Frames in James: The Turn of the Screw, What Maisie Knew, and The Ambassadors

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FRAMES IN JAMES:

THE TURN OF THE SCREW, WHAT MAISIE KNEW,

AND THE AMBASSADORS

by

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Abstract:

My paper is a reading of three of Henry James's major novels, *The Turn of the Screw*, *What Maisie Knew*, and *The Ambassadors*. It draws mainly upon Jacques Derrida's work on the *parergon* in *The Truth in Painting* and his essay "Outwork" from *Dissemination*. In my paper I argue the following:

1) The Prologue to *The Turn of the Screw* is a complete frame tale, not an incomplete one, according to Derrida's notion of the *parergon*, and it works to redress the lack of a beginning to the governess's narrative, a lack that can be compensated for only because it must be sustained as a lack in order for the narrative to succeed as a fairy tale.

2) Maisie Farange is herself a *parergonal frame* in *What Maisie Knew*, used to compensate for the lack of decency in her parents' adulterous relationships. I read these relationships as paintings that cannot sustain themselves against the strict Victorian moral code, thus requiring a frame of support. Innocence in *What Maisie Knew* acquires the tactile permanence of the *parergon* that adulthood, the *ergon* or work, depends upon. The novel, initially simply a portrait of a frame, portrays Maisie's progress toward an adulthood that transcends immorality with amorality.

3) In *The Ambassadors*, the Lambinet chapters (30-31) form a *parergonal preface*. This frame, separated from the work both by a lapse in time and by the imagery of "the oblong gilt frame," is a preface because it contains the great revelation, the truth that is necessary in a portrait of a "man of imagination" but incommensurable with the genre of realism. This preface also redresses the lack of action in the novel due to what I call the Paris esthetic. Action, like truth, is out of place in the Parisian society James illustrates but necessary in a "drama of discrimination," a drama that requires a climax. The novel, in short, has its climax in its preface, and my paper is an exploration of this peculiar design.

This essay is a tribute to the importance of the marginal in literature and philosophy and to the genius of James and Derrida.
FRAMES IN JAMES:

THE TURN OF THE SCREW, WHAT MAISIE KNEW,

AND THE AMBASSADORS

Paul Gorman Beidler

The truth is that what a happy thought has to give depends immensely on the general turn of the mind capable of it, and on the fact that its loyal entertainer, cultivating fondly its possible relations and extensions, the bright efflorescence latent in it, but having to take other things in their order too, is terribly at the mercy of his mind. That organ has only to exhale, in its degree, a fostering tropic air in order to produce complications almost beyond reckoning. The trap laid for his superficial convenience resides in the fact that, though the relations of a human figure or a social occurrence are what make such objects interesting, they also make them, to the same tune, difficult to isolate, to surround with the sharp black line, to frame in the square, the circle, the charming oval, that helps any arrangement of objects to become a picture. Henry James, Preface to The Awkward Age.1

Introduction:

James's "The Art of Fiction,"2 a critique of another essay of the same name by Sir Walter Besant,3 argues that the novel is free of all standards and subject to no set of requirements that the critic may wish to impose upon it. James was against an exact method, grammar, or science of fiction, and his only advice to a pupil who asked for the rudiments of writing would be "'Ah, well, you must do it as you can!'" (HJ 50):

The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of. (HJ 49)
James's project in "The Art of Fiction," as in his other essays and his novels, was to show that fiction is as fine an art as painting, and his vehicle for communicating this message is his insistence upon "the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist" (HJ 46), an analogy he sees as complete. Painting, like philosophy, is the "sister art" of fiction (HJ 46), and it seems to me to give [the novelist] a great character, the fact that he has at once so much in common with the philosopher and the painter; this double analogy is his magnificent heritage. (HJ 47)

Like a painting, James writes, the novel simply "stands there before you, in the honesty of pink and green and a gilt frame" (HJ 48).

It is fiction's affinity with painting and philosophy that makes an esthetic reading of James's novels especially pertinent, and James's fascination with the marginal and subordinate makes a Derridian interpretation of his novels a fruitful one, as evidenced by the recent work of Shoshana Felman, Julie Rivkin, and others. Particularly relevant is Derrida's essay "The Parergon" in The Truth in Painting, a deconstruction of Kant's implied hierarchy of work over frame in the third Critique and an anatomy of a philosophical category of art works that require frames for their completion. Traditional esthetics has assumed a hierarchy in which the painting, the work of art, is of primary importance, but this hierarchy is turned upside-down in Derrida, where attention is focused on the frame rather than the painting,
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the preface rather than the book, and the marginal rather than
the primary. I will argue here that the marginal is also of
primary importance in James's novels, often attaining primacy
itself over the course of a novel. I will explore this
peculiarly primary marginality in The Turn of the Screw, What
Maisie Knew, and The Ambassadors.

I

The Turn of the Screw: Exquisite Mystification, Pure Romance

Interest in the frame as a structural element in James's
fiction has focused mainly on the Prologue to The Turn of the
Screw, the only one of his major works that is explicitly framed.
Alexander E. Jones writes that the frame is simply a typical
"parenthetical device" used to make the reader "suspend his
broad-daylight common-sense disbelief and enter the mood of the
story" (Jones 112), but this view has been much questioned in
recent decades by critics who read the Prologue as an incomplete
frame.4 Susan Crowl rejects this view of the Prologue as what
she calls a "detachable stereotype" (Crowl 111) and reads the
frame as being intimately connected to the story but incomplete
and problematic, calling it "a half-frame which is full of
suggestive, if veiled, commentary on the story to follow" (Crowl 108). Crowl writes:

In my view, the form is left unfinished in this way in order to leave unfinished to our judgement the questions which occur in turn to the governess, to Douglas, and to James. (Crowl 110)

Crowl argues that the form of the novella is echoed ironically by the "double frame and subtle shifting of identity" in the story itself (Crowl 114): "The form of the story, an introductory frame and tale within a tale, is similarly consistent and repetitive in the nested inversions of reality and story-book romance which are the governess' attempt at a perspective on her shifting experiences at Bly" (Crowl 122). William Goetz takes much the same position. In a recent article entitled "The 'Frame' of The Turn of the Screw: Framing the Reader In," Goetz discusses the Prologue to the tale, "an exemplary scene by which James tells us how to read the tale" (Goetz 71), and its function as a framing device. He concludes that "the 'frame' of The Turn of the Screw is asymmetrical" (Goetz 73). We expect an epilogue, Goetz claims, that will explain the text that the Prologue has introduced, a completion of the frame: "The 'frame' shows us through its incompleteness that there is no easy recourse to an author, whether implied or real, just as for the governess herself there is to be no recourse to the Master" (Goetz 73). Goetz's notion of the incompleteness of the frame is echoed more recently by Richard Rust in his essay on thresholds in the novella:
We try to control our lives and prevent the terror of the liminal by providing frames or by confronting our fears... Yet the story ends terribly unframed with the shocking death of Miles. The horror is accentuated by the undermining of the frame structure itself, something we counted on to provide control. (Rust 444)

In short, there seems to be a recent critical consensus that *The Turn of the Screw* is only partially framed and that this incompleteness in the frame is somehow necessary, or at least appropriate, as a compliment to the incompleteness of the governess's narrative itself.

My feeling, however, is that while critics are right to stress the connectedness of the frame to the story they are wrong to argue that the frame is incomplete. The frame performs at the same time a more basic function than that of merely paralleling the story on a different level. Previous readings of the Prologue of *The Turn of the Screw* have been limited by their dependence on a static and simplistic notion of framing that relies too heavily on comparison with the rectangular frame of a painting. I will argue here that the Prologue, or frame, and the story itself are not simply juxtaposed, like a broken frame around a broken painting--the tightness, what James called the "small strength," unattackable ease," and "perfect homogeneity" of the tale, would seem to indicate a flaw in the half-frame theory. The Prologue is not a broken frame at all but a complete one that describes events that occur both before and after the story, thus framing the manuscript temporally and providing the
closure that critics argue is missing. There is thus little basis for the claim that the story should be further framed by an epilogue that would answer the problems of the text. In order to demonstrate and explore the completeness of the frame and its function, I require a more sophisticated notion of the concept of frame than has yet been offered, and for this I appeal to Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*. My purpose is to use Derrida's notion of the "parergon" to explore the mechanics of the relationship between the Prologue and the tale itself.

Derrida's essay "The Parergon" in *The Truth In Painting* is a philosophical treatment of the frame as a structural constituent. The parergon ("beside-work"), of which the picture frame is merely the most accessible example, is more than just a decorative enclosure of a work. It is that which is not part of the work of art but without which the work cannot exist as a work, like the signature of a drawing, the drapery that necessarily fails to cover the body of a nude woman in a figure painting, or the columns outside a building; "the parergon," Derrida writes, "is precisely an ill-detachable detachment" (Derrida 59), an entity that both is and cannot be separated from the work:

A parergon comes against, beside, in addition to the ergon, the work done, the fact, the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates with the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board. It is first of all the on
Like the Prologue to *The Turn of the Screw*, the parergon, on board but on the border, is of the work but not in the work. It is necessarily both present to and necessarily excluded from the work. It belongs to the work extrinsically and is thus separate both from the work and from that from which it separates the work:

Parerga have a thickness, a surface which separates them not only (as Kant would have it) from the integral inside, from the body proper of the ergon, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung, from the space in which the statue or column is erected, from the whole field of historical, economic, political inscription in which the drive to signature is produced. (TP 61)

Since the parergon separates both the inside from the outside and the outside from the inside, it stands away from both the inside and the outside simultaneously like figure on ground. When it performs its function, however, when it frames, it disappears completely:

The parergon stands out both from the ergon (the work) and from the milieu, it stands out first of all like a figure on a ground. . . . But the parergonal frame stands out against two grounds, but with respect to each of these two grounds, it merges into the other. . . . There is always a form on a ground, but the parergon is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out, but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy. (TP 61)

The parergonal frame, then, blurs into the exterior when the focus is on the interior, and it blurs into the interior, accentuating the work, when the focus is on the exterior. This is clearly the case in *The Turn of the Screw*—at the beginning
the Prologue appears part of the novel but by the end we have completely forgotten that we are in a room full of people by a fire. The Prologue jumps forward and forces both figure and ground into the background, but at the same time it fades away, disappearing into the outside when one looks intently at the inside of the work—the frame, in other words, cannot be in the background. The parergon is secondary but it cannot be secondary. Shoshana Felman perhaps has this chameleonic effect of the parergon in mind when she writes that

The frame [of The Turn of the Screw] is therefore not an outside contour whose role is to display an inside content: it is a kind of exteriority which permeates the very heart of the story's interiority, an internal cleft separating the story's content from itself, distancig it from its own referential certainty. With respect to the story's content, the frame thus acts both as an inclusion of the exterior and an exclusion of the interior: it is a perturbation of the outside at the very core of the story's inside, and as such, it is a blurring of the very difference between inside and outside. (Felman 123)

The frame of The Turn of the Screw is clearly easier to locate than the frame of Kant's third Critique, the subject of Derrida's essay, or the parergonal elements in What Maisie Knew of The Ambassadors. The Prologue exists beside the work, it is separate from both the inside and the outside of the work, and it appears part of the inside if the viewer's focus is on the inside and vice versa.

The most important characteristic of the parergon, however, and the one that will prove most useful here, is that it comes
into being, or is necessitated, because of a lack in the ergon, or work. It derives its paradoxical nature from the work itself, Derrida writes, but from something absent from the work rather than something present to it:

The parergon inscribes something which comes as an extra, exterior to the proper field . . . but whose transcendent exteriority comes to play, abut onto, brush against, rub, press the limit itself and intervene in the inside only to the extent that the inside is lacking. It is lacking in something and it is lacking from itself. (TP 56)

The parergon is thus present because of something in the work itself that is not present. That the parergon clearly lacks the work and cannot stand alone is obvious, but it is less obvious that the work also lacks the frame, and that the frame is necessitated by a lack in the work. This is not to say that all paintings lack a frame, but simply that many paintings do, and that the frame has somehow become part of what we mean when we say 'painting.' My purpose is to show that the relation between the Prologue and the tale in James's The Turn of the Screw is similar to the relationship Derrida describes between the painting and the frame. To understand the Prologue then, and to show how and why the frame is complete, one must isolate the lack in James's story that prompted him to complicate it with the addition of a prologue.

The Prologue to The Turn of the Screw is called a Prologue by critics of the tale because the narrator uses the term, presumably after Douglas himself. The narrator of the Prologue
writes: "It appeared that the narrative he had promised to read us really required for a proper intelligence a few words of prologue" (TS 4). It is necessary to distinguish clearly, however, between the Prologue and what I will call here the 'prologue,' especially since both preface different works entitled "The Turn of the Screw." The Prologue frames the novella, while the 'prologue,' which is contained by the Prologue and part of it, is Douglas's introduction of his manuscript to which the narrator refers. The 'prologue' summarizes not only the conditions of the governess's employment but also the details of the uncle's residence in town and the turn of events through which he has come to be in charge of Miles and Flora (TS 4), and this 'prologue,' according to Douglas, is necessitated by the audience, who without such an introduction would supposedly have trouble understanding the story.

But what necessitates the Prologue, the scene by the fire in the country house, in the first place? James added the dramatic Prologue because the governess's narrative is lacking something, and this lack is no mere uncertainty or ambiguity in the text, such as the question of whether or not the ghosts are real or that of whether the governess actually suffocates Miles in the end. An answer to either of these questions would become part of the work and augment it considerably, as James is clearly aware in the Preface to the tale when he writes: "this perfectly
independent and irresponsible little fiction rejoices, beyond any rival on a like ground, in a conscious provision of prompt retort to the sharpest question that may be addressed to it" (Preface 117). The "prompt retort," of course, is that the question is unanswerable. Deliberate ambiguity, as so many recent critics have pointed out, is necessary to the structure of the tale, and James makes clear in his Preface that all the particulars that would resolve the ambiguities of his text are purposefully omitted from his story so that it might not fail as dismally as those of his competitors. He writes of the work of his competitors:

One had seen, in fiction, some grand form of wrong-doing, or better still of wrong-being, imputed, seen it promised and announced as by the hot breath of the Pit--and then, all lamentably, shrink to the compass of some particular brutality, some particular immorality, some particular infamy portrayed: with the result, alas, of the demonstration's falling sadly short. (Preface 122)

The purpose of the prologue, then, cannot be to answer to a question asked by the text. The story, however, since it is so obviously framed, must have a more fundamental lack that cannot be eliminated internally, a lack that distinguishes it from the ordinary novel. John Carlos Rowe has argued that "the mise en abyme of the manuscript is an effect of the Uncle and his disguised power" (Rowe 143). More generally, however, I suggest that what the governess's manuscript is missing is simply a beginning. Her narrative simply does not begin, and it cannot: a beginning would violate its form.
One might object, of course, that the governess's story as we have it begins at chapter one--the word 'beginning,' one might add, is found in the first line of the governess's narrative:

I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong. (TS 6, emphasis added)

There is nothing within her narrative, furthermore, that indicates explicitly that it lacks a beginning, but if the lack were so explicit, that which satisfied it would be not a frame but an element of the story itself, hence Derrida's paradoxical reminder that "There is no natural frame. There is frame, but the frame does not exist" (Derrida 81). We also learn of the lack not from the work but from the frame itself. Douglas, who knows the story and knew its author, says that the beginning is missing, and the narrator repeats his words: "the written statement took up the tale at a point after it had, in a manner, begun" (TS 4). Douglas's 'prologue' is an attempt, embedded within the drama of the frame, to set the scene, to provide "the fact to be in possession of" (TS 4). It is this nakedness, this lack of the essential "fact" that the 'prologue' is to account for to the listeners around the fire. But the word "beginning" emphasizes not the beginning itself but the fact that the beginning is absent and must remain so. The Prologue as a whole redresses this lack by replacing the beginning.

The only other hint in the story, once we look for it, of a
missing beginning is the past-perfect narration in the first paragraph of the first chapter. There is nothing unique or problematic about pluperfection in the early pages of a novel, of course, but the past-perfect mode is employed specifically to refer to something that came before a given action in the past. There is no indication that pages are missing from the manuscript, or that its author would have liked to pick up the story earlier; the story has a confessional tone, as if the governess, like the narrator of "The Way it Came" (1896), never meant for her story to be read by anyone but herself and, perhaps, Douglas. In most novels, of course, this past-before-the-past remains outside the scope of the story--novels generally begin on page one like James's What Maisie Knew, which begins with a straightforward introduction to the main characters, but in The Turn of the Screw the beginning is supplanted by a lack of a beginning. In The Turn of the Screw, part of this past is recovered by the frame. Douglas's 'prologue' has the odd effect of making it unclear to the reader exactly where the story starts; the first sentences of the governess's narrative seem to imply that others once came before them. This 'prologue,' which he deems necessary but which we must simply accept, is not given to us directly, but is rather summarized by the narrator after the fact. The invisible 'prologue,' given to us indirectly, is a hole in the frame, a gap between the Prologue to the novella and the actual manuscript. The 'prologue' is that strange and
imperceptible place where the frame overlaps and intertwines with the story proper, where all horizon lines fade into the distance.

James judged his "amusette" much better framed than consistent and complete. The Preface to the New York edition of the novella, which begins by denouncing "mere 'modern' psychical case[s]" like that with which the Prologue begins and which it promises the tale itself will transcend (Preface 118). James's Preface makes it clear that anything added to the story itself would have destroyed not only the confessional tone but also the unity, the "perfect homogeneity" of the tale (TS 117):

On the surface there was n't much, but another grain, none the less, would have spoiled the precious pinch addressed to its end as neatly as some modicum extracted from an old silver snuff box and held between finger and thumb. (Preface 118)

The tension of the story depends on its starting where the action starts. When James first heard the story from the Archbishop of Canterbury, it was merely a "shadow of a shadow" (TS 118), and his intention was for it to remain obscure through "the process of adumbration" with which he expanded his shadow into a novella (TS 122). The extra information, the "fact[s] to be in possession of," could not be communicated by the story itself and had to remain, in James's view, detached.

But the Prologue is also ill-detachable, and the reasons for
this are more complicated. James liked nothing better than a good fairy-tale: he writes in the Preface to "The Altar of the Dead" that "the 'ghost-story,' as we for convenience call it, has ever been for me the most probable form of the fairy-tale" (AN 254). In the Preface to *The Turn of the Screw* he writes that

> The charm of all these [fairy tales] for the distracted modern mind is in the clear field of experience, as I call it, over which we are thus led to roam; an annexed but independent world in which nothing is right save as we rightly imagine it. (Preface 119)

The world of fairy tales, a "clear field of experience . . . annexed and independent," is the world that James had in mind when he created *The Turn of the Screw*, but to be annexed and independent, this world requires a frame. The world of fairy tales is thus framed, surrounded, and supported by life, just as the clear field of the governess's story of the children and the ghosts, "a fairy tale pure and simple" (*TS* 119), is framed by a lively Christmas Eve of story telling, a drama of

> the circle, one winter afternoon, round the hall-fire of a grave old country-house where (for all the world as if to resolve itself promptly and obligingly into convertible, into "literary" stuff) the talk turned . . . to apparitions and night-fears, to the marked and sad drop in the general supply . . . of such commodities. (*TS* 117)

The *romance* of the fairy tale is emphasized and heightened by juxtaposition with the *drama* of the frame. The story is framed for the same reason that it is ambiguous: to exaggerate the *romance* of the story and prevent it from becoming a drama, "a mere modern psychical case."
On another level, the reason that the Prologue is necessary involves the differences between speech and writing. Goetz writes that the main difference between the Prologue and the story itself is that the former is oral and therefore privileged, the latter merely written. By claiming that the oral Prologue is privileged over the story itself, which is merely written, Goetz invokes the traditional hierarchy of the primacy of speech that deconstruction has rebelled against: he claims that the story proper depends upon the oral flexibility of the Prologue. I argue, however, that if a hierarchy is to be invoked this solid inaccessibility is evidence more of the primacy of writing than of speech. The Prologue is a noisier and more dramatic piece of writing than the story it prefaces. When the Prologue begins, the manuscript, which the narrator has entitled The Turn of the Screw, is inaccessible, impenetrable, and silent, in "a locked drawer" (TS 2), and it must be made accessible by Douglas's servant in town. This impenetrability is a feature of all writing, and the juxtaposition of the tale with the Prologue emphasizes it. The Prologue, like the story, is also a written account, written down long after the events it describes take place. It describes an oral encounter with the impenetrability of writing, as does the story itself, in which letters that should be written simply are not and letters that are written are either not read or misinterpreted. The permanence and incompleteness of writing are thus celebrated in James's story as
is the ambiguous terror of the fairy tale, and the audience, who keep interrupting Douglas with annoying oversimplifications, are repressed and ancillary in the text; most of them are phased out of the text altogether:

The departing ladies who said they would stay did not, of course, stay: they departed in a rage of curiosity. (TS 4) Douglas does his best to ignore the excitement of the women: "He took no notice of her," the narrator recalls after one of them interrupts, "he looked at me, but as if, instead of me, he saw what he spoke of" (TS 2). Douglas soon becomes absorbed by the story he reads, ignoring the women and their impertinent comments and even ignoring the narrator, whom he clearly has some reason to respect above the others in the group. Even Douglas himself disappears: as the narrator summarizes Douglas's 'prologue,' Douglas is himself absorbed into oblivion by the manuscript he reads, and soon after the Prologue itself disappears, absorbed into the text and forgotten:

It disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy. (TP 61)

It is appropriate that James's greatest ghost story is a text in which the written word, like death, is dominant and speech, the living drama of the frame, is dispensable. The purpose of the juxtaposition, though, is less to sustain a hierarchic relationship between writing and speech (or, from the reader's point of view, between reading and listening), than to
unite them, to fuse them. The effect is a combined text with the permanence of a manuscript and the immediacy of a fire-side ghost story. This fusion of writing and speech, spiced with a vague touch of the past-perfect, is accomplished in the last line of the Prologue:

But Douglas, without heeding me, had begun to read with a fine clearness that was like a rendering to the ear of the beauty of his author's hand, (TS 6)

The frame of James's *The Turn of the Screw* thus fits much better than critics have claimed. It is not perfect, of course: One of the mysteries of the novella, as Graham McMaster points out, is the question of whether the governess is ever punished for her failure to protect the children and how she supported herself thereafter—she would have needed, one would imagine, letters of recommendation to have gotten the job as governess to Douglas's sister. These details, unlike the nature of the ghosts, are facts that Douglas surely would have known, but he gives no answers. The Prologue as parergon, however, is complete and effective; if nothing else, it raises so many more questions than it answers that one is forced to re-read the Prologue after finishing the tale, and thus serves as an epilogue as well. The Prologue thus heightens the ending of the tale and eliminates the need for a beginning; an ill-detachable detachment it frames the immediacy of the story and accentuates it while providing necessary background information in a way that does not encroach upon the story.
James's Preface to *Maisie* discusses the planning stages of the novel in painterly terms: "Sketchily clustered even, these elements gave out that vague pictorial glow which forms the first appeal of a living 'subject' to the painter's consciousness" (Preface 24). I have tried to clarify above the delicacy with which *The Turn of the Screw* is framed by its Prologue. My thesis here is that the relationship between ergon and parergon, or work and frame, is a fundamental one that exists in *What Maisie Knew* in the form of relationships between people within the novel instead of between discernible physical elements of the work of art itself. I am thus making a jump from the outside to the inside of the text that will reveal, among other things, that human frames are just as effective as esthetic ones.

Reading *The Turn of the Screw* and *What Maisie Knew* together, perhaps because they were written at much the same time, yields surprising results with implications that illuminate the readings of each separately. My reading of the latter will begin with the extent to which the situation of *The Turn of the Screw* is
reversed in it: Maisie is also a child whose absent parents are replaced by governesses, but her story is seen from the point of view of the child, rather than from that of the governess. In the early chapters Maisie's parents and governesses are as bizarre as the ghosts in The Turn of the Screw. What Maisie Knew thus begins as a ghost story, its eerie "turn of the screw" being that Maisie cannot even see the ghosts that haunt her existence. The point at which Maisie comes to realize the ghastliness of her guardians, which I will call the fairy-tale section, is thus the major turning-point of the novel.

There is much laughter in the novel, most of it directed at Maisie. Maisie is a clown, "a figure mainly to be laughed at" (WMK 50), and the adults around her, particularly the gentlemen, never tire of picking on her:

They pulled and pinched, they teased and tickled her; some of them even, as they termed it, shied things at her, and all of them thought it funny to call her by names having no resemblance to her own. (WMK 57)

Maisie is batted back and forth like a "shuttlecock" by her parents (WMK 42), and to their friends she is a plaything. Their laughter supplies her with an identity, as if she were perpetually on stage, and no one laughs more often than Sir Claude, whose laughter, to Maisie, "was an indistinguishable part of the sweetness of his being there" (WMK 70).17 Ironically in a book about knowledge and the death of childhood,18 the adults laugh hardest when Maisie knows something she shouldn't: "Even
her profundity had left a margin for a laugh" (WMK 80). Her knowledge, which she has no idea she even possesses, is what makes her so funny to the adults around her.

The viciousness of the humor of the early chapters, however, derives from the fact that Maisie herself does not get any of the jokes.¹⁹ These early chapters are laden with irony that seems heavy-handed and almost clumsy, on a first reading: we are told again and again that Maisie's parents' divorce unites them far more effectively than their marriage ever did and that each basks in the infamy of the affair. Maisie's parents' attitudes toward her are exactly reversed after the divorce: now each pushes Maisie toward the other instead of tugging her away as they had done during the litigation:²⁸

[Ida's] conscience winced under the acuteness of a candid friend who had remarked that the real end of all their tugging would be that each parent would try to make the little girl a burden to the other. (WMK 46)

The result of these role-reversals is that contradiction comes to appear natural to Maisie; she is young and has no basis on which to object to them. She comes to accept contradictions and to be comfortable with irony and paradox. Maisie does not distinguish between truth and fiction: "She was at the age for which all stories are true and all conceptions are stories. The actual was the absolute, the present alone was vivid" (WMK 42). Since the irony of her situation is too overwhelming for her ever to perceive it as such, she accepts it, acquiring
the positive certitude, bequeathed from afar by Moddle, that the natural way for a child to have her parents was separate and successive, like her mutton and her pudding or her bath and her nap. (WMK 44)

The pleasure the reader takes in her situation is a pleasure from which Maisie herself is excluded, and she accepts the string of almost preternatural governesses to whom she is subjected without doubt, suspicion, or regret.

A catalogue of the adults in Maisie's life is enough to show their similarity to the ghosts in The Turn of the Screw. After the divorce Maisie's world takes on a strangeness that she herself can hardly appreciate. "Her little world was phantasmagoric--strange shadows dancing on a sheet" (WMK 41), but the shades and the forms are all the same to Maisie, who has no idea that she is buried in the depths of Plato's cave. The first ghostly governess to drift into her new life after Moddle, who had taken care of her before the divorce, is Miss Overmore, "on whose loveliness, as she supposed it, the little girl was faintly conscious that one couldn't rest with quite the same tucked-in and kissed-for-goodnight feeling" that she had been accustomed to with Moddle (WMK 50). Miss Overmore, "the pretty one" (WMK 52), rolls her eyes at Maisie and is simply beautiful, like the children in The Turn of the Screw. Maisie seems aware that, like Miles and Flora, there is something strange about her, but she accepts this strangeness without question. Miss Overmore is thus Maisie's introduction to both the social ambiguity of the
station of governesses in late-Victorian England and the ambiguity of Maisie's own standing in the family. Maisie knows that Miss Overmore is "a lady, and yet awfully poor," as was often the case with Victorian governesses, and she knows also that "nursery-governesses were only for little girls who were not, as she said, 'really' little" (WMK 44). Miss Overmore is less bizarre than some of the other guardians Maisie is to have, but through her Maisie is introduced to the strange reality that lurks behind the appearances she is presented with: Maisie is unaware of the real reason that Miss Overmore follows her to Beale's household and of the strange relationship she is to have with Maisie's father under the guise of an employment that "he appreciates immensely" (WMK 47). She does seem to know, however, and to accept, that there is a real reason that she is not to know about: "Everything had something behind it: life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors. She had learned that at these doors it was not wise to knock" (WMK 54).

The eerie quality of Maisie's other governesses is clear to her: "She vaguely knew, furthermore, somehow, that the future was still bigger than she, and that part of what made it so was the number of governesses lurking in it ready to dart out" (WMK 44). And dart out they do. Before Miss Overmore joins Beale Farange's household permanently, Maisie is taken briefly into the
hands of "a fat dark lady with a foreign name and dirty fingers," a "strange apparition" that "faded before the bright creature who had braved everything for Maisie's sake" (WMK 47). Miss Overmore is next, and she is then replaced at Ida's by the motherly Mrs Wix, a "horrid beetle," who, with her diadem, her "dingy rosette like a large button," and her "straighteners" (WMK 49), is present to Maisie even in her absence throughout the novel:

"Her very silence became after this one of the largest elements of Maisie's consciousness; it proved a warm and habitable air, into which the child penetrated farther than she ever dared to mention to her companions. Somewhere in the depths of it the dim straighteners were fixed upon her; somewhere out of the troubled little current Mrs Wix intently waited." (WMK 60)

Mrs Wix is upstaged by the most phantasmagoric ghost of all, "little dead Clara Matilda, who, on a crossing in the Harrow Road, was knocked down and crushed to death by the cruelest of hansoms" (WMK 49). Clara, Maisie's "little dead sister" who "wasn't a real sister, but that only made her more romantic," takes on a ghostly reality to Maisie, who "knew everything about her that could be known, everything she had said or done in her little mutilated life" (WMK 49). Clara is as present to Maisie's fecund imagination as any of her governesses are, and Maisie seems to accept her as a member of the family, just as she accepts her obviously flawed governesses without question. Even Lisette, her doll, comes alive, and Maisie builds a world of mystery and ambiguity for her that reflects her own.
These governesses are real to Maisie in their incoherence, like the "intensive particulars" that, according to Jean Frantz Blackall, comprise Maisie's consciousness of the world (Blackall 133). The point is not so much that they are ghostly as that they are ghastly, like monsters in a romance, and would doubtless appear so to Maisie if she had not grown up surrounded by them. She accepts reality and fiction together as equals and does not distinguish between them or prefer one to the other. Her world, like Bly, is teeming with ghosts, but Maisie, unlike the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, is too innocent to object to them.

Maisie's parents remarry, and out of this world of phantoms a frame-like structure emerges, a neat quincuncial system of tugs and shoves, and in a sense Maisie's four parents and stepparents, who are always trying to "square" each other, form a frame around our portrait of Maisie. What Maisie lacks and desperately needs, of course, is parents, and if Maisie's guardians performed the roles that they pretend to perform, they would constitute a frame. But all these possible parents are replaced by ghostly governesses: "Parents had come to seem vague, but governesses were evidently to be trusted" (*WMK* 59). We would like to see Maisie nurtured and supported by some combination of her guardians and buttressed by them like a painting is braced and sustained by its frame, but she derives none of the benefits of a
frame from them. If Maisie is ever framed by her parents' remarriages, the affair between Mrs Beale and Sir Claude begins to erode the frame as soon as it is constructed. Her world subdivides too quickly for Maisie to choose sides; she is simply in the middle, surrounded by the chaos of adultery:

If it had become now, for that matter, a matter of sides, there was at least a certain amount of evidence as to where they all were. Maisie, of course, in such a delicate position, was on nobody's; . . . (WMK 93)

Maisie's frame is a fluid one; as soon as her parents remarry their marriages begin to deteriorate. Maisie is given the credit for bringing her stepparents together, just as she "did it" to Mrs Beale and her father (WMK 74), but she is actually no more than "a jolly good pretext" (WMK 154) that the adults cling to in order to prevent the world from seeing what they are really doing. The search for a frame in What Maisie Knew thus reveals that Maisie does not receive the care and support that she needs and that normal parergonal parents would provide for her.

Maisie's own role, I suggest, is that of a parergon: she is not an integral part of the family, but she frames it. Though Maisie does not understand her father's relationship with Miss Overmore, she does see that she is herself the "awfully proper reason" that they are able to contrive the arrangement (WMK 53). Miss Overmore's presence in the Farange household depends upon Maisie:

She was in a false position and so freely and loudly called
attention to it that it seemed to become almost a source of glory. (WMK 56)

Though Maisie is unwanted, she is necessary; the family would collapse without her. Like the frame of a painting, Maisie appears from a distance to be a part of the family, but from within it she is a complication for which there is no place; she is an excluded but necessary pretext. Maisie, like the column that holds up a building, is both necessary and oblivious to the goings-on inside. She is a parergon, "the great alternative to the proper" (WMK 58). Without Maisie, her father and Miss Overmore will be exposed as adulterers. The lack that necessitates the frame, then, is simply the lack of decency. A presence is required to atone for this absence of decency, and Maisie is that presence.

In What Maisie Knew, I suggest, James portrays a world in which adults use each other without scruple. Innocence is parergonal in What Maisie Knew because it is so useful, and we can thus draw a parallel between adulthood, which collapses under the weight of its own constraints, and the painting that requires a frame in order to be presentable. Adulthood is thus incomplete: it cannot sustain itself or realize its moral ideal without the pretext of a frame. Dennis Foster has this incompleteness in mind when he writes of Mrs Beale that "when she speaks, her language betrays the attempt of the unconscious to erase the conflict between socially acceptable and socially unacceptable roles, between wife and mistress" (Foster 212). The
inside of the work, actual family life, is not compatible with the outside, strict Victorian morality, and thus they must be separated and reconciled by a frame. Maisie is that frame, and the best we can say of her in the early chapters of the novel is that she is a brilliant one; she is successful in making her parents worthy of our attention. As James remarked in the Preface,

The great thing is indeed that the muddled state too is one of the very sharpest of the realities, that it also has color and form and character, has often in fact a broad and rich comicality, many of the signs and values of the appreciable.27 (Preface 30)

All this time, of course, Maisie's education is being neglected, but this unfortunate consequence of her parergonality is rationalized away by her guardians: Mrs Beale exclaims to her, "'It isn't as if you didn't already know everything, is it, love?'" (WMK 80). Maisie's apparent innocence is what makes her so valuable, but it is assumed from the start that Maisie has no real innocence and never has had any. What she derives from her experience of life, then, is "an innocence saturated with knowledge" (WMK 150). Since she does not yet completely understand the motivations of her elders, her education consists not of knowledge at all but of a fine sharpening of her ability to deal with ambiguity: she learns to reason with ghosts. Maisie is the margin between the inside and the outside of her family, and as such she is distant from both, a lonely child kept upstairs. Maisie is surrounded, as Paul Armstrong has observed,
by "a prison of ambiguity" (Armstrong 520), by the irony of jokes she does not understand. She is at home in the midst of ambiguity and nothing makes her shine so brightly, but a prison is not a frame. Maisie is separated from the irony of her situation in the first half of the novel as if by a pane of glass, and she has the feeling that she is watching her story unfold through a window:

So the sharpened sense of spectatorship was the child's main support, the long habit, from the first, of seeing herself in discussion and finding in the fury of it--she had had a glimpse of the game of football--a sort of compensation for the doom of a peculiar passivity. It gave her often an odd air of being present at her history in as separate a manner as if she could only get at experience by flattening her nose against a pane of glass. (WMK 101)

The image of Maisie with her nose against the glass is repeated in Chapter 15, where she still feels "as if she were flattening her nose upon the hard window-pane of the sweet-shop of knowledge" (WMK 120). Maisie is separated from her own history by an invisible barrier in the same way that a frame is separated from a painting by a crack. The action of the novel is vague and implied, it recedes into the background. Our attention is focused on Maisie, who understands fully none of her parents actions but at the same time is a pretext for them. What Maisie Knew is thus in esthetic terms a painting of a frame.

Many critics of What Maisie Knew have focused their attention on the end of the book, looking at the choice Maisie eventually makes and trying to ascertain whether or not Maisie
develops a moral sense. 29 I will argue that she does develop one, but I want to focus first on the portion of the novel that comes just before the end, Chapters 17-21, which I will call the fairy-tale section. This section is the turning point of the novel: it is here that Maisie ceases to be necessary to her parents, whereupon they both return to her to enact a ceremony of detachment from their daughter, a ceremony in which Maisie is an active participant. Maisie is thus left behind like a frame without a picture. Her perception of the world begins to change during the tumultuous fairy-tale section of the book, a section that Maisie herself recognizes as "a new phase" (WMK 137). The subject of this section is "the inevitable shift . . . of her point of view" (Preface 28). It begins with the trip to the Great Exhibition in Earl's Court, "an extemporized expensive treat" (WMK 146), and ends with the migration to France. It is like a dream vision for Maisie, in which the phantasmagoric world of her early childhood returns to torment her. The glass barrier of her innocence gradually disappears and Maisie's parents, hitherto distant, return to her like the bizarre characters in the stories of her childhood, suddenly near enough to touch. Her parents and her childhood return together, as it were, as if to say goodbye. 30

Strange tales and stories have formed a large part of Maisie's education: Maisie, we are reminded in Chapter 17,
had been in thousands of stories—all Mrs Wix's and her own, to say nothing of the richest romances of the French Elise—but she had never been in such a story as this... The Arabian Nights had quite closed round her.

From this minute that pitch of the wondrous was in everything. (WMK 145)

Sir Claude is "her good fairy" (WMK 136), and the money the Countess tosses to Maisie is "too much even for a fee in a fairy tale" (WMK 159). After the Exhibition, in the Countess's house, Maisie finds a surreal world of colors and flowers, of silence and light, and of feathers and chocolates. Maisie is awed by the turbulent changes her world is going through, and in the chaos she sees for the first time those around her, particularly her parents, as the monsters they are. Thomas Jeffers, citing Martha Banta, has written of the fairy-tale chapters that "the Shakespearean 'green world' metamorphoses into a Jacobean funny-terrible freak show, a debased amusement park inhabited not by simple nymphs but by bejeweled nymphomaniacs" (Jeffers 160). The colorful narration corresponds directly to Maisie's increased sensitivity to the world around her—unknown to the adults, Maisie is becoming more aware of her situation at the same time that it is encroaching more closely than ever upon her.

The fairy-tale section, in which Maisie's parents, no longer united so neatly by their hatred of each other, return to her separately and force her to renounce them and absolve them of their guilt, is appropriately divided by a period of five days into two parts, one for each parent. If these chapters are
dreamlike for Maisie, they are a carnival of delights for the reader and constitute the most humorous and vivid part of the novel. Maisie has begun the process of transformation from a frame to a work. It is thus in the fairy-tale section that Maisie first has the chance to apply her knowledge.

In the first part, in the Exhibition, Beale emerges from "the Flowers of the Forest" with the Countess, a woman who "might have been a clever frizzled poodle in a frill or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat" (WMK 156). We have seen little more of Beale Farange (whose surname was to be "Hurter" when James originally conceived of the story) than his haunting beard and teeth in the first half of the novel, but he suddenly reappears in Chapter 18, where he is described as if he were a fire-breathing dragon:

There was a passage during which [her father's "foolish awkwardness"], on a yellow silk sofa under one of the palms, he had her on his knee stroking her hair, playfully holding her off while he showed her his shining fangs and let her, with a vague affectionate helpless pointless 'Dear old girl, dear little daughter,' inhale the fragrance of his cherished beard. She must have been sorry for him, she afterwards knew, so well could she privately follow his difficulty in being specific to her about anything. (WMK 148)

Beale is harmless, however, defeated by the awkwardness of his guilt, and Maisie knows it. Maisie clearly knows exactly what her father is trying to do with her, but she is devoid in this passage of all the emotions she might be expected to feel in the presence of her sordid father. She feels pity, but no fear or
shame:

There was something in him that seemed, and quite touchingly, to ask her to help him to pretend—pretend he knew enough about her life and her education, her means of subsistence and her view of himself, to give the questions he couldn't put her a natural domestic tone. She would have pretended with ecstasy if he could only have given her the cue. (WMK 149)

Beale has never been enough a part of Maisie's life for her to regret his desertion of her; to her he is merely an associate who feels it is time to disconnect. She tries, though unsuccessfully, to pretend along with her father, and she feels sympathy for his awkward predicament. Maisie tries to help ease the process of his making her repudiate him as much as possible, but she feels no remorse or regret: she only understands. Her father is using her, and he is frustrated by the fact that he might have been able to continue using her if things had worked out differently:

When he had lighted a cigarette and begun to smoke in her face it was as if he had struck with the match the note of some queer clumsy ferment of old professions, old scandals, old duties, a dim perception of what he possessed in her and what, if everything had only—damn it!—been totally different, she might still be able to give him. (WMK 148-9)

The "it was as if" here and the "damn it!" indicate the extent to which Maisie is extrapolating from her father's words and make it difficult to tell just how much of his motivations she comprehends. She understands, however, what her father wants her to do: he wants her to repudiate him, to free him of the obligation he feels to protect her, and he wants to appear magnanimous while he does it.
It was exactly as if he had broken out to her: 'I say, you little booby, help me to be irreproachable, to be noble, and yet to have none of the beastly bore of it. There's only impropriety enough for one of us; so you must take it all. Repudiate your 'dear old daddy--in the face, mind you, of his tender supplications. He can't be rough with you--it isn't in his nature: therefore you'll have successfully chucked him because he was too generous to be as firm with you, poor man, as was, after all, his duty. (WMK 153)

This is Maisie at her coldest and sharpest: she even lies to him, promising "'I'll do anything in the world you ask me, papa!' (WMK 152). Her impression of him is compared to "one of the pantomimes to which Sir Claude had taken her: she saw nothing in it but what it conveyed" (WMK 156). But the astounding thing is that Maisie plays along with her father's pantomime. Regardless of her understanding of the nature of adultery, Maisie pities her father, proving that whatever it is that she knows, she understands him better than he has ever understood her.

Five days later, after a near-revolution in her father's household, Maisie is whisked off after breakfast to Folkstone, which "swim[s] in a softness of color and sound" (WMK 164) and which is for Maisie "paradise" (WMK 170):

Maisie had known all along a great deal, but never so much as she was to know from this moment on and as she learned in particular during the couple of days that she was to hang in the air, as it were, over the sea which represented in breezy blueness and with a summer charm a crossing of more spaces than the channel. (WMK 162)

In Folkstone she finds ecstasy and wonder, miracle and sacrifice, and her contumelious mother reappears in all her glory. Maisie and her step-father are sitting together in the garden of the
hotel, surveying "the human scene" when the "apparition" appears

(WMK 166):

Sir Claude, beside her, was occupied with a cigarette and
time the hotel was full the
garden showed the particular void that ensues upon the sound
of the dressing bell. She had almost had time to weary of
the human scene; her own humanity at any rate, in the shape
of a smutch on her scanty skirt, had held her so long that
as soon as she raised her eyes they rested on a high fair
drapery by which smutches were put to shame and which had
glided towards her over the grass without her noting its
rustle. She followed up its stiff sheen--up and up from the
ground, where it had stopped--till at the end of a
considerable journey her impression felt the shock of a
fixed face which, surmounting it, seemed to offer the climax
of the dressed condition. 'Why mamma!' she cried the next
instant. (WMK 166)

If her father reappeared as a dragon, her mother arrives on the
scene as a towering gliding ghost.

Again, however, Maisie somehow knows exactly what her mother
has come to do, and she seems almost embarrassed to have caught
her proud mother in the undignified position of arranging her own
renunciation:

She had the positive sense of . . . catching their relative,
catching her in the act of getting rid of her burden with a
finality that showed her as unprecedentedly relaxed. (WMK
167)

Maisie feels no resentment toward her mother for preparing to
desert her; rather, she sees Ida as an attractive and desirable
person worthy of sympathy and respect:

[Ida's] huge eyes, her red lips, the intense marks in her
face formed an éclairage as distinct and public as a lamp
set in a window. The child seemed quite to see in it the
very beacon that had lighted her path; she suddenly found
herself reflecting that it was no wonder the gentlemen were
Maisie feels no fear or intimidation at her mother's presence. She even stands up to Ida on the issue of her precious Captain, but she is not without feeling for her mother and looks on Ida with the kindness and understanding of a grateful daughter, knowing that she had not come to box any ears or to bang any doors or even to use any language: she had come at the worst to lose the thread of her argument in an occasional dumb twitch of the toggery in which Mrs Beale's low domestic had had the impudence to serve up Miss Farange. (WMK 173)

Again, the phrase "as if" is used to show how vividly Maisie understands her mother's tone; Maisie translates and explains to herself what her mother is really trying to say, just as she had done with her father:

It was as if she had said in so many words: 'There have been things between us,--between Sir Claude and me--which I needn't go into, you little nuisance, because you wouldn't understand them. (WMK 173)

This is not to say, of course, that Maisie knows what these "things" between them are. Again, as in the interview with her father, Maisie seems to lack a complete understanding of her mother's motivations: "her impatience itself made at instants the whole situation swim; there were things Ida said that she perhaps didn't hear, and there things she heard that perhaps Ida didn't say" (WMK 174). Maisie is interpreting and participating in her mother's pantomime of desertion. She is aware that her role has long been that of a parergonal pretext, and she knows that she is no longer interested in playing that role. She wants
to play it quickly and meekly to the end by assisting her parents in severing all connections with her. She wants to "complete the good work and set her ladyship so promptly and majestically afloat as to leave the great seaway clear for the morrow" (WMK 175). Maisie has big plans for the Continent, and she is relieved that her parents will no longer be around to complicate things for her.

Maisie sees the part she has been playing in the drama of her guardians' games, and though she may not be able to see beyond the pantomime to the rotten core of her parents' motivations, her understanding of the situation is still profoundly accurate:

The relation between her step-parents had then a mysterious residuum: this was the first time she had reflected that except as regards herself it was not a relationship. (WMK 141).

Maisie becomes aware, in the fairy-tale section, that Mrs Beale and Sir Claude are lovers (WMK 163-64), and this discovery helps her to understand the residuary nature of her own existence: she is simply matter remaining at the end of the process of her parents' and step-parents' manipulations of each other. The works, the adulterous couples, are removed from the frame, and Maisie is left behind like a noxious by-product, outgrown and discarded. Maisie realizes that she has long been knowingly "compromised" by her parents, and though she tries to fool her parents by continuing to play the role of the unwitting victim,
she is "much more of a little person to reckon with" \((WMK\ 148)\) because she has learned how to deceive. In the fairy-tale chapters Maisie, the ill-detachable detachment, participates in her own "detachment" from her parents \((WMK\ 151,\ 159)\). In these chapters Maisie ceases to be a frame.

The supreme irony of the fairy-tale section is that it is so eerie precisely because it is so real. The people have not changed but Maisie has come to see them as they are, a vision that accounts for the great change in tone. "The polished plate of filial superstition" \((WMK\ 173)\), like the window pane of Maisie's innocence, is fractured by her understanding of her situation, and this process of revelation is horrifying: "there was literally an instant in which Maisie saw--saw madness and desolation, saw ruin and darkness and death" \((WMK\ 177)\). At the end of Chapter 20, Sir Claude is free, and Maisie shares his freedom ecstatically. She is free, in her own eyes at least, of her wretched childhood:

After dinner she smoked with her friend--for that was exactly what she thought she did--on a porch, a kind of terrace, where the red tips of cigars and the light dresses of ladies made, under the happy stars, a poetry that was almost intoxicating. \((WMK\ 180)\)

The tone of the later chapters of *What Maisie Knew* is radically different from that in the beginning of the novel. Maisie is free, and she is determined to hold on to her freedom.
The scope of the novel has expanded as a result of Maisie's new determination: townspeople, virtually absent from the early chapters, are now described with clarity. The French patronne, for instance, is painted brilliantly with the extended metaphor of a clock on the mantle:

>a lady turned to [Sir Claude] from the bustling, breezy hall
a countenance covered with fresh matutinal powder and a bosom as capacious as the velvet shelf of a chimney-piece, over which her round white face, framed in its golden frizzle, might have figured as a showy clock. (WMK 239)

Even the French townspeople are characterized in flawless and affectionate detail:

>a very old personage with a red ribbon in his button-hole, whose manner of soaking buttered rolls in coffee and then disposing of them in the little that was left of the interval between his nose and chin might at a less anxious hour have cast upon Maisie an almost envious spell. (WMK 240)

We find towards the end of the book, also, the brilliantly mélodramatic dialogue that we expect from James and of which the earlier chapters are devoid. In Boulogne, Maisie is overcome with emotion, with "the great ecstasy of a larger impression of life" (WMK 181):

>She was 'abroad' and she gave herself up to it, responded to it, in the bright air, before the pink houses, among the bare-legged fish-wives and the red-legged soldiers, with the instant certitude of a vocation. Her vocation was to see the world and to thrill with the enjoyment of the picture. (WMK 181)

No longer called upon to frame her guardians, Maisie becomes an observer and thus, perhaps unwittingly, enters the world of the
adults. Maisie finds her "initiation" (WMK 181) in the French breakfast, and she changes immediately her role in her relationship with Susan Ash, becoming an explainer as her mother had always been and showing Susan around town: "she recognized, she understood, she adored and took possession; feeling herself attuned to everything and laying her hand, right and left, on what had simply been waiting for her" (WMK 182). Ostensibly, of course, and ironically, Maisie is no longer seeing as clearly as she did in the fairy-tale chapters. She is living a fantasy, a dream in which Sir Claude is her shining knight and Paris is "the real thing" (WMK 182). "Her heart was not at all in the gossip about Boulogne; and if her complexion was partly the result of the déjeuner and the petits verres it was also the brave signal of what she was there to say" (WMK 186). Maisie is in France to see and to say, neither of which she ever had the chance to do as a pretext in a prison of ambiguity: she is "coming out" (WMK 230).

Maisie, long stuck like the frame of a picture on a different plane of existence, is conscious in Boulogne of having shed her old role as pretext and is determined to make the most of her new opportunity. Her freedom, however, is short-lived. She clearly cannot sustain her freedom alone, and by the time of Mrs Wix's return in Chapter 22 the groundwork is already laid for the choice Maisie will soon have to make between the adults that
remain. Ida has sent Mrs Wix to Boulogne to keep Maisie and Sir Claude decent: "'It's to keep you decent that I'm here and that I've done everything that I have done" (WMK 192). Mrs Wix, in other words, is now to play Maisie's usual role by framing Maisie and her stepfather from the public scrutiny. Mrs Wix is back, "proving more of a force to reckon with than either of them had allowed so much room for" (WMK 200). She delivers her moral teachings with "an unparalleled neigh of battle" (WMK 196) and with "a great giggling insinuating naughty slap" to Sir Claude's face (WMK 197): "'nobody, you know, is free to commit a crime'" (WMK 207), she reminds them. Mrs Wix is a fearless avenger with "a certain greatness" (WMK 210), fighting for Maisie's now famous "moral sense" (WMK 211). Sir Claude and Mrs Beale, on the other hand, have decidedly not changed, though they appear different to Maisie. Sir Claude pays Maisie and Mrs Wix to let him return to Mrs Beale (WMK 199), and he pays Ida to cease to be Maisie's mother (WMK 228). Mrs Beale, later, uses Maisie to make Sir Claude return to Boulogne (WMK 220). Mrs Beale tries to entice Maisie with plans of a trip to the Etablissement, but Maisie is wary enough to expect little more than a repeat performance of the abortive trip to the Great Exhibition: "the francs failed like the shillings and the side-shows had set an example to the concert. The Etablissement in short melted away" (WMK 227).

The end of the novel is made up of a series of scenes in
which Mrs Beale and Sir Claude parallel the behavior of Beale and Ida in the fairy-tale section with uncanny accuracy. Mrs Beale forces Maisie back into a role of secondary significance by glibly explaining the mechanics of the settlement between Sir Claude and Ida in which "'she lets him off supporting her if he'll let her off supporting you'" (WMK 228). Mrs Beale even replaces Maisie as guide to the Continent, telling stories of her childhood travels that Maisie has heard so often in her own childhood that they have "with time become phantasmal" (WMK 227). Sir Claude, after a smooth string of lies, confides in Maisie separately, just as Beale had done in the Countess's apartments. Mrs Wix insists that without Maisie Sir Claude, left alone with Mrs Beale, will be destroyed: "'He'll have got nothing, He'll have lost everything. It will be his utter destruction, for he's certain after a while to loathe her'" (WMK 233-34). The warning proves valid when Sir Claude gives his speech at the café over breakfast the next morning:

'I've been awfully worried, and this's what it has come to. You've done us the most tremendous good, and you'll do it still and always, don't you see? We can't let you go--you're everything. There are the facts as I say. She is your mother now, Mrs Beale, by what has happened, and I, in the same way, I'm your father. No one can contradict that, and we can't get out of it . . . (WMK 247)

With Sir Claude Maisie finds herself again faced with the prospect of framing the indecency of her guardians. Sir Claude is worried about losing his freedom, and Maisie is thus everything to him. Like Chad and Madame de Vionnet in The
Ambassadors, for whom "not being able to marry is all they've with any confidence to look forward to" (TA 169), Sir Claude is trying to avoid marriage and to appear "good" while doing so:

'My idea would be a nice little place--somewhere in the South --where she and you would be together and as good as anyone else. And I should be as good too, don't you see? for I shouldn't live with you, but I should be close to you --just round the corner, and it would be just the same. My idea would be that it should all be perfectly open and frank. Honi soit qui mal y pense, don't you know?' (WMK 247)

Sir Claude and Mrs Beale do not see marriage as a viable solution to the problem of their attraction toward one another. Marriage does not present itself to Maisie's stepparents, as it may to the reader, as the easy and obvious way of framing their adultery, though it is the only socially acceptable arrangement. Sir Claude's idea is simply to have for himself the benefits of a wife without the responsibilities and torments of a legal union. Adulthood, which as we have seen is a synonym for adultery in this novel, collapses without a frame in Victorian England, and Maisie is to be the frame of it once again. Maisie's new "parents," like Beale and Ida in the fairy-tale chapters, are forcing her, under the guise of freedom of choice, to support their immorality. In the fairy-tale section she was called upon to sanction her parents' divorces, and now she is requisitioned to help her stepparents avoid marriage. No one in the story is less free than Maisie.
Maisie is aware of the situation she is confronted with in Boulogne, but she puts off her choice until the last minute. One of Maisie's alternatives is to agree to continue to frame adultery by accepting Sir Claude's proposition, remaining "equally associated and disconnected" (WMK 258) from her stepparents in parergonal suspension above and beyond the real world. Another choice Maisie considers, and which Sir Claude seems briefly to consider seriously as well, would make her an adulteress, at least in the eyes of the world. Her fantasy is to run off to Paris with Sir Claude, framed only by the newspapers and the pink and yellow novels that would serve for luggage. She has a chance to fulfill this dream:

She knew how prepared they looked to pass into the train, and she presently brought out to her companion: 'I wish we could go. Won't you take me?'
He continued to smile. 'Would you really come?'
'Oh yes, oh yes. Try.'
'Do you want me to take our tickets?'
'Yes, take them.'
'Without any luggage?'
She showed their two armfuls, smiling at him as he smiled at her, but so conscious of being more frightened than she had ever been in her life that she seemed to see her whiteness as in a glass. Then she knew that what she saw was Sir Claude's whiteness: he was as frightened as herself. (WMK 253-54)

Her fantasy remains unfulfilled, and though her fear fades into the distance with the passing train, she clings to her fantasy till the end.

Fortunately for Maisie there is a third alternative; she is not forced to choose between framing adulterers and becoming one
herself. Mrs Wix, who has sacrificed her own innocence to protect Maisie's own, protests:

Don't let me pay for nothing; don't let me have been thrust for nothing into such horrors and such shames. I never knew anything about them and I never wanted to know! Now I know too much, too much! (WMK 214)

Mrs Wix is thus the only person in the novel besides Maisie herself who has perceived the horrors of the fairy-tale chapters, and this shared perception is what links the two of them together in the end. Mrs Wix, also, still feels the pain of the daughter she lost to "the cruellest of hansoms" (WMK 49), and Maisie likewise has not recovered from the recent loss of her mother. Maisie and Mrs Wix thus both feel incomplete. Maisie chooses Mrs Wix not because she loves her or because she feels the need to live a moral life, but because they will be able to act as frames for each other. In the end she renounces both her fantasy and her role as a framing device and chooses simply to be a child. Maisie's choice of a mother over a business proposition is a sign, ironically, that she is growing up.

The beauty of Maisie Farange is that she never gives up. She never loses faith in her perception of the world, no matter how askew her interpretation may be, retaining "a small smug conviction that in the domestic labyrinth she always kept the clue" (WMK 90). Maisie does not, of course, hold the key to the labyrinth that engulfs her childhood, but her intuitive navigation of its passages is extraordinary. Maisie's intuition
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brings us back to the question critics of What Maisie Knew must try to answer, which is of course suggested by the title of the novel. Maisie herself sees no limits to the amount of knowledge available to her, and her handling of her parents' desertion and her choice of a fresh new attempt at childhood in the end support her conviction:

the very climax of the concatenation would . . . be the stage at which the knowledge should overflow. As she was condemned to know more and more, how could it logically stop before she should know Most? It came to her in fact as they sat there on the sands that she was distinctly on the road to know Everything. (WMK 213)

Inevitably the question of Maisie's knowledge depends upon the question of her morality. Foster has shown that if Maisie's guardians are immoral and Mrs Wix is moral, Maisie herself is amoral: "Maisie's moral sense never really includes an idea of good and evil" (Foster 210). Maisie remains parergonal to her immoral guardians for so long because she has no morals, and is thus untouched by her sordid environment. The immorality of Maisie's situation is thus an ethical curse but an epistemological blessing: it allows her to grow up without the often illogical constraints of popular morality to distract her from her ideal. Jeffers notes that "she posits this ideal as one might posit the idea of a God: it is the 'possible' she needs if she is to climb out of the fetid air of betrayal and recrimination she has breathed from the start" (Jeffers 167).

There is no limit to Maisie's potential for knowledge, then, because there is no limit placed upon her by morality. The same
immorality that stifles her education launches her toward freedom. Maisie's amorality is what allows her to endure, and it is her endurance, as Foster and others have noted, that we like about her.

III

The Ambassadors: The Oblong Gilt Frame

The Ambassadors may represent James's most sophisticated use of the framing device in fiction. The frame of the novel, as I will show, is hidden both where one would least expect to find it and where it can play its role most profoundly: it is Chapters 30 and 31, the Lambinet chapters, and it contains the climax of the novel. An examination of the climax, in which Strether's imagination leads to his discovery of the truth behind the "virtuous attachment" between Chad and Madame de Vionnet, shows that when what William Goetz calls the "fictional bounds of the text" (Goetz 187) are released, Strether escapes both into art and out of it, and that Strether is not wrecked by his imagination but rather saved by it. This is not to say, however, that characters do not also frame each other in this complex work.
as they do in What Maisie Knew.

Human frames are at work also at work in The Ambassadors, where Maisie Farange's character and her function as frame are echoed in Jeanne de Vionnet, whom many critics have neglected but who to Strether is like a beautiful work of art:

What was in the girl was indeed too soft, too unknown for direct dealing; so that one could only gaze at it as at a picture, quite staying one's own hand.

She was fairly beautiful to him—a faint pastel in an oval frame: he thought of her already as of some lurking image in a long gallery, the portrait of a small old-time princess of whom nothing was known but that she had died young. (TA 134-35, 154)

Jeanne must, of course, somehow remind Strether of his son, who died a small boy, and he tries to remain as distant from his Parisian friends as he is from his son, as if they are pictures instead of people. But though Strether views Jeanne as a picture her function in the drama is that of a frame, as Maisie's is in her own "drama of figures" (WMK 180). Jeanne de Vionnet frames her mother's relations, at least to Strether, in much the same way that Maisie frames her father's, by acting as a decoy bride-to-be, and she even resembles Maisie Farange's tone with her "'Mamma wishes me to tell you before we go ... that she hopes very much that you'll come to see us very soon'" (TA 134).

Jeanne de Vionnet is a frame, but Strether's fascination with her and his insistence on viewing her as a painting contrast ironically with James's own preoccupation with the parergonal and
his interest in the relation between the work and the frame that is the focus of this essay.

James, I argue, clearly preferred the quiet dignity of the frame to the audacity of the work, and the early chapters of The Ambassadors abound with evidence of this preference. Lambert Strether, also like Maisie, is a Jamesian hero who has been manipulated into the position of framing something more vulgar than himself. Strether, in the words of his friend Waymarsh, is "'a fine-tooth comb [used] to groom a horse'" (TA 74): "'You're being used for a thing you ain't fit for'" (TA 74), Waymarsh warns him. Mrs. Newsome, as if a literalization of Derrida's wheelchair metaphor, cannot support herself enough to realize her own desires and depends on Strether in much the same way that a work can depend on a frame: "'Everything's too much for her'" (TA 47) Strether explains. Strether is being used as a proxy by Mrs. Newsome, and it is thus from her entirely that he derives the strength, sustenance, and sense of purpose of his "life of utility" (TA 153). In return, of course, Strether is Mrs. Newsome's contact with Paris and with her son, and it is only through Strether that she is able to view the action in Paris. Strether obviously redresses a lack in Mrs. Newsome--without her lack of health and strength his own presence would be unnecessary. Maria Gostrey observes: "'I see it, her condition, as beneath and behind you; yet at the same time I see it as
bearing you up'" (TA 47). Even before his trip to Europe, Strether was a frame to Mrs. Newsome's "Review" (TA 50), "'her tribute to the ideal'' (TA 51). His name, not hers, appears on the journal's green cover, or frame, and this frame has become Strether's "'one presentable little scrap of an identity'' (TA 51), so that he has become not an independent man of action but a static and obedient front for Mrs. Newsome's endeavors:

He was Lambert Strether because he was on the cover, whereas it should have been, for anything like glory, that he was on the cover because he was Lambert Strether. (TA 62)

Though Strether is an effective frame, however, he is an incomplete one because the only form of union recognized in Woollellt is the legal form. In America there is no such luxury as the "'virtuous attachment'' (TA 112) that Chad enjoys in Paris, and so Strether can attach himself to his remarkable associate only through marriage. Strether endures his subordinate frame-like position partly because of what Sarah Pocock calls his "essential inaptitude" (TA 105), but mostly because he hopes to be remunerated for his efforts with marriage to the matriarch herself. He hopes, in short, to attach himself to Mrs. Newsome and become a permanent frame, and his success in this endeavor will depend on his success in Paris. But The Ambassadors is much more fluid a novel than the quincuncial What Maisie Knew, and Strether, like Jeanne, soon loses interest in framing another person's inadequacies. His failure hitherto to

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marry Mrs. Newsome soon becomes his triumph and saving grace. When he arrives in Paris, Strether's goal of permanent, secure subordinance is transformed by the taste of freedom, that elusive ideal, into a need to become "appreciable" himself. The novel follows the thread of Strether's journey to primacy, his quest to become, in Madame de Vionnet's words, "an object of interest" (TA 320).

Strether, "the hero of the drama" (TA 265), comes to see the world as a play in which his friends perform for him while he sits idly by and appreciates, and it is necessary at the outset to set the scene of that drama and to describe the situation Strether glides naïvely into on his arrival in Paris. Drama is the metaphor through which much of the meaning of The Ambassadors is expressed. Strether is an observer, or so he believes, seeing only what walks onto the stage of Parisian society in front of him, and he is left to guess about what it all means. In London Strether goes with Maria Gostrey to plays in the evening, and the stage, a world of types, becomes a metaphor of his experience of Europe:

It was an evening, it was a world of types, and this was a connexion above all in which the figures and faces in the stalls were interchangeable with those on the stage. (TA 43)

The only "types" Woollett had recognized were "the male and the female" (TA 44), and thus people there are distinguished from one another only by their spouses. Strether, who has long lived
without marital attachment, has thus lived the undistinguished life of a parergon. But "however he viewed his job" in Paris, Strether muses in the London theater, "it was 'types' he should have to tackle" in Europe (TA 44). Strether is an incomplete frame, a potential but as yet unattached ill-detachable detachment, but he becomes aware in Europe of the emptiness at the center of his life. Though he fears it may be too late, he is taking refuge in this new esthetic, his only chance for salvation in "the great desert of years" (TA 63), and he sets out "to visit unattended equivocal performances" (TA 64):

There were sequences he had missed and great gaps in the procession: he might have been watching it all recede in a golden cloud of dust. If the playhouse wasn't closed his seat had at least fallen to somebody else. (TA 64)

Strether's ideal is the ideal of the esthetic of Paris, and his espousal of it is a reaction against the crude good-and-bad, right-and-wrong morality of Woollett. Strether describes himself as "'a perfectly equipped failure!'" (TA 40), but the fact that he is a failure is what makes Strether so interesting to Maria Gostrey, whose function in the story is to enunciate what I will call the esthetic of Paris, "the shade of shyness" (TA 96), that Strether must discover through his experience in Europe:

"Thank goodness you're a failure--it's why I so distinguish you. Anything else to-day is too hideous. Look about you--look at the successes. Would you be one, on your honor? (TA 40).

Julie Rivkin shows that Miss Gostrey "deconstructs the literal
system of designation Woollett supposedly embodies" (826) in order to introduce Strether to the European system, and her use of the term "deconstruct" clarifies the sense in which the Paris esthetic and the Woollett ethic are diametrically and dialectically opposed. The esthetic of Paris complicates interpretation of the story because it prefers failure to success. This esthetic is appealing to the "man of imagination" (Preface 5) from Woollett because he is himself a failure. Paris offers him a chance to revel in his failure instead of compensating for it by marrying Mrs. Newsome. It offers him, therefore, a new light in which to view the memories of his youth, and it has the effect of making him young again.

The Paris esthetic prefers failure to success because of a more fundamental preference of potential to action, and this principle is exemplified by the peculiar beauty of little Bilham and enunciated again by Miss Gostrey:

"He won't do the least dreadful little thing. We shall continue to enjoy him just as he is. No—he's quite beautiful. He sees everything. He isn't a bit ashamed. He has every scrap of the courage of it that one could ask. Only think what he might do." (TA 87)

Little Bilham, an artist whose "productive power faltered in proportion as his knowledge grew" (TA 84), is beautiful in his inactivity and is as such the perfect product of the Paris esthetic: "Bilham is "'the best of them,'" "'so exactly right as he is'" (TA 86). Strether soon learns that "almost any
acceptance of Paris might give one's authority away" (TA 64)—one's authority, that is, to do anything at all. The Paris esthetic is not a place of action or of power but a place where people are simply and statically "wonderful." Toward the end of the novel, when Strether is most oppressed by the weight of the Paris esthetic, he recalls wistfully the full import of his "'Don't mention it!'" to Madame de Vionnet:

it had served all the purpose of his appearing to have said to her: "Don't like me, if it's a question of liking me, for anything obvious and clumsy that I've, as they call it, 'done' for you: like me—well, like me, hang it, for anything else you choose. . . . Be for me, please, with all your admirable tact and trust, just whatever I may show you it's a present pleasure to me to think you." It had been a large indication to meet; but if she hadn't met it what had she done, and how had their time together slipped along so smoothly, mild but not slow, and melting, liquefying, into his happy illusion of idleness? (TA 304-05)

The emphasis here is clearly on being rather than doing and on pleasure rather than sincerity. The Paris esthetic, in short, supplies Strether with this "happy illusion of idleness," the illusion that he is doing nothing and having no effect on the people around him. Though Strether remains determined in the early chapters of the novel to carry out his orders from Woollett and to play his role as emissary, he comes to expect much more than Chad's acquiescence from his trip to Europe. He embarks alone on a conscious search for his ideal, and he knows that to find truth he will have to get rid of his "odious ascetic suspicion of any form of beauty" (TA 118).
The journey to primacy Strether embarks on in Paris takes the form of a romantic quest for the ideal at Gloriani's party. In Gloriani's garden Strether opens "all the windows of his mind" to the "assault of images" that crowns the great sculptor "with the light, with the romance, of glory" (TA 120). Strether perceives himself to be on trial in this scene, seeing Gloriani's smile as "a test of his stuff" (TA 121). Strether's ideal is youth, and his tribute to this ideal, his promise to "save" Madame de Vionnet (TA 152), is his quest. Strether is absorbed into the drama of the garden, and his mode of perception blurs almost imperceptibly from the dramatic to the romantic. In his Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye writes that romance involves an adventure, often a quest, and an enemy "associated with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age," while the hero is conversely associated with "spring, dawn, fertility, vigor, and youth" (Frye 187-88). A romance, Frye writes, is a myth in which the hero is human, not divine (Frye 188), and its culmination is "the victory of fertility over the wasteland" (Frye 193). My purpose is not to argue that The Ambassadors is a romance ("Subtlety and complexity are not much favored," Frye writes, and "irony has little place in a romance" [Frye 195]) but to show that Strether has begin to perceive his role in the story as that of a romantic hero.

Gloriani, crowned "with the light, with the romance, of
glory" (TA 120), is the feudal king and Strether, the knight who must prove himself, sets off on a quest for his ideal. The goal of Strether's romantic quest is Madame de Vionnet, the spectacular *femme du monde*:

This [the *femmes du monde*] was a category our friend had a feeling for; a light, romantic and mysterious, on the feminine element, in which he enjoyed for a little watching it. (TA 122)

Strether is from Woollett and he knows what it means when a man and a woman involve themselves in a relationship. What he knows, exactly, is that unless such a relationship is legitimized by legal union it is bad, but Strether's quest is for the fairy queen, the only woman with whom the term "virtuous attachment" would not necessarily be a euphemism. Strether ignores Bilham's hint that the relationship may not be so virtuous as he imagines:

Strether came round to it. "They then are the virtuous attachment?"

"I can only tell you it's what they pass for. But isn't that enough? What more than a vain appearance does the wisest of us know? I commend you," the young man declared with a pleasant emphasis, "the vain appearance." (TA 124)

He ignores this obviously prophetic warning because life in Paris is a romance to Strether. No element of the great city inspires him more to wax romantic than Madame de Vionnet, and his quest is to rescue this *femme du monde* from Chad, the "brute" (TA 335):

he found himself making out, as a background of the occupant [Madame de Vionnet], some glory, some prosperity of the First Empire, some Napoleonic glamour, some dim lustre of the great legend; elements clinging still to all the consular chairs and mythological brasses and sphinxes' heads and faded surfaces of satin striped with alternate silk. (TA 145)
She is the object of his quest because of what she represents; with her "air of youth" (TA 127) she embodies his ideal, and his promise to save her becomes his "constant tribute to the ideal" (TA 241), the esthetic ideal that Christof Wegelin calls "social beauty" (Wegelin 442).

Much attention has been paid to the viscosity of the imagery in The Ambassadors. James Wise shows that Strether is "a man floating between two mental reactions without a center of self-knowledge or self-reliance on which to build a foundation for decision" (Wise 84). Wise concludes that Strether alternates in the novel "between a series of risings and plungings" (Wise 109) and that he escapes from the Woollett morality and floats off alone at the end. Reginald Abbott, more recently, has shown that the floating imagery that dominates The Ambassadors implies a reversal of the iconographical gender roles of fin-de-siècle culture, in which floating and inactivity were associated with the feminine while flying and activity were male attributes. Both these readings conclude that the water imagery in The Ambassadors is an expression of Strether's passivity, a conclusion supported by the ambivalent last line of the novel and by the way Strether seems now to be in one boat, now in another, and now floating randomly or washed up on some shore. These critics, however, have overlooked the one event in which Strether acts on his own initiative, changing drastically the course of
future events. This unique and isolated action in Chapter 31 stands out both from the general fluidity of the novel and from the dream-like romance of the Chapter itself as the climax or "peripeteia" (Lodge 208) of the book. Some read the Lambinet chapters of *The Ambassadors* as a descent into self deception that reflects negatively on Strether's progress toward his ideal. I will argue, on the contrary, that the Lambinet chapters portray Strether's greatest triumph of the novel, for it is here that Strether finally breaks free of the destructive Paris esthetic.

Strether's break for freedom from Woollett begins as soon as he steps off the boat in Chester, but it is not finalized until the end of Chapter 27. Strether has promised himself that whatever happens in Paris he will get nothing for himself: "it was to an ideal rigour that he had quite promised himself to conform" (TA 201). He realizes that by living his ideal he has separated himself from the rest of the world, and he is conscious of this separation:

His danger, at any rate, . . . was some concession, . . . that would involve a sharp rupture with the actual; therefore if he waited to take leave of that actual he might wholly miss his chance. (TA 201)

The "actual" referred to here is America, of which Strether himself was the representative until he is replaced by Sarah. Sarah represents the corporeality of human nature, which the Pococks have come to curtail with their staunch morality, and Madame de Vionnet represents an alternative to that reality. Strether has shifted in *The Ambassadors* from "the rigors of New
England authority to the pleasures of Parisian experience" (Rivkin 827). Sarah Pocock has replaced Strether as ambassador of the actual, leaving him in limbo, but the rupture with the actual referred to above is not finalized until the end of Chapter 27, when Strether's break with Sarah is complete:

The way he had put it to himself was that all quite might be at an end. Each of her movements, in this resolute rupture, reaffirmed, re-enforced that idea. Sarah passed out of sight in the sunny street while, planted there in the centre of the comparatively grey court, he continued merely to look before him. It probably was all at an end. (TA 280)

But Strether, always patient, still drags his feet, taking time for extended interviews with Chad and Miss Gostrey before acknowledging this rupture with action.

We recognize the validity, of course, of F. O. Matthiessen's assertion that "Art puts a frame around experience in the sense of selecting a significant design, and, by thus concentrating upon it, enabling us to share in the essence without being distracted by irrelevant details" (542). This view of the function of the frame in fiction, however, is the reader's point of view, but I am reading The Ambassadors as a drama and am thus more interested in looking at frames through Strether's eyes. We are given no account of Strether's decision to leave Paris. At the end of Chapter 29 there is a significant break in the action like that which obfuscates Isabel's marriage in The Portrait of a Lady, and when the next chapter begins, a change seems to have taken place in Strether. We are denied all details of
Strether's decision to leave Paris for the day, and we see him only as his train approaches the station where he will disembark and begin his adventure. The break is heightened by one of James's enigmatic shifts into past-perfect narration, a shift that, like the past perfect at the beginning of the governess's narrative in The Turn of the Screw, indicates the passage of time and compensates for the lack of a beginning to the episode.

Strether had taken the train a few days after this from a station--as well as to a station--selected almost at random; such days, whatever should happen, were numbered, and he had gone forth under the impulse--artless enough, no doubt--to give the whole of one of them to that French ruralism, with its cool special green, into which he had hitherto looked only through the little oblong window of the picture-frame. (TA 300-01, emphasis added)

A threshold has clearly been crossed during the break. A gap has somehow been bridged, and Strether is entering a realm that has always been distant from him and sacred. He has decided to devote a day to that French Ruralism, with its cool special green, into which he had hitherto looked only through the little oblong window of the picture-frame. It had been as yet for the most part but a land of fancy for him--the background of fiction, the medium of art, the nursery of letters; practically as distant as Greece, but practically also well-nigh as consecrated. (TA 301)

Strether has broken with both Paris and Woollett, transcending the dialectical quagmire of thesis and antithesis. His train journey is not so much to a place as to a realm of his remembered past that he has neglected for decades since he nearly bought a Lambinet painting as a young man. His memory of the painting is
his ideal, and he goes to the countryside to reconstruct it:

he could thrill a little at the chance of seeing something somewhere that would remind him of a certain small Lambinet that had charmed him, long years before, at a Boston dealer's and that he had quite absurdly never forgotten. (TA 301)

Strether is yearning in wishful regret, but not for the painting itself that he decided not to buy in Boston: "he never found himself wishing that the wheel of time would turn it up again." He wants to breathe life into the memory of it, to live and experience the painting as he could have done when he was young, and as the artist must have done in creating it. Early in the novel we learn that "he wasn't there to dip, to consume--he was there to reconstruct" (TA 67), and he pursues this reconstruction of his youth actively in Chapter 30: "it would be a different thing, however, to see the remembered mixture resolved back into its elements--to assist at the restoration of the whole far-away hour" (TA 301). His adventure at the gallery had been a "modest" one (TA 301), but his memory of the picture has "made him for a moment overstep the modesty of nature" (TA 301) by trying to reconstruct the work of art in its place of origin. It is this quest to recover his ideal, the feelings of one of the few adventures of his youth, and to experience those feelings again, that has motivated Strether's excursion into the country.
On his journey away from dusty Paris, Strether's memory of the painting continues to dominate his perception of the world, and he views the French countryside as a painting framed by the window of the train:

The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars and willows, the reeds and river—a river of which he didn't know, and didn't want to know, the name—fell into a composition, full of felicity, within them; the sky was silver and turquoise and varnish; the village on the left was white and the church on the right was grey; it was all there, in short—it was what he wanted. (TA 302)

When he arrives at the station, in effect, Strether leaves the train through this window, stepping into the tone and texture of the painting of his youth. What he finds is "the colors of life itself" (AF 65). Strether drifts into "French ruralism," into his memory of a Lambinet painting he "would have bought" (TA 301). He is absorbed by a world that is no less surreal than Maisie's in the Fairy Tale sequence. Like Maisie too, though for different reasons, Strether is never farther from the truth (that adultery is the prime motivator in the grand drama) than he is in his encounter with romance. But regardless of how far he may be from the truth, Strether has found his ideal.

What has happened is that Strether has been released from the bounds of fictionality. Equally detached from ethic and esthetic, he is free to reconstruct the world as he chooses. Strether's idealization of the world continues throughout the day: He
had admired, had almost coveted, another small old church, all steep roof and dim slate-colour without and all whitewash and paper flowers within; had lost his way and had found it again; had conversed with rustics who struck him perhaps a little more as men of the world than he had expected; had acquired at a bound a fearless facility in French; had, as the afternoon waned, a watery bock, all pale and Parisian, in the café of the furthest village, which was not the biggest; and had meanwhile not once overstepped the oblong gilt frame. . . . It might have passed for finished, his drama, with its catastrophe all but reached: it had, however, none the less been vivid again for him as he thus gave it its fuller chance. He had only had to be at last well out of it to feel it, oddly enough, still going on. (TA 305)

The dialectical "drama of discrimination" (Preface 7), he observes, has been going on without him since the arrival of the Pococks, and his response is to step out into the audience, where he notices that his absence from the stage is hardly missed. Strether's drama, he realizes, is larger and more beautiful than he has ever imagined, and it expands for him, opens up. This epiphanic discovery, a sudden release of the pressure Strether has been under since he arrived in Europe, is exhilarating to him, and he sits back in euphoric detachment and watches the drama of the world happen in front of him:

it was all there, in short; it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover, he was freely walking about in it. (TA 302)

Strether's detachment from the world is no longer merely the reminder of his failure that it has always been, "the period of conscious detachment occupying the centre of his life, the grey desert of the two deaths, that of his wife and that, ten years later, of his boy" (TA 43).
Strether's world, where there is "not a breath of the cooler evening that wasn't somehow a syllable of the text" (TA 306), nears consistency and completeness as he steps away from it, and the people performing on Strether's stage are "inevitable," natural," and "right" (TA 306). He discovers that it was essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky. The play and the characters had, without his knowing it till now, peopled all his space for him . . . . (TA 306)

The bounds of the story, its plot and the relations between its characters, have dissolved, indicating that Strether is in a dream fantasy, wandering about the countryside, seeing everything just as he would like it to be. He is in a world made entirely of his own impressions, a drama nearly complete and perfect. The drama Strether has been watching reaches its catastrophe at the end of Chapter 30, by which point Strether is so pleased with the vista in front of him and with his day in the countryside that his catharsis requires only a "comfortable climax" (TA 306):

the confidence that had so gathered for him deepened with the lap of the water, the ripple of the surface, the rustle of the reeds on the opposite bank, the faint diffused coolness, and the slight rock of a couple of small boats attached to a rough landing-place hard by. (TA 307)

When Strether is absorbed by the frame, the story briefly becomes Strether's autobiography as he repays the debt he owes himself for not buying the Lambinet in his youth. In effect, Strether is re-writing his life by trying to find in art what he
has missed in reality. The narrator is still present, perhaps more so than ever, but we are allowed to see what the story would have been like if Strether were the narrator: a romance, predictably composed and tinctured with idealism, with a happy ending.

Leon Edel has written that *The Turn of the Screw* must be read as two different stories, one of the governess's fancy and one of fact. This must, of course, be true of any novel where the narrative vehicle is a center of consciousness. The point of Strether's quest in *The Ambassadors* is that these two stories must converge. Lambert Strether, in other words, must match his imagination with the world around him. Strether succeeds in making fact and fancy converge in the end, but they are never more divergent than in the Lambinet chapters. The fanciful story is the immediate one that I have been describing, Strether's wishful romanticization, but the factual story, then, is the one we read, in which Strether charges with the momentum of a speeding train toward an encounter with the actual from which he has ruptured. We have long detected hints as to the nature of the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet, the most obvious of which is Strether's discovery in Chapter 19 that they are both mysteriously "out of town" (*TA* 200), but Strether is oblivious to these hints. There is no suspense at all in Strether's version of the outing, but in ours there is no sure
indication that Strether will survive the crash we know is imminent. When Strether sees the man and the woman in the boat his constructed picture/drama is complete, and his satisfaction with his impressions rivals James's own in the Preface to the New York edition:

It was as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day, and had now drifted into sight, with the slow current, on purpose to fill up the measure. (TA 307)

The dissolution of the fictional bounds of the story, however, and the absorption into the oblong gilt frame are more than an indication that Strether is deceiving himself, though he surely is. The lapse in time before Chapter 30, the past-perfect narration, and the lyrical and pastoral tone in that chapter all point to the fact that the frame through which Strether has passed is no mere metaphor. He has passed, more literally than we first imagine, into a new realm of being. Strether is overcome with the charm of the drama around him because he has transcended it. He has been absorbed through the frame into the painting he saw in Boston and is able to thrill to the lush texture of the world because he is detached from it, but at the same time he has transcended his own story, and this fact raises a question: if Strether is in the book but not in the story, where exactly is he? He is observing the world, looking at it as a detached and disinterested connoisseur because he is in the frame of the story. Strether jumps from his story to ours in the
Lambinet chapter. He leaves his post and steps back to read his own story as it unfolds from a detached vantage point. As in *The Turn of the Screw*, I argue that the relationship between the two stories I have been discussing in *The Ambassadors* is parergonal. Fact and fancy are related to each other like work and frame or, more specifically, novel and preface.

The preface to a book is the place where the author releases himself from all pretext of fiction and explains his intention, and there is nothing but tradition to dictate that the preface must be printed before the book. As Strether views the world through the oblong frame of the window and is thus absorbed into his memory of a painting, he unwittingly enters the frame of his own story and finds himself on the outside looking in. Strether has long played the role of the esthete, viewing his friends as paintings in a gallery and actors on a stage, and his imagination carries him in Chapter 30 into the frame itself, where he can look down on the rest of the world with the detachment of the Joycean creator, "paring his fingernails." It is from this new vantage point, virtually our own vantage point, that Strether is able to see the true nature of the virtuous attachment. The mechanics of this framing episode are crucial to an understanding of the novel, and I invoke Derrida once again to explore them.

Basically, the frame exists beside the work and redresses a
lack that cannot be eliminated within the work itself, thus providing external completeness. But the nature of this completeness is problematic and needs to be clarified. In Derrida's *Dissemination* (1972), in the propaedutic chapter entitled "Outwork," Derrida explores the function of the preface to a book. He invokes the ancient metaphor of the world, our world as we see it, as a final and divine text that imitates nature, a text that all other texts aspire to imitate. A book, then, in the tradition of western metaphysics, cannot imitate nature directly and must instead imitate the text of the world. But a text itself can never be complete or all-encompassing. If the world is a text, this implies

that nature is somewhere incomplete, that it lacks something needed for it to be what it is, that it has to be supplemented. . . . The book comes to add itself to nature . . . , but through this addition it must also complete nature, fulfill its essence. (*D* 53)

The book, which imitates the world, becomes a preface or frame to the world, imitating nature by redressing some incompleteness in it. But the book, which aims to complete the world by prefacing it, is of course itself incomplete. Literature, then, like the world,

seems to aim toward the filling of a lack (a hole) in a whole that should not itself in its essence be missing (to) itself. But literature is also the exception to everything: at once the exception to the whole, the want-of-wholeness in the whole, and the exception to everything, that which exists by itself, alone, with nothing else, in exception to all. A part that, within and without the whole, marks the wholly other, the other incommensurate with the whole. (*D* 56)
Like nature, literature is thus completed not by an alteration that would eliminate the lack (the nature analogy illustrates the futility of such an attempt) but by juxtaposition with something else. The lack is not merely eliminated but made into a positive element instead of a negative one. It is thus that in "The Parergon" Derrida answers the question of why a column of a building and a garment worn by a figure in a painting are parerga:

It is not because they are detached but on the contrary because they are so difficult to detach and above all because without them, without their quasi-detachment, the lack on the inside of the work would appear; or (which amounts to the same thing for a lack) would not appear (Truth in Painting 59).

The world prefaces nature, the book prefaces the world, and the preface, in the same way, frames the book. The issue is not whether or not the lack appears in the work (completeness is an impossible aim) but whether it contributes to the work or detracts from it. The lack is transformed by the parergon from a negative absence to a positive one, just as Mrs. Newsome's condition has become the backbone of Strether's existence when the novel begins.

I invoke Derrida here again because his work illustrates how the book is less an autonomous whole than a preface to another text. The book thus bears a greater resemblance to its own preface than to itself, and my thesis, that Chapters 30 and 31 of The Ambassadors in effect form a preface to the work, is an
extension of Derrida's argument into the realm of fiction.

We must isolate the lack in the work that would necessitate such a preface. Rivkin, who reads *The Ambassadors* in terms of Derrida's logic of the supplement, mentions the lack in her explanation but makes no attempt to isolate any fundamental lack in the novel that might necessitate supplementation. The most obvious lack at the center of *The Ambassadors*, of course, is the truth, the nature of the "virtuous attachment," the truth that we as readers are privy to but to which Strether is blind except for much of the novel. Strether searches for the truth of the virtuous attachment, never finding it but drawing ever closer with the graceful diligence of an asymptotic curve. Strether's convergence upon his asymptotic ideal would violate the rigor of realism. He is an elderly man from Woollett, Massachusetts, and it would not be realistic for him to fully understand his place in the world. The Lambinet scene is a revelation, but a revelation is something we interpret, not a discrete literal message disclosing the answer to a problem. The truth has no place in a realistic text, but at the same time it is unavoidable here because the subject of the portrait, Lambert Strether, is in search of the truth. Strether's nature as a "man of imagination" necessitates the truth, but a realistic portrait forbids its encroachment upon the unity of the composition. In a sense, then, the lack is the truth, and since this truth must be both
present to and detached from the work, it must be disclosed in a frame or preface. The chapters can be called a preface because they disclose, in a completely different style and mode than the rest of the novel, a truth that cannot be expressed in the work. This truth, like those truths that fill the prefaces in The Art of the Novel, must therefore be excluded.

But there is another more fundamental lack in the text that is redressed in Chapter 31 as an effect of this disclosure of truth, the lack of action, and this inaction is the main premise of the Paris esthetic I have described above. As I have argued, action is vulgar under the Paris esthetic, and beauty is found in one's potential, not one's endeavors. Action is what makes Waymarsh so increasingly unappealing to Strether as he wanders deeper into Parisian culture. All action in Strether's Paris is performance, which, like sacrifice, is action that merely pays tribute to an ideal. The only real action in the novel before the Lambinet chapters is Strether's "'Live all you can; it's a mistake not to'" speech (TA 132), and even this action is a passive and pitiful one. The speech, which has been taken by many critics of The Ambassadors, including, at least ostensibly, James himself, at its face value, is actually evidence of how confused Strether is by the party in Gloriani's garden. He tells little Bilham,

"It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that, what
have you had? This place and these impressions—mild as you may find them to wind a man up so; all my impressions of Chad and of people I've seen at his place—well, have had their abundant message for me. I see it now. I haven't done so before— and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh I do see, at least; and more than you'd believe or I can express. It's too late. And it's as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having had the gumption to know it was there." (TA 132)

Strether's message is clearly that he can see now what he should have done when he was young and that Bilham must do things now before he is too old do anything at all. Bilham naturally assumes that it is Gloriani whom Strether "should enjoy being like" (TA 133) because Gloriani is a successful artist, but Strether is dazzled by Gloriani more because he is successful than because he is an artist—Gloriani has lived. Strether's message is misinterpreted by Bilham, the Paris esthete who seems to have heard not "live all you can" but "see all you can":

"Didn't you adjure me, in accents I shall never forget, to see, while I've a chance, everything I can?—and really to see, for it must have been that only you meant." (TA 165)

With the exception of the "'Live all you can'" speech, the novel is virtually devoid of action on Strether's part, and thus his only action before Chapter 31 is less an action than a sentimental speech about action, and one that is interpreted to be a speech about inaction. "'I'm a case of a reaction against a mistake,'" Strether tells his "'happily and hatefully young'" friend (TA 132), but he is surprised to find in little Bilham's solemnity "a contradiction of the innocent gaiety [he] had wished to promote" (TA 132). The Paris esthetic is a morass of
passivity and an abyss of inactivity, and this speech is its low point; it is here, though he does not see it, that Strether touches bottom.

The only action of the novel, the only real transitive verb in a summary of the plot, comes at the beginning of Chapter 31. When Strether realizes that Chad and Madame de Vionnet are in the boat below him, he sees that "what it all came to had been that fiction and fable were, inevitably, in the air" (TA 311). He is able to see that his friends have been withholding details from him because he has stepped out of the story, as they have, and has surprised them out of costume. The catastrophe, the revelation to Strether of the identities of the boaters, is "a sharp fantastic crisis that had popped up as if in a dream" (TA 308), and Strether's realization puts him in command for the first time in the novel. Knowing that the others are not sure whether he has recognized them, he has the power to decide the future of his relationship with Chad and Madame de Vionnet. From his new vantage point he is able to decide either to be absorbed into the esthetic of Paris or to repudiate it, and he must make his choice in seconds. If he decides to play the game of Paris by pretending not to have seen them, i.e., by doing nothing, he will possess a secret about them and will be able to observe their attempts to disguise what he knows now to be the truth about their relationship. This alternative would seem a tempting
one to a man whose confidence has been used as Strether's has, but he refuses this opportunity for power, choosing instead the honest, jovial, and extravagant wave of recognition:

He hereupon gave large play to [surprise and joy], agitating his hat and his stick and loudly calling out—a demonstration that brought him relief as soon as he had seen it answered. (TA 308)

The sexuality latent in this stick-waving catharsis, symbolic of perhaps the most primitive action of all, in itself hardly requires comment, but Strether's phallic act is clearly proof that he has renounced the metaphysical as well as the actual. Drama, of course, is action, and Strether, no longer Mrs. Newsome's proxy, begins to act on his own. It is ironic that Strether does not act in the drama until he has stepped out of it. The rest of Chapter 31 is the denouement of the drama, Strether's descent back to the work in which he belongs.

The frame of a painting generally jumps forward and forces both figure and ground into the background while fading out of sight when one looks intently at the inside of the work, but a peculiarity of this frame is that though it easily jumps forward into primacy it obviously has a hard time fading away when we focus our attention on the subject. The reason is, of course, that this frame contains the climax to the book. To say that the novel lacks truth and action is simply a delicate way of saying that it lacks a climax and must lack one, hence its relegation to the frame. James excluded the climax, the great floating
revelation, from the rest of the work--this parergonal exclusion has led Mary Ann Caws to read the recognition wrongly as an anticlimax (Caws 157). James's intensification of the frame makes it vie for prominence with the work itself, this paralleling Strether's own progress toward primacy.

Another question raised by James's text is also answered by this exclusion: What do we make of James's propriety in relying so heavily on chance at such a crucial point? David Lodge has pointed out that the plethora of water imagery throughout the novel is "ironically prophetic" (Lodge 205):

How appropriate it is . . . that Strether, at the climax of an experience which he has consistently likened to swimming in or navigating a watery medium, at the very point where he has to reassess this experience and acknowledge the partial correctness of the Woollett interpretation of events, should be returned to the Woollett stance on the shore and recognize the deviousness of Chad's and Madame de Vionnet's conduct, as they come drifting down the river in a boat. (Lodge 208)

The coincidence of Strether's journeying to the same village that his friends are using for their retreat, however, is only partially explained away by its ironic appropriateness. Unnatural coincidence, like truth and action, has no place in a realistic portrait even of an imaginative man in Paris, but like them also this unnatural coincidence is no obstacle in a preface, where the author simply explains what he meant and how it happened under no obligation to conform to nature.
After his initial action, which so alters the course of future events, he coolly and elegantly reverts to his old idle ways, playing along with the lie and "superseding mere violence" (TA 308):

It had been a performance, Madame de Vionnet's manner, and though it had to that degree faltered toward the end, as through her ceasing to believe in it, as if she had asked herself, or Chad had found a moment surreptitiously to ask her, what after all was the use, a performance it had none the less quite handsomely remained, with the final fact about it that it was on the whole easier to keep up than to abandon. (TA 311)

Strether has left the oblong gilt frame behind now and has re-entered the drama of Paris as an active participant, an entity to be reckoned with. The difference is that Strether now knows that he is acting in a drama, a fiction in which everyone has, like Chad and Madame de Vionnet, "something to put a face upon" (TA 310). No longer an acolyte of one branch of a dialectic or the other, "He was, at that point of vantage, in full possession, to make of it all what he could" (TA 311).

Strether learns from his adventure in the countryside that he has always been more than a proxy to Mrs. Newsome, that he is involved in the drama and has always been, and that he has been fooled. Though there can be no absolute knowledge or revelation within realism, there can and must be understanding through impression and imagination:

[Strether] realized at last that he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing. Verily, verily, his labour had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and
wonderful things. (TA 313)

On the basis of his discovery of the lie and his realization of its truth Strether repudiates Maria Gostrey in much the same way that Maisie renounces Mrs Beale and Sir Claude and begins, in the last pages of the novel, to find himself. Renunciation, in James, is often a step toward maturity, and it is a skill that both Maisie and Strether ultimately acquire.

Strether's real discovery, though, is not so much the nature of the virtuous attachment itself as the fact that "his [own] moral superiority has vanished" (Wegelin 449) and that he is himself "mixed up in a typical tale of Paris" (TA 315). In the Postes et Télégraphes Strether notes that there is something in the air of these establishments; the vibration of the vast strange life of the town, the influence of the types, the performers concocting their messages; the little prompt Paris women, arranging, pretexting goodness knew what, driving the dreadful needle-pointed pen at the dreadful sand-strewn public table . . . . He was mixed up with the typical tale of Paris, and so were they, poor things--how could they altogether help being? (TA 314-15)

Strether has slowly come to realize a profound truth: that he has been involved all along in the drama and that behind the veil of the esthetic of Paris are real people, all of whom are actively participating in the drama of life, as Chad and Madame de Vionnet had been behind his back. He also sees, of course, that "somebody was paying something somewhere and somehow, that they were at least not all floating together on the silver stream of impunity" (TA 315), and Strether understandably reverts for a
time to the "old tradition" (TA 316) of the Woollett morality, "the notion that the state of the wrongdoer, or at least this person's happiness, presented some special difficulty" (TA 316). Strether goes to see Maria Gostrey for one last time, however, and "As she presented things the ugliness--goodness knew why--went out of them"· and Strether's indignant anger begins to subside. Strether sees how much his naïveté has aided his friends' intimacy, and he comes slowly, and indeed miraculously, to see this intimacy as a positive thing. "'What it comes to,'" he explains to Miss Gostrey, "'is that it's not, that it's never, a happiness, any happiness at all, to take. The only safe thing is to give. It's what plays you least false'" (TA 321). This maxim in Strether's enlightened grasp is no mere cliché: its profundity is evidenced by "the quaver of [Maria's] quietness" (TA 321) as she takes it in.

In his excursion to the preface Strether renounces both Woollett and Paris, but in the end he take upon himself the task of combining the Woollett ethic and the Paris esthetic, thus reconciling thesis and antithesis with synthesis. The end result of The Ambassadors, the "product" produced at Woollett and refined in Paris, is a man who sees both the crudity and the validity of the culture he was born into. But he also sees both the beauty and the hypocrisy of the Parisian culture. In short, he has educated himself: midway through the novel he could
barely "'toddle alone!'" (TA 190), but at the end he has learned from his adventures that the view of Paris as the "consecrated scene of rash infatuations and bold bad treacheries" belongs to the infancy of life as well as of art. Strether has retained the broad view of life afforded by his trip to Europe and his adventure in the preface and has grown out of that infancy. His successful mediation between Woollett and Paris is what earns him the title of ambassador.

Conclusion:

I have argued that the Prologue to The Turn of the Screw is a complete and effective frame tale according to Derrida's notion of the parergon, one that works to redress the lack of a beginning to the governess's narrative, a lack that can be redressed only because it must also be sustained in order for the narrative to succeed as a fairy tale. My main point in Chapter II, however, is that in the realm of fiction the frame/work relationship can be found in relationships between people as well as between elements of a work of art and that the primacy of the frame is as peculiar a characteristic within the work as it is outside it. In What Maisie Knew, Maisie Farange is herself a parergonal frame, used to compensate for the lack of decency in
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her parents' adulterous relationships. I read these relationships as paintings that cannot sustain themselves against the strict Victorian moral code, thus requiring a frame of support. In *The Ambassadors*, the Lambinet chapters (30-31) form a parergonal preface that contains the great revelation of the truth; this truth is both necessary in a portrait of a "man of imagination" and incommensurable with the genre of realism. The novel, in short, is in a sense the ultimate utilization of the parergon: it has its climax in a preface, and my Chapter III is an exploration of this peculiar design.

This essay is a tribute to the importance of the marginal in literature and philosophy. To Derrida a painting is not a unit but a composite of work and frame in which the frame, ostensibly subordinate to the work, is actually of primary importance because of the extent to which it is subordinate--the extent, in other words, to which it is necessitated by the work. In short, the frame does real work:

The frame labors indeed. Place of labor, structurally bordered origin of surplus value, i.e., overflowed on these two borders by what it overflows, it gives indeed. Like wood. It creaks and cracks, breaks down and dislocates even as it cooperates in the production of the product, overflows it and is deduc(t)ed from it. (TP 75)

Regardless of why paintings originally were framed, the frame has come to be associated intimately with our notion of what a painting is, and Derrida's premise that certain works of art need somehow to be framed involves an irony basic to my analysis: it
assumes that the work is intrinsically incapable of doing its own work. The goal of much recent minimalist art, what Michael Fried has called immanent "objecthood" (Fried 145), is thus a futile aspiration.

The incapability of attaining true primacy and the need to somehow overcome this handicap by juxtaposition are a characteristic of both the work of art and the human spirit to which James was clearly sensitive, both in structuring his novels and in portraying the human relationships within them. James's interest in the clumsy futility of honest action and the beauty of vagueness led to the characters of Gilbert Osmond, Little Bilham, and Sir Claude, who are so attractive precisely because they never seem to do anything. Lambert Strether, John Marcher, and the governess in The Turn of the Screw are all characters who see and wait but rarely act and whose fates are determined by their interpretation of events more than by action. James is thus linked with Derrida by his interest in the significance and beauty of the passive and subordinate—the novel itself was a subordinate genre that James was instrumental in raising to the level of a fine art.
Notes


3. For an analysis of the debate between Besant and James, see Mark Spilka's "The Art of Fiction' Controversy."


5. Cf. Felman, 120.

6. James clearly felt that it was important that both these effects of the frame be happen together, and that they did not happen together for Nathaniel Hawthorne. In an 1872 review of an edition of Hawthorne's journals from his travels to France and Italy James discusses the "admirably honest" (HJ 310) and "natural" (HJ 309) genius, whose response to the European paintings he finds charmingly naive:

   The "most delicate charm" to Mr. Hawthorne was apparently simply the primal freshness and brightness of paint and varnish, and--not to put too fine a point on it--the new gilding of the frame. (HJ 311)

In another essay on Hawthorne (1879), James writes:

   Whenever he talks of statues he makes a great point of the smoothness and whiteness of the marble--speaks of the surface of the marble as if it were half the beauty of the image; and when he discourses of pictures, one feels that the brightness and dinginess of the frame is an essential part of his impression of the work. (HJ 441)

James found Hawthorne's uneducated American naïveté amusing because of its attention to surface detail, particularly that of the frame, to the exclusion of the work itself. His patient chiding shows how important it was for him, however, that the frame be a part of the whole painting, a part that works with the work instead of distracting attention from it. The frame must accentuate the work by eliminating itself, by disappearing from the viewer's field of vision.

7. Bennington and McLeod translated Derrida's The Truth in Painting into English in 1987, but the work was originally published as La Vérité en Peinture (Paris: Flammarion) in 1978, and a shorter version of "Parergon," without illustrations, appeared in 1974 (Digraphe 3 and 4). It is not unlikely, therefore, that Felman's work was influenced by Derrida's notion of the parergon.
8. In addition to those already mentioned, see Millicent Bell, Meaning in Henry James; Dennis Chase, "The Ambiguity of Innocence: The Turn of the Screw"; Marcia M. Eaton, "James's Turn of the Speech-Act"; Vincent Pecora, Self as Form in Modern Narrative; Shlomith Rimmon, The Concept of Ambiguity--The Example of James.

9. I use the word "redress" here because the action to which I refer is not that of eliminating the lack but of compensating for it. "Redress" is a more forceful and dominating verb than "compensate," as evidenced by the fact that the latter would have to be accompanied by the preposition "for."

10. "The Way it Came," later renamed "The Friends of the Friends," is another ghost story written at just before The Turn of the Screw, and it is framed in much the same way as the latter. The tale's prologue (p. 371 of The Complete Tales, v. IX) takes the form of a letter from an editor to a possible publisher addressing the question of "the possibility of publication" of a manuscript, a copy of which follows. The story, divided by the narrator "for your convenience into several short chapters" but otherwise unaltered, is judged by the editor to be flawed. Rather than repairing it, however, the narrator prefaces the story with a cover letter of explanation. This principle of adding rather than altering is the same one at work in The Turn of the Screw.

11. Peter Beidler, in Ghosts, Demons and Henry James, has suggested that Douglas, in his college days, was a member of the Cambridge Ghost Club, and that "it may have been at Douglas's urging that the governess made a written statement of her experiences" (Beidler 40). This suggestion, as Beidler notes, would account for a number of inconsistencies in the novel, the confessional tone of the narrative among them.

12. It is necessary to point out that the propaedeutic pre-chapter to What Maisie Knew, James's "ugly little comedy" (Notebooks 167) is not a parergonal frame like the Prologue to The Turn of the Screw. The Prologue to What Maisie Knew, it is true, differs in tone and style from the narrative that follows it. Mary Galbraith, furthermore, has analyzed the transition from the Prologue to Chapter 1 of the novel and shown that the Prologue differs epistemologically as well. In the Prologue Maisie does not yet exist as a character, but only as a marker in the adults' game: The last paragraph of the prologue is almost entirely devoted to the perspective of [Beale and Ida's] social circle, for whom the Faranges's divorce is a wonderful distraction. The topics of paragraph 7 [of the Prologue] enact the topics of importance to this circle: physical appearance and money. Within this universe, the child Maisie is virtually nonexistent as is evidenced by the lack of mention of her within this paragraph. She exists only as a marker in the
game of wealth, beauty, and power. (Galbraith 199)
Maisie, as Galbraith illustrates, is brought to life only by the
first sentence of Chapter 1. Even this difference between Prologue
and tale, however, does not make the Prologue a frame. The
Prologue is simply a part of the novel that comes before the first
chapter. It is an introduction, an informative beginning, exactly
the likes of which The Turn of the Screw is lacking. The fact that
the Prologue to What Maisie Knew precedes the first chapter of the
novel emphasizes the beginning of the novel rather than obfuscating
it as is the case in The Turn of the Screw.

13. See the Notebook entry for Saturday, January 12, 1895.

14. Cf. Shoshana Felman's account of the mechanics of letter-
writing in The Turn of the Screw in ch. 5 of her "Turning the Screw
of Interpretation."

15. Michael Taylor has interestingly suggested that the reason for
this respect is that the narrator is female but in any case, the
mysterious relation emphasizes the dramatic element of the Prologue
and heightens the contrast with the governess's narrative.

16. James heard the story that became The Turn of the Screw on
Thursday, January 10, 1895, according to the notebook entry of the
following Saturday, but he did not publish the story until January
of 1898 (Notebooks 109). James got the idea for What Maisie Knew
on November 12, 1892, according to his note dated two days later,
and was published in 1897.

17. Sir Claude, originally "the Captain," is described as "a
simple, good, mild chap" in the notebooks. See the entry for
December 22, 1895 (Notebooks 150).

18. "'Poor little monkey!' [the good lady] at last exclaimed; and
the words were an epitaph for the tomb of Maisie's childhood." (What Maisie Knew 36)

19. See, for example, this description:
[Maisie's] features had somehow become prominent; they were so
perpetually nipped by the gentlemen who came to see her father
and the smoke of whose cigarettes went into her face. Some of
these men made her strike matches and light their cigarettes;
others, holding her on knees violently jolted, pinched the
calves of her legs till she shrieked--her shriek was much
admired--and reproached them with being toothpicks. The word
stuck in her mind and contributed to her feeling from this
time that she was deficient in something that would meet the
general desire. She found out what it was; it was a
congenital tendency to the production of a substance to which
Moddle, her nurse, gave a short ugly name, a name painfully
associated at dinner with the part of the joint that she didn't like. (WMK 39-40)

20. Ida Farange's interest in her daughter is reduced to "the mere maternal pull" (WMK).

21. Though the Penguin edition of What Maisie Knew uses a free-standing hyphen to separate these phrases, I will use in my transcriptions the double dash employed by the editors of the Norton Critical editions of James's novels. Evidence that the double dash is more in line with James's own intentions is to be found in Book Five of The Ambassadors, just after Strether's famous "Live all you can" speech:
   Slowly and sociably, with full pauses and straight dashes, Strether had so delivered himself. (TA 132; emphasis added)

22. Foster notes that "her analysis of the lovers goes beyond understanding them, beyond knowing about love, to a participation in love's stratagems" (Foster 209).

23. James repeatedly calls her an "honest frump" in the notebooks. See the entry for December 22, 1895 (Notebooks 149).

24. Mrs Wix follows Maisie wherever she goes, appearing later, to Maisie, on the cliffs of Dover the night before Maisie and Sir Claude break for France:
   Maisie stared at them as if she might really make out after a little a queer dear figure perched on them - a figure as to which she had already the subtle sense that, wherever perched, it would be the very oddest yet seen in France. But it was at least as exciting to feel where Mrs Wix wasn't as it would have been to know where she was. (WMK 165-66)

25. Marriage in What Maisie Knew is simply "the unbroken opportunity to quarrel" (WMK 37).

26. James writes in the Preface to the New York Edition that "the child becoming a centre and pretext for a fresh system of misbehaviour, a system moreover of a nature to spread and ramify: there would be the 'full' irony, there the promising theme into which the hint I had originally picked up would logically flower" (WMK 25).

27. James writes in the Preface to What Maisie Knew that "the thing has but to become a part of the child's bewilderment for these small sterilities to drop from it and for the scene to emerge and prevail--vivid, special, wrought hard, to the hardness of the unforgettable; the scene that is exactly what Beale and Ida and Mrs Cuddon, and even Sir Claude and Mrs Beale, would never for a moment have succeeded in making their scant unredeemed importances--namely
appreciable" (WMK 29-30). Maisie's role as a frame, then, is not only to make her parents' and stepparents' adultery appear decent to their peers in society, but also to validate their presentation to the reader by making them "appreciable". It is Maisie's unifying presence that makes her upbringing what Lambert Strether calls a "situation" (TA 168) or "case" (TA 234); it is she alone that makes her milieu interesting. Being "appreciable" is the aesthetic ideal that I will focus on in the next chapter.

28. Armstrong observes that "the excess of seeing over understanding which imprisons Maisie in a world of ambiguity is the surplus of her unreflective experience over what she can appropriate in reflection" (Armstrong 519). Thomas Jeffers, in a similar vein, has described Maisie's childhood as a tomb: "If the denouement signals 'the death of her childhood, properly speaking" (Preface 28), it is the death of something deathly. Denied all salutary light and air, Maisie's childhood has been buried in 'the tomb' (WMK 36)" (Jeffers 161). [I have adjusted Jeffers's pagination to correspond to that of the Penguin edition.]

29. See Blackall 518 for a brief review of the debate.

30. Paul Theroux has noted the change in tone in Chapter 17 and postulated that it is here that James surrendered to his writer's cramp and began dictating to an amanuensis. See page 11 of Thoroux's introduction to the Penguin edition.

31. See the notebook entry for August 26, 1893 (Notebooks 77).

32. There is no extended dialogue until Chapter 6, and little of much importance until before Chapter 13.

33. His stick, of course, is in Mrs Beale's bedroom (WMK 239).

34. Foster writes: "Nothing in Maisie's experience makes it self-evident that taking a wealthy lover is evil. For Mrs. Wix, the leap from paying lovers to immorality is automatic, having been schooled for so long in a convention linking the two that she has come to assume it is a fact of nature. So long as Maisie has not learned this convention, her failure to follow Mrs. Wix's leap emphasizes the weakness of the logic of morality" (Foster 210).

35. Julie Rivkin, similarly, has claimed that "the supplement itself is a 'prime idea' in The Ambassadors" (384, note 6), as has Mary Ann Caws, who writes that "By the time of The Ambassadors, the aesthetic sense of border is openly of greater interest for James than the rather dreary 'plot'" (Caws 148).
36. Derrida claims that the work collapses without the frame, but his statement is wittily obfuscated by one of the blank boxes that periodically interrupt his work. The statement, in which Derrida compares a work of art to a person in a wheelchair, thus appears as follows in the text:

One pushes forward something which cannot stand up, does not erect itself by itself . . . . Framing always supports and contains that which, by itself, collapses forthwith, exc

(Derrida 78-79)

The fragment "exc" here [s'exc in French] may be the first half of "except," which might mean that there are some cases where the work does not necessarily collapse without the frame. But whatever qualification once followed has itself been coyly framed by its own elision; Derrida's concern is with those works that do require framing.

37. Strether also paints a "picture" (TA 50) of Mrs. Newsome for Maria Gostrey at every opportunity in the dawn of their acquaintance, and through his descriptions Miss Gostrey "sees" the subject of the painting: "how intensely you make me see her!" she exclaims to Strether (TA 50). Strether, as a frame connected to but on a different plane of existence than the "work" he is employed to serve, cannot see completely either his subject or the nature of his relationship to her, but Maria Gostrey is a seer, an observer and interpreter in the system of ill-detachable detachment that is Strether's situation:

"You see more in it," he presently returned, "than I."
"Of course I see you in it."
"Well then you see more in 'me'!"
"Than you see in yourself? Very likely. That's always one's right." (TA 53)

38. Cf. Chapter 14: "he was 'being, as he constantly put it though mutely expressed it, used. He was as far as ever from making out exactly to what end; but he was none the less constantly accompanied by a sense of the service he rendered. He conceived only that this service was highly agreeable to those who profited by it; and he was indeed still waiting for the moment at which he should catch it in the act of proving disagreeable, proving in some degree intolerable, to himself. He failed to see how his situation could clear up at all logically except by some turn of events that would give him the pretext of disgust." (TA 152)

39. This term comes from the Preface to What Maisie Knew. See note 27 above.
40. R. W. Short has written that the theatrical images in *The Ambassadors* generally "stand for the unnatural, the meretricious, the over-ingenious, the glittering front, the false ritual, the social perversion" (Short 951) while Lodge has pointed out that "the legitimate theater is in fact one of the novel's touchstones for indicating fineness of crudity of sensibility, the acceptance or rejection of European culture and the idea of social beauty" (Lodge 210).

41. Rivkin also suggests that "her name falls one consonant short of 'go straight' and leaves us with the open-ended sound and open path of 'go stray'" (824).

42. See also Holder-Barell 117-24.

43. Garis has written that "there has in fact been no education at all" and that the novel's conclusion illustrates "Strether's incapacity for either education or life" (307). Goetz writes, similarly, that

Maria's praise for [Strether's] imagination [at the end of chapter 29] comes at an ironic moment, just preceding Strether's retreat into the Laminet-like French countryside where his imagination sets him up for his greatest fall in the novel, a fall which will almost wreck him. (Goetz 190). I will argue here, however, that Strether's imaginative adventure almost saves him, and that to save him any further would violate the realism of the novel.

44. Robert Garis writes that after "twenty-nine chapters dramatizing, with extraordinarily close attention to the rigors of a consistent point of view" the book ends with seven chapters in which "the writing is brilliant in invention and secure in justice" (309-10).

45. William R. Goetz argues that in *The Ambassadors* a tension builds up between Strether and the narrator as a result of James's fear that Strether would too much resemble himself, making the book appear to be an autobiography. Goetz's thesis is based on James's famous renunciation of the first-person form of address in longer works of fiction in the Preface to *The Ambassadors*:

Strether, ... encaged and provided for as "The Ambassadors" encages and provides, has to keep in view proprieties much stiffer and more salutary than any our stiff and credulous gape are likely to bring home to him, has exhibitional conditions to meet, in a word, that forbid the terrible fluidity of self-revelation. (TA Preface 11)

Goetz writes that the purpose of the Preface is to "make the avoidance of autobiography seem a purely technical decision" (Goetz 185) but that this avoidance is really an act of defense and that Strether is guilty of the crime of impersonating his creator.
Strether's encagement within the text, Goetz writes, functions as punishment for this crime:

The familiar tightness versus fluidity operates here in a way uncomfortable to Strether. He is encaged and subject to the "stiffer proprieties" of James's focalized narrative so that he cannot escape the fictional bounds of the text and be confused with his author. (Goetz 187)

Goetz perceives the obvious resemblance between James and Strether as one that made the former uneasy and writes that "this obvious threat of the author's identification with his hero calls forth a countermovement, an act that will protect James by keeping Strether distinct from him, a prisoner, as it were, of the fictional text" (Goetz 187). Goetz sees Strether's imprisonment, in other words, as an act of defense on the part of tyrannical author who refuses him "the double privilege of subject and object" (Preface 11) to protect himself from the indignity of autobiography.


47. The Preface to The Ambassadors shows James more confident than at any other point in The Art of the Novel, and the metaphor he chooses to convey his excitement, that of the pursuit of a run-away slave, shows the extent of his confidence in his achievement:

No privilege of the teller of tales and the handler of puppets is more delightful, or has more of the suspense and the thrill of a game of difficulty breathlessly played, than just this business of looking for the unseen and the occult, in a scheme half-grasped, by the light or, so to speak, by the clinging scent, of the gage already in hand. No dreadful old pursuit of the hidden slave with bloodhounds and the rag of association can ever, for "excitement," I judge, have bettered it at its best. (TA 4)

48. Viola Hopkins has suggested that Strether, by this point, has drifted out of Lambinet's "French ruralism" into something more impressionistic, a Manet perhaps. See Hopkins 565.

49. See p. 483 of The Portable James Joyce, ed. Harry Levin.

50. See also Mary Ann Caws's Reading 'Frames in Modern Fiction. Caws, however, is concerned more with what is framed than with the frame itself, which is to be my focus. She writes: "The question as to where the frame is said to be, and its relation to Hegel's notion of the parergon, is of less concern to me here than the effect of the actual passages I read as framed within the texts and the recognition of their borders" (Caws 13).

51. Preface to The American (p. 24 of The Art of the Novel).
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Vita

I was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, on October 10, 1968. I have a B.A. in English (January 1992) from Lehigh University, and I have also studied at The Barnstone Studios in Coplay, Pennsylvania, Sichuan University in Chengdu, China, and the University of Edinburgh in Great Britain. In the summer of 1991 I married Aphrodite Tatla in Athens, Greece, whereupon life began for me in earnest.
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TITLE