Toward the Novel in Motion: Movement and the Narrative Eye

Daniel Defoe is well known for his realistic detail. But in *Moll Flanders*, he does not give us a single description—only lists of Moll's clothes and statements about her beauty—until a third of the way through the book. And what a scant picture: "One Night I had the Curiosity to disguise my self like a Servant Maid, in a Round Cap and a Straw Hat, and went to the Door." In *Robinson Crusoe* he does not provide a single description of the storm, although "such a dismal sight I never saw." Moreover, the details from which the reader must draw a picture of the island are abstract and quantitative: compass directions, circles, rows, yards.

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* is away from home for the first time, discovering a new world, writing home with great frequency, and telling her family everything that happens to her—but we see hardly anything. She tells us what she was given by her "kind master," yet we do not see what anything looks like when she lists "a suit of my late lady's clothes, and a half a dozen of her shifts, and six fine handkerchiefs, and three of her cambric aprons, and four holland ones." It is only when the "barbarous" Mrs. Jewkes intrudes into her life and upsets her equilibrium—and this is in the thirty-second letter—that we are made to see. "Now I will give you a picture of this wretch: She is a broad, squat, pursy, fat thing. . . . She has a huge hand, and an arm as thick as my waist. . . . Her nose is flat and crooked, and her brows grow down over her eyes: a dead spiteful, grey, goggling eye, to be sure she has. And her face is flat and broad; and as to colour, looks like as if it had been pickled a month in saltpetre."

We are certainly engaged by the scene, but we see very little when Joseph Andrews enters Lady Booby's room to discover "one of the whitest Necks that ever was seen." Nor does Fielding invite
us to see what is happening in the world of *Tom Jones* until after an introduction comparing the arts of storytelling and cookery and using sense experience to engage our intellects rather than our eyes or taste buds; until after a "short description of Squire Allworthy," which is not a description but the location of Allworthy on the English map and social system and in the novel's narrative pattern and moral scale; and until after a narrative account of "an odd accident which befell Mr. Allworthy at his return home. The decent behavior of Mrs. Deborah Wilkins, with some proper animadversions on bastards." We are finally given a chance to see what is happening—or what Mr. Allworthy sees from the terrace—just before presenting his sister with a little bastard.

In the midst of the Grove was a fine Lawn sloping down towards the House, near the Summit of which rose a plentiful Spring, gushing out of a Rock covered with Firs, and forming a constant Cascade of about thirty Foot, not carried down a regular Flight of Steps, but tumbling in a natural Fall over the broken and mossy Stones, till it came to the bottom of the Rock; then running off in a pebly Channel, that with many lesser Falls wined along, till it fell into a Lake at the Foot of the Hill, about a quarter of a Mile below the House on the South Side, and which was seen from every Room in the Front. Out of this Lake, which filled the Center of a beautiful Plain, embellished with Groups of Beeches and Elms, and fed with Sheep, issued a River, that for several Miles was seen to meander through an amazing Variety of Meadows and Woods, till it emptied itself into the Sea, with a large Arm of which, and an Island beyond it, the Prospect was closed.

On the right of this Valley opened another of less Extent, adorned with several Villages, and terminated by one of the Towers of an old ruined Abbey, grown over with Ivy, and Part of the Front which remained still entire.

The left Hand Scene presented the View of a fine Park, composed of very unequal Ground, and agreeably varied with all the Diversity that Hills, Lawns, Wood, and Water, laid out with admirable Taste, but owing less to Art than to Nature, could give. Beyond this the country gradually rose into a Ridge of wild Mountains, the Tops of which were above the Clouds.

But Fielding has allowed us to see the world of *Tom Jones* at the expense of his story. And he ends his plentiful description with a warning: "Reader, take care, I have unadvisedly led thee to the Top of as high a Hill as Mr. Allworthy's, and how to get thee down without breaking thy Neck I do not well know. However, let us e'en venture to slide down together, for Miss Bridget rings her Bell, and Mr. Allworthy is summoned to Breakfast, where I must attend, and, if you please, shall be glad of your Company" (43-44).
Laurence Sterne is noted for his playful disruptions of the story line, but the first time he invites us to see what is happening in the world of Tristram Shandy is in the tenth chapter. The first picture is of a saddle owned by the husband of the midwife who brought Tristram into the world. The narrative eye moves from top to bottom of a “demi-peak’d saddle, quilted on the seat with green plush, garnished with a noble row of silver-headed studs, and a noble pair of shining brass stirrups, with a housing altogether suitable, of grey superfine cloth, with an edging of black lace, terminating in a deep, black silk fringe, poudré d’or.” But this was not the saddle upon which the parson rode, for he fitted his “lean, sorry, jack-ass of a horse” with such a saddle “as the figure and value of such a steed might well and truly deserve.” He left his splendid saddle—the first fully seen element in the novel—hung up behind the study door.

Defoe does not picture Moll Flanders, the storm that threatens Robinson Crusoe, or the island he meticulously cultivates; he lists and counts and forms general outlines. In Pamela the epistler does not pause in her account of what happened to show us what anything looks like until the thirty-second letter. In Tom Jones “the reader’s neck [is] brought into danger by a description.” In Tristram Shandy the first item described is immediately withdrawn from the narrative; indeed, the playful narrator teases our appetite to see by substituting a picture of what is not there in the story for what is there but is never seen by the reader. What we discover in the early English novel is a powerful allegiance to the movement of the story, or to the art and joy of storytelling, and a wary regard for the power of seeing. When we are made to see, the narrator is in a singular state of agitation, loses control of the story, or self-consciously toys with our desire for immediacy.

Of course, we visualize in a general way even when the narrator provides few cues. We project our own images, or fill in what Roman Ingarden calls “spots of indeterminacy” even when Pamela lists her gifts. But we do not begin to see until the narrative eye begins to move. In Fielding’s description of the view from Allworthy’s terrace, the narrative eye moves from near to far and then left to right. In Sterne’s picture of the parson’s saddle, it moves from top to bottom. What distinguishes Pamela’s picture of Mrs. Jewkes is a movement of the narrative eye that is like the movement of our eyes in the act of seeing, and that the moving picture camera accentuates when it pans, tilts, zooms, and shifts from angle to angle. When Pamela, still in a state of heightened agitation, relives the moment she encountered Mrs. Jewkes, she
engages us to see not only *what* but *how* she saw. First she takes in the “broad, squat, pursy” figure. Then she focuses on the huge hand, the arm as thick as her waist, the crooked nose, the hanging brows, the goggling eye. And finally she widens her glance (though not as wide as it was at first) to take in the flat, broad, pickled face.

Whether we are agitated or composed, seeing is a form of action. Our eyes are in continual motion, restlessly searching, actively selecting. They scan the field before us, even to see internal images of dreams and thought. They shift five times a second to refocus the spot of sharp vision. As Rudolph Arnheim says, “through the world roams the glance, directed by attention, focusing the narrow range of sharpest vision now on this, now on that spot, following the flight of a distant sea gull, scanning a tree to explore its shape. This eminently active performance is what is truly meant by visual perception.”

The first English novel that continually engages us in the act of seeing is Smollett’s *Expedition of Humphry Clinker*. Although there may be more physical action in *Joseph Andrews* or *Tom Jones*—the journeys being faster paced and filled with more chasing, escaping, and slapstick—Smollett’s reader experiences more activity, or livelier sensations of motion. This is due to the rapid flashes of visual detail and rapid movement of perspective as Matthew, Lydia, Jeremy, Tabitha, and Win report to their different correspondents. Although Matthew orders his perceptions numerically, there is no logic to their sequence. Matthew’s eye leaps from one vulgar object to another in the Vauxhall garden, and the reader’s eye leaps not only with Matthew’s but, through his metaphors and similes, along an even wider range: “Here a wooden lion, there a stone statue; in one place, a range of things like coffee-house boxes, covered a-top; in another, a parcel of alehouse benches; in a third, a puppet-shew representation of a tin cascade; in a fourth, a gloomy cave of a circular form, like a sepulchral vault half-lighted; in a fifth, a scanty slip of grass-plat, that would not afford pasture sufficient for an ass’s colt.” Then, four pages later, Lydia is “dazzled and confounded with the variety of beauties that rushed all at once upon my eye.” Now Vauxhall is

a spacious garden, part laid out in delightful walks, bounded with high hedges and trees, and paved with gravel; part exhibiting a wonderful assemblage of the most picturesque and striking objects, pavilions, lodges, groves, grottoes, lawns, temples, and cascades; porticoes, colonades, and rotundos; adorned with pillars, statues, and painting; the
whole illuminated with an infinite number of lamps, disposed in different figures of suns, stars, and constellations; the place crowded with the gayest company, ranging through those blissful shades, or supping in different lodges on cold collations, enlivened with mirth, freedom, and good humour, and animated by an excellent band of musik.

Matthew and Lydia do far more than describe a vista, like the narrator of *Tom Jones*, or list the items of interest, like Robinson Crusoe and Pamela. They convey what Lydia calls the “rush” of objects on their eyes, or, more precisely, the flashing movement of excited perception. And to this movement is added the shifting of perspectives as we leap from one correspondent’s vantage to another. Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Sterne focus on the movement of their characters—their movement from place to place and their changes in situation. When this kind of movement comes to dominate a novel, it is a novel of motion. Although we experience this motion vicariously, it comes to us indirectly, for we are distanced from it by the narrative medium. Smollett engages us in the movement of the narrative eye, to which he adds a shifting of perspectives. That is, he locates the source of movement in the narrative medium—our most immediate point of contact—and, therefore, we experience the sensation of motion directly in the act of reading. Smollett looks forward to the novel in motion.

When the novel in motion fully emerges, the medium will not only engage us directly, its energy will become dominant and even autonomous, continually upsetting our equilibrium and ultimately threatening us with a loss of control. Charles Dickens takes us a step closer. Influenced by Smollett, Dickens created novels that are alive with visual vitality—where the narrative eye generates dramatic excitement by flashing from point to point and shifting perspectives by “cutting in” for a close-up and “intercutting” between story lines. Indeed, it creates distortions, animates objects, mechanizes people, develops surprising connections and disconnections so that his world seems to be governed by a life force of its own. Ultimately, Dickens maintains control of this world; as Robert Alter points out, his imagination comes to possess and subdue the alien realm. But the movement of his narrative eye becomes a powerful dramatic force. It is just this movement that influenced D. W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein, who realized the potential of the camera—the narrative eye of moving pictures—to generate drama through its own kinds of motion. But Griffith and Eisenstein developed in different ways, and a comparison may
help us understand the kind of motion that was generated in the modern novel.

In 1908, while planning a film called *After Many Years*, Griffith proposed that the scene showing Annie Lee waiting for her husband be followed by one showing him cast away on a desert island. But, his employers objected, "how can you tell a story jumping about like that? The people won't know what it's about." Griffith replied, "Doesn't Dickens write that way?"12 In conceiving *After Many Years*, Griffith was discovering that the narrative eye need not hold still until a scene was played through, that indeed it gained interest as it was broken into a sequence of shots that disrupted the story line, and that it gained vitality as the movement of the camera disrupted the viewer's equilibrium.

This point becomes clear when we measure Griffith's accomplishment against that of Edwin Porter, who created the first notable chase scene in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Porter initiated the dynamics of the chase when he cut from the escaping bandits back to the train station and the formation of the posse that would pursue them.13 But, despite his enormous success, his chase turns out to be one of the slowest in the history of film.14 We can see why when we turn, first, to Griffith's *Lonely Villa* (1909) and, then, to *The Lonedale Operator* (1911).

Porter cut back in time to show the formation of the posse, but in the actual chase the posse followed the bandits past the camera—which sat still on its tripod by the roadside. In *The Lonely Villa* Griffith cut back and forth between the besieged wife and the husband frantically driving home—decreasing the duration of each shot, and thereby increasing the speed of the action—but the cutting is minimal and the composition is static. *The Lonedale Operator* has far more vitality due to the increased number of cuts and the different kinds of shots. The camera seems in continual motion—focusing now on the telegraph office where Blanche Sweet is trying to protect herself, now outside the building or outside the door where the bandits are trying to break in, now on the train speeding to the rescue, now a full shot, now a close-up, now from one angle, now from another. In each of these films, then, the spectator's experience is progressively intensified by the increased movement of the narrative eye. More and more we feel the displacement; more and more our equilibrium is upset; more and more the motion of the narrative eye intensifies the experience of the chase.

Griffith established the dynamics of the chase—film's "great
element of dramatic narraturgy"—because he understood the difference between pictures of motion and pictures in motion—or the power of the moving camera. Indeed, he continually engaged the spectator in this movement even in scenes of less physical action, by cutting between long establishment shots, medium shots, and close-ups. When he acknowledges his kinship with Dickens, he leads us to see that fiction like film is composed of narrative-pictorial units, and that it too gains a singular vitality when the narrative eye shifts between them.

Actually, it is Eisenstein who led us to understand this in his essay on "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today," where he turned a sequence of Oliver Twist into a shot-by-shot scenario. He demonstrated how the tension was heightened when the narrative eye cut back and forth between Oliver's capture and the old man waiting with his watch, and his analyses of Dickens revealed a great many other effects achieved through the cutting and joining of disparate shots. Besides Dickens and Griffith, Eisenstein was influenced by Dziga Vertov, whose editing was designed to bring workers and machines to life and awaken the spectator to new understanding rather than engage him in the story. He was also attracted by the "jump cuts" in Kabuki drama and the dazzling vitality of Abel Gance, especially as he cut across three screens in Napoleon. What Eisenstein emphasized in his cutting was not the development of a story or the joining of story lines but fragmentation, leaping, conflict, and collision—or a movement that continually disrupts the viewer's equilibrium. Although there is very little movement of the camera within the shot, an enormous amount of movement is generated by the rapid cutting between shots as the narrative eye changes its location, distance, and angle and creates its own dynamic rhythm by varying the duration of each take.

Griffith established the dynamics of the chase but kept it within the limits of the story frame. That is, the movement of the camera simply reinforces the movement of the chase; each perspective is clearly grounded, and at the end all the lines are drawn together. Eisenstein destroyed the spatial and temporal limits of the story frame to engage us in the terror or beauty of the motion itself. He engages us in the anxiety of the citizens fleeing down the Odessa steps by radically shifting perspectives, by shooting from points that destroy our sense of space, by fragmenting images, by repeating shots over and over, by drawing out moments to what seem interminable lengths. He can also engage us in the motion of an
urban scene to show how his movement is grounded in contemporary reality.

All sense of perspective and of realistic depth is washed away by a nocturnal sea of electric advertising. Far and near, small (in the foreground) and large (in the background), soaring aloft and dying away, racing and circling, bursting and vanishing—these lights tend to abolish all sense of real space, finally melting into a single plane of colored light points and neon lines moving over a surface of black velvet sky . . .

Headlights on speeding cars, highlights on receding rails, shimmering reflections on the wet pavements—all mirrored in puddles that destroy our sense of direction (which is top? which is bottom?), supplementing the mirage above with a mirage beneath us, and rushing between these two worlds of electric signs, we see them no longer on a single plane, but as a system of theater wings, suspended in the air, through which the night flood of traffic lights is streaming.

Eisenstein, then, was following more in the line of Smollett and Dickens than was Griffith, for in liberating his narrative eye from the bounds of realistic perspective, he was giving it an independent life of its own. Indeed, he was extending this line in ways very much like those of Joyce and Faulkner, whom he at least indirectly influenced.