

# Henry James's Prefatory Discourse as a Site for Innovation, Construction, and Instruction

Henry James'in Önsöz Yazma Geleneği Üzerine

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## Abstract

This study attempts to show the distinct features of Henry James's prefaces as a body of criticism that provides the receiver with new cues to read not only his narratives but also fiction in general. It aims to demonstrate how his prefatory discourse becomes a site for literary criticism and an extra-textual space that allows the author to communicate his "lessons" on new fiction theories rather than an illustrative pre-text that discloses the author's objectives. Through an unconventional use of prefaces, James endeavors to change the reading habits of the past by making the modern reader aware of his rebellious style and innovative theories of fiction and acquainting him/her with a different treatment of the literary text in the critical act. James is known to have adopted new techniques, like stream of consciousness and the scenic method, in his novels and instructs the reader in his prefaces to focus on the character and pay heed to the governing intelligence in the narrative, thereby providing a philosophical account of the relationship between art and the artist, and art and life.

**Keywords:** Henry James, preface, prefatory discourse, nineteenth-century narrative, innovation.

## Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, yalnızca kendi anlatısına değil, genel olarak kurmaca metin okuma konusunda ipuçları sunan Henry James'in önsözlerinin eleştirel bir bütün olarak özelliklerini sergilemektir. James'in önsöz yazma geleneğinin yazın eleştirisi için yer açtığı ve bu sayede yazarın okuyucuya yeni kurgu teorilerine dair "ders" verdiği metin dışı alanlar oluşturduğu gösterilmektedir. Romancının önsözlerini böyle sıra dışı kullanması geleneksel okuma biçimlerini değiştirme amacı gütmektedir. Modern okuyucunun yenilikçi anlatı yollarının farkına varmasını ve metni yorumlama süreci içerisinde metinle farklı bir ilişkiye girmesini istemektedir. James, bilinç akışı ve manzara yöntemleri gibi yenilikçi teknikleri kullanması ile ünlenmiştir. Eserlerinin önsözünde okuyucuyu eserde geçen karakterlere odaklanmasını ve hikayelerini şekillendiren yapıyı dikkatle okumasını ister. Böylece, sanat ve sanatçı, sanat ve yaşam arasındaki ilişkiye dair düşünsel bir aktarım da elde edilmiş olur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Henry James, önsöz, söylem, 19. yy romanı, yenilikçi anlatı.

## Introduction

In its extensive definition, the term "Preface" in Latin means either "spoken before" (prae and fatia) or "made before" (prae and factum). While the former usage of the word could narrow its meaning to that of a prologue, the latter

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strongly implies an introduction written before the body of the book.<sup>1</sup> A preface generally covers the story of how the book came into being and how the story of its creation was developed; this is often followed by acknowledgments to those who helped the author accomplish the work. When the reader revisits a multitude of famous prefaces taken together, s/he can conclude that the conceptualization of “preface” varies from one use to another, depending on the writer’s objective. The classical meaning of prefaces as found in books’ opening pages can be traced back in canonical works, essentially to direct readers to the intended meaning. The volume entitled *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books: The Five Foot Shelf of Classics*, which includes prefaces ranging from William Caxton to Walt Whitman, is extremely helpful in the attempt to comprehend the motive behind each preface. Caxton (1422-1492), for instance, wrote the prologues and epilogues to his translations, perhaps to justify some imperfections in his performance. This series comprises also Sir Walter Raleigh’s preface to *The History of the World* (1614) as well as the inspiring prefatory statements of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and the preface to the great dictionary by Dr. Johnson (1709-1784). These frontal texts, though detached from the main works, fit into the determined function of the preface and preserve its objective as a personal statement composed by the author to establish an intimate contact with the reader and to impart his/her intentions before the commencement of the act of reading. The present study lays its focus on one of the most unconventional uses of prefaces through the exploration of the prefatory discourse of the Anglo-American author Henry James (1843-1916). James’s famous prefaces do not conform to the classical definition of the term, but rather follow their own self-constructed rules and structure. In fact, his prefaces do not only describe the conditions in which the story was composed, but, more amazingly, provide a body of criticism to his own work, a criticism that teaches the reader how to be a new brand of critic who copes with the literary novelties and abandons the traditional superficial act of reading. The objective of the present study then is to show an untraditional use of the preface discourse that appeared more penetratingly with James in the context of his philosophy of innovation and desire to unchain his works from the dictated standards of writing. By performing a critical reading of James’s innovative narrative techniques as they were introduced in his prefaces and used in his fiction, the paper aims to demonstrate how the preface becomes a space to explicate the writer’s philosophy and new theories and direct the reader’s attention to new angles in the art of fiction.

Like William Wordsworth’s famous preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* (1800), which appeared as a radical discourse that broke with Neoclassicism and introduced a new type of poetry, James’s prefaces presented groundbreaking fiction theories that revolutionized the narrative tradition of his time. If Wordsworth provided the Romantic Manifesto on poetry and society in his preface, James expounded

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<sup>1</sup> See *User Contributed Dictionary*.

his theories of psychological realism in his prefaces and introduced the technique of the stream-of-consciousness in the fiction genre. He used them to look back over his established body of fiction that had already found its way onto the nineteenth-century reader. James's prefaces are rather post-faces that occurred as ensuing self-assessing texts, "endeavoring to introduce each text to new readers and to situate it within the context of his literary career" (Rundle para. 1). In this context, R.P. Blackmur claims that with James, "Criticism has never been more ambitious, nor more useful. There has never been a body of work so eminently suited to criticism as the fiction of Henry James, and there has certainly never been an author who saw the need and had the ability to criticize specifically and at length his own work" (vii). The author loses his authorship as the creator of his work and seizes an opportunity to manifest himself to the reader to grant him new tools of access to the modern text and capture for him an upper sight of the architecture of the book. In the preface to *The Golden Bowl* (1904), James announces that he is transcending the narrative tradition and that he is writing a new form of art:

I have already betrayed, as an accepted habit, and even to extravagance commented on, my preference for dealing with my subject-matter, for "seeing my story," through the opportunity and the sensibility of some more or less detached, some not strictly involved, though thoroughly interested and intelligent, witness or reporter, some person who contributes to the case mainly a certain amount of criticism and interpretation of it. (*The Art of the Novel* 337)

In this new mode of prefaces, the author puts on the garment of the critic; a critic of his own work while taking distance from himself as the author. James's prefaces are not mere introductions to the works or words of acknowledgements. They turn into territories for the author-critic to declare his challenge to the long-established literary traditions, advance his theories of fiction writing, enlighten the modern reader in his act of reading, and show him how to set himself free from the passive habits of reading popular literature. James took a step back from his novels and composed prefaces to them altogether for two main reasons: first, to construct his fictional theories, and second to instruct and inform the modern reader.

In a challenging rigorous critical act, James did not follow the conventions of the use of the preface to literary works either in its spatiotemporal composition or in its subject matter. In a seminal article entitled "Defining Frames: The Prefaces of Henry James and Joseph Conrad," Vivienne Rundle offers a comparative study between James and Joseph Conrad as writers who delivered their prefatory texts in the form of retrospective post-faces. What seems to be shared between the two authors is the fact that "[s]ince each set of prefaces was written well after the initial publication of the accompanying novels, these texts provide invaluable insight into the nature of each writer's relation to his readership" (Rundle para. 1). Nevertheless, Rundle remarks that James appeared more concerned with the preservation of the authority of authorship than Conrad, who seemed more permissive with his readers: "While James's prefaces strive

to shore up narrative authority, Conrad's 'Author's Notes' disperse authorial power by inviting the reader's interpretation, explicitly questioning the author's importance, obscuring the historical referents of narrative, and including alternative versions of a story within the preface" (Rundle para. 7). Rundle's study shows the distinct binding character of the Jamesian prefaces as framing strategies that maintain the authority of the author. The consideration of his prefaces as frames to his works is not only advanced by Rundle but more profoundly analyzed by John H. Pearson in his book *The Prefaces of Henry James: Framing the Modern Reader* as a rare comprehensive study of these prefaces that discloses James's strategy to create an ideal reader through them. Pearson suggests that James's ultimate objective is to make the reader aware of his art and adept in the critical performance. Even with the leading introduction of Blackmur to James's critical prefaces and the insightful works of Pearson and Rundle, James's prefaces have remained an infrequently trodden area and an overlooked zone in the literature despite the crucial role of his prefaces in acquainting the modern reader with the author's new theories and teaching him to question the conventional. Their unconventionality, which goes hand in hand with James's unconventional style of writing, has not been deeply investigated compared to their use as a framing strategy. That is why the present paper seeks to present James's prefaces not only as theoretical frames but also as a mirror of his rebelliousness and non-conformity. It seeks to fathom the motives behind James's eccentric employment of prefaces while placing them in the context of his seditious temperament and tendency to innovation.

### **A Brief Outline of the Reading Strategies**

In the novel genre particularly, the preface writing tradition can be said to be a marked part of the narrative that intended to address the reader directly, starting with Cervantes' publication of *Don Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Cervantes's opening phrase "idle reader" shocked but awakened the reader who would immediately feel close to the author as a person. This closeness increasingly grew when the writer informed his receivers that his story looked real despite its fictional character and that he refused to garnish it. He announced that his preface would be void of the common decorum as the sonnets and epigrams that had been traditionally delivered at the beginning of books. This rebellious note led to the change of the usual preface from an ornamental introductory part to an opportunity to form an intimate bond with the intended reader. When Cervantes reported his hesitations of how to proceed with the preface and declared that it was plain and unadorned, he established an unpretentious friendship with his readers who would love and believe his tale. The tradition extended to the earlier novels in British literature with the publications of Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne, for instance. Fielding's preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742) indicates the maintenance of this tradition of preface writing, albeit in a more enlightening pattern. He intended to correct the reader's perception of romance and instructed him about the

components of the comic romance and its difference from the other genres in a scholarly exposition of the classical theories of genres. Likewise, Sterne's delayed and misplaced preface which appeared in the third volume of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759) informed of his awareness of the significance of his preface for the reception of his jumbled and unconventional biographical chapters and of the remaining volumes. It also redeemed the fragmentation of the narrative's digressions and progression, and brought him into contact with his most intellectual readers while setting his heroes offstage. Since the dawn of the modern era, the established tradition of preface writing has served as a direct channel between the real author and his receiver either to touch on the latter's emotions or give him lessons about the English classics and philosophical or religious accounts.

In the Anglo-American protestant culture of the seventeenth century, authors commonly presented a direct address to their targeted readers in inaugural written statements. The writer's objective was to instruct the reader on the ways of reading the text that would follow, especially if the text is of a religious nature. It was an authorial strategy mainly used to help the ideal reader understand the described process of redemption. The emergence of the English romance in the second half of the seventeenth century, however, changed the reading habits from "solemn" ways of reading to a "nonchalant" performance of reading. In the nineteenth century, as a result of the invasion of the industrial revolution and the change of the social and economic systems, there were varied forms of literature that satisfied more secular tastes by addressing a new market of readers that included women and children. Genre fiction or popular fiction, nonfiction books like magazines and cookery books, were abundantly consumed, which created a superficial and an unreflective type of reading. Following that change in the mode of reading, from the "devotional" mode of the seventeenth-century Protestants to the nineteenth-century light mode, certain novels reacted against that popular taste and asked for a more serious engagement with literary texts.

James was exceptional in his ways of instructing the reader whereby he uses his prefaces to combat that invasive trend of superficial reading activities. He calls for attention, understanding and explanation after facts. In the preface to *The Ambassadors* (1903), for example, James criticizes the passive follow-up of events in the classical reading tradition and aspires to a modern reading habit that cares for the character's central consciousness:

for my first care, I had thus inevitably to set him up a confidant or two, to wave away with energy the custom of the seated mass of explanation after the fact, the inserted block of merely referential narrative, which flourishes so, to the shame of the modern impatience, on the serried page of Balzac, but which seems simply to appal our actual, our general weaker, digestion. "Harking back to make up" took at any rate more THE ART OF THE NOVEL doing, as the phrase is, not only than the reader of today demands, but than he will tolerate at any price any call upon him either to understand or remotely to measure; and for the beauty of the

thing when done the current editorial mind in particular appears wholly without sense. (*The Art of the Novel* 422)

In the nineteenth century, novels were produced in monthly parts, with advertisements at either end to intensify their consumption. The writers that published their novels in weekly or monthly segments in magazines and periodicals ended each episode on a cliff-hanger to arouse the suspense and curiosity of the reader about the next episode. Interested in the course of events more than anything else, some readers even corresponded with authors to suggest endings for novels: Dickens, for instance, changed the original gloomy end for Walter Gay, in *Dombey and Son* (1848) to a happy one because of the readers' response. Because of this monthly serialization, James could not write a preface to each novel. After the production of a huge number of novels and short stories, James revisited his works, revised them, re-read them, re-wrote them and shared with his readers his revisions. Having been aware of the superficiality of the act of reading in the nineteenth century, James directed his prefaces to his audience in the hope of creating a model of the modern reader who would no longer be focused on the plot and the events to come in the serial story or magazine episodes. He hankered for a levelheaded and shrewd reader who would pay heed to the techniques of fiction writing, the character and his psychology, his flow of ideas, and his central consciousness. Blackmur succinctly defines the objectives of the Jamesian prefatory scripts, saying: "One burden of the Prefaces was to prove how much the reader would see if only he paid attention and how much he missed by following the usual stupid routine of skipping and halting and letting slide. Without attention, without intense appreciation an art of the intelligent life was impossible and without intelligence, for James, art was nothing" (xvii).

## **Constructing New Fiction Theories**

### ***The Stream-of-Consciousness Technique***

The theories and innovative ideas of James that had already been implemented in his narratives were elucidated in his prefaces. The purpose of these prefaces was to enlighten the reader, teach him these innovations and new techniques, call him to detach himself from the passive habits of the reading practice, lose his concern for the plot and abandon his curiosity about what would happen in the following episode. James's instructions were gathered in a collection of prefaces that appeared in the form of critical essays, known as the New York Edition in which he selected and revised his novels and tales and made extensive revisions of his early works; he added eighteen prefaces that provide what many readers believe to be the best commentary on his fiction. The title of the collection is *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*; originally written for the 1909 multi-volume New York Edition of Henry James's fiction, first appeared in book form in 1934 with an introduction by the critic R. P. Blackmur. Those texts are prefaces that James wrote for a reprint of his novels. Through his prefatory

statements, James attempted to construct an ideal reader that would pay attention to his artistic and modern narrative performance. In the eighteen prefaces, he used strategies to prepare the reader for the prefaced texts. He sought to create an up-to-date reader, one who would learn to appreciate and discriminate his literary art. His prefaces were used as a framing strategy to his tales whereby he endeavored to instruct the reader in his aesthetic of fiction. The readings of *The Awkward Age* (1899), *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Aspern Papers* (1888), and *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) through the prefaces proffered more theoretical implications than the serial reading as scattered bite-sized bits of novels.

James gave rise to the stream-of-consciousness novel as a genre<sup>2</sup> that takes as its subject the procession of ideas that happens in the mind of one or more of its characters. It has contributed to the development of the psychological novel. James created what he coined a “central consciousness” or a governing intelligence, a character whose flow of thoughts and emotions is explored throughout the novel. This new narrative method intended to shift the reader’s mind from the course of action to the inner mind of the character, from the inclination to know about the events to the eagerness to explore the human consciousness. Lengthy passages are devoted to the description of the mental scenes that take place in the interior architecture of the character’s mind, such as in the famous fireside scene in James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* wherein Isabel must consider her choices and affront her destiny. The techniques used in the stream-of-consciousness novel create the illusion that the narrator had been overhearing the flood of sensations, nonverbal thoughts within a character’s mind before he could organize them in well-ordered rational verbal sequences or transform them into decisive choices and actions. Therefore, the novelist has to use a distinct style that goes hand in hand with the unstructured states of mind while dispensing with grammar, coherent sentences and orderly structures. It is a break with the main canon of literary works as narratives of logic with an excess of order and accumulation of events; as stories with beginnings, middles and closed endings.

The reader takes cognizance of that central consciousness technique through James’s prefaces which turn into a reference book that covers the tools of fiction writing or “a sort of comprehensive manual or vademecum for aspirants in our arduous profession” (Blackmur viii). James considers the technical side of an artistic work more important than the story itself. The stylistic devices of a work reflect the relationship between art and life and how art can transmit reality with an artistic lens. He repudiates the conventional telling of the story and prefers instead a detached narrator who would show the characters reflecting, talking, reacting, taking decisions. Furthermore, he extemporaneously lets his character think and act in accordance with the situation without a preparation

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<sup>2</sup> The term “stream-of-consciousness” was first used by the philosopher and psychologist William James, Henry’s brother, the founder of pragmatism. He did not use it to describe an imaginative writing but the workings of the mind; it is the attempt to render the thoughts as they naturally fall upon the mind, flowing, free, and chaotic as they are.

of a preset scenario and insists on the character's responsibility for this choice and action. In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James describes his novel as a "conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny" (*The Art of the Novel* 48). James asks the reader to follow the consciousness of Isabel Archer, the spirited young American lady who assumes the outcomes of her choice of a devious husband who succeeds in deceiving her, hunting her fortune, and dragging her to betray her ideals. These new techniques are methodically expounded in his prefaces; in the preface to *The Ambassadors*, for example, James reserves the last part to talk about the technical exposition of the novel whereby the single consciousness of the hero and the scenic method are highlighted.

### ***The Scenic Method***

James's prefatory discourse informs the reader about the technical overlap between fiction and drama in the construction of the major themes of his work. In the preface to *The Ambassadors*, James describes his novels as built up around the scenic method:

The material of "The Ambassadors," conforming in this respect exactly to that of "The Wings of the Dove," published just before it, is taken absolutely for the stuff of drama; so that, availing myself of the opportunity given me by this edition for some prefatory remarks on the latter work, I had mainly to make on its behalf the point of its scenic consistency. (*The Art of the Novel* 322)

James arouses the attention of the reader to the dramatization of the action and to the focus on the method of the scene alternation with its reliance on monologues and exchange of speeches between its characters. A declaration of the adoption of the "scenic law" is made obvious in the preface to *What Maisie Knew*:

If I speak, as just above, of the ACTION embodied, each time, in these so "quiet" recitals, it is under renewed recognition of the inveterate instinct with which they keep conforming to the "scenic" law. They demean themselves for all the world--they quite insist on it, that is, whenever they have a chance--as little constituted dramas, little exhibitions founded on the logic of the "scene," the unit of the scene, the general scenic consistency, and knowing little more than that. To read them over has been to find them on this ground never at fault. The process repeats and renews itself, moving in the light it has once for all adopted. (*The Art of the Novel* 157)

The Dramatic Scene as a tool of James's indirect approach is the major device employed by the author in his fiction and explained in his prefaces. These new techniques are used to restrict the attention of the reader, stimulate his thought and inculcate self-reliance in him. James's Indirect Approach is defined by Blackmur as follows:



James never put his reader in direct contact with his subjects; he believed it was impossible to do so, because his subject really was not what happened but what someone felt about what happened, and this could be directly known only through an intermediate intelligence. The Dramatic Scene was the principal device James used to objectify the Indirect Approach and give it self-limiting form. Depending on the degree of limitation necessary to make the material objective and visible all round, his use of the Scene resembled that in the stage-play... But the novel was not a play however dramatic it might be, and among the distinctions between the two forms was the possibility, which belonged to the novel alone, of setting up a fine central intelligence: “no other art could dramatise the individual at his finest”. (xvii)

That technique of the dramatic scene that is introduced in the art of fiction by James in order to focus on the single consciousness of the hero is the result of James’s temptation by drama and his experience with writing plays. He published his first play *Pyramus and Thisbe* in 1869. The other two experiments of his twenties, *Still Waters* (1871) and *A Change of Heart* (1872), failed in realistic representation as well as in dramatic subtlety. Both plays have “unnatural soliloquies and reflexive sides” (Murphy 58). It was not until ten years after these early efforts that James returned to the drama. His 1882 dramatization of *Daisy Miller* (1878) was his first full-lengthy play which was written for the American theater while *The American* (1890) was dramatized for the British theatre. These two works “are the first examples of James’s mixture of comedy with the French drama Bourgeois, the serious play about middle-class people” (Murphy 58). During the nineties, he wrote four plays that were intended for production. He published them into two volumes, *Theatricals: Two Comedies* (1894) and *Theatricals: Second Series* (1895). After writing *The High Bid* (1907) and some of his other late plays, James extended his tendency to direct stage business “to the point of maintaining tight control of the portrayal of his characters, right down to the tones of their speeches” (Murphy 65). After he failed artistically and publicly, especially in his early dramatic experiment, he returned to fiction. He kept revisiting drama in-between his fictional works during his literary career although he had already reached reconciliation between the two genres through the creation of the dramatic novel. The dramatic principle controls the majority of James’s works whether in structure, form, themes or characters.

Likewise, James’s body of critical essays on drama affected his fictional work by inciting the inclusion of the dramatic form in his novels which often function as comedies or tragedies. James’s introduction of the “dramatic scene” in the novel as related to the emotional development of the character is, according to Stephen Spender, a revolution with which “the novel has, of course, in the presentations of passions, never broken quite away from the tradition of the theater . . . in the description, we see the alignment of characters; in the scenes we witness the release of emotions, the expression of passion” (104). The theatre allowed James to explore “the self as performance, to give himself up to what he called ‘different experiences of consciousness’” (Wilson 41). In *The*

*Bostonians* (1886), many big scenes mark the development of the action, climaxing in the big theatrical scene of the conclusion, set up in a theatre while arousing the same theatrical emotional effect. In *Henry James and the Experimental Novel*, Sergio Perosa describes these scenes as “sensational, melodramatic scenes –coups de théâtre –rather than dramatic scenes” (26). *The Tragic Muse* (1890) similarly contains intense and compressed scenes, articulating sequences and showing actions through dialogues. James says about it: “the whole thing has visibly, from the first, to get itself done in dramatic, or at least in scenic conditions” (*The Art of the Novel* 89-90). He uses the dramatic method within the framework of the pictorial style; in *The Literature of the American People*, Clarence Gohdes describes the work as “a series of rich prose pictures of scenes” (qtd. in Perosa 21). In the novels of the following decade, the narrative method would rely more and more on dramatic presentations of little actions and minor events. While preserving the dramatic style, James relies on the march of action through the application of the limited point of view and scenic form, aiming at “synthetic compression” (Perosa 48). *The Awkward Age*, for instance, is one of his avant-garde novel of that period; it is theatrically structured around dialogues and trialogues. It is modeled upon the play script where each of the “acts” is divided into numbered units or “scenes” which are evenly distributed among the ten-character-named books of the novel. James is so tempted by drama that he loses the genre motif in his writings and establishes what he calls a “contact with the DRAMA, with the divine little difficult, artistic, ingenious, architectural FORM that makes old pulses throb and old tears rise again” (Carlson 411).

Having instilled the dramatic techniques into the fiction genre, James moved to the composition of plays as a self-sufficient genre. After James's first period extending from 1865 to 1882 in which he discovered his cosmopolitan subject and developed his international theme, he shifted to realistic political themes concretized in his two long novels: *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) and ended this second phase with the world of art tackled in *The Tragic Muse*. Susan Carlson classifies James's dramas into three clearly-defined periods, starting from *Pyramus and Thisbe* (1869) to his dramatic years when he wrote *The American* (1890) and *Guy Donville* (1893), for example, and closing with his later plays like *The Saloon* (1908), *The Other House* (1908). Some plays are theatrical adaptations of his own fiction like *Daisy Miller*, *The American*. Others like *The Other House*, the scenario for the play preceded. Hence, the impact of drama is strong on James's fiction which loses its connection with the deep-rooted standards of literature and breaks free from the main literary canon. These innovations and transcendence of the genre boundaries are channeled to the reader's mind through the prefaces.

In addition to the elucidation of the stream-of-consciousness technique, the indirect approach and the scenic method in James's prefaces, there is a reference to other elements of fiction analysis like the plot, setting, characterization, and themes. Some Prefaces are more about the technical aspect, like those of *The*

*Wings of the Dove* and *The Awkward Age*; however, others deal with the thematic complexities of the story, such as *What Maisie Knew* and *The Ambassadors*. In the preface to *The Ambassadors*, the reader gets informed about the setting and is led to think about the protagonist and the major theme of the novel all the same: James says that “It had been a frank proposition, the whole bunch of data, installed on my premises like a monotony of fine weather,” (*The Art of the Novel* 310) and adds, “since most immediately to the point was the question of that supplement of situation logically involved in our gentleman’s impulse to deliver himself in the Paris garden on the Sunday afternoon” (*The Art of the Novel* 311). On the creation of his hero, he declares: “I rejoiced in the promise of a hero so mature, who would give me thereby the more to bite into- since it’s only into thickened motive and accumulated character, I think, that the painter of life bites more than a little” (*The Art of the Novel* 310). By underlining the hero’s maturity, James refers to the character’s power of imagination and acknowledges that he is doing a “man of imagination” (*The Art of the Novel* 310). The author deals with the story of Strether in the preface, providing the reader with personal information about the protagonist like his identity, original country, and the reason behind his visit to Paris. In the same textual space, he similarly accounts for his characters and leads the reader in thinking about the serene difference between Madame de Vionnet and Chad Newsome. In fact, James is building a whole theory of criticism that mainly revolves around the character, a theory that trains the modern reader on making the plot, the setting and the theme at the service of the character: his consciousness, imagination, and maturity.

## **Instructing the Modern Reader**

### ***Calling for the Attention to the Central Intelligence***

James deems his prefaces useful to the acquaintance of the modern reader with the real meaning of criticism that stems from an appreciation to the text. He wrote to W. D. Howells that his prefaces “are, in general, a sort of plea for Criticism, for Discrimination, for Appreciation on other than infantile lines as against the so almost universal Anglo-Saxon absence of these things” (Blackmur viii). He insists on the equation between criticism and appreciation because once appreciated, the artistic work will be the possession of the reader. In the preface to *What Maisie Knew*, James puts: “To criticize is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in fine a relation with the criticised thing and make it one’s own” (*The Art of the Novel* 155). That plea for the rewriting of the text by the reader is, in fact, an anticipation of Roland Barthes’s postmodernist critical theory of the Death of the author and the birth of the reader in the act of reading. The reader, according to James, should possess the text; this process of appropriation is a direct result of the feeling of appreciation. In his prefaces, James asks for attention and appreciation; R.P. Blackmur affirms that: “The one faculty James felt that the artist may require of his audience is that of close attention or deliberate appreciation; for it is by this faculty alone that the audience participates in the work of art” (xvii).

According to James, the reader should not approach a work of art with fear and anxiety; they should rather be unprejudiced and think about it with a critical mind, dwelling within its curves, assimilating its themes, and discerning the character's intelligent consciousness. There is an appeal for the intellectual reappropriation of the text instead of its precocious rejection. Blackmur avers that: "The reader had better make sure he knows what it is before he rejects it. The act of rejection will deprive him of all knowledge of it. And this precept applies even more firmly to the criticisms he made of his work to the effort he made to reappropriate it intellectually than to the direct apprehension of the work itself" (xiii). James focuses on the characters' intelligence regardless of their age, sex and social position. He puts both Maisie the child in *What Maisie Knew* and Strether Lambert the adult in *The Ambassadors*, for instance, on equal footing by showing how Maisie is intelligent enough in her entourage to govern situations and influence the other characters up to her understanding, and makes Strether also excessively sensible to represent the human consciousness at its fullest. In the preface to *What Maise Knew*, James asserts:

This precious particle was the full ironic truth the most interesting item to be read into the child's situation. For satisfaction of the mind, in other words, the small expanding consciousness would have to be saved, have to become presentable as a register of impressions; and saved by the experience of certain advantages, by some enjoyed profit and some achieved confidence, rather than coarsened, blurred, sterilised, by ignorance and pain. (*The Art of the Novel* 142)

The prefaces of James arouse awareness of the governing intelligence of the characters and calls for the attention of the reader to that intelligence as the character's central consciousness. "Without attention, without intense appreciation," claims Blackmur, an art of the intelligent life was impossible and without intelligence, for James, art was nothing" (xvii). The author crafts intelligent protagonists in his narratives in order to make them spontaneously sensible to their surroundings and to help them give meaning to their lives. He sets up and pleads for a fine central intelligence. The Jamesian text seems difficult to grasp and his style is so elaborate that an overage reader may not be able to discern the character's intelligence in coping with situations in his disorderly surrounding. The protagonists of James are created sufficiently quick-witted to predict the future and deal with the unknown. The reader is appealed in his prefaces to pay attention to the character's workings of the mind in order to reveal the human fine central consciousness in the novel. The stream-of-consciousness technique is a gadget that allows the reader to dig deep in the human mind and apprehend the verve that instigates the character's comportment. That is why the reader is invited to focus on the character rather than the plot and on the human intelligent consciousness in lieu of the progress of events and closures in his narratives. As a consolidation of that idea, James writes in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*:

I see that it must have consisted not at all in any conceit of a “plot,” nefarious name, in any flash, upon the fancy, of a set of relations, or in any one of those situations that, by a logic of their own, immediately fall, for the fabulist, into movement, into a march or a rush, a patter of quick steps; but altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman. (*The Art of the Novel* 42)

### ***Explaining the Relationship between Art and Life***

In his prefatory discourse, James draws the attention of the reader to the major theme treated in his fiction, which is, in fact, the relationship between art and life. Art is, in James’s view, a domain full of thought and intellectual depth since it represents the intricacies of life. He always claims that the artist is “in a perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken” (*The Art of the Novel* 5). James displays an obsession with the theme of the “conflict between art and ‘the world’” (*The Art of the Novel* 79) and believes that the endurance of the artist dwells in his personal conviction of his art and recognition of his talent irrespective of the sterile and static old conventions. As an artist, he records reality and declares in his prefaces that his plots, settings, and characters are derived from real places, stories, and persons. James admits that “the novelist must write from his experience, that his ‘characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life’” (“The Art of Fiction” 4). In the essay “The Art of Fiction” produced in 1902, he calls for general and representative characters as archetypes derived from real life. He compares the genre of the novel to a painting, stating that “as the picture is reality, so the novel is history” (“The Art of Fiction” 2). Perosa echoes James’s opinion about the novelist who has “the right and indeed the duty to deal openly with every aspect of life, even those regarded as taboo in the Victorian age” (15).

James assembles his theories in the body of his prefaces after applying them to his novels where he actually relies on experiment and deals with taboo subjects like politics, sexuality, homosexuality and feminist issues. He attempts to write about anarchist politics in London with an analysis of its institutions of law and auxiliaries. Hence, *The Princess Casamassima*, for example, is “a novel about the mysteries of London, about spies and secret societies, and it is also a novel about spectatorship, about seeing and being seen” (Seltzer 96). Political satire is also present in *The Tragic Muse* through the character of the unmotivated politician and reluctant parliamentarian Nick Dormer. James based his novels on the “reality effect” of verisimilitude to find himself implicated in feminist issues by which he interconnected political and social recordings. He wrote novels that contain elements of deception, betrayal, exploitation and victimization. In his notebooks, he describes *The Bostonians* as “a tale very characteristic of our conditions . . . the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf” (*The Notebooks of Henry James*, 47).

The Jamesian prefatory discourse endeavors to bring to the reader’s mind that the narratives are but the byproduct of the artist’s imagination despite their historical aspect. In the preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, he avers: “It is a

fact that, as I look back, the attentive exploration of London, the assault directly made by the great city upon an imagination quick to react, fully explains a large part of it" (59). He wishes to convey to his readers the idea that the artist represents life within the limits of his imagination, and that the story is what the intelligence feels about reality. While talking about romanticism and reality, Blackmur counts eight pages in James's prefaces on which he attempts to answer the question why one picture of life is called romantic and the other real. Blackmur carries on, saying that the answer comes in the preface to *The American* when James affirms that "The experience here represented [in his novel *The American*] is the disconnected and uncontrolled experience uncontrolled by our general sense of 'the way things happen' which romance alone more or less successfully palms off on us." (*The Art of the Novel* 33). So the realism of the picture presented in a work of art depends on the artist's consciousness, intelligence and imagination. This very assumption shakes the traditional meaning of realism and invites the reader to reflect on fiction as personalized bits of life dependent on the author's sensibility.

The Jamesian prefaces do not only instruct, explore the artist's center of consciousness, hanker for the focus on the character's workings of the mind, but also draw the readers' attention to the amusing side of these characters. For James, the art of fiction is at the same time thoughtful and pleasurable, serious and delightful. It is true that art gives the reader a vivid account of reality but it also distracts. Not to cause the abrupt rupture with the previous entertaining spirit of the reading activity, James believes in the necessity of amusement. Blackmur claims that "To be amusing, to be interesting; without that nothing of his subject could possibly transpire in the reader's mind. In some of his [James's] books half the use of certain characters was to amuse the reader" (xvii). Blackmur gives the example of the character of Henrietta Stackpole in *The Portrait of a Lady* who serves mainly to capture the reader's thought because of her excessive liberation and unconventional character. It would be added that in *The Bostonians*, Mrs Luna, the jealous spinster, Henry Burrage, the indulgent son, Mr Pardon, the banausic journalist, Mr Tarrant, and the mesmerist healer are ridiculous figures, intended for fun though James deeply implies a rejection of their attitudes. Some characters are designed for distraction so that the reader is reenergized once he feels the boredom of satire, the bitterness of reality and the solemnity of the dramatic style.

## Conclusion

James opens a space through his prefaces wherein he describes the conditions of the writing of his works of art, describes real places, delivers some autobiographical details, explains his new fiction theories, endeavors to change the reader's mentality, conveys his own vision about art and the artist, and art and life, presents his themes and also entertains. The preface is a whole story; according to Blackmur, "a Preface is the story of a story, or in those volumes

which collect a group of shorter tales the story of a group of stories cognate in theme or treatment” (xi). In his prefaces, James narrates the conditions of his novels’ conception while touching on biographical and historical details, and struggles to show that his narrative methods carry an insightful meaning in themselves other than the focus on the plot and the ending; their ultimate goal is to enhance the knowledge of the reader. The latter is taught new techniques in the art of fiction and called to ponder over a different mode of writing that lets the receiver cut loose from the classical literary traditions and desert his past passive and superficial reading habits. James’s prefaces are also a synthetic reading in his own narratives, a space to compare the conditions of writing, the events and the characters of his various works, an opportunity to draw on their similarities and differences, and an arena to exhibit his attitude towards the art of fiction.

To conclude, one can say that the collected Jamesian prefaces function as a powerful critical discourse that deviates from the conventional use of the preface. Away from the commercial purposes, James does not compose his prefaces to lure and attract the consumer into buying his tales but rather to inform and instruct him, stuff him with the theories of fiction and furnish his mind with imagination and intelligence, and make him attentive to the central consciousness of the character. He builds his philosophy on the importance of the human intelligence that enables people to understand how things happen around them and not what really happens. It is a rebellious critical thought strikingly brought through his prefaces in which he shares with his readers the revision of his own texts. The preface, for James, becomes a framing strategy in educating the modern reader unto an active and deep rewriting of the text, and a space where he would introduce his theories of the aesthetics of fiction.

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