chapter ten

Flight: Some Conclusions

"If things become unbearable go somewhere else."

—Edward T. Bowden,
*The Dungeon of the Heart*
As I hope I have shown, the current of escape that runs through the modern American novel runs broad and deep. Generally, the escapes are from societies and their specific evils—war, injustice, the encroachments on the individual sensibility. Involved also is the flight from an earlier, innocent self, a discovery of a new reality (or simply reality, as opposed to pristine innocence). Concomitantly, it also involves a growing (and conscious) rejection of former values, and finally a denial of one’s former life. As corollary, these flights may also involve a flight toward maturity, toward a new life, toward a search for a new identity (or perhaps for an earlier identity).

In view of these criteria, how effective, then, have the escapes been? Can we draw some tentative conclusions from our findings? Edward T. Bowden makes one observation about the impulse to escape that makes its own valid point. Bowden here uses George Willard as his example, but the example may be taken as a paradigm for all escapers in the modern American novel:

If things become unbearable, go somewhere else. George [Willard] is escaping from Winesburg, but one suspects that the escape is for him only a temporary one. Death would seem the only really complete escape from life, but death is too final an answer.¹

Of course "death is too final an answer"! It eliminates any possibility of rebirth—on this plane. From this kind of “out” nothing can obviously be gained—either for the escaper or for the literature that celebrates him. The concomitant of escape implies that the escaper has learned something from the experience—if only negatively.

All of the escapers discussed in the preceding pages seem to display a common element: they are either individuals who have had—so they thought—strong beliefs that they are no
longer able to believe in, or they are impulsively reacting to what was, in the hope of finding something better. These run the gamut from Huck Finn, with his initial trust in the shibboleths and customs of a hypocritical society, to Preacher Casy and his exchange of an earlier, simpler belief for a more socially conscious vision. Only Bigger Thomas’s escape is, in its long range sense, an act of desperation rather than hope.

About half of the escapers we have discussed move west: Huck Finn (to the Territory), Theron Ware (to Seattle), George Willard (to “the city”—presumably Chicago), and the Joads (to California). Their escapes, unlike those of Frederick Henry, John Andrews, Jake Blount, and Bigger Thomas, have an element of hope in them, no matter how tenuous that hope may be. Out West, they seem to feel, they will find what they thought to be lacking where they came from.

But hopeful or not, the escapes are more than just escapes; where successful, or even, ambiguously, semisuccessful, they suggest—symbolically for the most part—a form of rebirth. Three of these are achieved by the conventionally ritualistic (i.e., symbolic) immersion in water: Huck into the Mississippi; Lieutenant Henry into the Tagliamento; and John Andrews into the Seine. Jake Blount’s escape may be likened to the motions of a karmic wheel (like the flying jinny he operates) whose turnings lead from one life into another, though not necessarily a better, one. Bigger Thomas’s escape is perhaps the most hopeless of the lot, restricted, as it is, to the prison (the ghetto labyrinth) of his larger society. Bigger’s escape, we know, is doomed from the start. We can afford greater optimism toward the efforts of Bigger’s companions in the fraternity of flight in the American novel.

Tom Joad is reborn, but Steinbeck deliberately seems to have kept his destination—though not his destiny—ambiguous (since Tom intends to blend in with the “social soul”). Of all
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the escapers, Tom has tied his goal to the larger cause of that "soul," to the destiny of "the people," with whom he finally identifies, and with whom he aims to merge. His escape is thus more explicitly spiritual than geographical, though of course virtually all of the escapers discussed in this study need to embark on a geographical journey in order to reach some sort of spiritual destination.

Huck lights out into the Territory. But even if his escape is not a permanent one, it does represent—perhaps even coincides with—the escapes of those who moved West when that movement was beginning to get under way. Jake Blount's escape, on the other hand, is a weakening of the force that inspired the Westward Movement in the first place. His escape is a limited one—a wandering from one southern town to another. Although Huck will return to the society he has left behind, his escape, limited as it is, does at least suggest new beginnings. When he returns to that society he will not be the boy who fled it; psychologically he will have entered manhood. Blount's escape, on the other hand, suggests no substantive growth. Indeed, his escapes have led from one dead-end town to another: they represent a spiritual cul-de-sac; he seems to have learned nothing from his traumatic experiences.

Huck's escape is perhaps the most comprehensive; for it virtually rejects every aspect of a society that thrives on violence, hypocrisy (manifest in its inflated rhetoric), and the degradation of black people. Indeed, the more orotund the rhetoric, the less one can trust what it attempts to defend—the slave society. And Huck comes by this knowledge painfully—as all who mistake rhetoric for reality must.

According to Lauriat Lane, the escapes of Huck and Jim are futile since their significance lies not so much in their achievement—or more to the point, lack of it—but in what each of the escapers has learned from the experience. Yet if
the escapers have indeed gained something from the experience, then the gains have surely outweighed the futility of their escapes or their attempts. In truth, Huck's escape is open-ended. It is left (deliberately?) ambiguous and unresolved. As R. P. Adams suggests, the true conclusion of the story—and Huck's escape along with it—is its very inconclusiveness:

The impression Clemens has to leave, and does leave, in the reader's mind and feelings is that Huck will continue to develop. He will escape again, as many times as he needs to, from society and any of its restrictions which would hamper and prevent his growth. He will die and be reborn whenever his character needs to break the mold that society would place upon it. Accordingly, the structure of the story is left open: the conclusion is deliberately inconclusive.²

According to Albert E. Stone, "Huck's quest for freedom cannot succeed" ³ whether because of the river whose current carries him farther south into slave territory or because of the accidents of fogs and floods. But such phrases as "the quest for freedom" and "escape" need some qualification.

It has been suggested that Huck doesn't really make good his escape to the Territory (in the sense of a satisfactory resolution) but intends—consciously or not—to return to St. Petersburg, as indeed he does in Tom Sawyer Abroad (1894), where both he and Tom will be whisked across the Atlantic by a mad balloonist, and thence across the Sahara. Wished-for or not, this episode is another version of escape, though it hardly has the symbolic resonance of a Huckleberry Finn.

Yet in spite of Huck's transatlantic adventure, the suggestion of escape is still relatively valid; for at the encouragement of Tom, he has left St. Petersburg behind, and in doing so he foreshadows the later transatlantic expatriate-escaper of the twenties.
Like Lauriat Lane and Albert Stone, Leslie Fiedler also suggests that Huck's escape is in vain: Huck "does not know to what he is escaping, except into nothing. Huck is heading for no utopia, since he has heard of none; and so he ends up making the flight itself his goal. [His escape] of course is a vain evasion except as it leads him to understand that no society can fulfill his destiny." In this sense all of our escapes end there. Freud, to whom Fiedler is partly indebted, amply supports the notion of a return to beginnings—in short, regression. Yet the value of escape lies not so much in its ends as in its means (or in the experience). There are those, of course, who do not learn from experience. Jake Blount is one, and, perhaps at a greater remove, Theron Ware. Curiously, Bigger Thomas, whose escape is the most hopeless, seems to have gained by his escape (more an act of personal liberation than of classic escape) a new realization of the inner drives and mechanisms of his old and new self. But perplexity is part of the human predicament: for an escape may as often prove to be an entrance into a new trap, or an old prison, as a way out of it—as indeed it becomes for Bigger Thomas.

According to Walter F. Taylor, Theron Ware's escape is another of those unsuccessful bids for freedom. But we must remember that Theron's escape is not so much from a society—he will probably end up in the same sort of sorry milieu he has left—as from one way of life (or life-style) into another. Thus, Theron's escape is only partly successful. Among those elements he wished to escape (apart from his ministry) were Alice, his wife, and the marriage that bound him to her. Ironically, she accompanies Theron out West, ever a reminder of his more innocent self and the days of his more audacious desires—but also a reminder that he is still bound to her!

George Willard makes his escape a "revolt from the village." But again, the conclusion—his departure from Winesburg—is
more suggestive than definitive. What is important is not that the escapers have specific plans—perhaps the plan, if any, suggests what they are escaping from—but that they make the escape at all. In this instance, then, the desire rather than the fulfillment is what is important.

John Andrews escapes from the regimentation of modern life as represented by the army. But his escape is ultimately unsuccessful. Again, it is the intention rather than its consummation that is important. Actually, Andrews's predicament is more personal than universal. Certainly, his plight is not nearly as critical as that of Lieutenant Henry or Tom Joad, and certainly nothing to compare to Bigger Thomas's. Although, like Henry, Tom and Bigger, he may be said to be a "prisoner" of the system, his tendency to indulge in hystericst tends to overplay (and therefore to undercut) those horrors of regimentation that lie, not so much in their tedium—which can be endured—as in the manner in which the tedium itself is filtered through Andrews's mind.

Lieutenant Henry's escape from the war and its senselessness is partly successful, and carries a greater resonance than does that of Andrews. Henry's hope that Catherine would live "is as illusory as his belief that he could escape the war by signing a separate peace." Ray B. West's conclusion here is that one cannot "escape," in the existential sense, the consequence of an action: "What [A Farewell to Arms] says, finally, is that you cannot escape the obligations of [an] action. You can only learn to live with life, to tolerate it as 'the initiated' learn to tolerate it."  

Tom Joad not only escapes from the law (specifically) but also from what James Baldwin might call a "previous condition." His escape is not so much from the society itself as it is a merging with that society (the social soul). Actually, it is an escape back into society, not so much to accept as to fight it
—or at least to fight its seamier aspects. His escape, unlike those of the other escapers, is not an outright rejection of society—Joad is no revolutionary—but a desire to get society to make some urgently needed changes. In *The Grapes of Wrath* there is at least some slight hope that things will get better, as compared with the near nihilistic despair at the end of *A Farewell to Arms*. Both novels conclude in rain, symbol of death in each. In *A Farewell to Arms* death ends the last scene—as it usually does!—both for Catherine and her still-born baby. But in *The Grapes of Wrath* there is the suggestion that Rose of Sharon will survive both the depression of the times as well as of the heart. Peter Lisca maintains, "Out of her need [Rose of Sharon] gives life [the milk-full breast she offers the starving man]. Out of the profoundest depth of despair comes the greatest assertion of faith." 8

Jake Blount's escape in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* tells us, as we have noted, of Jake's bankruptcy of hope. Quite simply, Jake no longer has any territorial frontiers to escape across. He has been born too late for a frontier and perhaps too early for his version of the American (proletarian) dream. Jake's escape is therefore the least effective (in terms of the success of his revolutionary goals) of any of the escapers we have discussed. Whereas most of the escapers have changed, or have been transformed by their experiences—Huck, reborn through the discovery of his heart; Andrews and Henry, through their separate peace; Willard, through youth to early manhood; Tom Joad, through his vision of social unity; Theron Ware, through a new knowledge (painfully acquired) of his limitations—Jake Blount remains essentially what he was before he fled town. His escape is illusory. Where the other escapers have some idea of where they are bound—even if they don't always succeed in getting there—Blount has no idea of where he is going. Thus, his escape is symbolically, if not liter-
ally and geographically, circular; he will end up in the same kind of town he has left—and probably, with his frayed idealism, repeat all of the futile motions.

Still, if there is any escape that is more hopeless than Blount's, it is Bigger Thomas's. Of all the escapers, notwithstanding Sinclair Lewis's prescription (that the escaper not only needs a "place from which to flee but a place to which to flee"), Bigger has no place to escape to. His escape is not merely circular, as in Blount's case, but, as was suggested in the preceding chapter, labyrinthine, moving ever inward on itself, so that Bigger meets himself on the way out and falls into the hands of the law, that legal trap provided by the society that has driven him into the labyrinth in the first place. Where Blount's escape, futile as it is, held out some small hope (or so Blount believes), Bigger's is completely without that small saving quality. Bigger himself, even in the process of running away, knows well enough that his flight is doomed even before it begins.

Finally, escape seems to express the discrepancy between what life is and what it could be—in the minds of the escapers at least. It is also a manifestation of the dislocation of life in its transition from the latter decades of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth—as noted so mordantly by Henry Adams in his *Education*.

In our time—roughly the fifties to the seventies—this universal experience, particularly as it has been dealt with by the Jewish-American writer, attests to the possibility of other forms of escape. Leslie Fiedler says:

All flights, the Jewish experience teaches, are from one exile to another; and this Americans have always known, though they have sometimes attempted to deny it. Fleeing exclusion in the Old World, the immigrant discovers loneliness in the New World; fleeing the communal loneliness of seaboard settlements,
he discovers the ultimate isolation of the frontier. It is the dream of exile as freedom which has made America; but it is [also] the experience of exile as terror that has forged the self-consciousness of Americans.9

Yet for whatever reason—out of hope or hopelessness—escape seems to be as much an "inalienable right" as those other guaranteed rights Americans have usually taken for granted. Still, we must not forget that the "guarantees" are provisional. The following little anecdote of Robert Frost is as illustrative of this (essentially youthful) impulse as any we have shown here, and it is a fitting note on which to end:

A young fellow came to me to complain of the department of philosophy in his university. There wasn't a philosopher in it. "I can't stand it." He was really complaining of his situation. He wasn't where he could feel real. But I didn't tell him so [; I didn't go into that. I agreed with him that there wasn't a philosopher in his university—there was hardly ever more than one at a time in the world—and I advised him to quit. Light out for somewhere. He hated to be a quitter. I told him the Bible says, "Quit ye, like men." "Does it," he said. "Where would I go?" Why anywhere almost. Kamchatka, Madagascar, Brazil. I found him doing well in the educational department of Rio when I was sent on an errand down there by our government several years later.10


7. Ibid., p. 36.

8. Peter Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1958), p. 177. Critics have generally deplored this unrealistic (i.e., implausible) denouement, especially its sentimentality. But we can ignore the sentimentality—admittedly there—in favor of the symbolic redemption of hope in a time of hopelessness. As such, the scene has its valid place in a novel that, though told in the naturalist tradition, is nevertheless saturated with mythopoeia.
