my word’s my bond.

—Michael Henchard in The Mayor of Casterbridge

Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of plain saying that our word is our bond.

—J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words

This book’s topic is new ways of reading Hardy today, in the light of recent developments in literary and critical theory. Should we read Hardy’s work differently from the way it was read thirty or forty years ago? If so, what would those new ways be? In a sense, these are nonQUESTIONS, since it is natural that a major writer like Hardy will be read anew in different ways by each new generation of critics. It follows that there will be, as indeed there have been, readings of Hardy that are Lacanian, feminist, new historicist, Foucauldian-Marxist, inspired by cultural studies, and so on. Already in 1977 the editor of the Norton Critical Edition of The Mayor of Casterbridge reported the existence of ‘approaches which are philosophical, sociological, formalist, stylistic, archetypal, and psychological’ (Hardy 1977, viii). Since then, the list of approaches has lengthened and become even more diverse. The multiplicity of these may be a sign of the desperation or even of the death-throes of old-fashioned literary study. These new readings reflect the broad, heterogeneous, even, if I may dare to say so, incoherent field of literary studies today. By ‘incoherent’ I mean, for example, that one cannot logically be a Lacanian and a devotee of cultural studies at the same time, since the two modes of explanation cannot be reconciled. Il faut choisir. Eclecticism in literary study, a little of this and a little of that, is a vice. That vice should be avoided at all costs.

Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of a return to the texts to see what you can make of them, you personally, I mean, as an individual reader, and as little as possible (it is not really altogether possible) the mouthpiece
of ideological assumptions. In place of Fredric Jameson's 'Always historicize', I would put, 'Always look at the text.' A good many of the new approaches to Hardy reflect a desire to 'put literature in its place', to distance oneself from it, with one degree or another of distaste or suspicion, or to register a distancing that has already occurred. This holding at arm's length tends to presuppose that Hardy's work has little but antiquarian interest today. It is no more than a symptom of a bygone historical moment in a particular culture, or it is a symptom of a particular psychological hang-up in Hardy himself.

As for me, I love literature, as the graduate student in Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card* said when the protagonist suggested she should study the role of the telephone in modern literature. She said she still loved literature, to which Derrida's protagonist replied by saying, 'Me too. Mais si. Mais si', which might be translated, 'But still. But still.' (The narrator comments: 'Curious to know what she understood by this' [Derrida 1980, 219].) If I also continue to love literature, I love it with a sense that the cultural role it once had is fast disappearing as new media take its place. The most urgent question for literary studies today, I claim, is the question of literature's future, if any, in the age of the new media. Just why would anyone want to read Hardy today? How many people actually do so, with a sense that the reading makes any difference in their lives?

With all this in mind, I have returned to reread, after a good many years, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, to see what I make of it today. That is a project I am better able to carry out than a broad discussion of how Hardy might be read differently today by students of literature in general. I used to teach *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from year to year, but then I shifted to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, along with Hardy's poetry. That means I can look at *The Mayor* with a relatively fresh eye. Over the years, after publishing a book on Hardy in 1970, I have kept coming back repeatedly to Hardy and writing new essays on his work. I have studiously refrained from reading again any of that previous work in preparation for writing this essay. I have not, moreover, discussed *The Mayor* in print since the sections on that novel in *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*. I confess that, on rereading *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, I have found the novel powerful and moving. I am even still a fall guy for the final sentimental twist of the dead goldfinch at the end. Poor goldfinch! Poor Henchard!

I by no means repudiate what I said about *The Mayor* in my book on Hardy. I think I was on the right track. I have resolved now, however, to go back again to reread the novel with the intertwined topics of speech acts, decision, and community in mind. These may seem at first heterogeneous or unconnected topics. It is easy, however, to see how they are related. Standard speech act theory, for example, as developed in J. L. Austin's seminal *How to Do Things with Words*, presupposes the existence of an established community. Such a community will have legal and social conventions