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.

GEORGE ELIOT *Adam Bede* (1859)

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.

THOMAS HARDY *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873)