The Literary Frame

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The function of the aesthetic closure which marks off literary space is to establish the particular historical distribution of the "real" and the "symbolic" within which the text operates. The border of the text constitutes and defines its specific fictional status and the kinds of use to which it can be put. This border is therefore in one sense an immaterial system of expectational norms. But I will argue that it is also always materially embodied and should not be conceived simply as a mental projection; in Erving Goffman's words, "A cup can be filled from any realm, but the handle belongs to the realm that qualifies as reality."5

I shall use the term frame to designate this limit, as once material and immaterial, literal and figurative, between adjacent and dissimilar ontological realms. The frame can be anything that acts as a sign of a qualitative difference, a sign of the boundary between a marked and an unmarked space. If this definition seems tautological, it is because since Mauss and, in a different way, since Duchamp we know that the aesthetic space is not an anthropological constant but is constituted by a cultural recognition: the toilet seat hung in a museum is an aesthetic object because the museum sanctions its situation as aesthetic.

Every aesthetic object or process has a frame or frames peculiar to it. Since the frame is not simply a material fact, it can be multiple—the frame of a painting, for example, may be reinforced by the broader frame of the museum—and we could think of the "edge" of the work as a series of concentric waves in which the aesthetic space is enclosed. Theatrical space is defined by the borders of the stage and by the theater situation (the relation of the auditorium to the stage and the convention that the space of the stage is a privileged space of illusion).6 Cinematic space is

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defined by the screen—by the darkness that surrounds the screen, by the projection apparatus, by the theater situation, and by advertisements and billings which have created expectations that this is a movie and that it is a particular kind of movie; but there is also an internal frame, the title sequence, which supplements and narrows down the predefined of the kind of aesthetic space being presented. For a literary text the frame is particularly complex: it is made up, first of all, of the covers of a book or the lines enclosing a poem in a journal (or by a recitation or reading situation), of the title pages, specifying genre expectations and the expectations created by the date, by the author’s name, by dedicationary material, by the title, and perhaps by the publishing house. Texts which have a special legitimacy often display special framing effects such as that of a collected or standard edition, editorial exegesis (which may frame individual pages), an introduction stressing the canonic status of the text, or expensive binding (corresponding to “the salient and richly ornamented enclosures that once... conveyed the idea of the preciousness of the work through its gilded mount”). On a general scale, they are framed by the publishing apparatus and by their position within the literary system. A poem is usually framed, at a more intensive level, by the white margin that marks off line lengths (and this margin can be stressed in particular ways, as in the calligrams of Herbert or Apollinaire or the attisive dispersal of the lines over the page of Un coup de dés). For a narrative, the most intensive frame is that constituted by the beginning and, especially, the end of the narration. JurijLotman has constructed a typology of narrative modes on the basis of a distinction between those texts (e.g., myths, medieval chronicles) which emphasize origins and those, like the novel, which emphasize ends. The beginning of a text is governed by the modelling of causality, whereas the end stress goals, and this would seem to be a valuable way of linking plot structure to the "edge" of the text, the point at which the text passes into, and is closed off from, nonaesthetic space. The beginning of a text, finally, is the point at which the distancing between author and narrator usually occurs; the fourfold frame in which Scott encloses Heart of Midlothian, for example, sets up a succession of redundant narrations in a strangely hesitant development of the narration which will be more fully explored later in the century. This distancing, like that effected by a prologue and epilogue, both reinforces the difference between the realm of narration and the realm of the narrated and eases the reader into the fictive world, sparing him the abruptness of a sudden passage.

The frame holds literary discourse in a kind of suspension such that the framed word is, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s terminology, a “represented word”: the word represents itself, cites itself as a fictive word, a word which cannot be accepted directly. It is in this sense (a sense which does not depend on a positivistic notion of “truth”) that we could adopt I. A. Richards’s concept of literary discourse as pseudostatement.
discourse is fictional to the extent that it handles consciously unrealities, the mythical patterns and codes, which ideology deals in unconsciously. By delineating aesthetic space as an " unreal" space (an "imaginary garden with real toads in it"), the frame both neutralizes direct referentiality and calls attention to the concentration of meaning within this space, the absence of immediate meaning creates an expectation of total meaning. The tendency of bracketed discourse is, then, to a universality of connotation, although particular genres will attempt to play this down as much as possible. And since the frame has the force of law, it is impossible to break the fictionality of a genre through a simple change of intention—for example, through a politicization of its themes. Unless the function of the genre is radically altered, the introduction of political elements will lead, not to an "activation" of the work, but to a formalization and neutralization of the political thematic.

The authority of the frame is equivalent to that of the genre expectations which it establishes, and the internal structure of the text may either confirm this authority or react dynamically to it, or at the extreme it may break it. In all of these cases, structure is only made possible by the presence of the frame, as norm or restriction and as the conventional sign of a closure which separates the limitedness of the aesthetic object from the unlimitedness of its environment. As a limit, its importance lies precisely in this ambiguity of its threshold situation. Meyer Schapiro and Boris Uspensky both assign the frame of a painting to the space of the observer rather than the illusory three-dimensional space of representation, although Schapiro does concede that the frame may also function as a compositional device. Goffman, on the other hand, is fully aware of the ambivalence of its function. He distinguishes two levels of the frame: "One is the innermost layering, wherein dramatic activity can be at play to engross the participant. The other is the outermost laminating, the rise of the frame, as it were, which tells us just what sort of status in the real world the activity has, whatever the complexity of the inner laminations." The frame of course is unitary, neither inside nor outside, and this distinction of levels must be seen as a convenient fiction to express the frame's dual status as a component of structure and a component of situation. For a literary text, it works both as an enclosure of the internal fictional space and as an exclusion of the space of reality against which the work is set; but this operation of exclusion is also an inclusion of the text in this alien space. The text is closed and suspended, but as a constructional element the frame is internal to this closure, and through it the text signifies difference, signifies what it excludes. Within the field of vision are included both the aesthetic space and the edge of aesthetic space. The extra-aesthetic is manifested negatively at this moment of passage, where the text reaches the limit and starts to become context. The energy of the frame thus radiates in two directions simultaneously. On
the one hand, it conducts the "trace" of the excluded nonaesthetic area inwards, so that the delimited space of the text is structured by its limit and becomes significant because of the selection operated by the frame. Thus the compositional structure of a painting—its perspective, the play of vectors, the foregrounding and backgrounding of motifs—is defined by the relation to the vertical and horizontal lines of the "edge," and these are not simply the farthest points to which the painting reaches, but are rather the dynamic moments which constitute the system and the semantic richness of the painting; similarly, the margin around a poem is not an empty support of the printed text but actually breaks the poem off from its continuity with everyday life, suspending the line in arbitrary rhythmic or typographic lengths and isolating the poetic flower as l’absence de tous bouquets; and the end of a narrative shapes the plot, not as a static sequence of events but as a teleologically structured movement which characterizes the time of the text as a significant time in relation to the nonsignificant time against which it is set and from which it differentiates itself. On the other hand, the frame situates the work within nonaesthetic space and thus transforms it into a function. The text is "quoted" by and within its context—the context of a particular kind of speech situation. This situation is variable: a text may be situated in the "normal" space of an aesthetic function indicated by its frame (e.g., a play may be staged as an aesthetic object), or the frame may be ignored and the text "quoted" to nonaesthetic ends (the text of the play may serve as a moral or sociological example, or the play may be staged as a historical curiosity so that it becomes a citation in a larger written or unwritten text). The frame signifies only the norm (the text as an aesthetic object and the normative expectations governing the reception of this object); as a sign of a conventionally guaranteed use of the text it cannot account for deviant functions, i.e., for uses of the text which choose to ignore this norm.

But the mere fact of the convergence of the internal structure and the contextual function of the text at the "edge" of the text indicates that the frame does not simply separate an outside from an inside but mediates between the two. This is not to posit a constant relation between two constant factors but to indicate the way in which changes in the context of reception of a work alter the kinds of expectation governed by the frame and are thus translated into structural shifts in the work; and, conversely, the way in which structural changes (i.e., new interpretations of a work) become institutionalized as changes in the norm signaled by the frame and so gradually alter the situation of the work in its context. In this dialectic, the frame internalizes the "external" function of the text. Attention to the frame, not as physical border but as the conventionally regulated index of a demarcation, should perhaps lead us to think in terms of the mediations between "intrinsic" structure and "extrinsic" function,
but the precondition for this would be a conception of the text as a "play" of forces which is constantly restructured (reinterpreted) as its relation to the frame (to the historically shifting conventions which establish it as an aesthetic object and through which it is "seen") changes. The drama, where the frame is manifested largely as a visible architectural border and where genre expectations can be closely correlated with the material fact (at least in the long term), provides a particularly clear example of this. The change from the projecting Elizabethan stage to the pictorial space of the proscenium arch both corresponds to and reinforces a radically different kind of speech situation in which the whole nature of the scenic illusion is modified. The alteration of the frame, in direct relation to modifications in the literary system (to the distance and the closed rigidity of frame characteristic of a neoclassical system), alters the nature of dramatic reality (the nature of the fictional space), and this is illustrated in exemplary fashion by modifications in the aesthetic object itself (modifications in interpretation of existing plays: for example of Shakespeare through new canons of performance [Tane's Lear] or through editorial restructuring of the texts; and in the production of new texts: e.g., the change between Antony and Cleopatra and All for Love).

As the index of a conventional mode of appropriation of reality, the frame thus corresponds roughly to what George Kubler calls the "self-signal" of a work, its signification of itself as a function with a differential relation to reality. But the difficulty of coping with the concept of frame is the near-invisibility of the frame. We have been taught to naturalize the artificial space of the aesthetic object, to lose ourselves in an inside which is as unlimited as the world, and this means that our "natural" inclination is to see the work in the same way we see the world, without awareness of the edge of our eyes' scan. The white margin around a poem, the beginning and end of reading, the darkness around the stage disappear as we focus on the presence of the text; they become an unapprehended negativity. And in fact the frame is an absence insofar as it is a purely relational moment, the point of crystallization of the normative conventions of reception, like the nonexistent meridian line dividing night from morning, it exists only as a sign of difference, and without a special act of attention it is blotted out by the quasi-substantiality of its content. To "see" the frame is to account for the culturally determined occasion, by which the conventions determining the reception of the work are naturalized, become second nature; and the full social dimension of the literary sign can only be restored through a deliberate reconstruction of these conventions.
NOTES

3. Ibid., pp. 124-25.
4. C.S. Christopher Logan's conception of this most unusual of frames in *New Numbers*. The flyleaf begins:

   This book was written in order to change the world
   published at 12/- (softback), 25/- (hardback) by Cape
   of 30 Bedford Square, London WC1
   (a building formerly occupied by the Ceart Effort)
   in 1969.
   It is generously scattered with dirty words
   particularly on pages 9, 31, 37 and 49
   and was written by Logan
   a sexy young girl living among composed villagers
   ...

9. As usually happens when the technical basis of a genre is altered, or as happens in Bertolt Brecht's *Ehrentuch*, where the frame situation of the spectator is abolished.
10. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, p. 210; note, however, Goffman's caution (*Frame Analysis*, p. 46) that "keying," the modulation to a secondary frame, is a shift not from the unframed to the framed but from the imperceptible primary frame of everyday experience to a perceptible secondary frame.
15. Although it is also true that much of the defamiliarizing effort of modernist art has been directed to a foregrounding of the frame, it stresses the astigmatism of the limit of the work; cf. Degas's *Theatre Box*, where the frame cuts off half of the man's face, or Gaudí's technique of having his characters walk casually in and out of a "badly composed" frame.
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