INTRODUCTION

The Novel in Motion

“We shall sing of the man at the steering wheel.” F. T. Marinetti

The dynamo—revolving “at some vertiginous speed” within arm’s length of Henry Adams—makes the very earth seem unimpressive “in its old-fashioned, deliberate, annual or daily revolution.” And Henry Adams begins to see history as governed by the law of acceleration. Everyone wants to see moving pictures—of people, horses, trains, but especially of the chase in Edwin Porter’s *Great Train Robbery* and the “last-minute rescues” of D. W. Griffith. Collision, says Sergei Eisenstein, is the key to montage. Ragtime derives its energy from syncopation—from what were once called “driving notes,” or a rhythm that displaces the regular beat and seems to run away from the steady bass. Improvisation, the “break” or “hot lick,” is the driving force of jazz. In painting, fixed vantage gives way to shifting perspectives. For Einstein matter is always in motion, and motion determines the size and weight of material objects. Yeats portrays the modern experience in terms of centrifugal force—the falcon “turning in a widening gyre.” Leopold Bloom is always on the move, physically and mentally, and the reader of *Ulysses* leaps back and forth between modern and Homeric times. Dos Passos centers on the new automobile, airplane, and movie industries, but, even more, on America’s aimless and uncontrollable energy. Hemingway and Fitzgerald picture the ceaseless movement of the Lost Generation. Faulkner’s characters run, hunt, gallop, fly, raid, chase, and escape throughout Yoknapatawpha County. The picaro travels through the novel of the fifties. Robbe-Grillet creates a world of shifting landscapes and inscapes. “Where we going?” asks Benny
Profane in Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* “The way we’re heading,” answers Pig Bodine. “Move your ass.”

Movement—a creative ideal and a destructive obsession of modern consciousness—dominates the modern novel, especially in America. But what is it that actually moves? Dos Passos relates twentieth-century history to the development of the automobile, the airplane, and the movies. But, except for Charlie Anderson’s suicidal race with the speeding train, there is little actual movement in *U.S.A.* Most of the scenes are static, and a thousand pages of pedestrian narrative clog the spirited tempo of the newsreels, biographies, and camera eye. Fitzgerald’s characters are restless; and, speeding in Gatsby’s yellow roadster, Daisy Buchanan runs over her husband’s mistress. But we never see the climactic scene. Among the most memorable images are Daisy and Jordan “buoyed up” on an enormous white couch, the director and his star holding for a kiss beneath the white plum tree, and the enormous eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg staring out from a faded billboard. Hemingway mastered the pure sequence of movement in bullfights and fishing; but there is far more talk than action in *The Sun Also Rises,* and “Big Two-Hearted River” conveys far more inner tension than outward movement.

Movement is the continuous going from point to point, the process of changing places, or displacement. But a writer cannot continually focus on the going or changing without sacrificing a density that traditional readers expect in a novel. Faulkner’s *Pylon* contains pages and pages where nothing happens except that the reporter—sometimes alone, sometimes with the flyers whose story he is covering—crosses town from the newspaper office to the hotel to his apartment to the airport, always against the current of the Mardi Gras crowds. This movement dominates the novel after the hero crashes. It is intensified by the descriptions of eating and drinking, and it intensifies the dramatically central descriptions of the air races. But *Pylon* has been one of Faulkner’s least-read or -discussed novels because it does not satisfy conventional expectations for characters with deeper motivations or richer complexities. Faulkner could satisfy these expectations in his portrayals of such flat characters as Jason Compson and the Snopeses. And he could evoke the sensation of motion not only by focusing on the continual movement of his characters but through his continual and disorienting shifts of focus—even upon motionless subjects. Indeed, we can distinguish between his pictures of motion (where his subjects run, ride, chase,
or flee) and his pictures in motion (where the narrative eye continually shifts, fragments, and flashes). I hope to show that the sensation of motion is greater when we are directly engaged by the kinetic power of the medium than when we are indirectly engaged by the movement of characters.

First, we must ask how we sense and detect movement—and we should be aware that to sense (or simply feel) and to detect (or find information) are not the same, nor do they necessarily accompany one another. We sense and detect movement when our equilibrium is disturbed and we feel that movement directly in our bodies (this is called proprioception). We detect movement but sense it with less intensity when we perceive a displacement outside or at a distance (this is called exteroception). The most sensitive detector of direct movement is the complex system in our inner ear, where specialized organs are designed to move and, therefore, to directly convey each movement of the head: turning, lifting, and lowering movements are conveyed directly by organs that drag and bend tiny hairs. Equally direct is the movement conveyed through changing bone and muscle relations, and through the displacement of stimuli on the skin surface.

Seeing is a more complex process. We see movement at a distance; therefore it is not conveyed directly upon our eyes. Nonetheless, our eyes do move to locate a moving object in the very narrow area of acute vision and to follow its movement. Moreover, our eyes move constantly to scan the field before us and search out structures—even when the field contains no movement at all. Indeed, our eyes move even to scan mental images when dreaming and thinking. It is well known that our eyes move while dreaming. It is less well known that they move when we picture a situation in our minds; but this can be verified easily by asking someone to count the windows in his living room, and watching his eyes move as he counts them. Of course, we are not always conscious of our eye movements. That is, we do not always detect the fact that they move; but we do have kinetic sensations, and the more radical the displacements, the more conscious we are that they are sensations of movement.

Reading a novel is like seeing—experience at a distance that affects us indirectly. It is experience at a distance in three ways. The first is physical: what happens to a character does not happen to us directly. The second is temporal: the story told by the narrator has already happened by the time we encounter his words in the printed text. The third results from the intervention of the
medium: our direct stimuli are words—the product of an intervening narrator, a set of complex signs and symbols, a series of printed objects—that distance us from what happened in varying degrees, depending on the convention.

But reading, like seeing, has its own kinetic potential. We can be made to feel our own dislocations and displacements in the act of reading. What stimulates these sensations is the very medium that distances us from narrated events: the intervention of the narrator as he selects details and frames events; and the intervention of the printed language as it embodies the narrator's voice, alludes to references beyond the story, and exists as its own physical presence. Indeed, the medium can stimulate the sensation of motion directly by engaging us in the event of its own dynamic.

The traditional narrator, who often suppresses the act of narrative intervention, tells us what happened and what was there by covertly processing details for us. He selects them for us and arranges them to advance the story, establish a character, evoke a mood, focus the symbolism, or geometrically simplify the scene by moving from left to right, top to bottom, or near to far. But another mode of narration—established by Smollett and developed by Dickens, Conrad, Joyce, and Faulkner—engages us directly in the narrator's experience of excited perception. It does not process details but records the dynamic of the searching eye as it scans the field to discover what is happening and what is there. It causes us to feel the kinetic sensation. Modern novelists also engage us in the events of the dynamic medium and stimulate us kinetically through dislocations that jolt our mental equilibrium. We are made to experience shifting points of view, changing frames of reference, and unpredictable transformations. And recent novelists have discovered how to stir us physically by creating syntactical and typographical rhythms that accelerate the pace of reading.

Paradoxically, attention to seeing did not lead to clearer pictures on the screen of our visual imagination. More vivid, yes—but not clearer. Indeed, as we are drawn into the act of excited perception, it becomes more difficult to hold on to an image, let alone grasp the whole scene. The frame is broken; the picture flies to pieces. But, then, we do not normally see clear pictures. Joel Snyder traces the popular confusion between the picture and what we see back to Alberti, who invented the system of perspective painting. Alberti did not advocate painting what was seen; his
picture was a "rational structure of perceptual judgments." If his kind of picture seems to be validated by the "realistic" photograph, this is because the camera was designed to be an aid to the painter. Lens-makers were instructed by the artists; each new step in the development of the camera was designed to meet the needs of the painter following in Alberti's line. When writers went beyond even what an individual might see to shift perspectives, when they changed the frames of reference, when they brought their very medium into the plane of action, what we see on the screen of our visual imagination becomes even less clear, even more difficult to grasp. The experience may be best described—to use a term from modern physics but equally applicable to all the modern arts—as "unpicturable." As René Guilleré put it fifty years ago in his essay on the jazz age:

Antique perspective presented us with geometrical concepts of objects—as they could be seen only by an ideal eye. Our perspective shows us objects as we see them with both eyes—gropingly. We no longer construct the visual world with an acute angle, converging on the horizon. We open up this angle, pulling representation against us, upon us, toward us. . . . We take part in this world. That is why we are not afraid to use close-ups in films: to portray a man as he sometimes seems to us, out of natural proportions, suddenly fifty centimeters away from us; we are not afraid to use metaphors, that leap from the lines of a poem, or to allow the piercing sound of a trombone to swoop out of the orchestra, aggressively.

We may distinguish, then, between the novel of motion and the novel in motion. The novel of motion focuses on the movement of its subject; the movement is at a distance and is conveyed to us indirectly. The novel in motion may focus on a subject that moves fast or slowly or even stands still, but it engages us directly in the dislocations of the narrative medium. It continually disrupts our equilibrium and imparts the sensation of motion with disturbing immediacy. It draws us into an experience of multiplicity and indeterminacy—or an experience of modern consciousness. It also draws us into an experience of temporality—the dynamic of history. This is a continual joining of the old and the new, the known and the unknown, a movement that seems ungovernable, unpredictable, threatening, but also full of possibility. Without a frame of reference, a stable center, an "objective" point of view, a reliable map or guide, the novel in motion compels us to take full responsibility for our perceptions and judgments.

I have written The Novel in Motion for the general scholarly
reader as well as the specialist; the later chapters, therefore, are more descriptive and designed for those who may not be familiar with the more contemporary writers. My thesis has developed inductively over the past ten years, through a series of empirical analyses that began during a sabbatical year when I was reading intensely in the history of physics and film, and when I also discovered that the principles of film analysis could illuminate a great deal about what we see in narrative fiction. I would like to express my appreciation to Wheaton College for the grant that helped initiate my project, for the A. Howard Meneely Chair, which gave me time to complete it, and to my colleague Vaino Kola for his drawing of the duck-rabbit. I would also like to thank Caryn James for her resourceful assistance in research and editing and Beverly Clark for her helpful suggestions. I owe a great deal to Raymond Federman for his contagious enthusiasm and critical acumen, to Alan Spiegel for helping me solve some major problems in the development of my thesis, to Melvin Friedman for his continual encouragement and friendship, and to Jean Pearce for her insightful reading, her insistence on clarity, and her responsiveness to a chapter that finally read well.

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