The Art of Fiction

David Lodge

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About the Author

David Lodge's novels include *Changing Places, Small World, Nice Work, Thinks ..., Author, Author, Deaf Sentence* and, most recently, *A Man of Parts*. He has also written stage plays and screenplays, and several books of literary criticism, including *The Art of Fiction, Consciousness and the Novel* and *The Year of Henry James*.

Also by David Lodge

Essays
Write On
The Practice of Writing
Consciousness and the Novel
The Year of Henry James

Drama
The Writing Game
Home Truths

To John Blackwell

"genius among editors" (*The Writing Game,* Act Two Scene Two)

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Preface

For twelve months between 1990 and 1991, the poet James Fenton contributed a weekly column to the book pages of *The Independent on Sunday* entitled "*Ars Poetica*", the title of a famous treatise on poetry by the Roman poet Horace. Each week Fenton printed a short poem or extract from a poem, and wrote a commentary designed to throw light on both the text and some aspect of the art of poetry in general. Early in 1991 the literary editor of the newspaper, Blake Morrison, rang me up and asked if I would be interested in writing something similar about prose fiction when James Fenton had finished his stint.

Usually I take time to consider journalistic proposals, and more often than not I say no in the end; but on this occasion I had decided to say yes almost before Blake had finished his pitch. For nearly thirty years, between 1960 and 1987, I was an academic as well as a novelist, teaching English Literature at Birmingham University. Over that time I published several books of literary criticism, mainly concerned with novels and "The Novel", and for many of those years I offered a course called Form in Fiction. After taking early retirement from my university post in 1987 I found that I had little inclination or incentive to go on writing criticism for an essentially academic audience; but I felt that I still had things to say on the art of fiction and the history of the novel that might be of interest to a more

general reading public, and sensed that a weekly newspaper column might provide an ideal platform.

I settled quite quickly on a format that was topic-centred rather than text-centred, since a novel, unlike many excellent poems, cannot be quoted in its entirety in a newspaper article. Each week I chose one or two short extracts from novels or stories, classic and modern, to illustrate some aspect of "The Art of Fiction". (Following on Fenton's "*Ars Poetica*", this was a more or less inevitable name for the series, and I have retained it for the book in spite of some uneasiness at trespassing on the title of a venerated essay by Henry James.) With a few exceptions – Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James – I took my examples from a different author, or brace of authors, each week. I confined myself almost exclusively to English and American writers, because this is, as academics say, "my field" and I am less confident of doing accurate close analysis of novels outside it. I have commented on some of these passages before in print, but not in exactly the same terms.

I began with "Beginning" and always intended to end with "Ending". In between these two, one week's article sometimes suggested the topic for the following week, but I did not design the series as a systematic, progressive introduction to the theory of the novel. In revising the pieces for book publication I have inserted a number of cross-references, and provided an index, which should compensate for the somewhat random sequence of topics. Once a teacher, always a teacher. Although the book is intended for the "general reader" I have deliberately used, with explanations, a number of technical terms which may be unfamiliar to such a reader, because you cannot analyse a literary text without an appropriate descriptive vocabulary, any more than you can strip down an engine without an appropriate set of tools. Some of these terms are modern, like "intertextuality" and "metafiction", and

some are ancient, like the names of figures of speech in classical rhetoric ("metonymy", "synecdoche" etc.), which modern linguistics has not yet improved upon. An alternative title for this book, if Wayne Booth hadn't used it already, would be *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. I have always regarded fiction as an essentially rhetorical art – that is to say, the novelist or short story-writer *persuades* us to share a certain view of the world for the duration of the reading experience, effecting, when successful, that rapt immersion in an imagined reality that Van Gogh caught so well in his painting "The Novel Reader". Even novelists who, for their own artistic purposes, deliberately break that spell have to cast it first.

The original articles were written to a prescribed length, but I usually submitted my copy slightly over-long, leaving the task of trimming it to fit the available space in the capable hands of Blake Morrison and his assistant Jan Dalley. (I should like to record here my appreciation of the skill and tact with which they carried out this task.) In revising the articles for book publication I have restored some of the passages which they were obliged to cut, and some which I deleted myself from earlier drafts, and have added new material, both illustrative and argumentative, to nearly all of them. One item has been replaced by a new piece on "Chapters". To throw light on the nuts and bolts of fiction, I have drawn more frequently on my own experience as a writer than seemed either appropriate or practicable in the original newspaper articles.

The book is approximately thirty per cent longer than the original series. But I have not attempted to "cover" any of the topics exhaustively. Most of them, after all, could be the subject of full-length essays or whole volumes, and in many cases already have been. This is a book for people who prefer to take their Lit. Crit. in small doses, a book to browse in, and dip into, a book that does not attempt to say the definitive word on any of the topics it touches on, but

one that will, I hope, enhance readers' understanding and enjoyment of prose fiction, and suggest to them new possibilities of reading – and, who knows, even writing – in this most various and rewarding of literary forms.

1 Beginning

EMMA WOODHOUSE, HANDSOME, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

She was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father, and had, in consequence of her sister's marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period. Her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses, and her place had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection.

Sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr Woodhouse's family, less as a governess than a friend, very fond of both daughters, but particularly of Emma. Between *them* it was more the intimacy of sisters. Even before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess, the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away, they had been living together as friend and friend very mutually attached, and Emma doing just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgment, but directed chiefly by her own.

The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a

disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her.

Sorrow came – a gentle sorrow – but not at all in the shape of any disagreeable consciousness. – Miss Taylor married.

JANE AUSTEN *Emma* (1816)

This is the saddest story I have ever heard. We had known the Ashburnhams for nine seasons of the town of Nauheim with an extreme intimacy – or, rather, with an acquaintanceship as loose and easy and yet as close as a good glove's with your hand. My wife and I knew Captain and Mrs Ashburnham as well as it was possible to know anybody, and yet, in another sense, we knew nothing at all about them. This is, I believe, a state of things only possible with English people of whom, till today, when I sit down to puzzle out what I know of this sad affair, I knew nothing whatever. Six months ago I had never been to England, and, certainly, I had never sounded the depths of an English heart. I had known the shallows.

FORD MADOX FORD *The Good Soldier* (1915)

WHEN DOES A NOVEL BEGIN? The question is almost as difficult to answer as the question, when does the human embryo become a person? Certainly the creation of a novel rarely begins with the penning or typing of its first words. Most writers do some preliminary work, if it is only in their

heads. Many prepare the ground carefully over weeks or months, making diagrams of the plot, compiling c.v.s for their characters, filling a notebook with ideas, settings, situations, jokes, to be drawn on in the process of composition. Every writer has his or her own way of working. Henry James made notes for *The Spoils of Poynton* almost as long and almost as interesting as the finished novel. Muriel Spark, I understand, broods mentally on the concept of a new novel and does not set pen to paper until she has thought of a satisfactory opening sentence.

For the reader, however, the novel always begins with that opening sentence (which may not, of course, be the first sentence the novelist originally wrote). And then the next sentence, and then the sentence after that … When does the beginning of a novel end, is another difficult question to answer. Is it the first paragraph, the first few pages, or the first chapter? However one defines it, the beginning of a novel is a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined. It should therefore, as the phrase goes, "draw us in".

This is not an easy task. We are not yet familiar with the author's tone of voice, range of vocabulary, syntactic habits. We read a book slowly and hesitantly, at first. We have a lot of new information to absorb and remember, such as the characters' names, their relationships of affinity and consanguinity, the contextual details of time and place, without which the story cannot be followed. Is all this effort going to be worthwhile? Most readers will give an author the benefit of the doubt for at least a few pages, before deciding to back out over the threshold. With the two specimens shown here, however, our hesitation is likely to be minimal or non-existent. We are "hooked" by the very first sentence in each case.

Jane Austen's opening is classical: lucid, measured, objective, with ironic implication concealed beneath the

elegant velvet glove of the style. How subtly the first sentence sets up the heroine for a fall. This is to be the reverse of the Cinderella story, the triumph of an undervalued heroine, that previously attracted Jane Austen's imagination from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Mansfield Park*. Emma is a Princess who must be humbled before she finds true happiness. "Handsome" (rather than conventionally pretty or beautiful – a hint of masculine will-to-power, perhaps, in that androgynous epithet), "clever" (an ambiguous term for intelligence, sometimes applied derogatively, as in "too clever for her own good") and "rich", with all its biblical and proverbial associations of the moral dangers of wealth: these three adjectives, so elegantly combined (a matter of stress and phonology – try rearranging them) encapsulate the deceptiveness of Emma's "seeming" contentment. Having lived "nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her", she is due for a rude awakening. Nearly twenty-one, the traditional age of majority, Emma must now take responsibility for her own life, and for a woman in early nineteenth-century bourgeois society this meant deciding whether and whom to marry. Emma is unusually free in this respect, since she is already "mistress" of her household, a circumstance likely to breed arrogance, especially as she has been brought up by a governess who supplied a mother's affection but not (by implication) a mother's discipline.

This suggestion is made more emphatically in the third paragraph; but at the same time, interestingly enough, we begin to hear the voice of Emma herself in the discourse, as well as the judicious, objective voice of the narrator. "Between *them* it was more the intimacy of sisters." "They had been living together as friend and friend …" In these phrases we seem to hear Emma's own, rather self-satisfied description of her relationship with her governess, one which allowed her to do "just what she liked." The ironic

structure of the paragraph's conclusion, "highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgment, but directed chiefly by her own," symmetrically balances two statements that are logically incompatible, and thus indicates the flaw in Emma's character that is explicitly stated by the narrator in the fourth paragraph. With the marriage of Miss Taylor, the story proper begins: deprived of Miss Taylor's company and mature counsel, Emma takes up a young protégée, Harriet, who encourages her vanity, and on whose behalf she begins to indulge in a matchmaking intrigue, with disastrous results.

Ford Madox Ford's famous opening sentence is a blatant ploy to secure the reader's attention, virtually dragging us over the threshold by the collar. But almost at once a characteristically modern obscurity and indirection, an anxiety about the possibility of discovering any truth, infect the narrative. Who is this person addressing us? He uses English yet is not English himself. He has known the English couple who seem to be the subject of the "saddest story" for at least nine years, yet claims to have "known nothing" about the English until this very moment of narration. "Heard" in the first sentence suggests that he is going to narrate someone else's story, but almost immediately it is implied that the narrator, and perhaps his wife, were themselves part of it. The narrator knows the Ashburnhams intimately – and not at all. These contradictions are rationalized as an effect of Englishness, of the disparity between appearance and reality in English middle-class behaviour; so this beginning strikes a similar thematic note to *Emma*'s, though tragic rather than comic in its premonitory undertones. The word "sad" is repeated towards the end of the paragraph, and another keyword, "heart" (two of the characters have supposed heart-conditions, all of them have disordered emotional lives), is dropped into the penultimate sentence.

I used the metaphor of a glove to describe Jane Austen's style, a style which itself claims authority partly by eschewing metaphor (metaphor being an essentially poetic figure of speech, at the opposite pole to reason and common sense). That same metaphor of a glove actually occurs in the opening paragraph of *The Good Soldier*, though with a different meaning. Here it signifies polite social behaviour, the easy but restrained manners that go with affluence and discriminating taste (a "good" glove is specified), but with a hint of deceptive concealment or "covering up". Some of the enigmas raised in the first paragraph are quickly explained – by, for instance, the information that the narrator is an American living in Europe. But the reliability of his testimony, and the chronic dissembling of the other characters, are to be crucial issues in this, the saddest story.

There are, of course, many other ways of beginning a novel, and readers browsing through this book will have opportunities to consider some of them, because I have often chosen the opening paragraph of a novel or story to illustrate other aspects of the art of fiction (it spares me from having to summarize the plot). But perhaps it is worth indicating the range of possibilities here. A novel may begin with a set-piece description of a landscape or townscape that is to be the primary setting of the story, the *mise-en-scène* as film criticism terms it: for example, the sombre description of Egdon Heath at the beginning of Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, or E. M. Forster's account of Chandrapore, in elegant, urbane guide-book prose, at the outset of *A Passage to India*. A novel may begin in the middle of a conversation, like Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*, or Ivy Compton-Burnett's idiosyncratic works. It may begin with an arresting self-introduction by the narrator, "Call me Ishmael" (Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*), or with a rude gesture at the literary tradition of

autobiography: "… the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it" (J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*). A novelist may begin with a philosophical reflection – "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there" (L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*), or pitch a character into extreme jeopardy with the very first sentence: "Hale knew they meant to murder him before he had been in Brighton three hours" (Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock*). Many novels begin with a "frame-story" which explains how the main story was discovered, or describes it being told to a fictional audience. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* an anonymous narrator describes Marlow relating his Congo experiences to a circle of friends sitting on the deck of a cruising yawl in the Thames estuary ("And this also," Marlow begins, "has been one of the dark places of the earth"). Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* consists of a deceased woman's memoir, which is read aloud to guests at a country-house party who have been entertaining themselves with ghost stories, and get, perhaps, more than they bargained for. Kingsley Amis begins his ghost story, *The Green Man*, with a witty pastiche of the *The Good Food Guide*: "No sooner has one got over one's surprise at finding a genuine coaching inn less than 40 miles from London – and 8 from the M1 – than one is marvelling at the quality of the equally English fare …" Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* begins, "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*." James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* begins in the middle of a sentence: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs." The missing fragment concludes the book: "A way a lone a last a loved a long the"

– thus returning us to the beginning again, like the recirculation of water in the environment, from river to sea to cloud to rain to river, and like the unending production of meaning in the reading of fiction.

2 The Intrusive Author

WITH A SINGLE drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertook to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the 18th of June, in the year of Our Lord, 1799.

<div align="right">GEORGE ELIOT Adam Bede (1859)</div>

To Margaret – I hope that it will not set the reader against her – the station of King's Cross had always suggested Infinity. Its very situation – withdrawn a little behind the facile splendours of St Pancras – implied a comment on the materialism of life. Those two great arches, colourless, indifferent, shouldering between them an unlovely clock, were fit portals for some eternal adventure, whose issue might be prosperous, but would certainly not be expressed in the ordinary language of prosperity. If you think this ridiculous, remember that it is not Margaret who is telling you about it; and let me hasten to add that they were in plenty of time for the train; that Mrs Munt secured a comfortable seat, facing the engine, but not too near it; and

that Margaret, on her return to Wickham Place, was confronted with the following telegram:

All over. Wish I had never written. Tell no one. – Helen.

But Aunt Juley was gone – gone irrevocably, and no power on earth could stop her.

E. M. FORSTER *Howards End* (1910)

THE SIMPLEST WAY of telling a story is in the voice of a storyteller, which may be the anonymous voice of folk-tale ("Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess") or the voice of the epic bard (e.g., Virgil's "Arms and the man I sing") or the confiding, companionable, sententious authorial voice of classic fiction from Henry Fielding to George Eliot.

At the beginning of *Adam Bede*, by a neat rhetorical trick with the drop of ink, which is both mirror and medium, George Eliot transforms the act of writing into a kind of speaking, a direct yet intimate address to the reader, inviting us "over the threshold" of the novel, and literally over the threshold of Jonathan Burge's workshop. By implication she contrasts her own, minutely particular, scrupulously historical kind of story-telling, with the dubious revelations of magic and superstition. The nugget of information about the techniques of Egyptian sorcerers has no other narrative function, but is not without interest in itself. We read fiction, after all, not just for the story, but to enlarge our knowledge and understanding of the world, and the authorial narrative method is particularly suited to incorporating this kind of encyclopedic knowledge and proverbial wisdom.

Around the turn of the century, however, the intrusive authorial voice fell into disfavour, partly because it detracts from realistic illusion and reduces the emotional intensity of the experience being represented, by calling attention to the act of narrating. It also claims a kind of authority, a God-like omniscience, which our sceptical and relativistic age is reluctant to grant to anyone. Modern fiction has tended to suppress or eliminate the authorial voice, by presenting the action through the consciousness of the characters, or by handing over to them the narrative task itself. When the intrusive authorial voice *is* employed in modern fiction, it's usually with a certain ironic self-consciousness, as in the passage from *Howards End*. This concludes the second chapter, in which the Bloomsburyite Margaret Schlegel, having heard that her sister Helen has fallen in love with the younger son of a *nouveau-riche* captain of industry, Henry Wilcox, despatches her aunt (Mrs Munt) to investigate.

Howards End is a Condition-of-England novel, and the sense of the country as an organic whole, with a spiritually inspiring, essentially agrarian past, and a problematic future overshadowed by commerce and industry, is what gives a representative significance to the characters and their relationships. This theme reaches its visionary climax in Chapter 19, where, from the high vantage-point of the Purbeck hills, the question is posed by the author, whether England belongs to those who have created her wealth and power or "to those who … have somehow seen her, seen the whole island at once, lying as a jewel in a silver sea, sailing as a ship of souls, with all the brave world's fleet accompanying her towards eternity."

Both the author and Margaret clearly belong to the visionary company. The Infinity that Margaret associates with King's Cross station is equivalent to the eternity towards which the ship of England is sailing, while the materialism and prosperity on which King's Cross

adversely comments belong to the world of the Wilcoxes. The solidarity of sentiment between author and heroine is obvious in the style: only the shift to a past tense ("*implied* a comment", "*were* fit portals") distinguishes Margaret's thoughts, grammatically, from the authorial voice. Forster is overtly – some might say, overly – protective towards his heroine.

"To Margaret – I hope that it will not set the reader against her …" "If you think this ridiculous, remember that it is not Margaret who is telling you about it," are risky moves, which come near to creating the effect Erving Goffman calls "breaking frame" – when some rule or convention that governs a particular type of experience is transgressed. These phrases bring into the open what realistic illusion normally requires us to suppress or bracket off – our knowledge that we are reading a novel about invented characters and actions.

This is a device much favoured by postmodern writers, who disown a naive faith in traditional realism by exposing the nuts and bolts of their fictional constructs. Compare, for example, this startling authorial intrusion in the middle of Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold* (1980):

> Once again Gold found himself preparing to lunch with someone – Spotty Weinrock – and the thought arose that he was spending an awful lot of time in this book eating and talking. There was not much else to be done with him. I was putting him into bed a lot with Andrea and keeping his wife and children conveniently in the background … Certainly he would soon meet a school-teacher with four children with whom he would fall madly in love, and I would shortly hold out to him the tantalizing promise of becoming the country's first Jewish Secretary of State, a promise I did not intend to keep.

Forster does not undermine, as radically as that, the illusion of life generated by his story, and invites our sympathetic interest in the characters and their fortunes by referring to them as if they are real people. So what is he trying to achieve by drawing attention to the gap between Margaret's experience and his narration of it? I suggest that, by making a playful, self-deprecating reference to his own rhetorical function, he obtains permission, as it were, to indulge in those high-flown authorial disquisitions about history and metaphysics (like the vision of England from the Purbeck hills) which are scattered throughout the novel, and which he saw as essential to its thematic purpose. Urbane humour is an effective way of deflecting and disarming the possible reader-response of "*Come off it!*" which this kind of authorial generalizing invites. Forster also makes a joke out of the interruption of narrative momentum which such passages inevitably entail, by apologetically "hastening" to return us to the story, and ending his chapter with a fine effect of suspense.

But suspense is a separate subject.

3 Suspense

AT FIRST, WHEN death appeared improbable because it had never visited him before, Knight could think of no future, nor of anything connected with his past. He could only look sternly at Nature's treacherous attempt to put an end to him, and strive to thwart her.

From the fact that the cliff formed the inner face of the segment of a hollow cylinder, having the sky for a top and the sea for a bottom, which enclosed the bay to the extent of nearly a semicircle, he could see the vertical face curving round on each side of him. He looked far down the façade, and realized more thoroughly how it threatened him. Grimness was in every feature, and to its very bowels the inimical shape was desolation.

By one of those familiar conjunctions of things wherewith the inanimate world baits the mind of man when he pauses in moments of suspense, opposite Knight's eyes was an imbedded fossil, standing forth in low relief from the rock. It was a creature with eyes. The eyes, dead and turned to stone, were even now regarding him. It was one of the early crustaceans called *Trilobites*. Separated by millions of years in their lives, Knight and this underling seemed to have met in their place of death. It was the single instance within reach of his vision of anything that had ever been alive and had had a body to save, as he himself had now.

NOVELS ARE NARRATIVES, and narrative, whatever its medium – words, film, strip-cartoon – holds the interest of an audience by raising questions in their minds, and delaying the answers. The questions are broadly of two kinds, having to do with causality (e.g. whodunnit?) and temporality (e.g. what will happen next?) each exhibited in a very pure form by the classic detective story and the adventure story, respectively. Suspense is an effect especially associated with the adventure story, and with the hybrid of detective story and adventure story known as the thriller. Such narratives are designed to put the hero or heroine repeatedly into situations of extreme jeopardy, thus exciting in the reader emotions of sympathetic fear and anxiety as to the outcome.

Because suspense is particularly associated with popular forms of fiction it has often been despised, or at least demoted, by literary novelists of the modern period. In *Ulysses*, for instance, James Joyce superimposed the banal and inconclusive events of a day in modern Dublin upon the heroic and satisfyingly closed story of Odysseus's return from the Trojan War, implying that reality is less exciting and more indeterminate than traditional fiction would have us believe. But there have been writers of stature, especially in the nineteenth century, who consciously borrowed the suspense-creating devices of popular fiction and turned them to their own purposes.

One such was Thomas Hardy, whose first published novel, *Desperate Remedies* (1871), was a "sensation-novel" in the style of Wilkie Collins. His third, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), was more lyrical and psychological, drawing on Hardy's courtship of his first wife in the romantic setting of north Cornwall, and was the favourite novel of that master

of modern autobiographical fiction, Marcel Proust. But it contains a classic scene of suspense that was, as far as I know, entirely invented. The word itself derives from the Latin word meaning "to hang", and there could hardly be a situation more productive of suspense than that of a man clinging by his finger-tips to the face of a cliff, unable to climb to safety – hence the generic term, "cliffhanger".

About halfway through *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the young and somewhat fickle heroine, Elfride, daughter of a Cornish vicar, takes a telescope to the top of a high cliff overlooking the Bristol Channel, to view the ship that is bringing home from India the young architect to whom she is secretly engaged. She is accompanied by Henry Knight, a friend of her stepmother's, a man of maturer years and intellectual interests, who has made overtures to her, and to whom she is becoming guiltily attracted. As they sit on the cliff top, Knight's hat is blown towards the edge, and when he tries to retrieve it he finds himself unable to climb back up the slippery one-in-three slope that terminates in a sheer drop of several hundred feet. Elfride's impetuous efforts to assist him only make things worse, and as she clambers back to safety she inadvertently sends him sliding further towards disaster. "As he slowly slid inch by inch … Knight made a last desperate dash at the lowest tuft of vegetation – the last outlying knot of starved herbage where the rock appeared in all its bareness. It arrested his further descent. Knight was now literally *suspended* by his arms …" (*my italics*). Elfride disappears from Knight's view, presumably seeking assistance, though he knows they are miles from any human habitation.

What happens next? Will Knight survive, and if so, how? Suspense can only be sustained by delaying the answers to these questions. One way of doing this, beloved of the cinema (whose effects Hardy often anticipated in his intensely visual fiction) would be to crosscut between the anguish of Knight and the frantic efforts of the heroine to