
Introduction

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Fear and alarm are what I remember most about my first encounter with Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Palpable alarm. Unlike the treasure-island excursion of *Tom Sawyer*, at no point along Huck's journey was a happy ending signaled or guaranteed. Reading *Huckleberry Finn*, chosen randomly without guidance or recommendation, was deeply disturbing. My second reading of it, under the supervision of an English teacher in junior high school, was no less uncomfortable—rather more. It provoked a feeling I can only describe now as muffled rage, as though appreciation of the work required my complicity in and sanction of something shaming. Yet the satisfactions were great: riveting episodes of flight, of cunning; the convincing commentary on adult behavior, watchful and insouciant; the authority of a child's voice in language cut for its renegade tongue and sharp intelligence. Liberating language—not baby talk for the young, nor the doggedly patronizing language of so many books on the “children's shelf.” And there were interesting female characters: the clever woman undecieved by Huck's disguise; the young girl whose sorrow at the sale of slaves is grief for a family split rather than conveniences lost.

Nevertheless, for the second time, curling through the pleasure, clouding the narrative reward, was my original alarm, coupled now with a profoundly distasteful complicity.

Then, in the mid-fifties, I read it again—or sort of read it. Actually I read it through the lenses of Leslie Fiedler and Lionel Trilling. Exposed to Trilling's reverent intimacy and Fiedler's irreverent familiarity, I concluded that their criticisms served me better than the novel had, not only because they helped me see many things I had been unaware of, but precisely because they ignored or rendered trivial the things that caused my unease.

In the early eighties I read *Huckleberry Finn* again, provoked, I believe, by demands to remove the novel from the libraries and required reading lists of public schools. These efforts were based, it seemed to me, on a narrow notion of how to handle the offense Mark Twain's use of the term “nigger” would occasion for black students and the corrosive effect it would have on white ones. It struck me as a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children. Amputate the problem, band-aid the solution. A serious comprehensive discussion of the term by an intelligent teacher certainly would have benefited my eighth-grade class and would have spared all of us (a few blacks, many whites—mostly second-generation immigrant children) some grief. Name calling is a plague of childhood and a learned activity ripe for discussion as soon as it surfaces. Embarrassing as it had been to hear the dread word spoken, and therefore sanctioned, in class, my experience of Jim's epithet had little to do with my initial nervousness the book had caused. Reading “nigger” hundreds of times

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embarrassed, bored, annoyed—but did not faze me. In this latest reading I was curious about the source of my alarm—my sense that danger lingered after the story ended. I was powerfully attracted to the combination of delight and fearful agitation lying entwined like crossed fingers in the pages. And it was significant that this novel which had given so much pleasure to young readers was also complicated territory for sophisticated scholars.

Usually the divide is substantial: if a story that pleased us as novice readers does not disintegrate as we grow older, it maintains its value only in its retelling for other novices or to summon uncapturable pleasure as playback. Also, the books that academic critics find consistently rewarding are works only partially available to the minds of young readers. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* manages to close that divide, and one of the reasons it requires no leap is that in addition to the reverence the novel stimulates is its ability to transform its contradictions into fruitful complexities and to seem to be deliberately cooperating in the controversy it has excited. The brilliance of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it is the argument it raises.

My 1980s reading, therefore, was an effort to track the unease, nail it down, and learn in so doing the nature of my troubled relationship to this classic American work.

Although its language—sardonic, photographic, persuasively aural—and the structural use of the river as control and chaos seem to me quite the major feats of *Huckleberry Finn*, much of the novel's genius lies in its quiescence, the silences that pervade it and give it a porous quality that is by turns brooding and soothing. It lies in the approaches to and exits from action; the byways and inlets seen out of the corner of the eye: the subdued images in which the repetition of a simple word, such as "lonesome," tolls like an evening bell; the moments when nothing is said, when scenes and incidents swell the heart unbearably precisely because unarticulated, and force an act of imagination almost against the will. Some of the stillness, in the beautifully rendered eloquence of a child, is breathtaking. "The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine" (59). ". . . it was big trees all about, and gloomy in there amongst them. There was freckled places on the ground where the light sifted down through the leaves, and the freckled places swapped about a little" (61). Other moments, however, are frightening meditations on estrangement and death. Huck records a conversation he overhears among happy men he cannot see but whose voices travel from the landing over the water to him. Although he details what the men say, it is how distant Huck is from them, how separated he is from their laughing male camaraderie, that makes the scene memorable. References to death, looking at it or contemplating it are numerous. ". . . this drowned man was just his [Pap's] size, . . . but they couldn't make nothing out of the face . . . floating on his back in the water. . . . took him and buried him on the bank I knowed mighty well that a drowned man don't float on his

back, but on his face” (30). The emotional management of death seeds the novel: Huck yearns for death, runs from its certainty and feigns it. His deepest, uncomic feelings about his status as an outsider, someone “dead” to society, are murmuring interludes of despair, soleness, isolation and unlove. A plaintive note of melancholy and dread surfaces immediately in the first chapter, after Huck sums up the narrative of his life in a prior book.

Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars were shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes. . . . I got so downhearted and scared I did wish I had some company. (20)

Although Huck complains bitterly of rules and regulations, I see him to be running not from external control but from external chaos. Nothing in society makes sense; all is in peril. Upper-class, churchgoing, elegantly housed families annihilate themselves in a psychotic feud, and Huck has to drag two of their corpses from the water—one of whom is a just-made friend, the boy Buck; he sees the public slaughter of a drunk; he hears the vicious plans of murderers on a wrecked steamboat; he spends a large portion of the book in the company of “[Pap’s] kind of people” (166)—the fraudulent, thieving Duke and King who wield brutal power over him, just as his father did. No wonder that when he is alone, whether safe in the Widow’s house or hiding from his father, he is so very frightened and frequently suicidal.

If the emotional environment into which Twain places his protagonist is dangerous, then the leading question the novel poses for me is, What does Huck need to live without terror, melancholy and suicidal thoughts? The answer, of course, is Jim. When Huck is among society—whether respectable or deviant, rich or poor—he is alert to and consumed by its deception, its illogic, its scariness. Yet he is depressed by himself and sees nature more often as fearful. But when he and Jim become the only “we,” the anxiety is outside, not within. “We would watch the lonesomeness of the river . . . for about an hour . . . Just solid lonesomeness” (158). Unmanageable terror gives way to a pastoral, idyllic, intimate, timelessness minus the hierarchy of age, status or adult control. It has never seemed to me that, in contrast to the entrapment and menace of the shore, the river itself provides this solace. The consolation, the healing properties Huck longs for, is made possible by Jim’s active, highly vocal affection. It is in Jim’s company that the dread of contemplated nature disappears, that even storms are

beautiful and sublime, that real talk—comic, pointed, sad—takes place. Talk so free of lies it produces an aura of restfulness and peace unavailable anywhere else in the novel.

Pleasant as this relationship is, suffused as it is by a lightness they both enjoy and a burden of responsibility both assume, it cannot continue. Knowing the relationship is discontinuous, doomed to separation, is (or used to be) typical of the experience of white/black childhood friendships (mine included), and the cry of inevitable rupture is all the more anguished by being mute. Every reader knows that Jim will be dismissed without explanation at some point; that no enduring adult fraternity will emerge. Anticipating this loss may have led Twain to the over-the-top minstrelization of Jim. Predictable and common as the gross stereotyping of blacks was in nineteenth-century literature, here, nevertheless, Jim's portrait seems unaccountably excessive and glaring in its contradictions—like an ill-made clown suit that cannot hide the man within. Twain's black characters were most certainly based on real people. His nonfiction observations of and comments on "actual" blacks are full of references to their guilelessness, intelligence, creativity, wit, caring, etc. None is portrayed as relentlessly idiotic. Yet Jim is unlike, in many ways, the real people he must have been based on. There may be more than one reason for this extravagance. In addition to accommodating a racist readership, writing Jim so complete a buffoon solves the problem of "missing" him that would have been unacceptable at the novel's end, and helps to solve another problem: how effectively to bury the father figure underneath the minstrel paint. The foregone temporariness of the friendship urges the degradation of Jim (to divert Huck's and our inadvertent sorrow at the close), and minstrelizing him necessitates and exposes an enforced silence on the subject of white fatherhood.

The withholdings at critical moments, which I once took to be deliberate evasions, stumbles even, or a writer's impatience with his or her material, I began to see as otherwise: as entrances, crevices, gaps, seductive invitations flashing the possibility of meaning. Unarticulated eddies that encourage diving into the novel's undertow—the real place where writer captures reader. An excellent example of what is available in this undertow is the way Twain comments on the relationship between the antebellum period in which the narrative takes place and the later period in which the novel was composed. The 1880s saw the collapse of civil rights for blacks as well as the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*. This collapse was an effort to bury the combustible issues Twain raised in his novel. The nation, as well as Tom Sawyer, was deferring Jim's freedom in agonizing play. The cyclical attempts to remove the novel from classrooms extend Jim's captivity on into each generation of readers.

Or consider Huck's inability to articulate his true feelings for Jim to anybody other than the reader. When he "humbles himself" in apology to Jim for the painful joke he plays on him, we are not given the words. Even to Tom, the only other friend he has and the only one his own age, he must mask his emotions. Until the hell-or-heaven choice,

Huck can speak of the genuine affection and respect for Jim that blossoms throughout the narrative only aslant, or comically to the reader—never directly to any character or to Jim himself. While Jim repeatedly iterates his love, the depth of Huck's feelings for Jim is stressed, underscored and rendered unimpeachable by Twain's calculated use of speechlessness. The accumulated silences build to Huck's ultimate act of love, in which he accepts the endangerment of his soul. These silences do not appear to me of merely historical accuracy—a realistic portrait of how a white child *would* respond to a black slave; they seem to be expert technical solutions to the narrative's complexities and, by the way, highly prophetic descriptions of contemporary negotiations between races.

Consider the void that follows the revelation of Jim as a responsible adult and caring parent in chapter 23. Huck has nothing to say. The chapter does not close; it simply stops. Blanketed by eye dialect, placed auspiciously at chapter's end, held up, framed, as it were, for display by Huck's refusal to comment, it is one of the most moving remembrances in American literature. Then comes the “meanwhile-back-at-the-ranch” first line of the next chapter. The hush between these two chapters thunders. And its roar is enhanced by Huck's observation on the preceding page: that although Jim's desperate love for his wife and children “don't seem natural,” Huck “reckon[s] it's so” (201). This comment is fascinating less for its racism than for the danger it deflects from Huck himself. Huck has never seen nor experienced a tender, caring father—yet he steps out of this well of ignorance to judge Jim's role as a father.

What I read into this observation and the hiatus that follows Jim's confirmation of his “naturalness” is that the line of thought Jim's fatherhood might provoke cannot be pursued by the author or his protagonist for fear of derailing the text into another story or destabilizing its center (this is *Huck's* adventure, not Jim's). It invites serious speculation about fatherhood—its expectations and ramifications—in the novel. First of all, it's hard not to notice that except for Judge Thatcher all of the white men who might function as father figures for Huck are ridiculed for their hypocrisy, corruption, extreme ignorance and/or violence. Thus Huck's “no comment” on Jim's status as a father works either as a comfortable evasion for or as a critique of a white readership, as well as being one of the gags Twain shoves in Huck's mouth to protect him from the line of thought neither he nor Twain can safely pursue.

As an abused and homeless child running from a feral male parent, Huck cannot dwell on Jim's confession and regret about parental negligence without precipitating a crisis from which neither he nor the text could recover. Huck's desire for a father who is adviser and trustworthy companion is universal, but he also needs something more: a father whom, unlike his own, he can control. No white man can serve all three functions. If the runaway Huck discovered on the island had been a white convict with protective paternal instincts, none of this would work, for there could be no guarantee of control and no games-playing nonsense concerning his release at the end. Only a

black male slave can deliver all Huck desires. Because Jim can be controlled, it becomes possible for Huck to feel responsible for and to him—but without the onerous burden of lifelong debt that a real father figure would demand. For Huck, Jim is a father-for-free. This delicate, covert and fractious problematic is thus hidden and exposed by litotes and speechlessness, both of which are dramatic ways of begging attention.

Concerning this matter of fatherhood, there are two other instances of silence—one remarkable for its warmth, the other for its glacial coldness. In the first, Jim keeps silent for practically four-fifths of the book about having seen Pap's corpse. There seems no reason for this withholding except his concern for Huck's emotional well-being. Although one could argue that knowing the menace of his father was over might relieve Huck enormously, it could also be argued that dissipating that threat would remove the principal element of the necessity for escape—Huck's escape, that is. In any case, silence on this point persists and we learn its true motive in the penultimate paragraph in the book. And right there is the other speech void—cold and shivery in its unsaying. Jim tells Huck that his money is safe because his father is dead.

“Doan’ you ‘member de house dat was float’n down de river, en dey wuz a man in dah kivered up, en I went in en unkivered him and didn’ let you come in? . . . dat wuz him” (365–66). Huck says and thinks nothing about it. The following sentence, we are to believe, is Huck's very next thought: “Tom's most well now. . . .”

As a reader I am relieved to know Pap is no longer a menace to his son's well-being, but Huck does not share my relief. Again the father business is erased. What after all could Huck say? That he is as glad as I am? That would not do. Huck's decency prevents him from taking pleasure in anybody's death. That he is sorry? Wishes his father were alive? Hardly. The whole premise of escape while fearing and feigning death would collapse, and the contradiction would be unacceptable. Instead the crevice widens and beckons reflection on what this long-withheld information means. Any comment at this juncture, positive or negative, would lay bare the white father/white son animosity and harm the prevailing though illicit black father/white son bonding that has already taken place.

Such profoundly realized and significant moments, met with startling understatement or shocking absence of any comment at all, constitute the entrances I mentioned earlier—the invitation Twain offers that I could not refuse.

Earlier I posed the question, What does Huck need to live without despair and thoughts of suicide? My answer was, Jim. There is another question the novel poses for me: What would it take for Huck to live happily without Jim? That is the problem that gnarls the dissolution of their relationship. The freeing of Jim is withheld, fructified, top-heavy with pain, because without Jim there is no more book, no more story to tell.

There is a moment when it could have happened, when Jim, put ashore at Cairo, would have gone his way, leaving Huck to experience by himself the other adventures

that follow. The reasons they miss Cairo are: there are only saplings to secure the raft; the raft tears away; Huck “couldn’t budge” for half a minute; Huck forgets he has tied the canoe, can’t “hardly do anything” with his hands and loses time releasing it; they are enveloped in a “solid white fog”; and for a reason even Huck doesn’t understand, Jim does not do what is routine in foggy weather—beat a tin pan to signal his location (115-16). During the separation Huck notes the “dismal and lonesome” scene and searches for Jim until he is physically exhausted. Readers are as eager as he is to locate Jim, but when he does, receiving Jim’s wild joy, Huck does not express his own. Rather Twain writes in the cruel joke that first sabotages the easily won relief and sympathy we feel for Jim, then leads Huck and us to a heightened restoration of his stature. A series of small accidents prevents Jim’s exit from the novel, and Huck is given the gift of an assertive as well as already loving black father. It is to the father, not the nigger, that he “humbles” himself.

So there will be no “adventures” without Jim. The risk is too great. To Huck and to the novel. When the end does come, when Jim is finally, tortuously, unnecessarily freed, able now to be a father to his own children, Huck runs. Not back to the town—even if it is safe now—but a further run, for the “territory.” And if there are complications out there in the world, Huck, we are to assume, is certainly ready for them. He has had a first-rate education in social and individual responsibility, and it is interesting to note that the lessons of his growing but secret activism begin to be punctuated by speech, not silence, by moves toward truth, rather than quick lies.

When the King and Duke auction Peter Wilks’s slaves, Huck is moved by the sorrow of Wilks’s nieces—which is caused not by losing the slaves but by the blasting of the family.

. . . along about noon-time, the girls’ joy got the first jolt. A couple of nigger-traders come along, and the king sold them the niggers reasonable, for three-day drafts as they called it, and away they went, the two sons up the river to Memphis, and their mother down the river to Orleans. I thought them poor girls and them niggers would break their hearts for grief; they cried around each other, and took on so it most made me down sick to see it. The girls said they hadn’t ever dreamed of seeing the family separated or sold away from the town. . . .

The thing made a big stir in the town, too, and a good many come out flatfooted and said it was scandalous to separate the mother and the children that way. (234–35)

Later, when Huck sees Mary Jane Wilks with “her face in her hands, crying,” he knows what is bothering her even before he asks her to tell him about it. “And it was the niggers—I just expected it.” I think it is important to note that he is responding to the separation of parents and children. When Mary Jane sobs, “Oh, dear, dear, to think they

ain't *ever* going to see each other any more!" Huck reacts so strongly he blurts out a part of the truth just to console her. "But they *will*—and inside of two weeks—and I *know* it" (240). Her dismay over the most grotesque consequences of slavery catapults him into one of his most mature and difficult decisions—to abandon silence and chance the truth.

The change from underground activist to vocal one marks Huck's other important relationship—that between himself and Tom Sawyer, to whom Huck has always been subservient. Huck's cooperation in Jim's dehumanization is not total. It is pierced with mumbling disquiet as the degradation becomes more outré. "That warn't the plan"; "there ain't no necessity for it"; "we're going to get into trouble with Aunt Polly"; ". . . if you'll take my advice"; "what's the sense in. . ."; "Confound it, it's foolish, Tom"; "Jim's too old . . . He won't last"; "How long will it take?"; "it's one of the most jackass ideas I ever struck." But these objections are not enough. Our apprehension as we follow the free fall of the father is only mildly subdued by our satisfaction at the unmanacled exit of the freedman. Tom Sawyer's silence about Jim's legal status is perverse. So perverse that the fact that Huck never speaks of or considers returning to his hometown to carry on with his erstwhile best friend (this time in safety *and* with money of his own) but wants to leave civilization altogether is more than understandable. Huck cannot have an enduring relationship with Jim; he refuses one with Tom.

The source of my unease reading this amazing, troubling book now seems clear: an imperfect coming to terms with three matters Twain addresses—Huck Finn's estrangement, soleness and morbidity as an outcast child; the disproportionate sadness at the center of Jim's and his relationship; and the secrecy in which Huck's engagement with (rather than escape from) a racist society is necessarily conducted. It is also clear that the rewards of my effort to come to terms have been abundant. My alarm, aroused by Twain's precise rendering of childhood's fear of death and abandonment, remains—as it should. It has been extremely worthwhile slogging through Jim's shame and humiliation to recognize the sadness, the tragic implications at the center of his relationship with Huck. My fury at the maze of deceit, the risk of personal harm that a white child is forced to negotiate in a race-inflected society, is dissipated by the exquisite uses to which Twain puts that maze, that risk.

Yet the larger question, the danger that sifts from the novel's last page, is whether Huck, minus Jim, will be able to stay those three monsters as he enters the "territory." Will that undefined space, so falsely imagined as "open," be free of social chaos, personal morbidity, and further moral complications embedded in adulthood and citizenship? Will it be free not only of nightmare fathers but of dream fathers too? Twain did not write Huck there. He imagined instead a reunion—Huck, Jim and Tom, soaring in a balloon over Egypt.

For a hundred years, the argument that this novel *is* has been identified, reidentified, examined, waged and advanced. What it cannot be is dismissed. It is classic literature, which is to say it heaves, manifests and lasts.