Enter the Frame:  
The Loss of Clarity

Narrative is distinguished from all other forms of art by the voice of a narrator who intercedes between the subject and the listener or reader. The traditional novel is distinguished by the narrator's view, which the narrative voice describes and which, therefore, also stands between the subject and the reader. The narrator's view follows from his choosing a detached and fixed vantage, even when he narrows his focus to the mind of a central intelligence, and from his enclosing his subject within a convenient frame. Ironically, the narrator's view gains in objectivity and clarity—becomes easier to grasp or hold on to—through a suppression of the frame that he imposes upon his subject, as well as a suppression of the medium through which he fashions his narrative. Pamela's gifts, Allworthy's vista, Yorick's saddle, Gervaise's room, what Stephen sees in the first four chapters of the Portrait, all may lack visual vitality. But they are easy to grasp because the narrator, standing on a fixed vantage, orders and frames the details before he recounts them to us. The objects in Vauxhall garden and the young women on the library steps are more vivid because we see them as the narrators see them, their attention aroused and their eyes flashing from point to point. But what we see is still clear because Matthew and Lydia frame what they see within the form of their letters, and Joyce's narrator frames what Stephen sees by remaining, however inobtrusive, between his subject and his reader.

What we experience in the later Joyce, Faulkner, and Beckett derives from a radical change in narrative dynamics. The narrator is no longer situated between his subject and the reader, he no longer stands on a fixed vantage, and he no longer encloses the
subject within the frame of his visual imagination. He enters the frame of the narrative. The medium asserts itself as an independent source of interest and control. The narrative voice loses its independent and dominant status. What the reader sees is no longer a clear picture contained within the narrator’s purview, but an erratic image where the narrator, the subject, and the medium are brought into the same imaginative field of interaction, an image that is shattered, confused, self-contradictory, but with an independent life of its own.

What the reader of a modernist novel may see is like what the viewer sees in Eisenstein’s *Potemkin*, when the crowd flees the advancing soldiers down the Odessa steps: soldiers fragmented into boots and rifles and marching mechanically, people running down endless steps and off in impossible directions, motion sped to a frenzy and slowed unendurably, perspectives maddeningly shifted, shots repeated, lines unnaturally accented, light and shadow in unnatural relation, and in the midst of the terrorized crowd a huge mirror doubling what we see of a student’s face as he watches the slaughter around him. It is also like what we all see in a cubist painting, where faces, backs, arms, objects—all on different planes—as well as unnatural colors, obtrusive contours, and surprising textures are all brought onto the same surface. And it is like what we try to see when reading physicists’ accounts of elementary particles that are described as *both* continuous waves and discontinuous particles—and which are, as physicists say, “unpicturable.” Developments in the modern novel, then, are part of a galaxy of developments that emerge in the twentieth century. What begins, in every field, as an attempt to make us see more sharply, ends with an experience that cannot be held within our visual imagination. To understand these developments, and to establish a base from which we can explain the unpicturable motion in Joyce, Faulkner, and Beckett as well as in Nabokov, Pynchon, Robbe-Grillet, Coover, and the contemporary field of surfiction, we must turn back to an earlier galaxy of developments in the Renaissance.¹

Hugh Kenner reminds us that the philosophy of Descartes, “which makes the whole of intelligible reality depend on the mental processes of a solitary man,” came into being at the same time as the “curious literary form called the novel.”² The traditional novel’s intelligible reality does indeed depend on what the narrator frames in his mind, and the narrator is indeed solitary as he chooses his detached and fixed vantage. Let us, therefore, follow
Kenner's lead and approach the traditional novel through a series of innovations that, like Descartes, helped establish an intellectual and imaginative approach to reality that would dominate Western thought until the twentieth century.

In his *Dialogue of the New Sciences*, Galileo shows how he arrived at the principle of inertia: "I conceive as the work of my own mind a moving object launched above a horizontal plane and freed of all impediment." In a solitary ordeal and a break not only from tradition but from reality, Galileo imagined an ideal picture freed from the impediments that objects naturally encounter; and, as Ortega y Gasset remarks, it was by just this imaginative act that Galileo founded the new science. But Ortega, in seizing on the relationship between science and art, only begins to realize the potential of his subject. It was a particular pattern of imaginative activity and picturing that distinguished Galileo's achievement—a pattern like that which established the new philosophy, the new art, and the new literature. Galileo's pattern can be divided into three stages, although Galileo himself might not have conceived them this way. First, he created an ideal picture; that is, from the detached perspective of a solitary but ideal viewer, he framed his subject or isolated it from the clutter and continuity of its context. Second, he reintroduced the impediments to reconstitute the "full" or "real" picture, implying a relationship between the impediments or a quantity of visible elements and a sense of reality.

Third, he transformed his three-dimensional mental picture of a moving object into a two-dimensional and static picture—a series of dots framed by the coordinates of time and space.

Now, Galileo did not invent the system of coordinates, nor did he realize their geometrical potential, and the history of this mathematical construct has two interesting parallels in the history of Western arts and letters. Shortly after the coordinates were invented, in the early fifteenth century, Alberti developed a system of perspective. By looking through a tiny opening in a small box, he found that he could translate the exact proportions of a three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional plane. Alberti established a new art, like Galileo, by imposing a frame upon a cluttered and continuous field from the detached perspective of an ideal viewer, by filling his frame with a quantity of "realistic" detail, and by reducing a three-dimensional and dynamic perception to a static, two-dimensional form.

The second interesting point relating to the development of coordinate geometry came shortly after Galileo used the system to
discover the principle of inertia, when Descartes helped develop it into a major scientific tool. Descartes applied the same imaginative pattern in his *Discourse on Method* to establish the new philosophy. Since Descartes doubted the lessons of custom, habit, authority, and the senses, he imposed a frame upon the clutter and continuity of history from the perspective of an ideal, solitary, and detached viewer; his ideal picture, freed from all but the necessary elements, consisted of the fact of his doubting and, hence, of his existence. From this certain fact he reconstituted the “full” or “real” world: the First Cause, the heavens, the stars, the earth, water, air, fire, minerals, and so on. And he arrived at his picture of the world through deductive logic. That is, he reduced and translated a dynamic field into that static language of geometry—a system of points whose relationship, he tells us, could be best understood if viewed as “subsisting between straight lines.”

Alberti imposed his frame upon the dynamic field of visual experience, Galileo upon a universe filled with moving objects and impediments, Descartes upon the movement of history. A similar step was taken by Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding (Sterne being the singular exception, who prefigured the course of modernism). Of course, the frame was not invented in the Renaissance, but it did serve a new purpose and carry a new message. In the Middle Ages the frame was an outer edge—a limit to the imaginative construction that called attention to the act of imagination and to the fact of its being shaped in a particular medium. In the Renaissance the frame began to be a limit imposed upon the real world. As the novel developed away from the oral tradition, the narrator gradually shifted his role from that of professional storyteller toward that of witness. He found ways to disguise or suppress the fact that he was conveying a fiction through artificial conventions, and he imposed the frame upon reality itself. Boccaccio, following in the specific tradition of the fourteenth-century *favellatore* and in the general tradition of storytellers from the epic to the *fabliaux*, was retelling stories with eloquence and evocative power. His “Preface to the Ladies” called attention to itself as a frame that enclosed his stories. Chaucer created a narrator who claims to have witnessed the events of his narrative; but his pretense is an obvious convention, and his frame is seen only as a more skillfully created device than Boccaccio’s. What distinguishes the traditional novel from the epic, the early short narrative, and the stories told within the walled garden of a plagued city or the time encompassed by a journey to Canterbury is our
sense of the narrator not as a storyteller but as a witness who has imposed his frame upon reality. Whether his story is told in the first or third person, the narrator is present as a witness who holds a world of time and space within his solitary purview.

Indeed, the narrator of the novel, with his detached and fixed viewpoint and his enclosing frame, is very much like the ideal intellect that was postulated by Laplace at the end of the eighteenth century that would serve as a scientific model for the next hundred years. This “intellect which at a given instant knew all the forces acting in nature, and the position of all things of which the world consists . . . would embrace in the same formula the motions of the greatest bodies in the universe and those of the slightest atoms; nothing would be uncertain for it, and the future, like the past, would be present to its eyes.”

In the Renaissance a stance was developed to view objects defined not by their inherent qualities, limits, or dynamics but by their relation to a fixed observer governing a closed system. The term “realistic”—deriving from the Latin res, or “thing”—applies to this kind of objectification. It applies, that is, to Galileo’s ideal picture, which he transformed to a coordinate graph; to the view through Alberti’s little box, which he transformed onto a two-dimensional canvas; to the world picture generated by the solitary mind of Descartes, which he structured on the principles of geometry. And to the purview of the narrative persona who imposes his frame on a continuous stream of events, holds the movement of the past, present, and future before him, and fits the dynamic details of character, setting, commentary, motivation, and action into the static grid of his plot.

It is the frame that gives the narrator’s picture its peculiar clarity—a clarity, for all the novel’s illusion of movement through time, that is essentially geometrical. And yet in order to evoke an illusion of objective reality, the frame, as an idealized or esthetic limit, was suppressed. The frame would seem to say, “The world of space and time outside of me is qualitatively the same but is unnecessary and would blur my focus. Moreover, you should forget that only some of the visual details (not every blade of grass) and only some moments in the sequence of time (not every word or action) are actually included within me.” As realism in the arts and sciences developed, more and more details were included within the frame and more skill was manifested in their representation—and the message was always that the creation was real, full, and complete.
The picture’s clarity was also achieved through a suppression of medium: the canvas as a two-dimensional object, the stage as a framework for carefully plotted and skillfully executed action, and the novel as an artfully contrived sequence of words virtually disappeared. The two-dimensional canvas would seem to say, “I am three-dimensional reality.” The proscenium stage would seem to say, “I am a real room with the fourth wall removed.” The novel would seem to say, “I am really happening.”

Now let us examine the evolution of the narrative stance paradigmatically by focusing on four works where the story-frame plays and important role: Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, an apparently simple illustration of traditional fiction reaching for a sophisticated extreme of objectivity; Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, where the story as story asserts itself as the true subject; William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* , where the story as main subject is beyond the grasp of the storytellers and the reader; and Samuel Beckett’s trilogy, where the central conflict becomes that between the storytellers and the story—indeed, between the storyteller and the storytelling voice—or between various formal elements of the fiction itself.

Henry James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw* is a useful illustration of traditional fiction reaching a limit, not only because it is short but because one of its chief aims is to bring an ostensibly fantastic story within the grasp of realistic objectivity. The narrative structure begins with the frame of a detached and fixed narrator, who underscores his detachment by remaining nameless. Within his frame is the frame of Douglas, who is telling a story to the guests of the manor. Douglas is not so detached from the story, for he had been involved with the protagonist for twenty years in a way that he can only intimate, and he has preserved this relationship in his memory for the twenty years since she died. Within Douglas’s frame is the frame of the governess, this time not the voice of a living character telling a story from memory but the manuscript of a woman long since dead, who, as the style suggests, composed a traumatic experience into an extremely controlled story. Hence the real subject, contained within her frame, is absolutely beyond our grasp. This does not mean that the ultimate picture is unclear. Quite the contrary. We see the frame imposed by each narrator and the story contained within these frames with absolute clarity. It is only the subject, what actually happened, that remains beyond our final grasp. The story is not unclear but ambiguous. Our perception is like that of the
viewer who tries to fix on the ambiguous picture, common to psy­
chology, that E. H. Gombrich discusses in *Art and Illusion* (see
below). When we read *The Turn of the Screw*, we may see Peter
Quint as a demonic ghost or as a figment of a repressed imagina­
tion, just as we can see either a rabbit or a duck in the drawing. We
may shift from one to the other, but, as Gombrich points out, we
can never see both at once. The images may be contradictory, but
no single perception contains a self-contradiction.

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is also structured on the
principle of a frame within a frame, but the narrative stance and
dynamics are entirely different. Again the largest frame is pro­
vided by an unnamed narrator. He is not so detached as the first
narrator in James’s novella, for, as a comparison of his opening
and closing descriptions shows, the story has a profound effect on
his consciousness. Nonetheless, he imposes his frame from a de­
tached and fixed vantage. Within his frame sits Marlow, in the
lotus-flower position, who tells the main story. But Marlow’s
stories are not like those of the typical seaman—or those of the
traditional narrator, including the narrators of *The Turn of the
Screw*—“the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a
cracked nut.”*10* For Marlow “the meaning of an episode was not
inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought
it out.” The subject of the *Heart of Darkness* is not a series of
events contained within a frame but Marlow’s story as story, a dy­
namic process where style, description, characters, symbols, ac­
tions are constantly evolving—and where all these elements are
brought into the same dynamic field of imaginative perception
and meaning. Conrad does not, cannot, focus on the heart of
darkness: the landscape was “great, expectant, mute. . . . I felt
how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn’t talk,
and perhaps was deaf as well. . . . Somehow it didn’t bring any
image with it” (94). Nor can he focus on Kurtz, or hold onto a complete image of him: “The man presented himself as a voice” (119). And when, near the very end of the story, he is finally brought onto the scene, all we see is “the thin arm extended commandingly, the lower jaw moving, the eyes of that apparition shining darkly far in its boney head” (135).

Conrad does not try to focus on the heart of darkness, on Kurtz—on the kernel of his story or a static subject within the shell of a frame—but on the “enveloping” and developing tale, the movement of Marlow’s story. He does, however, frame Marlow’s tale and provide a stable vantage for the reader. The first narrator, despite the changed perspective that results from his vicarious experience, does stand between the reader and Marlow. He does recount his own story from a fixed point in time and space. He does enclose his subject—Marlow telling his story—within a traditional frame.

Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* aims directly at the kernel, or the character of Thomas Sutpen, whose story would seem to provide the meaning of Western history—from its sources in classical and biblical times to those of frontier American and the antebellum South—and to provide the link between the past and the present. But the kernel is never grasped or directly encountered, for it is approached from the vantage of four characters with different preconceptions, needs, obsessions, and degrees of relationship to Sutpen. Rosa—the one character who ever saw Sutpen, and the object of his traumatic insult—is dominated by puritanic repressions and a Gothic imagination. “Out of a quiet thunderclap,” she sees him “abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a school prize watercolor.” Mr. Compson, having heard a great deal of the story from his father, an apparently reliable witness, has stoically come to terms with the outrages of history. For him Sutpen seems to have been “created out of thin air and set down in the bright summer sabbath sunshine in the middle of a tired foxtrot” (32). Quentin—obsessed by chivalric values and love for his sister, ambivalent about a history where the sources of affirmation and negation are one—focuses less on Sutpen than on his son and daughter. And Shreve—detached from the situation historically, emotionally, and psychologically, but genuinely curious and imaginatively sympathetic—focuses more on Sutpen’s noble bastard son.

What we see in our experience of *Absalom, Absalom!* is not a clear or even an ambiguous picture of Sutpen or the events of his
legend, and though the novel leads us to reconstruct the events and fit the pieces of the picture puzzle together, to end at this point is to deny the primary experience of the novel. For the legend of Sutpen is beyond our imaginative perception, owing to the psychological and historical limitations of each narrator. Indeed, the gaps between each narrator and the central story assert themselves as a dramatic part of the novel’s fabric. Nor, as in *The Turn of the Screw*, do we see a series of frames, one within the other. What we see are four partially overlapping and constantly shifting frames attempting to enclose a subject that is not there. The subject of the novel is not an enveloping or developing story but a kinetic montage of storytellers as they try to impose a frame and reconstitute the “full” or “real” picture.

As in *Heart of Darkness*, various elements of subject and medium are brought into the same field of perception and meaning, but they are not enclosed within the frame of a solitary, fixed, and detached narrator. There is a narrative voice that encompasses the four narrating characters; but it does not frame them, for it is not fixed in time or space, nor is it detached or always separable from the characters. While it creates a syntactical distance and continuity by turning each “I” into a “he” or a “she,” it also insinuates itself into the voice and view of each narrating character—sometimes unobtrusively as subtext, sometimes breaking through with its own allusions, images, rhythms, and intensities. It is the voice of a hovering narrator who does not provide a frame but, like the narrating characters, tries to apprehend an experience that remains unclear and beyond his grasp. Moreover, it is responsible for the shifting of frames and caesurae—as it shifts its stance from one of identification to one of intrusion or usurpation, as it shifts its focus from one narrating character to another, as it shifts its perspective to bring us into the presence of different narrators simultaneously. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the frames that attempt to enclose the subject and the dynamic of shifting frames are experienced as part of the subject.

What we have seen so far in this paradigmatic development from traditional to modern fiction is that, as the narrator relinquishes his detached stance and eliminates the distance from his subject, he can no longer enclose the subject and keep it fixed within a frame; and the medium, less amenable to his control, asserts itself as an independent and dynamic part of the subject. Therefore, the narrator’s view loses its clarity, and we can no longer hold on to what we see in our visual imagination. In Sam-
uel Beckett's trilogy, as we have seen, not only the view but the very voice of the narrator is called into question, and the medium not only liberates itself from the narrator's control but threatens to deny him his very existence.

In the trilogy, as in *Absalom, Absalom!*, we encounter a montage of shifting frames, which finally draws us into the Unnameable's experience of perpetual motion. But in *Absalom, Absalom!* there is a primary narrator, and—although he enters the frame of the narrative, shifts his focus from one narrating character to the next, and hovers near each of them to create a palpable uncertainty—he retains his narrative identity. In Beckett's trilogy one narrator yields to the next, and we become increasingly uncertain about the narrative source. That the final narrator is unnamable establishes our ultimate uncertainty. A key word in the trilogy is *aporía*, the rhetorical device of doubting. But unlike Descartes's the Unnamable's doubting cannot lead to the affirmation of a doubter, and hence of his existence, for the Unnamable goes so far as to doubt the very voice with which he doubts. The narrative voice in Beckett's trilogy is not only inseparable from the subject but is the major antagonist. At once liberated from its traditional position between the subject and the reader and gratuitously imposing itself upon the narrator, it threatens to usurp the narrator-protagonist while continually undermining the narrative view.

Hugh Kenner has shown how Beckett extends and parodies the line of Descartes, who, like the classical novelist, “made the whole of reality depend on the mental processes of a solitary man.” We might go further, to say that Beckett stretches the line to its breaking point—and destroys not only the Cartesian enterprise and the strategy that gave rise to classical physics, perspective painting, and the novel, but the very essence of narrative. It is indeed the achievement of Beckett's anti-narrative to evoke a vital protagonist even though the very sources of fictional characterization—the narrator's voice and narrator's view—are denied. He realizes what would seem to be an impossibility by creating a comic-tragic conflict between his narrator and the narrative voice, or between his protagonist and the limits of his medium—which results in perpetual suffering, perpetual affirmation, perpetual negation, and perpetual motion.