

Getting Uncivilised: Huckleberry Finn as Moral Experience

A. Robert Lee

I

Whether or not Hemingway's celebrated pronouncement in *Green Hill of Africa* that «all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*»¹, tells the whole indisputable truth might be open to some doubt. But it registers, with due insistence, the kind of recognition Twain's masterpiece ought to be accorded, the more so because *Huckleberry Finn* has to survive faults which almost immediately would have damned a lesser work. Rightly then, *Huckleberry Finn* has come to be judged a major and inescapably central American classic, of a kind with *Moby-Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Walden* and —closer to his own later nineteenth century— the fiction of Henry James and writing like Henry Adams's *Autobiography* and William Dean Howells's *Silas Lapham*. Twain it is, also, both in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and in his dark final writings, who marks the transition from the American Renaissance and the New England Transcendentalist years into the era of literary realism as articulated by the likes of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser.

Huckleberry Finn amounts first to a triumph of vernacular, a «voice» operating to irresistible effect, grainy, idiomatic, shot through with spectacular ungrammaticality and rich covert ironies of tone. It reflects Twain's mastery of a kind of alternative or regional and adolescent frontier counter-language against which the «official» values of his invented St. Petersburg and the larger historic 1840's South from which it is drawn can be understood and deflated. Where better, or more memorably, has colloquial folk American speech been realized on the page? Twain's vivid, wonderful idiom spoken with such sustained and unselfconscious ease by Huck lingers in the senses with the resonance of the greatest

¹ Ernest Hemingway: *Green Hills Of Africa*, (New York: Scribners, 1935).

poetry. The novel is also major comedy, though nearly always to be sure nuanced subversive black comedy in the manner of *Don Quijote* or *Gil Blas* and thus wholly alert to the different inclinations of humankind towards illusion, the necessary or self-persuading lie.

And in taking us down the great central, arterial waterway of America, the «Abraham» of rivers as Herman Melville calls it in his own so-called river «Masquerade», *The Confidence Man*, Twain refers us always to the larger paradigm of the human journey, the river as at once exuberantly literal—a seeming actual river belonging to an actual geography—and at the same expression of how a life unfolds, turn by turn, error upon error and awakening by awakening. In this, Huck joins a long line of American literary journeyers, Melville's Wellingborough Redburn and Ishmael, Cooper's Natty Bumppo, Crane's Henry Fleming, and in our own century, loners from Hemingway's Nick Adams to that 1950's adept in the countervailing uses of the vernacular, J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield². For all of them, with or without companions, the process of self-fathering becomes essential, the means to their own authenticity and identity.

Huckleberry Finn, furthermore, not only refers to history, especially the fraught nineteenth century South of slavery and race and the pinched oppressive Puritanism of small-town frontier America, but itself serves as an expression of history. For Twain's novel, written from the vantage point of Reconstruction and his deep personal knowledge both of the Hannibal and surrounding larger Missouri region and of the Mississippi he learned first as a boy and later as a seasoned river-pilot, offers a stunning run of insights into a representative phase of Southern frontier and slave life (though published in 1884/5 Twain began *Huckleberry Finn* as early as 1876). Above all, and underpinning the intricate vernacular skeins of language and the book's affecting, dramatic *comédie humaine*, there shows through a rooted moral conviction, not in the sense of some petty sermonistic «moral» of the kind Twain in his Notice rightly orders banished, but conviction infinitely subtler and more capacious. For within the river-journey of Huck and Jim and their fugitive raft-republic of two, and at each excursion on to the shore, we are confronted with instances whereby truly usable human value can be acquired and subsequently protected.

In re-directing attention towards the moral and inescapably human resonances of *Huckleberry Finn*, a no doubt antequated and incorrigibly Anglo-Saxon focus in an age of deconstructionist polemic—much of it with a departure-point in French structuralism—one perhaps runs the risk of sounding obsolescent, or at least evasive of newer formalist modes of understanding the rhetorics of fiction. More seriously still, however, to my mind, one courts the danger of making the novel sound solemn, thereby depriving it of its brilliant, engaging energy as

² For suggestive comparisons between *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher In the Rye*, see Charles Kaplan: «Holden and Huck: Odysseys of Youth», *College English*, XVIII (November 1956), pp. 76-80; Edgar Branch: «Mark Twain and J.D. Salinger: A Study in Literary Continuity», *American Quarterly*, IX (Summer 1957), pp. 144-158; and Arvin R. Wells: «Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield: The Situation of the Hero», *The Ohio University Review*, 11 (1960), pp. 31-42.

a reading experience. Nevertheless, the novel's moral claims, finally, are for me what make *Huckleberry Finn* so momentous a work, Twain's steady, mature, stylish insistence on the humanness of Huck's voice (and his own behind him) and the provocations the novel offers in making us think throughout just what we do believe in as human worth. The voice which opens the book, and to which it again reverts almost exactly in the last paragraph, offers the appropriate note, in addition to setting up the dialectic between «civilization» as Huck and Jim experience it on shore and that «free» (or «freer») space of river and frontier to which Huck, if not Jim, will eventually light out. The voice of Huck caught in the custodial, respectable grip of the Widow and St. Petersburg runs as follows:

The Widow Douglas, she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out. I got into my old rags, and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied³.

We have only to compare this with Huck at the close of the Phelps farm episode, those problematic ten last chapters of the novel, to see the continuity of image and motif in Huck's mode of understanding the world. He speaks as the veteran of the Mississippi journey with Jim and as the psychic survivor of a shoreline world spoiling with violence, deceit and the meanness hiding behind the many masks of provincial gentility:

Tom's most well, now, and got his bullet round his neck on a watch-guard for a watch, and is always seeing what time it is, and so, there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before (245).

Not only does Twain here confirm his mastery of the fine tuning which goes into Huck's vernacular, he underlines the various antimonies the novel has explored throughout: «civilization» as against being «free and satisfied», enclosure as against «lighting out», and the sheer «unadoptability» of Huck's accumulated experience by the small-town Aunt Sallies and the dire scale of provincial good intention they represent. These and associated contrasts in the novel I want to pursue in closer detail by analyzing a half-dozen or so of the novel's essential elements.

II

The world we first enter in *Huckleberry Finn* ostensibly carries over from Tom Sawyer, St. Petersburg as a primly respectable, «cosy» but backwater town

³ Page references throughout are to: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Ed. Henry Nash Smith, Boston; The Riverside Press, 1958, p. 3.

still presided over by its Judge Thatchers, Aunt Pollies and Widow Douglasses. But though abrim with a kind of Sunday School rectitude, a surface social good order, it is also a slave-holding town and one barely a generation's remove from frontier lawlessness. Its complacency, like that of Dawson's Landing in *Puddn'head Wilson*, also conceals beneath the thin layer of gentility, an almost intolerable self-boredom, so that the slightest excitation, especially if it involves scandal, proves more than welcome. This provincial adult domain, marked by its domestic rituals and its language of watchful sociability, is subtly mirrored by Tom Sawyer's gang domain, his bookish-inspired theatre of sham-chivalry and romantic derring-do. In the ritual he insists upon and his sense of hierarchy and «honour», he both apes the codes of his St. Petersburg elders and points forward to the supposed gentlemanly «cavalier» codes which Huck will experience on his journey down river. These two domains play against each other beautifully; the one self-proclaimingly Christian in which the Widow can nonetheless own Jim, her «big nigger», the other full of boyish high pranks, night meetings and rituals, hookey, and locally adapted Quixotism (a book Tom asserts he has read but has made over to his own ends). Huck essentially is marginal to both domains, «cramped» by the «dismal regular» adult order, slightly distrustful of Tom's elaborate fantasy world. We can't help but notice from the outset that he is no longer the Huck of Tom Sawyer, merely Tom Sawyer's first lieutenant. He knows all too well about alcoholism, dead men, floggings, the nuance and mystique of slave culture. Yet nor does Twain suggest he has somehow ceased to be wholly a part of the St. Petersburg style; he speaks of «niggers» with typical unthinking, plays tricks on Jim on the grounds that all slaves are superstitious, and generally takes his bearings from the town's social and pervasive racist assumptions.

The first serious intrusion into this adult-and-child world comes with the arrival of Pap Finn, attracted by his son's newly acquired wealth. Pap Finn is a remarkable portrait by any standards. Dirty, pathetic, violent, and an alcoholic, he knows just how to play the game of the reformed drunkard, the newly-won apostle to temperance (as when he tricks the new judge). He blends, like a Dickens villain, a tendency toward viciousness with his homespun witty snarl (not least in attacking Huck's ability to read and his new clothes). He seems to flit, too, between life and death, at first reported drowned, then found to be all too alive, «born again» as a reformed drinker, at a later stage thought his own son's murderer, then the source of Jim's being thought a murderer, and in turn, in his DTs, driven to think Huck «the Angel of Death». Later, when he is actually drowned, Jim prevents Huck from seeing his father's water-logged corpse, a true act of parenting. For *Huckleberry Finn*, among other things, offers a parable of fathers and sons, parents and offspring, some false, some real, and out of which Huck must assume responsibility for his own parenthood.

Pap fulfils to perfection the image of the white-trash, nigger-hating, redneck rural Southerner, who clings to his notional superiority over black people as evident compensation for his own exploded self-respect. His is a grotesque white Southern version of property psychology, that history which transforms black people into «niggers», human beings into expendable forms of capitalist commod-

ity. Thus, with characteristic outrage, he enters the stage asserting that he has been denied his «rights», that Huck's money belongs to him, and in his confusion associates the denial of these «rights» with having seen a «free» Negro, a professor in fact, vote. His whole received heritage of white superiority undergoes a challenge, and his indignation offers its own sobering parody:

And to see the cool way of that nigger — why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way. I says to the people, why ain't this nigger put up at auction and sold? — that's what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why, they said he couldn't be sold till he'd been in the State six months, and he hadn't been there that long yet. There, now — that's a specimen. They call that a govment that can't sell a free nigger till he's been in the State six months. Here's a govment that calls itself a govment, and yet's got to set stockstill for six whole months before it can take ahold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted, free nigger, and - (25).

We can be fairly sure that Twain censored the actual language a Pap Finn would use, but as it stands the outburst is revelatory enough. It bespeaks a diseased consciousness. And the ambiguities of «free», «bought», «slave» and «owner» come thick and fast everywhere; a language which in all its subtle viciousness perfectly articulates the grim historic sickness of slavery as a God-ordained, perfectly just order of things.

Some little time later, besotted on jug whiskey, he has the bout of DTs in which Huck becomes his «angel of Death», and the dour Calvinist vision of hell preached so effortlessly in the Sunday School domain of adult St. Petersburg society for a moment becomes almost surrealistically literal. For Pap actually belongs on precisely the same moral spectrum as the Widow Douglasses, the Judge Thatchers and the rest; they, too, sanction a slave-holding order, uphold a hell of Calvinist origins and think little of buying and selling human stock. And it is precisely that «respectable» St. Petersburg which causes Jim, against whom Huck and Tom have played their own version of night-time tricks, which proposes, through the Widow, to sell him for 800 dollars (Jim says of himself in a further wonderful irony «I owns myself, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars. I wish I had de money, I wouln' want no mo'» 41). These two fugitives, the one fleeing a murderous father and foster-parent world, the other a murderous slave and property world, begin their mutual run for «freedom» at Jackson's Island, a kind of staging-post for the exacting, ambiguous river journey ahead.

Even by this point we can see how Twain's direction of his vernacular operates: at no point is it suggested that Huck speaks from anything but his instantaneous, unanalyzed response to experience. The moral decipherment falls unflinching upon the reader, the decoder of the boy's language, his companion critic and interpreter as it were. Nor does Huck tell his story, as for example Dickens' David Copperfield does, as a kind of first-person retrospect, occasionally glossing and seeking to understand the important phases of his experience. Twain thus wonderfully concentrates the reader's mind; it is the reader who must slowly discern the live community of usage and moral assumption which lies behind Huck's freely-given, ostensibly guileless, fable.

III

Like Huck, Jim has «run off» (38), to avoid being «sold down the river» (the awesome historical literality behind which phrase grows increasingly clear) by «the Old Missus», Widow Douglas. Both have fled through «murder», Huck's attempt to fake his own death (his essential unsqueamishness lies in «sticking» the pig and leaving its blood as «evidence»), Jim as Huck's supposed assassin. From death, thus, they find in each other, life, a spontaneous kinship, despite Huck's willingness to exploit Jim still as the superstitious darkie and Jim's reciprocating view of Huck as a white ghost come to haunt him. Huck's language again points up the widening gap between, as Twain drew the distinction in his well-known phrase, the boy's «sound heart» and his «deformed conscience». Huck's response to Jim's escape reveals him using the very language of St. Petersburg against itself:

People would call me a low down Ablitionist and despise me for keeping mum - but that don't make no difference. I ain't agoing to tell, and I ain't agoing back there anyways (38).

Jim's subsequent wholly ingenuous punning on the notion of «stock», in which he confuses capital stock with cattle, underlines to a fine degree the intricate degradation of language as of moral value which slave-ownership imposes. Perhaps the dead man they find (44), naked and shot in the back («too gashly» as Jim says), serves as a form of epitaph to their own former «selves», the metaphor of their mutual respective «deaths» in St. Petersburg.

At Jackson's Island too, they inaugurate the bond which will carry them against adversity and the threat of the shoreline. Huck again gives evidence that he personifies no maudlin standard of Christian-pious goodness when he causes Jim to be stung by the rattler, an act which anticipates his later attempt into tricking Jim during the fog. Their bond has to be earned, despite Huck's instinctive relief in meeting up with Jim. Having, then, killed one identity in St. Petersburg, Huck launches out on a sequence of others, the first of which Twain exploits marvellously in making Huck play a girl, the composite girl who can't thread a needle or catch as a girl and whose name emerges finally as «Sarah Mary Williams George Ellexander Peters» (53). But despite the fun, the insight into how social gender is created, Huck learns from Mrs Judith Loftus that Jim is thought Pap's murderer and that they have not after all floated free of St. Petersburg. Fleeing back to Jim, we witness the extraordinary, affirming identification of two human beings, divided by historic racial custom, age and colour, into a single «us». Huck's words break the deepest taboo:

Git up and hump yourself, Jim! There ain't minute to lose. They're after us! (54).

The force of «us» in this context hardly needs stressing. Huck and Jim, white boy and black man, free man and slave, youth and age — their mutual pact

atrikes at the very heart of the ancestral myths of prohibited behaviour in a slave-holding Southern culture.

It therefore comes as perfectly appropriate that throughout Chapter XII (and later Chapter XIX) Twain offers us the almost flawless pastoral idyll of two beings, freed of all «smotheriness» and restraint, gliding down the Mississippi. It affords one of the great tableaux in literature:

It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big still river, laying on our backs and looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed only a little kind of a low chuckle. We had mighty good weather, as a general thing, and nothing ever happened to us at all, that night, nor the next, nor the next.

Every night we passed towns, some of them away up on black hillsides, nothing but just a shiny bed of lights, not a house could you see. The fifth night we passed St. Louis, and it was like the whole world lit up. In St. Petersburg they used to say there was twenty or thirty thousand people in St. Louis, but I never believed it till I see that wonderful spread of lights at two o'clock that still night. There warn't a sound there; everybody was asleep (55/6).

One perhaps doesn't have to think the river a Greek God, like Lionel Trilling, to see in Huck's sense of night-time stillness the sheer exuberant well-being which follows from being with Jim and on the raft⁴. Or if the river is a deity of place, it quickly proves an ambiguous one, for where the Mississippi can offer restoration and calm to the soul, it can, and frequently in the novel does, turn treacherous, full of dangerous eddies, fogs, hidden risks and banks. Further, it is not immune to the different corruptions of the shore: the Duke and Dauphin will get on board; a river steamer will run them down; the river will carry disease and corpses as well as slave and other stolen freight. But here, and in a recurring pattern of allusion, the Mississippi reflects a genuine standard for life, the enhancement of being human. It is this dimension of the river which Huck turns to, also, after the Shepherdson/Grangerford feud, the raft and river as sanctuaries against the static, murderous behaviour of clan revenge:

I never felt easy till the raft was two mile below there and out in the middle of the Mississippi. Then we hung up out signal lantern, and judged that we was free and safe once more. I hadn't had a bite to eat since yesterday; so Jim he got out some corndodgers and buttermilk, and pork and cabbage, and greens — there ain't nothing in the world so good, when it's cooked right — and whilst I eat my supper we talked, and had a good time. I was powerful glad to get away from the feuds, and so was Jim to get away from the swamp. We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft (99).

This offers the same language we have met at the beginning of the novel: on the one hand «civilization», or its St. Petersburg and shoreline face as «cramped up

⁴ See Lionel Trilling: *Introduction To The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Rinehart Editions, 1948).

and smothery», on the other hand the raft and the Mississippi as «free and easy». Chapter XIX confirms the note:

Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark - which was a candle in a cabin window - and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two - on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It's lovely to live on a raft... (100-101).

The raft with Huck and Jim aboard, in other words, offers the touchstone; life as unhampered by artificial social restraint, at once instinctual, brotherly and free. But an image such a life is, for «civilization», in the form of violence, the Duke and the Dauphin, the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, Colonel Sherburn and the whole assorted riff-raff of robbers, murderers, sneak-thieves and lynchers, keeps breaking in, not to mention the «home» from of Judge Thatcher and the domestic foster-parental figures of Aunt Polly and the Widow. Nonetheless, in these magnificent raft scenes the novel offers up its human standard.

As if to show that the Mississippi is indeed also a Melvilleian place of trickery and false «confidence», after Chapter XII has given the account of drifting aboard the raf, Huck and Jim witness the aftermath of a robbery and the intended killing of one of the gang members (59-60), and in the escape, Huck, true to his recently begun role as impersonator fakes his background in order to save the robbers trapped on the wreck. That the wreck should be the *Walter Scott*, the author to whom Twain once acerbically ascribed the demise of the South on account of its emulation of Scott's chivalric ritual, adds further point.

The course of Huck's education takes another deepening turn when he and Jim (Chapter XV) get separated in the fog. Huck tricks Jim into thinking, according to stereotype, that Jim has dreamed the whole episode. For Huck, Jim remains still a figure enshrouded in voodoo, ghosts and «conjure» superstition. Jim, eventually, sees through the hoax, and chastises Huck. His language absorbs into its colloquial dialect style the deepest moral authority; it can hardly not fail to touch the responsive reader. Pointing to the brush and debris which has attached itself to the raft, he says:

«When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn't k'yer no mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin', all safe en soun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss' yo' foot I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed».

Then he got up slow, and walked to the wigwam, and went in there, without saying anything but that. But that was enough. It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed *his* foot to get him to take it back.

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger - but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither.

I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd knowed it would make him feel that way (73/4).

Learning to know that Jim «would feel that way», kissing a «nigger's» foot - in feeling of this order Huck, or at least we through him, bear witness to the sheer human loss engendered by slave-society and its residue. Huck secures his dignity, but only as it is released to him through Jim's better, tested, dignity in the face of all conceivable odds.

IV

From this Twain directs us even more towards the moral centre of his novel, and inevitably the focus has to do with slavery, both the unconscionable literal historic Southern fact of slavery, and «slavery» as an implicitly larger notion, the slavery of false gods, codes, a whole complex gathering of ruling illusions. The internalized voice of «conscience», the language of slave-ownership which St. Petersburg has taught Huck to speak and believe in, begins to assert itself as he and Jim make their way down-river away from Jackson's Island. Given Jim's growing status in Huck's eyes and the impact of events like the separation in the fog, Huck's interior monologue speaks directly - devastatingly — to the shore world which has produced him and against which his «heart» must increasingly rebel:

Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he *was* most free — and who was to blame for it? Why, me. I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way. It got to troubling me so I couldn't rest; I couldn't stay still in one place. It hadn't ever come home to me before, what this thing was that I was doing. But now it did; and it staid with me, and scorched me more and more. I tried to make out to myself that *I* warn't to blame, because *I* didn't run Jim off from his rightful owner; but it warn't no use, conscience up and says, every time, «But you knowed he was running for his freedom, and you could a paddled ashore and told somebody». That was so - I couldn't get round that, noway. That was where it pinched. Conscience says to me, «What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean? Why, she tried to learn you your book, she tried to learn you your manners, she tried to be good to you in every way she knowed how. That's what she done» (74/5).

Twain fully conveys the duplicitous flavour of the Calvinist property ethic of slavery as lodged inside Huck. The slave-holding world of his upbringing — as expressed through the authority figures of judges, «aunts», preaches, foster-parents and neighbours — has trained him, too, to think of slavery in the defensive terms of private property. Miss Watson's resolve to sell Jim will rank perfectly with the more explicit later gesture of the Duke and the Dauphin in trafficking Jim for «forty dirty dollars». But in this outburst, Huck demonstrates

how the ethic of human property has encloused itself in the sharply defensive language of Christian conscience and ownership. In allying himself with Jim, he allies himself against «manners» — «civilisation» — and against the Bible («your Book») as taught by Miss Watson. «Goodness» consists in acceding to, and perpetuating, slave ownership. The inversion of term like «freedom» gains added force when Jim (75) vows to buy his wife out of slavery, proposing with her in turn to then buy their children «and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them». This same inverse rhetoric asserts itself in Chapter XXXI, for me the very axis of the whole novel.

First Huck, en route to the Phelps farm, thinks of the damage to his reputation in having aided a slave escape:

And then think of *me!* It would get all around that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was ever to see anybody from that town again, I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame. That's just the way: a person does a low-down thing, and then he don't want to take no consequences of it. Thinks as long as he can hide it, it ain't no disgrace. That was my fix exactly. The more I studied about this, the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't agoing to allow no such miserable doings to go only so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, «There was the Sunday School, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire».

It made me shiver. And I about made up my mind to pray; and see if I couldn't try to quit being the boy I was, and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. Why wouldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from me, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn't come. It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I was playing double. I was letting onto give up sin, but way inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth *say* I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write that nigger's owner and tell where he was; but deep inside me I knowed it was a lie — and he knowed it. You can't pray a lie — and I found that out (178/9).

«Playing double», «praying a lie», being «brung up wicked», each of these phrasings underlines how deeply Huck must dissent if he is to give free rein to the imperatives of the heart which he has acquired in his journey with Jim. The language of «providence» and «wickedness» belongs precisely in the sermons of his Sunday-school mentors, a Biblebelt American Christianity cynically inverted to make slavery a form of ethical right behaviour, and abolition of a kind with drink and fornication, the sure and certain route to damnation.

And write the letter to Miss Watson Huck does, feeling: «good and washed free of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life» (179) as he says in the born-again salvationist rhetoric of the convert. But the Jim he thinks of aboard the raft haunts him; a human counter-image to the figure he now proposes to return to Miss Watson as the «rightful» owner. In choosing, as he does, between «two things», heart and conscience, his own feelings and those coercive «social» feelings engendered by St. Petersburg and the shoreline, he opts for life over death, brotherhood against ownership, the true civilization of the heart:

... somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I came back out of the fog; and when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to see him in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling because, I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

«All right, then, I'll go to hell» — and tore it up (179-80).

The hell to which Huck thinks himself bound is the Calvinist hell which the Miss Watsons, and the whole elaborate slave-ownership system behind her, threaten when their property, human or otherwise, becomes endangered. Little ironic wonder that a moment later, Huck twists the language even further by vowing «to go to work to steal Jim out of slavery again» (180). Twain's continued subtlety in making his own rhetoric precisely «play double» parodies the whole Sunday School and church pieties about slavery, the massive, conspiratorial double-standard of slavery in an ostensible Christian society. But he keeps the rhetoric free of intrusive moralizing; it stands as its own comprehensive indictment, and in Huck's mouth, as language from which the boy not only seeks to escape but to do so almost unknowingly moved only by the values of the heart and the memories of human kinship build up over time and space with Jim.

V

If «hell» is Huck's destination, we need to see in yet greater particularity how he journeys there. For although the river offers, in its more benign aspects, the means to escaping hell, it also by the dangers it poses and by its vulnerability to the shoreline, casts Huck and Jim up against the forces of the townships and their citizenry. Time and again Huck is forced to witness society as a charade, cruel and arbitrary and full of self-serving demands and customs, which obliges him

to tell lies in order to survive, to acquire new names, to assume appropriate defensive roles and to see through its smokescreen of rhetoric and institutions like the Sunday School, the temperance clubs, and the argot or rectitude and good works. In part, the tone of Twain's satire is jokey, full of wellaimed good humour; but the tone is also saturated with distaste which borders on contempt and which will find fullest expression in the mouth of Colonel Sherburn as he out-faces the lynch-mob, the voice of the later Twain berating «the damned human race», as he terms it, and which marks out stories like «The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg», *What is Man?* and *The Mysterious Stranger*. Nowhere better does Twain turn his irony to dark trenchant effect than in the Shepherdson/Grangerford feud.

«Col. Grangerford was a gentleman, you see. He was a gentleman all over; and so was his family» (89): so Huck defers to the apparent high gentry in the shoreline world of the Mississippi. But Grangerford, like his mutual nemesis in the Shepherdson clan, masks beneath the surface cavalier pose a kind of violent jungle law, an inclination toward clan murder which identifies him as an imposter, as clear an imposter as the Huck who calls himself George Jackson. The clues to the Grangerford spurious aristocracy lies in the mockbaronialism of the estate: the marvellous factitious house with its grotesque clock; the «big outlandish parrot» made of chalk; the oil-cloth table cover with the «red and blue spread eagle on it» (85); the library «full of beautiful stuff and poetry»; the histrionic paintings any one of which might illustrate an Ambrose Bierce parody; and above all, the scrap-book poetry of Emmeline Grangerford, especially the ode to Stephen Dowling «that fell down a well and was drowned» (87). All of this takes a grimmer turn, however, when Huck witnesses each ritual killing, especially of his new friend Buck. Comedy turns black and inside out as he hears the chant «Kill them, Kill them!» (97), and as so often when he leaves the raft for the shore, he is made to feel «sick». This amounts to Tom Sawyer's child world sardonically transformed into its adult equivalent; one of mawkish Scott-like belles, parodic Romeo and Juliet romance, gang violence which masquerades as chivalry, and the tribal enactment of revenge and «the feud» against any real historic logic. When the notion of «honour» is unpacked it reveals only brute mindlessness; little wonder that the rueful observation frequently surfaces that it was in the South that the code of the West was born. Huck is finally driven back on the evidence of his senses as he sees reality turning literally murderous and into nightmare:

I wishes I hadn't ever come ashore that night, to see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them — lots of times I dream about them (97/98).

Yet not even the raft offers a respite against this carnage, for Huck and Jim must next negotiate the presence of the Duke and the Dauphin (chapter 19), Twain's sharp-eyed confidence-men *par excellence*, improvisational masters and the perfect adepts in every manner of ventriloquism. Again, the sheer energetic fun that they call up in the reader mixes with a far meaner, darker strain; their willingness to lie, cheat, steal, sell Jim, mock the impaired, and take every advantage of backwoods Arkansas credulity.

Their first appearance as European «aristos», fake royalty in a supposed levelling frontier society, also reveals that they know, too, how to ape the professions — one purports to have been a teacher, lecturer and «medical» mesmerist, the other a preacher and missionary - and they speak in the calculated style of the professional, the figure with claims to instant ranking authority. They both can «work the crowd», flatter and deceive, and turn to their own immediate low advantage any rhetoric they choose to work in, whether it be medicine, law, temperance, repentance, theatre, or grief. Their mastery of the spoken word means they are thus constantly «on stage», and the climax of their masquerade Twain locates in two dazzling sequences, the Wilks Farm episode and the mock-Shakespeare. Huck, as always, serves as the monitoring response:

It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes, at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds. But I never said nothing, never let on: kept it to myself; it's the best way; then you don't have no quarrels, and don't get into no trouble. If they wanted us to call them kings and dukes, I hadn't no objections, 'long as it would keep the peace in the family; and it warn't no use to tell Jim, so I didn't tell him. If I never learnt nothing else out of pap, I learnt that the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way (106).

Yet for all that he sees through them, Huck himself almost matches their patent fraudulence by his sentimental tall-tale of his drowned family from Pike County, Missouri, further evidence of his self-defensive endeavour to control hostile circumstance. But the masquerade goes on, nowhere more grotesquely and comically, than in the mock-Shakespeare, an inspired sequence which both guys bar-dology and the frontier Arkansas audience which knows no better than that it wants only sound, lights, over-played theatrical effect. If this amounts to «legitimate» mock-theatre, the Boggs/Sherburne episode which takes place between the rehearsals and the performance, most certainly is not, a life, actual theatre of cruelty (Boggs I shall come back to). In the comic garbled Shakespeare, Twain takes revenge on behalf of every schoolboy who has dutifully been obliged to learn in all due reverence the great immortal lines as scripture, the heady stuff of Shakespeare as literary saint. Yet again when Jim is dressed to as to play Lear, the high-jinks takes a profoundly more serious comic turn:

(The duke) dressed Jim up in King Lear's outfit - it was a long curtain-calico gown, and a white horse-hair wig and whiskers; and then he took his teatre-paint and painted Jim's face and hands and ears and neck all over a dead dull solid blue, like a man that's been drowned nine days. Blamed if he warn't the horri-blest looking outrage I ever see. Then the duke took and wrote out a sign on a shingle so - *Sick Arab — but harmless when not out of his head* (132).

The comedy works backward and forwards: Jim plays some demented, wode-encrusted Anglo-Saxon king, an antic Lear, as well as a deranged Muslim, yet in truth he does indeed belong on the same moral plain with Lear and with high-born Arabian royalty.

To this explicit theatricality, with its grease-paint, costumes, dramatic lines and tones, the Wilks episode simply serves as a transfer from the stage to life. As the duke and dauphin impersonate the heirs to the Wilks estate, Twain again rings the ironic changes on property, inheritance, false and legitimate ownership. The comedy at times turns bitter: the jokes about the harelipped girls; the funereal pieties which surround death (the township enjoys nothing so much as a good death to relieve the boredom); and the sheer knock-about, Feydeau-like farce of the buried inheritance. But again the essential comment belongs to Huck:

It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race (137).

Twain then, once more, reverses the process, as the two «Royal Nonesuch rascallions» (193) are tarred and feathered. In a Lilliputian Brobdignagian turn-about, Huck's sympathies are made to extend out to the duke and the dauphin:

Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world, It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings can be awful cruel to one another (194).

Amid all the shenanigans of the Shakespeare and Wilks episode there is interposed the Sherburn matter (Chapters XXI and XXII): again an event witnessed by Huck and again one which plays both ends of the moral spectrum. Boggs, the town-drunk, in the company of his daughter, lets drink get the better of prudence and vows to shoot the Colonel; he in turn is gunned down, ostensibly in the name of honour. The crowd then rises, mob-like, resolved to lynch the colonel. His speech outfaces them, the speech of the later Twain, dismissive, sardonic, deeply contemptuous of the thin veneer of «civilization» which for him covers an almost ativistic culture:

The idea of you lynching anybody! It's amusing. The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a *man*! Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a *man*? Why, a *man*'s safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind - as long as it's day-time and you're not behind him (123).

The touchstones are those of sheer cynicism, those of an older Huck perhaps, or certainly the «mysterious stranger» of the story of that name.

VI

Thus it is, in the last ten chapters of the novel, that Huck Finn undergoes yet one final metaphorphosis, not this time as the boy-girl «Sarah Mary Williams George Elexander Peters», or «George Jackson», or the orphan survivor, or the plague-threatened river driften, or the stage-hand, or property-thief, but as, of all people, Tom Sawyer, the Self to which Twain uses to point up the gap between

the re-introduced actual Tom Sawyer and the Huck of the river-journey with Jim. These last chapters have understandably long been a source of critical unease. For some they serve to underscore the contrast of Tom's play-world with the real world; for others, they reveal a failure of nerve, an inability on Twain's part to deliver on the novel's moral logic — for instance, by avoiding the patent sentimentality of a death-bed repentance by Miss Watson and by *now* selling Jim «down the river», in the manner of the ending of *Puddn'head Wilson*. But whether they serve to restore *Huckleberry Finn* to the realms of a child's domain, or serve as catharsis after the river scenes, they confirm the well-known difficulty Twain had in thinking through a right ending to the novel. And they remain a problem. Portions, needless to say, are perfectly fine and redeemable as in this exchange about a boat which has blown up on the river.

«Good gracious! Anybody hurt?»

«No'm. Killed a nigger».

«Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt» (185).

But if this underscores how much has been made morally available to Huck by Jim, what are we to make of Huck's subsequent comment that Jim was acceptable because he «was white inside» (250)? Further, the elaborate bric-a-brac which Tom re-introduces, the false imprisonment and escape and the Count of Monte Cristo ruses and rituals, one suspects for most readers becomes wearing; though Tom's conversion of the bullet into a kind of charm nicely modulates between the historic, actual world of «civilisation» and his own continuing fantasy world. For Huck there can be only «the Territory ahead», the frontier physical territory and the «free» «uncivilized» inward space of his own Self. Like his many American fictive successors, he embarks «on the road», the necessary, eternal Ishmael, adjacent to but never wholly of the «civilization» whose masquerades he has «been to before» and which for him can only «smother» and finally destroy. In his very last statement, Jim reveals that Pap Finn in truth did die; Huck is both orphan and finally his own true father. *His* civilization lies within, the truly «civilized» morality which can draw on his tested bond with Jim and his memory of «there warn't no home like a raft».

