

## The Crowded Raft

### *Huckleberry Finn* & Its Critics

J. C. FURNAS

Credentials first: I am a Finnophile first-class. At the age of nine in a Pullman car on the way to Florida in 1915, I read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Tom Sawyer's Comrade) and have never been the same since. The ensuing seventy years have widened my acquaintance with American literature. Yet if forced to choose only one piece of American writing to be spared from an otherwise clean-sweep annihilation, I'd never hesitate. For many that is at least an understandable choice. It is anything but original. Long since, H. L. Mencken, T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, F. R. Leavis ("one of the great books of the world") have celebrated it far beyond my poor power to add or to detract. Yet if most of what is usually promulgated about that remarkable work is sound, we primitive Finnophiles are dismayingly misguided.

Late last year while having a nightcap with a college classmate of whom I see less than I'd like, I learned for the first time, though not to my surprise, that he agreed that, alone among Mark Twain's works, *Huckleberry Finn* does justice to his extraordinary talent. We got to quoting chunks of it to each other: The loafers' drowsy maunderings at the ferry landing; Pap's blast at the "govment"; Jim's contempt for the wisdom of Sollerrmun; the lovely passage beginning, "It was a monstrous big river down there. . . ." We further agreed that today's—and yesterday's as far back as the 1920s—accepted wisdom about the book not

only misrepresents but obscures its virtues.

Maybe we were experiencing ESP. A few days later my *New York Times Book Review* proclaimed a landmark of which we had been unaware—1985 as the hundredth anniversary of the American publication of *Huckleberry Finn*. The same annus mirabilis also included the hundredth birthday of Ring Lardner and the three hundredth of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel. All received appropriate attention. But when the final precincts have reported, *Huckleberry Finn* will probably be a squeakily close second, at worst. The University of California Press published three new editions with various refinements. The University of Missouri Press published a twenty-five-warhead book of essays on Huck. Chicago's Goodman Theatre revived a stage version produced by the local Organic Theatre ten years ago; Huck got double publicity from that, for inevitably it revived the controversy over whether its consistent use of *nigger* makes him unacceptable. A vast musical version alleged to cost three million dollars came to Broadway. The National Geographic Society set up a *Huckleberry Finn* exhibit in Washington. It felt as though Tom Sawyer had called in a Madison Avenue PR wizard to make sure Huck got his centenary just due. Heaven knows he deserves it, heaped up and running over—but a *just* due. Too often the terms in which he is celebrated make one wonder what book the climbers on the bandwagon are talking about.

For, all too many of them, however sure they are that it is a masterpiece, cannot accept it as is—an unruly, lopsided, half-inadvertent joy too sui generis to hold still even for the label "picaresque novel." Only its brilliant

♦ J. C. FURNAS is the author of many books, the latest of which is *Fanny Kemble*, winner of the Theatre Library Association's 1982 George Freedley Award.

central portion carries the full range of its virtues. The first twenty-five pages are just warmed-over *Tom Sawyer*. When Pap arrives in Huck's bedroom, the magic begins and weaves gorgeous spells for more than two hundred pages. But the concluding ninety pages, though sometimes irresponsibly funny, are an exasperating reprise of Tom Sawyer-ism that, as Stephen Leacock said and Ernest Hemingway agreed, spoils things.

That is the work under discussion. The reader is assumed to be well versed in it. The underprivileged (those who are uncertain about who Mrs. Judith Loftus was) are urged to do themselves the favor of rereading.

After some preliminary rumblings, the tone-setting opening gun of the doings came when the *New York Times Book Review* asked Norman Mailer to celebrate *Huckleberry Finn*. Most of his piece whimsically sketched its influence on American writing. But his last two paragraphs took off into what I had been flinchingly expecting—a rehash of orthodox criticism that set the keynote:

Few works of literature can be so luminous without the presence of some majestic symbol. . . . We are presented with the best river ever to flow through a novel . . . larger than a character, the river is a manifest presence, a demiurge to support the man and the boy, a deity to betray them, feed them, all but drown them, fling them apart, float them back together. The river winds like a fugue through the marrow of the true narrative which is nothing less than the ongoing relation between Huck and the runaway slave, this Nigger Jim whose name embodies the very stuff of the slave system itself—his name is not Jim but Nigger Jim. The growth of love and knowledge between the runaway white and the runaway black is . . . full of betrayal and nourishment, separation and return. So it manages to touch that last fine nerve of the heart where compassion and irony speak to one another and thereby give a good turn to our most protected emotions.

. . . One comes to realize all over again that the near-burned-out, throttled, hate-filled affair between whites and blacks is still our great national love-affair. . . . "*Huckleberry Finn*" frees us to think of democracy and its sublime, terrifying promise.

Mailer flawed his credentials as a Finnophile by admitting that at the age of ten or so he much enjoyed *Tom Sawyer*, but *Huckleberry Finn* as a sequel sadly disappointed

him; and then in college he was puzzled by the high regard nearly everyone who taught American Lit. "professed for it. Obviously I was waiting for an assignment from the *New York Times*." (That is the reverse of my experience; I read *Tom Sawyer* second and thought it much inferior, and still do.) Evidence is strong that Mailer not only reread the book at the paper's behest but also explored the commentaries with which critical enterprise has cumbered it. Maybe he also recalled bits of those American Lit. lectures in Sever Hall. Anyway, the above carries the authentic flavor of not a justified Finnophilia but an overwrought Finnomania.

For a symptomatic error: Mailer's overplayed "Nigger Jim" motif has no standing in court. No such label appears in *Huckleberry Finn*. It is exactly wrong to say "his name is not Jim but Nigger Jim." Lowercase "nigger" is freely used, of course, as an intrinsic (however distasteful nowadays) part of Huck's supple, shapely, back-homey idiom. Others, black and white, refer to Jim as "nigger"; but Mark Twain's text designates him only as "Jim" or "Miss Watson's Jim"; no racial tag, no capitalized "Nigger Jim" to make him the archetype symbol of black slavery. The only capitalization involved is his notion that to achieve freedom will make him rich, for he will then own himself, and a slave trader had offered Miss Watson \$800 for him. Yet that "Nigger Jim" distortion is curiously common in the accumulated literature—used by, among others, Hemingway, Ralph Ellison, Lionel Trilling, Leslie Fiedler. It typifies in miniature the liberties so often taken with the book in hopes of squaring it with such critical clichés as Mailer purveys in dwelling on the river-as-symbol and the erotic overtones of black/white. The prurient tingle in that last may stem from Fiedler's essay, conspicuous a generation ago, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey"—a model of impertinence (in both senses) that lumped Huck/Jim, Ishmael/Queequeg, Leather-Stocking/Chingachgook, and Dana/Hope as intertwined symbols of latent homosexuality in cronyism between whites and nonwhites.

But the general tenor of Mailer's overture actually goes back much further, almost three generations, to Waldo Frank's *Our America* (1919). Its hot-news statement was that *Huckleberry Finn* is:

the voice of American chaos. . . . Mark Twain had meant it for the mere sequel of another tale . . . but his theme was too apt a symbol. . . . Huck is America. And Huck floats down the current of a mighty Stream . . . is the American epic hero . . . an illiterate lad . . . expresses our germinal past . . . the movement of the American soul through all the sultry climates of the Nineteenth Century. . . . The whole gamut of American beginnings ran with the river. And Huck along. One rises from the book lost in a great rhythmic flow . . . and upon the heaving surface of this Flood . . . the American soul like a midge upon the tide of the world.

That really belongs in the *New Yorker's* "How's That Again?" department. How can chaos have anything so integrated as a voice? "The whole gamut of American beginnings"? For its first century and a half our America had little to do with the Mississippi. "One rises from the book lost in a great rhythmic flow"? One does so deploring Mark Twain's imposing on the reader that coda of thirty-thousand words of contrived farce. "Illiterate lad"? Frank must have meant *uncultivated*, for Huck has learned to read and write; his gleanings from the books found in the wrecked steamboat set off entertaining discussion between him and Jim. About the only element that stands scrutiny is the description of the Father of Waters as a "mighty Stream." It was those wild swings that not only began but have permeated in spirit the tradition of irresponsible rhapsody ever since, enhancing the epiphany of *Huckleberry Finn*: no gold and no myrrh, but lots of Frankincense.

Until *Our America* set those symbols tinkling, Finnophiles had been content to call the book something gloriously close to the Great American Novel that literary patriots longed for. By 1913, for instance, John Macy, eminent critic and liberal friend of good writing, rated it "the greatest piece of American fiction . . . one of the unaccountable triumphs of creative power that happen now and again." But once Frank had shown the way to lily gilding, throngs of disciples came heaping their extravagances—some imitative, some innovative—on their leader's. Thirty years ago Leo Marx had reason to complain that "the problem of evaluating the book is as much obscured by unqualified praise as it once was by parochial hostility"—meaning that hostility of the librarians of the 1890s who rejected it as "unqualified trash." Further apropos,

Kenneth S. Lynn later protested that "the only trash connected with *Huckleberry Finn* is what emanates from the teachers thereof" and ascribed at least part of the trouble to "professional interpreters of literature [lacking] a sense of humor."

Among them such interpreters have given Ole Man River quite a beating, working up the world's first 2,348-mile cliché. Though Macy had early deplored a tendency to call *Huckleberry Finn* "an Odyssey of the Mississippi," in 1931 Constance Rourke's widely acclaimed *American Humor* said it "gave to the great flood of the Mississippi an elementary place in the American experience, with the river a dominating fantasy, with the small human figures as prototypes of those untethered wanderers who had appeared so often on the popular horizon." If that really means anything, it casts Huck, Jim, Huck's drunken rattlesnake of a father, and Colonel Sherburn as abstract walk-ons in a World's Fair pageant cobbled together round a river theme. Ever since, the symbol seekers have clogged the Mississippi with pretentious metaphor and simile; a fair sample is Pascal Covici's: "Just as the river flows between slave and free territory [as it doesn't during most of the book], so Huck's soul balances between an infinite series of opposites."

F. R. Leavis took high ground when seeing in Huck's story "a central theme . . . the complexity of ethical values in a society with a complex tradition." Trilling raised the ante: the novel "has the truth of moral passion [and] . . . deals directly with the virtue and depravity of man's heart." His credentials were better than Mailer's: "One may read [*Huckleberry Finn*] at ten and then annually ever after, and each year find that it is as fresh as before." But he goes on, ominously, "Each year adds a new growth of meaning," and likens the first-time reader to an Athenian boy growing up with the *Odyssey*. To cue in his river motif, Trilling quotes Eliot about the Mississippi as "a strong brown god" and proceeds: "Huck himself is the servant of the river-god and he comes very close to being aware of the divine nature of the being he serves. . . . The river itself is only divine; it is not ethical and good. But its nature seems to foster the goodness of those who love it and try to fit themselves into its ways." This could be a Wagnerian libretto starring Heidi.

Trilling also joined the movement to inflate Jim into a figure from an anti-racist WPA mural: "In Jim [Huck] finds his true father . . . the boy and the negro slave form a family, a primitive community—and it is a community of saints." Somewhat later Kenneth Rexroth formally ushered Huck's adventures into the lecture-room Valhalla: "It would have been impossible for Mark Twain not to have had Homer constantly in mind. . . . Huck and Jim are obviously Crusoe and Friday reborn. . . . Twain's novel occupies the same symbolic universe as Whitman's *Passage to India*." No doubt Sam Clemens read one or another translation of Homer, but I know of nothing in his writings to show it. And if there are two important American writers less alike than Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, it would have to be Finley Peter Dunne and Theodore Dreiser.

The effect—and doubtless the purpose—of all that sort of thing is so to blur the actual nature of the text in question that it will sound like a blend of *Moby-Dick* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ghosted by Thomas Wolfe, its chief merits consisting of the river-symbolism and the way Nigger Jim as essence of black slavery causes Huck's soul to bud and blossom. That might make a notable book, but it would not be *Huckleberry Finn*. If it were, those elements would dominate the text; whereas, in fact, of its roughly one hundred and ten thousand words, a rough workup shows only three thousand dealing with the river in any manner suggesting a pervasive symbol; and only twenty-two hundred dealing with slavery, including the deservedly famous long passage about Huck's decision to go to hell in order to stay on Jim's side. Clearly the river and Jim-as-slave are only minor, though priceless, matters recurring off and on—indeed hit-or-miss—in an overflowing, rambling yarn.

Waldo Frank, Lionel Trilling, and Norman Mailer may serve as benchmarks between which some sixty years of academic busywork has evolved several other gratuitous mythologies. More may be hovering, for so far, nobody has imaginatively exploited the book's thunderstorms, a speciality of Mark Twain's. (And how well he did them!) His patent delight in meteorological turmoil could afford some candidate for a Ph.D. God-knows-what pregnant surmises. For present purposes, however, most of the orthodox range is succinctly pack-

aged in a purchase I recently made at the bookstore of a famous university town: *Cliffs Notes on Huckleberry Finn* by James L. Roberts of the University of Nebraska's department of English—one of that teeming series of handbooks supplying apprehensive students with synopses of and deep thoughts about *Beowulf*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Anna Karenina*, *Don Quixote*. . . . Its text is unsettlingly shaky on the exact meanings of words, using *persecute* for *prosecute*, *instigate* for *initiate*, *imitate* for *impersonate* and calls the King's and the Duke's treacherous sale of Jim back into slavery their "final calumny." But it is a thorough \$2.75 worth.

Dutifully it leads off with ". . . the Odyssey down the river . . . immediately takes upon [*sic*] a mythical quality" and touches all bases from then on. "Birth and rebirth" are soon symbolizing away, starting when Huck fakes being murdered to get away from Pap and then, on Jackson's Island, enjoys the attempt to find his presumably waterlogged body. Every time he assumes a false identity to get out of trouble, birth and rebirth raise their chubby little hands. Pap carries two layers of significance: first he symbolizes the brutality of the civilization that Huck mistrusts—Pap being the least civilized figure Mark Twain could draw—then later is alleged to provide an antithetic parallel to Jim's dismay over having struck his deaf daughter. The name of the wrecked steamboat, *Walter Scott*, betokens Mark Twain's scorn for the Author of *Waterley*. The ease with which the King and the Duke impose on others shows how "only through the sentimentalizing and the gullibility of the general public can such rogues flourish." Huck's shying away from "sivilization" correlates with Jim's "quest of freedom from slavery." The fits of loneliness that Huck, reasonably enough, associates with the unrelievedly empty expanse of river must be further linked to "the vastness of the frontier . . . and the formidable forests which surrounded the settlements"—neither of which elements has a part in the story. The masterly pages about the Grangerford house and Emmeline as poet and artist—one of the most delightful pieces of writing in English—are adduced merely as part "of Twain's technique of using Huck as a realistic reporter . . . [and] satire against those who have . . . bad taste in almost everything." The undertaker, rat,

and dog at the Wilks funeral—one of the funniest things ever written—is solemnly identified as “the first significant American satire on the sentimentality of funeral customs.” All this is derivative, of course, distilled off from a mash of the handbook’s elders and betters; but that makes it an invaluable museum of Finnomania.

Those *Cliffs Notes* thus supply what it is advisable to regurgitate at exam time. But this *Huckleberry Finn* item will soon need revision. That fresh-off-the-press *Hundred Years of Huckleberry Finn* has added to the compost 180,000 more words from twenty-five qualified scholars.

The editor’s preface asks: “Do we really need . . . another couple of dozen essays on that novel” and then assures itself that the following contributions triumphantly show “how inexhaustible a source of the need for fresh commentary *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been, is, no doubt will be.” No doubt. Once established, perpetual motion takes a lot of braking.

Allison R. Ensor’s able account of the illustrations that have visually interpreted Huck, Jim, Aunt Sally, et al. over the last century has value for even the mere Finnophile. So has David Sewell’s expert discussion of the subtle variations of Mark Twain’s manipulations of language. Beyond that, however, the book suggests numerous well-meaning blind men so engrossed in elaborating farfetched insights that if the elephant were to walk out on them they’d hardly notice.

Among them a certain professor of English, who dabbles in psychoanalysis and naturally leans heavily on Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, describes Huck as testing “the affection of Jim, his totemic second father, in the masculine Sacred Forest of Jackson’s Island, then in the feminine coils of the river monster.” But it is an unalloyed professor of English who, noting that the late Peter Wilks left three daughters, suggests that the whole Wilks episode is “an inverse duplication of King Lear.” For another professor, the name Finn, admittedly drawn from the town drunk of Mark Twain’s boyhood, nevertheless implies “Huck’s association with the river and the fish on which he and Jim depend . . . with its reference to a legendary Gaelic warrior . . . it also implies that a former grandeur lies behind the family debased by . . . Pap Finn.”

Still another professor treats Pap at more respectful length in his highly original analysis of an alcoholic psychopath: he represents “an-archic individualism . . . because he feels none of the positive ties of family and affection. . . .”

Though he has had no academic training, Huck comes up with some pretty breathless subtleties; for instance, he detects “an underlying kinship between Emmeline’s speedy tributes for [sic] the dead and Buck’s monomaniacal haste to kill a Shepherdson.” From observing the King and the Duke he deduces “that the confidence man is no longer a marginal predator but a national symbol of the American character.” Or, less actively, in the trendy light of the 1980s, he “represents the typically helpless victim of a world in which nightmare, absurd quests for identity, alienation, and apocalypse are the facts of daily life.” But he comes down with a thud as still another essayist denigrates him and associates: He is only “a dimly comprehending fumbler and stooge”; Tom Sawyer “a dominating knave”; Jim “a victim.” Indeed Tom is “the true protagonist” of this novel—in which he appears in less than a third of its length.

These givers of good measure customarily speak as though the patterns they ascribe to the text are Mark Twain’s doing. If so, in writing *Huckleberry Finn* he consciously meant: to teach “that whereas utopianism is possible, utopians are not”; to “lead us to comprehend how the Civil War was possible”; to inculcate “the hard lessons about accumulated wealth that he thought Americans . . . were in need of learning.” Even a temporary reference to the biblical Moses in the early section is seized on as Mark Twain’s “clear prefiguration of Huck’s . . . mission . . . helping Jim to gain freedom.” And—take a long breath here—the book as a whole embodies his “understanding of human life . . . as . . . a precarious continuity in which identity is maintained only by our willingness to accept definition of ourselves from the norms of society and the expectations of others.” Now exhale.

The other possibility is, of course, that such speculations detect and describe the symptoms of subliminal struggles within the writer’s mind or emotional depths, however labeled, which implies that, among them, this scratch committee of earnest specialists in

literature can deduce from the outside and, long after the fact, what Mark Twain had in mind, or what his maimed psyche hoped to saddle him with. It all makes *Huckleberry Finn* a cryptopsychodrama riding seven mutually contradictory ways at once. Fortunately we don't need to guess what Mark Twain would have said about this amateur psychiatrists' grab bag. He led off the first edition of *Huckleberry Finn* with this "Notice": "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." And you should see what ingenious squirreling occurs when a loyal significance seeker goes to the mat with that.

Another gnarly problem for the *Huckleberry Finn* industry is that brought up by *Cliffs Notes* in review question number nine, as well as by several of the experts in *One Hundred Years of Huckleberry Finn*: "If the purpose of the trip down the river is to gain freedom for Jim, why do they continue deeper and deeper into slave territory?"

The simple, maybe adequate, answer is that Mark Twain usually wrote in bursts of improvisation. He was not the man to bother reflecting that, if keeping Jim from being sold down the river—his stated reason for running away—was primary, all he had to do the first dark night was catch a drift log and swim to the free-soil Illinois shore from Jackson's Island before Huck ever found him there. Indeed, Jim makes it clear that he has some such intention: "I'd . . . swim ashore, en take to de woods on de Illinois side." Had he thus tried his luck, however, all Mark Twain's suddenly new plans for Huck and Jim together would have miscarried. Further, this question illuminates the book's inadequacy as the sermon-after-the-fact against slavery that it is often thought to be; as a devoted student of it recently wrote: "The principal purpose was to describe an ignorant 14-year-old boy's awakening to the injustices of slavery." That is a worthy purpose, and Mark Twain had come to hate what slavery had been, as certain of his other works show. But if that was what he had in mind for *Huckleberry Finn*, he had a strange way of going at it.

Back to review question number nine. It is likely that, on picking up the unfinished draft

of *Huckleberry Finn* after it had lain fallow for years, he sent Huck and Jim's raft past Cairo, the last vestige of free soil, because he was obeying an imperative impulse to show readers the raffish settlements along the lower Mississippi that he had known as a river pilot. Since this resulted in the central narrative that is perhaps America's best book, *bravo!* But it blurred the values of Jim's predicament. Worse, Tom Sawyer reenters the story fifty thousand words later and embarks on frivolous claptrap to free Jim in spite of Tom's being aware, as Huck and Jim are not, that on her deathbed Miss Watson has already freed him. Those capers cut the emotional ground from under the freedom-for-good-old-Jim issue and identify Mark Twain as the most irresponsible great writer since Shakespeare, who was so heedless about the way his plays got printed. Yet, the over-subtilizers being what they are, many a critic unable to accept this has sought to maintain that, looked at creatively, the misbegotten ending really symbolizes the values of the trip-down-the-river—or some such casuistry. Whereas what Leo Marx wrote thirty years ago remains starkly true: "To take seriously what happens on the Phelps farm is to take lightly the entire downstream journey."

Huck's growing affection for Jim and Jim's loyalty to Huck creep up on the reader just as they should. That has set certain observers—most cogently Philip Foner—nominating him the hero of the story. Even if one limits "hero" to the classic meaning of "principal male character," the notion is unsound; if there is a hero, Huck is it. That Mark Twain had nothing like a Jim-hero in mind is obvious, as the Tomfoolery on the Phelps place leaches away the dignity that Huck has sensed in Jim during the trip down the river. The basis for Jim-as-hero was scant anyway. The first few pages show him as pretentiously self-impressed by his own exaggerations of superstitious delusions. Some of the E. W. Kemble illustrations that Mark Twain personally insisted on (more numerous in the first edition than in subsequent trade editions) make Jim a pop-eyed, grinning semi-caricature. Saying that he was "white inside" and "had an uncommon level head for a nigger" is as far as Huck goes toward what today's standards would prefer. Toward the end Jim regains some dignity by risking return to slavery in order to get Tom's

wound looked after. By the last time we see him, he has reverted to the chuckleheaded superstitions of the first chapter. In *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, a feeble sequel, Mark Twain returns him to the kind of dispute that led Huck to say: "You can't learn a nigger to argue." Ralph Ellison had cause to write: "I could imagine myself as Huck Finn . . . but not Nigger Jim . . . a white man's inadequate portrait of a slave."

The customary Huck image also shows disconcerting flaws. Can "the sensitive and suffering Huck" really serve as "a conscience for an entire era and culture," as Frank Baldanza asserted? DeLancey Ferguson was much closer to the actuality: Mark Twain, he writes, "simply took a clever and uninhibited boy and let the whole world of the Mississippi happen to him." His willingness to go to hell for Jim is notably overplayed. It is not mounting revulsion against slavery, as such, but generous defiance for personal reasons of the "civilization" that he already dislikes and of which slavery, as he knows it, is an integral part. Frilling saw this: "He no more condemns slavery than Tristram and Lancelot condemn marriage." What happens to Huck is often character revealing, never character developing—never a flash of light on the road to Damascus. It is often laid down that major characters in great fictions should mature or degenerate or somehow shift levels of emotional leverage. By that criterion this very great fiction falls short. Huck begins and ends as the atomic, incorrigible maverick, an archetype that, one hopes—anxiously—can resist any amount of academic wear and tear.

Discussion of what Huck would do or feel under given circumstances is, of course, a tribute to his creator. Thus to be speculated about like a real person happens to only the aristocracy of fictional characters: Hamlet, Falstaff, Iago, Rebecca Sharp, Beatrix Esmond, Anna Karenina, Julien Sorel. . . . In that fourth dimension not only is personality distilled to a proof higher than real people usually show, it can also jar the rest of the cast into acting over their heads. One comes to know Queen Gertrude only after Hamlet drags her into his magnetic field. That is why none of Mark Twain's major characters outside *Huckleberry Finn*—not Roxy or Hank Morgan or Colonel Sellers—persists in the

memory like the minor ones passing through Huck's orbit: not only Jim and Pap, but Mrs. Loftus and Aunt Sally and even Buck Harkness, that paragon of trenchant pantomime.

Those special vividnesses come of refraction through the pellucid but also prismatic Huck-medium in the first person. This kind of narrative makes two stern demands: The narrator, like Huck, may say he is writing for print, but his text must come out like speech sublimated without losing texture and informality. And all the while he chats away, his soul and ways of thinking and feeling must covertly emerge until the reader knows him rather better than he probably knows himself. In all those respects Huck sits among the royalty of first-persons, along with Barry Lyndon, Lorelei Lee, Gully Jimson, and Jack Keefe. This is fast company, but his way with his unadorned native speech is beyond comment. Its virtues persist in many pages of that misbegotten final section as a half reason for being reconciled to its presence. Under his surefooted sentences well up the many affinities of congenial words and the unaccountable, ever-various throb of our astonishing native tongue. In the last few pages before Tom's jiggery-pokery begins, Huck is reconnoitering the Phelps plantation:

It was all still and Sunday-like, and hot and sunshiny; the hands was gone to the fields; and there was that kind of faint dronings of bugs and flies in the air that makes it seem so lonesome and like everybody's dead and gone; and if a breeze fans along and quivers the leaves it makes you feel mournful because you feel like it's spirits whispering—spirits that's been dead ever so many years—and you always think they're talking about *you*. As a general thing it makes a body wish *he* was dead too, and done with it all. . . . I went around and clumb over the back-stile by the ash-hopper and started for the kitchen. When I got a little ways I heard the dim hum of a spinning wheel wailing up and sinking along down again; and then I knowed for certain I wished I was dead—for that *is* the lonest sound in the world.

Never mind the ash-hopper and the spinning wheel and the superstitious set of the poor-white mind as cultural data. The same voice in other keys can strike brisk and savory: a certain kind of meat tastes like "old cold cannibal"; the King and the Duke "took on about that dead tanner like they'd lost the twelve disciples"; "most folks don't go to

church only when they've got to, but a hog is different." Hats off. Shoes off the feet. That bush is really burning.

Strange that all those hundreds of thousands of words conscientiously spun out about *Huckleberry Finn* for the edification of others should practically ignore the things that make it great. The spinners necessarily suggest the proverbial musicologist so intent on the score that he doesn't hear the music. Indeed in this case, the score has small relation to the music: not enough river, too little anti-slavery parable. . . . What's printed in the novel seems far from what Professor Procrustes was lecturing about yesterday. In that sense Mailer may have been right about his American Lit. first time around.

Such muttering is probably futile. Literary fashions, like others, have their own momentum. That new *Huckleberry Finn* musical is entitled—what else?—*Big River*. George F. Will, the *Newsweek* columnist, weighs in asking: "Is the steamboat that wrecks Huck's raft—his pristine island of self-government—a symbol of the machine destroying Huck's garden?" Whereas years ago Justin Kaplan cast that steamboat as "the image of avenging society." Whereas, further, in *Hundred Years*

Jeffrey Steinbrink suggests that the smashup betokens "a frenzy of anger, frustration, and resignation" overcoming Mark Twain because his plot wouldn't behave to suit him. Actually what it probably symbolizes is the storyteller's wish to get Huck ashore without Jim so he can spend a while with the Grangerfords.

The Finnophile can only stubbornly stand on the credo drawn up by Bernard De Voto, a sound, if often overextended, stalwart: "There is a type of mind, the lovers of *Huckleberry Finn* belong to it, which prefers experience to metaphysical abstractions and the thing to its symbol. Such minds think of *Huckleberry Finn* as the greatest work of nineteenth century fiction in America precisely because it is not a voyage in pursuit of a white whale but a voyage among feudists, mobbers, thieves, rogues, nigger-hunters and murderers, precisely because Huck never encounters a symbol but always some actual human being working out an actual destiny."

Huck called the King's running off at the mouth at the Wilks's house "soul-butter and hogwash." That phrase kept occurring to me as I prowled back through the thickets of Frankincense.



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