

# *The End of a Book: A Look at American and British Fiction*

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The end is where we start from. — T. S. ELIOT, *Four Quartets*

THE CONCLUSION OF A BOOK contains its end or highest ideal. This presupposition may be at odds with the traditional view of fiction that stresses complication of plot, climax, and denouement, but it is nevertheless fruitful as a formal means of determining the difference between New-World and Old-World writing. American literature is characterized by the hypervisual — Emerson's deference to the "genius in America, with tyrannous eye"<sup>1</sup> — while English literature, for example, operates under Wordsworth's assumption of "a man speaking to men." Yeats may confess for the British/European bloc that "I *hear* it in the deep heart's core" (italics mine); but Emerson quietly offers this rebuttal in his journals: "That which others hear, I *see*."<sup>2</sup> As we turn to a demonstration of this significant difference, it might be well to remember that our purpose is also to clarify what H. L. Mencken calls the "active aversion that runs beneath the surface" of the American and English languages. That is, we hope to provide some basis for understanding the bafflement expressed by the London *Morning Post* (1934):

Those who have had to do with Americans will not mistake them for our intimate cousins, our near psychic relations. *They are a different people*. . . . I am not sure, in fact, that we cannot more easily get to understand the soul of Frenchmen, Italians, Germans, Spaniards even. After all, we belong geographically and spiritually to the European cultural bloc.<sup>3</sup>

## I. AMERICAN CONCLUSIONS: THE HYPERVISUAL IMPETUS

Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of  
leaden rain clouds.

— STEPHEN CRANE, *The Red Badge of Courage*

It is no accident, I think, that Benjamin Franklin improved the street lamps of Philadelphia with open panes so that their brilliance outshone the "poorly illuminated streets of London"<sup>4</sup> or that he combined the macro- and micro-scopic focus into bifocals so that, like Emerson's "transparent eyeball" in "Nature," he might "see all" (*Selections*, p. 24). Indeed, this American "sight-geist," in both its macroscopic and microscopic forms, has so permeated American fiction that the conclusions to novels depend upon this hypervisual precedent — the thrust of vision over lyricism, of sight over speech and social interaction. As Emerson declared in his *bon mot*, "Eyes wait for no introductions; they are no Englishmen."<sup>5</sup>

Thus we find the solitary spectacle and spectator at the end of so many major American novels. Who can forget, for instance, the conclusion of *Moby-Dick*, when after "concentric circles seized the lone boat itself" and "carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight," and after Tastego had pinned his hammer to a significantly moribund and shrieking sky-hawk, the whole scene resolved itself as follows: "All collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago." Or even if we look at the conclusion to the "Epilogue," which purports to be the narration of one on parallel with Job's messenger, we find not essentially the dialogical but the visual, "a sail" drawing nearer and nearer, of the "devious-cruising Rachel," who picks up merely another hypervisual "orphan." Or if we look at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, we find no social or moral commentary but the stark description of the tombstone of Hester and Dimmesdale — an object perplexing to the "curious investigator." Here there was "on a field, sable, the letter A, gules" — which letter is emphasized even in ignominy as "one ever-glowing *point of light* gloomier than the shadow" (*italics mine*). Of course, both *Moby-Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter*, with their

obsession with "a sharp eye for the White Whale"<sup>6</sup> and the dazzling ornament on Hester's breast, evince throughout their pages the hypervisual ideal; and their conclusions serve as final and emphatic "points of light" to that particular ideal.

Here, we should note that the hypervisual ideal is the primary American means of identification — transcending periods of "romance" or "realism" or "naturalism" and transcending the differences in the styles and subject matters of the individual centuries themselves. Thus, we can simply point to James Fenimore Cooper, the writer Brooks, Lewis, and Warren call "the founder of American literature" (*American Literature*, p. 283), and present more remarkable evidence of the visual bias. For example, the conclusion to *The Pioneers* leaves us with this eye-orientation:

That was the last that they ever saw of the Leather-stocking, whose rapid movements preceded the pursuit which Judge Temple both ordered and carried out. He had gone far towards the setting sun — the foremost in that band of pioneers who are opening the way for the rest of the nation across the continent.

Indeed, so intensely does this hypervisual Pathfinder "open the way for the rest of the nation," both literally and visually, that in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Deerslayer is given his quintessentially American name — Hawkeye. The conclusion to this novel also gives the preferred eye-orientation: the good Indian, Chingachgook, "a blazed pine in a clearing of pale-faces," describes his own life thus:

My day has been too long. In the morning I saw the sons of Unamis happy and strong; and yet, before the night has come, have I lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans.

In "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences," Mark Twain criticizes his early mentor for, among other things, his characters' unbelievable eye-sight: "How *could* Pathfinder see that little pellet fly through the air and enter that distant bullet-hole?" (*American Literature*, p. 1333). Here, Twain simply should have recognized the extent to which the hypervisual ideal has permeated both the character and denouement ideals of this "founder of American literature."

Although we are chiefly investigating the longer fiction of American writers, I believe we would be justified in briefly mentioning that work which both Edgar Allen Poe himself and D. H. Lawrence call Poe's "chief story," "Ligeia." This tale, which begins with the narrator's obsession with Ligeia's "larger than ordinary eyes" — "those eyes! those large, those shining, those divine orbs!" (*American Literature*, p. 413) — ends with the ultimate paean to the American metamorphosis: Ligeia has usurped the body of Rowena in one of the "wildest and least frequented portions of fair England," and the beloved Ligeia is recognized only by her eyes:

"Here then, at least . . . can I never — can I never be mistaken — these are the full, and the black, and the *wild eyes* — of my lost love. . . ." (italics mine)

Not for nothing did D. H. Lawrence sense some "alien quality" to that literature which arose "upon the continent of America and no where else"; for although this "new consciousness" would "hurt horribly," it nevertheless caused Europeans to "open new eyes."<sup>7</sup> Or as Emerson knew in a judgement that would be the perfect critique of Poe's "Ligeia": "The eye is final; what it tells us is the last stroke of nature."<sup>8</sup>

If we now turn to the middle and second half of the nineteenth century, we continue to find the concluding visual preponderance. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, a romance in which Hawthorne assumes as his privilege "to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture,"<sup>9</sup> Alice Pyncheon, "after witnessing these deeds, this bygone woe and this present happiness," takes her departure — "as she floated heavenward from the House of the Seven Gables!" *The Red Badge of Courage*, which supplies the epigraph to this part, ends with a kind of Emersonianism that outshines even *Walden's* conclusion wherein "the sun is but a morning star"; Stephen Crane's young hypervisual initiate or "bearer of colors" makes this final observation: "Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds." Or consider *Billy Budd*, published long after Melville's death in 1891, which has a narrator

preoccupied with "who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins." At Billy's hanging, "a vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory" — reminiscent of Crane's own vision — and the final lines of the tale are emphatically visual poetry. No sounds reach "Billy in the Darbies," the epitaph for the dead sailor in sea-weed fetters on the ocean floor:

... look:  
 Through the port comes the moonshine astray!  
 It tips the guard's cutlass and silvers this nook.  
 .....  
 I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist.

Perhaps the conclusion to *Huckleberry Finn* should be mentioned, too, before we leave the famous novels of the nineteenth century. In the final paragraph, Tom has "got his bullet around his neck on a watch-guard for a watch, and is always seeing what time it is," and Huck himself suggests his own Cooper-like pioneering imagery: "I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest." Finally, in the conclusion to Frank Norris's masterpiece of naturalism, *McTeague*, the huge dentist "remained stupidly looking around him, now at the distant horizon, now at the ground, now at the half-dead canary chattering feebly in its little gilt prison." Indeed, the English "canary" is doomed in the American waste land presided over by the "tyrannous eye."

Twentieth-century American novels continue or even increase the stress upon the strong visual ending. To turn more quickly to British fiction, we here only mention several of the more important or interesting. Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* has the woman portrayed in a final vision as "in your rocking chair, by your window dreaming." Willa Cather's *O Pioneers* ends with a paean to Emerson's exultation in "The Poet" that "America is a poem in our eyes" (*Selections*, p. 238): "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat . . . in the shining eyes of youth!" In Lewis's *Babbitt*, there is figured forth the image — not the conversation — of solidarity: "Arms about each others' shoulders, the Babbitt men marched into the living-room and faced the

swooping family." Or in *Main Street*, the conversation concerns itself with a small-town scrutiny of events: "Say, did you notice whether the girl put that screwdriver back?"

Finally, in Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eugene Gant, the quintessential American "transparent eyeball" and searcher, stands by the stone angels on his father's porch and does not speak but "turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges." Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* not only utilizes the literal drawing of the eye itself in the final pages — "Keep your [eye] on Mottson, the gap filled by a human eye with an electric pupil"<sup>10</sup> — but the conclusion of the novel has Luster "looking back" to observe how "the broken flower drooped over Ben's fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene," with "post and tree, window and doorway, and signboard, each in its ordered place." At the powerful conclusion to *A Farewell to Arms*, the Hemingway code hero turns off the light and confronts "a statue" before simply walking back "to the hotel in the rain." In *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator notes that "Gatsby believed in the green light" and that we are driven as "boats against the current." Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* finishes with the memorable scene of a woman nursing a starving man: "She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously." Not for nothing has Flannery O'Connor called herself a "descendant" of Hawthorne, for her *Wise Blood* concludes with the identical image of *The Scarlet Letter* — Hazel Motes's apotheosis through the darkness into "the pin point of light." Moreover, *The Violent Bear It Away* depicts another hypervisualist prophet, "his singed eyes, black in their deep sockets," moving ahead, "his face set toward the dark city."

Here, we could go on and on with novels such as *Hiroshima*, with two children "looking for their mothers," or Malamud's *A New Life*: "Got your picture." However, we turn now to an examination of the ends of British fiction and to an explication of Thoreau's cryptic epigram in *Walden*: "Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new" (*American Literature*, p. 775). We turn, in fact, to the hyperverbal orientation of English literature.

## II. BRITISH CONCLUSIONS: THE PREROGATIVE OF THE EAR

Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

— WORDSWORTH, "The World is Too Much With Us"

Whether the origins of the English novel be in allegory, didacticism, or the epistolary form, *comment* — often moralistic — and *conversation* form the norm for the end of the book and, indeed, for the *Zeitgeist* of the people as a whole. To demonstrate this aural/oral/verbal propensity, we see that Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* concludes with a rumour, a promise, and a farewell: "As for Christian's children," the narrator writes, "I heard one say that they were yet alive"; if possible, the narrator will give "an account" of things he omits here; and finally he "bids his reader adieu" (*italics mine*). Turning from this allegory to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the American critic especially might expect a more imagistic conclusion to a travel saga. Yet, if Diana Neill is correct in calling *Robinson Crusoe* "the epitome" of middle-class virtues, this comment is most revealing in that *Crusoe*, "in the whole of his stay on the island . . . never once remarked on the beauty of nature or rhapsodized over a sunset."<sup>12</sup> The novel in fact closes with the un-Emersonian contentment of the narrator, "having lived a life of infinite variety seventy-two years, and learned sufficiently to know the value of retirement, and the blessing of ending one's days in peace." By contrast, Emerson knows that all these masterpieces of Europe are impotent in the face of his hypervisual ideal: "When I see the daybreak I am not reminded of these Homeric, or Chaucerian, or Shakespearean, or Miltonic pictures"; nor of "Pope and Addison and Johnson" who "write as if they had never seen the face of the country"<sup>13</sup> (*italics mine*). Here Emerson wants to rhapsodize: "Look, look, old mole! there, straight up before you, is the magnificent Sun."<sup>14</sup> Unlike the traveller, *Crusoe*, who knows the "value of retirement," Emerson strives relentlessly for "an original relation to the universe" (*Selections*, p. 21) — a relationship which he obtains by the dogma that "the eye is final" and "in the woods is perpetual youth" (*Selections*, p. 24).

Not unexpectedly, therefore, these hypervisual Emersonian "woods" had little charm for the characters of Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, who return to England on this moralistic comment: "We resolve to spend the remainder of our years in sincere penitence for the wicked lives we have led." This same penchant for moral didacticism and commentary has combined with the epistolary form in the novels of Samuel Richardson and produced some of the most talky fiction on record. In *Pamela*, for example, even after the final letter wherein the heroine receives the "blessed news, that you will set out for this happy house on Tuesday morning," the author must continue with "applications to the minds of Youth of Both Sexes." The novel concludes with this long-winded sentiment:

And the Editor of these sheets will have his end, if it inspires a laudable emulation in the minds of any worthy persons, who may thereby entitle themselves to the rewards, the praises, and the blessings, by which Pamela was so deservedly distinguished.

Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, begun as a parody of *Pamela*, also concludes with the blessed family and the eschewing of — albeit satirically — any "appearance in high life" or the British obsession with class. And if *Tom Jones* contrasts with *Clarissa* by presenting "a panorama flooded with warm light" (Neill, p. 71), this sunny imagery does not filter down to the conclusion, which ends with the customary social comment: "There is not a neighbor, a tenant, or a servant, who doth not most gratefully bless the day when Mr. Jones was married to his Sophia." Moreover, if Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* showed "how flexible the novel was" (Neill, 83), nevertheless it continues in the talky mode, concluding with a reference to a story, "And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard" (*italics mine*).

Nor do the Gothic Romances typify anything like Poe's conclusion of the dramatic, crumbling "fall" of the House of Usher. Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* ends with melancholy "frequent discourses" to one woman about another lover, now lost. Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* ends with more comment apropos of "the pleasures of enlightened society" and "domestic blessedness." And whether Austen's *Northanger Abbey* be bur-



lesque or not, it is nevertheless forced to come to terms with the forms of the day and concludes with moral didacticism: "I leave it to be settled, by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience."

On and on we could go with our illustrations, from Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* and the quintessentially British raven "who has probably gone on talking to the present time"; to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, which concludes with the prayer, "Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus"; to Eliot's *Silas Marner*, and its typical comment on happy domesticity: "I think nobody could be happier than we are." And in the twentieth century, there are the examples of Forster's *The Longest Journey*, with its concluding reference to a child "to whom he had given the name of their mother"; of Ford's *The Good Soldier*, beginning with "the saddest story I have ever heard" and concluding with "a telegram to Leonora," with which "she was quite pleased"; of Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, ending with an ironic prayer, "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven"; and of Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, concluding with the words of Father Rank: "And you may be in the right of it there, too."

Here, instead of continuing with these examples *ad infinitum* or *ad nauseam*, we conclude this survey with the final revelation of Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, where the young British hoodlum, Alex, is given what is hoped to be the ultimate re-socialization: "I laid there with my glazzies closed, slooshying the lovely music" — Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Yet the effect is not entirely what the British officials expect or desire, for the youth is so over-lyricized that he wishes to cut the throat "of the creeching world": "And there was the slow movement and the lovely last singing movement still to come. I was cured all right." It would appear that there are significant dangers — as well as benefits — to either the hypervisual or the hyperverbal ideal.

### III. EXCEPTIONS?

Of course, there are exceptions to the hypervisual/hyperverbal dichotomy presented above. The preceding examples illustrate a

dominant trend in each culture; and it is hoped that the reader will perform his own survey of stories and novels with which he is acquainted in order to further judge and qualify the hypotheses of this paper.

Still, I would like to argue that at least some of the apparently obvious exceptions to the hypervisual/hyperverbal rule are really much less damaging to the validity of my argument than may at first appear so. Take, for example, the *remark* of Lily Briscoe at the conclusion of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: "I have had my vision." This statement, with its tone of both finality and even relief (or weariness), is at odds with the on-going and pioneering search of a Leatherstocking, a Huck Finn, or a Hazel Motes. As Walt Whitman put it, we are ever to "look" for him "under our boot-soles." Our calling, as Emerson knew, was to "live ever in a new day" — an infinitely recurring "thousand-eyed present" (*American Literature*, 715). Or again, a British novelist may conclude, as Lawrence does in *The Rainbow*, with the assertion that "the rainbow stood on the earth"; but he is not content, as a Stephen Crane is, to leave the vision at that — he must also explain about the sweeping away of "corruption" and the creation of abstract "Truth." Conrad, in *Nostromo*, may give us the striking image of "a big white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver"; but not content with this, he adds the more abstract conclusion about "the genius of the magnificent capataz de cargadores" that "dominated the dark gulf containing his conquests of treasure and love." Indeed, Conrad's final emphasis upon "love" reveals the ultimately *social* impetus behind the English-speaking geist. Emerson in "Nature" would simply counter with the New-World predicament and ideal: "If a man would be alone, let him look at the stars" (*Selections*, p. 23).

Here, if a critic would understand both American and British literature and culture, let him look at the ends of their books.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "The Poet," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 238; hereafter cited parenthetically as *Selections*.

<sup>2</sup> William Butler Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," *Selected Poems*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Collier Books, 1968), p. 14; R. W. Emer-

- son, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, VII: 1838-42, ed. A. W. Plumstead and Harrison Hayford (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1968), p. 152.
- <sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Grigson, qtd. in H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York: Knopf, 1946), p. 43; italics mine.
- <sup>4</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Inventions and Public Service," in *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, ed. Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, 2 vols. (New York: St. Martin's, 1973), p. 135; collection hereafter cited parenthetically as *American Literature*.
- <sup>5</sup> Emerson, qtd. in *The Home Book of Quotations*, ed. Burton Stevenson (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1962), p. 597.
- <sup>6</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Charles Feidelson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), p. 220. Since most of the novels discussed are available in many editions, and endings are easily located, no citations are given for quotations from endings.
- <sup>7</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923), pp. 1, 2; *The Symbolic Meaning*, ed. Armin Arnold (New York: Viking Press, 1960), p. 17.
- <sup>8</sup> Emerson, *Journals*, XIV: 1854-61, ed. Susan Sutton Smith, p. 166.
- <sup>9</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: Signet, 1961), p. vii.
- <sup>10</sup> William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 388.
- <sup>11</sup> Flannery O'Connor, Correspondence to William Sessions (September 13, 1960), in *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966), p. 223.
- <sup>12</sup> Diana Neill, *A Short History of the English Novel* (New York: Collier Books, 1967), p. 51.
- <sup>13</sup> Emerson, in *A Modern Anthology*, ed. Alfred Kazin and Danile Aaron (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), pp. 37, 39.
- <sup>14</sup> Kazin and Aaron, p. 50.