

twain, *huckleberry finn*, and the reconstruction

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The controversial ending of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* begins, not with Huck's decision to endure damnation for Jim's sake, but with Tom Sawyer's discovery of the place where Jim is confined. "Watermelon shows man, lock shows prisoner; and it ain't likely there's two prisoners on such a little plantation, and where the people's all so kind and good" (p. 181).¹ It is here, following Mark Twain's "watermelon," that we go down the hole into the wonderland of American racial history, that illogical and unpredictable terrain where nothing is as it seems, and where Jim's fate, that inexorable issue, must be decided. The question of his liberation is no longer an intimate concern to be debated in the close quarters of Huck's conscience. In one stroke Tom unwittingly lays bare the meaning of Jim's imprisonment and reveals its modern context. The Phelpses are "kind and good" people, exemplary citizens, and in their midst sits a brooding black man whom they have shackled. Concealed throughout most of the novel, Jim's presence is at last unavoidably visible and nearly everyone strives to solve the burden of that presence. The Phelpses simply want to get him legally off the premises. Huck would steal him and make once more for the dubious sanctuary of the river. Only Tom, with Miss Watson's certificate in his back-pocket, understands that Jim is neither a slave nor a free man and that, therefore, anything can be done to him.

"When I start in to steal a nigger, or a watermelon, or a Sunday-school book," Huck reminds Tom, "I ain't no ways particular how it's done so it's done" (p. 191). His complaint is brushed aside. The capriciousness with which Tom postpones the declaration of Jim's assigned freedom suggests the extent to which he believes Miss Watson's remission actually frees Jim. The document means only that Jim will not be sent down river, and no more. If anything, his emancipation offers opportunities for a new form of exploitation which Tom immediately

seizes—the chance to manipulate the black man’s feelings, to play godlike with his aspirations. In brief, Jim’s situation at the end of *Huckleberry Finn* reflects that of the Negro in the Reconstruction, free at last and thoroughly impotent, the object of devious schemes and a hapless victim of constant brutality. What indeed was to be done with Jim, this black man whom Twain had so conscientiously humanized? “Murder, killing and maiming Negroes, raping Negro women—in the 80’s and in the Southern South, this was not even news”; W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, recalling his years as a student at Fisk University, “it got no publicity; it caused no arrests; and punishment for such transgressions was so unusual that the fact was telegraphed North.”² This was the implacable reality that lay outside the shed on the Phelps farm, the historical context that made, then as now, the notion of Jim’s “freedom” seem so obscene.

Twain had rendered Jim’s liberation in *Huckleberry Finn* at that precise moment in American history when barely realized liberties were being wrenched one by one from the grasp of the emancipated black man in the South. Between 1876 and 1883, the period during which he worked on the novel, the Reconstruction was nullified, the ambitious programs of the Radical Republicans abandoned and the fate of the Negro restored to the keep of his former master, a fate manifest in the annual toll of lynchings. The magnitude of that betrayal invests *Huckleberry Finn* with excruciating ironies. If, as W. R. Brock has observed, the idea of racial equality was at best a shaky “hypothesis” in the nineteenth century “not accepted in the North any more than it was in the South,” and “even abolitionists were anxious to disclaim any intention of forcing social contacts between the races and all shied away from the dread subject of racial amalgamation,”³ there nonetheless, struggling against the current, was *Huckleberry Finn*. Without overt political reference or sentimental appeals Twain reaffirmed the validity of that “hypothesis.” Huck and Jim do that appalling thing—loaf on their raft with perfect equanimity, eat, drink and sleep together, enjoying (to paraphrase Harry Golden) a horizontal as well as a vertical relationship. But they do so by inhabiting the retreat of the river, drifting through the world Du Bois and Brock describe, and inevitably Twain had to bring them back into that restrictive tortured world. There was, in short, no way in which he could make his ending structurally symmetrical or formally apt. Twain could not discard the awkward question of Jim’s fate—he had either to deal with it realistically and reintroduce a critical voice like that of Colonel Sherburn or treat it symbolically. Nor could he ignore or deflect the craziness of racism that enmeshed *all* white men (even Huck) when they regarded the black man. In facing this complex problem, Twain chose to discover Jim shorn of his subjective reality, no longer actively engaged in the process of living. Tom pursues the watermelon in order to locate an iconical Jim, that black man trapped in the prison of the white man’s mind.

Even those writers who dealt with the plight of the Negro in the objective realm of politics could not evade the inner madness Twain so deviously exhibited at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*. "The South was right in believing that the North cared little or nothing for the negro as a man," Albion Tourgée wrote in *A Fool's Errand* (1879), "but wrong in the idea that the theory of political equality and manhood suffrage was invented or imposed from any thought of malice, revenge or envy toward the South."⁴ Twain had none of Tourgée's political expertise—he had only the Southerner's intuitive understanding of the gothic interior of American racism, his own compelling care for the Negro as a man and a sense of the insanity bubbling within Tourgée's lucid observation. In 1874 he had published the remarkable sketch, "A True Story," in which a jovial black cook, Aunt Rachel, suddenly confounds Mister C—and his guests with a tale of suffering that makes them cringe in their naiveté. They think of her as an exuberant mammy and relish the sweetness of her laughter, but her narrative, which she relates only when prodded to explain her native simplicity, explodes her anguish into the calm of the evening. It is a familiar tale—children torn from her arms on the auction block, heavy chains and savage beatings, divided loyalties and self-hatred. The mystery of her happiness is left unanswered. Unlike Mister C—, who is portrayed as a fumbling liberal gentleman, Tom seems to understand the peril of allowing the black man to assert the horror of his experience. Not until the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* lies encased in a neurological ward, electroshocked into the absence of identity and past, do we regain the hallucinatory insight of Twain's ending of *Huckleberry Finn*, that vivid sense of the enclosed black man helplessly submitting to the white man's medicine, enduring an incomprehensible cure for the color of his skin and the content of his thought.

It is an affront, this sequence at the Phelps farm, because the humanity of its prime character is patently, systematically ignored. Everything is drawn into the structure Tom creates: Huck's tenuous sympathy for Jim's difficult position, Aunt Sally's routine, the somnolent neighborhood, even Jim's awareness of his own suffering. The narrative flow of the novel freezes as Tom's game simply elaborates and becomes increasingly monstrous. We are ushered into a nightmare where everything is urgent, activity feverish, and nothing happens. It is the grotesque logic of this game which is so difficult to perceive, that and the totality of Tom's presumption. What does Jim's legal freedom mean? Nothing. "The very center of Twain's book," Ellison has written, "revolves finally around the boy's relations with Nigger Jim and the question of what Huck should do about getting Jim free after the two scoundrels had sold him."⁵ But as Twain renders it, the process of getting the black man out of his unjustified bondage is so difficult, so painfully bizarre, that the momentous question, as I have suggested, becomes the one Jim signally

fails to ask: why, if already free, must I perform in such demeaning charades?

The answer is concealed in the maze of Tom's fecund imagination. We must relocate Jim in that intensely contrived world of dungeons and jails which is at once Tom's synoptic vision of European history and his symbolic prevision of *bourgeois* life in St. Petersburg. In either setting imprisonment is an integral part of the order of things, a given, and one either evades it or escapes it in isolation, as a solitary feat. The context of political injustice or societal oppression is simply not recognized. Liberation for Tom is a jail-break (or a weekend), the reward one gets for using his ingenuity. There is no substantive freedom, no being free. Huck's experience on the river is beyond Tom's imagining. Beneath all the costume and paraphernalia, Tom's notion of freedom is vulgar, that of the bank clerk who dreams unintelligently of becoming Jesse James. Thus Jim is transferred from the actuality of the shed to a new and more terrifying confinement in Tom's consciousness. There a new enslavement begins, a new series of tortures, a revised ordeal that lacks the primitive solace of at least knowing who the jailors and torturers are. In this new prison the first thing Jim must learn is that he has become a character in a fantasy. The white man who defined his slavehood now dreams and defines the experience of his liberation, and in both roles the black man must act his part or perish. Tom's fantasies are melodramatic transcriptions of the swashbuckling novels of Scott and Dumas. They reflect a consciousness Jim could not possibly understand. His problem is to decipher their hieroglyphic, to decode the actual demands hidden in the exotica.

Somehow Jim must be freed without ripping apart either the cartilage of the social structure or the fabric of its myth. "Only I couldn't believe it," Huck exclaims. "Tom Sawyer a *nigger* stealer!" (p. 176). It is clear, however, that Tom will have nothing to do with Jim as a defiant slave. Those unfortunate black men "ungrateful enough to run away" (p. 185) are properly hanged. By an act of the imagination (as duplicitous as Miss Watson's generous bill of freedom), Tom transforms the renegade black man into a fugitive courtier, an ebony Cassanova. What seems, then, a mindless escapade is in fact a skillful caricature of the process which ennobles the black man by expunging his negritude. In order to rise from the degradation of slavery the black man must first become a white European. One thinks of Du Bois in the eighties, recently graduated from Fisk, teaching Cicero's *Pro Archia Poeta* to the rickety children of black sharecroppers. It is not, moreover, simply a matter of making Jim's blackness acceptable, but also a way of structuring the emancipation so that the white man's guilt is obscured by the magnanimity of his gesture. In all of Tom's fanciful plans there is no mention of what brought the captive to his prison. Jim is taught a new self that will not only satisfy Tom's conception of how he should rise from slavery, but

which will also feel the requisite gratitude. To achieve that remarkable condition of being, Jim must lose the notion of himself as a renegade nigger. His criminality (the act of choosing freedom) must be thoroughly effaced.

This impulse supplies the underlying logic in Tom's manic insistence that Jim undergo what amounts to a purgative ritual, that he assume an assigned identity before emerging once more into daylight. "Who ever heard of a state prisoner escaping by a hickry-bark ladder?" (p. 187). The horrors that spring innocuously from Tom cut deeply, sharpened by the grim accuracy of his statement. "He said it was the best fun he ever had in his life, and the most intellectual; and said if he only could see his way to it we would keep it up all the rest of our lives and leave Jim to our children to get out; for he believed Jim would come to like it better and better the more he got used to it" (p.193). In such passages, chilling in their prefigurative clarity, we are indeed close to Ellison's vision of things as they are—that "receding horizon" the black man is forever pursuing in America. Jim's self is an indefinite malleable quality to be interminably shaped. All that the process requires is Jim's tacit consent, his willingness to forget the past. In the *Invisible Man* the narrator lies strapped to a table and out of the "vast whiteness" about him emerge placards demanding, to his consternation, that he announce who he is. One of the physicians considers the possibility of a prefrontal lobotomy. The result of such operations, he notes approvingly, "is as complete a change of personality as you'll find in your famous fairy-tale cases of criminals transformed into amiable fellows after all that bloody business of a brain operation."⁶ In that particular scene we are finally inside Jim's pen, hearing the maniacal scuffle of the boys outside, their whispered lunacies and impossible requests. "There was no getting around it. I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free."⁷ This sense of entombment in the white man's mind, of losing one's self in that "vast whiteness," has been variously imagined (and ironically resolved) by a host of modern black writers. Court Royal, in LeRoi Jones' *Great Goodness of Life*, is brutally harassed by an unseen magisterial voice demanding that he free himself by slaying the murderous blackness in his heart—which he does, capering finally somewhat like Jim in the last chapter of *Huckleberry Finn*, chanting: "My soul is as white as snow. White as snow. I'm free. I'm free. My life is a beautiful thing."⁸

By denying Jim the experience of gaining his own freedom, Tom effectively deprives him of a self. Jim had taken flight because Miss Watson betrayed him and it is presumably Miss Watson's remorse that has freed him, but the simplicity of that acknowledgment—and the simplicity of getting him out—does not occur to Tom. That resolution of Jim's presence means seeing him as an "ungrateful slave," means taking

him seriously as a man. "And told him how to keep a journal on the shirt with his blood, and all that. He told him everything. Jim he couldn't see no sense in most of it, but he allowed we was white folks and knowed better than him; so he was satisfied, and said he would do it all just as Tom said" (p. 193). The design of the escutcheon which Tom creates for Jim depicts an escaped slave over the ironic motto, "*Maggiore fretta, minore atto . . . the more haste, the less speed*" (p. 200). Jim's ultimate liberation, Tom calculates, will take a long time. He must first assert the modes of feelings that Tom dictates, and when the black man protests that "he didn't know how to make the letters," Tom's response is that "he would block them out for him, and then he wouldn't have nothing to do but just follow the lines" (p. 201). These instructions are dumped into Jim's pen and he is left there to learn a new personality, "jews-harping the rats," fitting his psyche into the image Tom has established for him.

While Twain's view of these proceedings is easily ascertained, the way in which he regarded the problem of Jim seems ambivalent. Tom's behavior is repugnant, clearly, but what *is* one to do with the nigger? Huck's scheme, "hiding daytimes and running nights, the way me and Jim used to do before" (p. 181), is no longer possible. Jim has been freed and must be brought back into the world, back into the same social structure that denied him the right of manhood. In the shed he bears the stigma of the fugitive slave, a frightful thing in the pre-Civil War South. Miss Watson's certificate frees him, but it does not alter what he has done or the way in which the white Southerner would regard him. Tom's method is to transfer him, to change the oppressive thing that he is, a renegade nigger, and reconstitute him in the apparel of the conventional white hero. The alternative, which Twain lamely accepts, is to thrust the black man back into a quasi-existence: free but subservient, funky but noble, "white inside." Tom does not care for the whiteness of Jim's interior self. What he demands is merely Jim's commitment to certain gestures and a vocabulary. Twain, however, clings to his desire to express Jim's inner being, to show him as he really is. Thus Jim absurdly decides to sacrifice his life (and the family he professes to love) for Tom's sake. The nightmare which Tom articulates blurs into the compromised contradictory vision of the white liberal. Jim's native goodness negates the crushing burden of his past, transcends the pain that has been inflicted on him and finally diminishes his humanity. Denied the privilege of wrath, even resentment, Jim hardens into a piece of statuary.

For all his scathing contempt of Tom's febrile imagination, Twain could not himself get wholly outside it. The cruelty of Tom's attitude and the gentleness of Twain's approach, his longing to spare Jim the reality of his fate, inexorably amount to the same thing—the mythologizing of Jim's political being. Indeed it is at that point in Twain's narra-

tive where Jim is most historical (confined to his small dark coop) that his otherness, the solidity of his suffering, is almost lost from view. Huck's liberation from the imperatives of racism is intensely realized, but his discovered love, it would seem, is not enough. The power of Tom's blindness, his simple inability to see Jim, intervenes. Huck is made a reluctant actor in a scenario that provides Jim with a spurious escape and an authentic mob of lynchers. The sordid history of the Reconstruction with its betrayal and humiliation of the black man pours into *Huckleberry Finn* at the end, inhibiting Twain as Huck is inhibited.

One has only to scan *Life on the Mississippi* to see at once how well Twain understood the significance of the Reconstruction. His journey in 1882 had taken him deep into the remorseless South past desolate niggertowns where the black man's condition, after Emancipation, had visibly worsened, and then back into the prosperous industrialized Midwest where the free life he had known on the river had been profitably extinguished. In *The Gilded Age*, his first novel, he had rendered an acidulous portrait of the hypocrisy of Northern politicians, senators like Dilworthy and Buckstone who exploited the hopes of freed black men for some measure of rehabilitation by pushing through Congress spurious land appropriations for institutes and schools that never materialized. The shadow of the so-called New South was on Twain when he wrote the ending of his novel, all those old unrelieved pressures, old pressures that were manifest in the journals of Samuel Sewall and the writings of Thomas Jefferson. *What are we to do with the black man?* Twain had added a phrase: *Whom I need*. To read the ending of *Huckleberry Finn* as a formal resolution, a way of happily rounding off the story, is to cast aside entirely the book's milieu, to deprive Twain of his praiseworthy aggravation. But that is all it comes to finally—an aggravation, a restless circling around the shed in which Jim's blackness is bound.

Like most of his contemporaries in the eighties, Twain looked at the black man across an impassable chasm and was mystified, nagged and frightened by the enigmatic face that stared back at him. "The white man's half-conscious awareness that his image of the Negro is false," Ellison observes, "makes him suspect the Negro of always seeking to take him in, and assume his motives are anger and fear—which very often they are."⁹ What this means, in effect, is that the white man sees the Negro in two primary poses—either docile or enraged, and that when he deals with the Negro, or treats him in fiction, he oscillates radically between the two images. The farmers who hunt Jim down at the end of *Huckleberry Finn* regard him as a menacing Nat Turner until the doctor intervenes with the contrasting view that he has never seen a "nigger that was a better nuss or faithfuller" (p. 220). The lens are quickly switched, the wrath of the farmers immediately subsides and Jim stands there, first "roughed" up and then cordially approved. The

irony is that Twain recognizes this cruel deceit and yet consents in his own way to it. If not this gentle and loyal Jim, what Jim is there?

The most rudimentary examination of what happens to Jim—Miss Watson's perfidy, the travail on the river, his captivity at the Phelps farm and Tom's sadistic play—provides an unsettling response to the inquiry. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* the domestic slaves have no scruples in pilfering because, as Twain laconically observes, they consider themselves to be in a state of undeclared war with their masters. How then does Jim, the brutalized fugitive, feel? "Why, Mars Tom, I doan' want no sich glory" (p. 203), he protests when Tom seeks to have him embrace a rattlesnake, and that plaintive outcry is about as far into Jim as we get. What overwhelms Twain, who felt so generously for the plight of the Negro, is American racial history—Jim's history—that stark record of oppression and atrocity. It is the demands this ugly past imposes on the present that enmesh Twain in Tom Sawyer's crude fantasies. For Twain, like Tom, forces Jim to forget, can deal with him no other way. It is because Jim ought to come out of his shed with a knife (the brass candlestick Tom gives him, sharply honed) that he emerges with a dulcet grin, ready to sacrifice himself.

The exemplary Jim who is "pleased most to death" at the end of *Huckleberry Finn* has undergone, then, an excruciating *rite de passage*, not through his journey down the Mississippi, but within the confines of his pen at the farm. He stands there, clenching Tom's money, and reassures Huck of his happiness. "Dah, now, Huck, what I tell you?—what I tell you up dah on Jackson islan'?" (p. 225). This surely is the black man with whom Twain, and all of us, would make peace. He is no longer the renegade nigger who made "such a raft of trouble . . . keeping a whole family scared most to death for days and nights" (p. 219), whose very presence, the whites fear, will infect their slaves with dangerous notions, but rather an improbably blanched creature. There is no murder in his heart, only solicitude for our guilt. He is content with his piece of paper and the gratuity. All the dire experiences that occurred between Jackson's Island and the Phelps farm, the desperation and the indignities, are struck from his memory. Indeed, the past is so deeply buried that no future is possible. Twain's attempts to write sequels to *Huckleberry Finn* were all dismal failures. Like the figures on Keats' urn, these two barefoot adolescents and the grinning black man compose a final tableau that hangs in space beyond the violence of time.

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footnotes

1. All references are to the Norton Critical Edition of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, edited by Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty and E. Hudson Long, New York, 1961.

2. *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York, 1969), 122.

3. W. R. Brock, *An American Crisis: Congress and Reconstruction, 1865-1867* (London, 1962), 285.

4. Albion Tourgee, *A Fool's Errand* (New York, 1880), 123.
5. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1966), 182.
6. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, 1952), 206.
7. *Ibid.*, 212.
8. LeRoi Jones, *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (Indianapolis and New York, 1969), 63.
9. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 69.