netnography" and defines it against digital ethnography and the digital humanities more widely. Looking at how the internet is, as 'one of the key drivers of social evolution', both shaped by and shaping of offline relationships, Sarnou delves into the possibilities of netnographic research and techniques in understanding digital and non-digital communication, and this primarily within the context of education. This not only leads Sarnou to put forward 'the idea of bringing together netnographers, educators, parents, and learners in order to bridge the many technology-based gaps that are distancing older generations from younger ones', but also leads her to analyse the nuanced difficulties beginning to emerge, in this age of the internet, between digital natives and digital immigrants.

The last essay, 'Re-thinking Beginning: Okri's *The Famished Road* and the Crisis of the Postcolonial Nation', deals with time as 'the dominant trope in anticolonial and postcolonial discourses on nation formation and redemption'. Here Rogers Asempasah (*University of Cape Coast*) examines the notion of a radical beginning, as well as differing notions of temporality,

within the postcolonial framework. Through Ben Okri's novel, Asempasah reads nationalist imaginaries aside from their typical associations with anticolonial declarations of independence, looking instead at alternative futures and democratic spaces founded by a beginning rooted in "betrayal", as has been articulated by Frantz Fanon and others. "Beginning" is thus here understood as "crisis", something which Okri's novel both works with and reconfigures, where political hope and agency can stem from a beginning that is realised when 'people become aware of their historical duty to the present and the past'.

It seems, then, that beginnings occupy our past, present, and future, and not necessarily in that order. But what is it to "continue", or even "resume", or better yet: to "stop"? The essays here each invite us to stop with the thoughts they present, for a while, before, once more, beginning.

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