

I 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)

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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

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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 under-

tones. 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

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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.