Intro to Modern Library Edition

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THE UNITED STATES OF HUCK

INTRODUCTION TO *ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

INTRODUCTION TO THE INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by confessing that I have had more trouble with this piece than I've ever had writing anything in my life, mainly because I love this book and was deathly afraid I would fail to do it justice, which caused me to rush off to the library and do hours and hours of research, which only terrified me further and reduced me to writing quaking tautological sentences like "Much has been written about the fact that much has been written about the fact that, whereas the shores of the Mississippi, mythologically speaking, represent America's violence, the center of the river, which traditionally has been represented as Utopian, is also occasionally seen to contain bloated floating corpses." Recognizing that my sentences were perhaps not as clear as they could be, I began furiously editing, bearing in mind at every

instant that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is probably the greatest and certainly the most influential American novel of all time, and has inspired feelings of fierce love and loyalty in every important American writer, except in those other important American writers who have really, really disliked it and found it morally problematic, and soon I had worked myself into such a state of bowing obeisance and timidity that my sentences became a bland series of tenuous apologetic nouns, no verbs at all, as these, I felt, were too risky.

But luckily that phase is past, and I can now, using quite a number of verbs, espouse a Tentative Narrative Theory regarding *Huck Finn.*

A TENTATIVE NARRATIVE THEORY REGARDING *HUCK FINN*

Have you ever been in an airport and seen those escalators whose purpose it is not to actually escalate, but to move people horizontally, which is why they are called people movers? Imagine the novelist as a person standing at one end of a people mover, with a shovel, in front of a big pile of dirt. The pile of dirt represents The Thing This Writer Loves To Do, And Does Naturally. The writer started writing so that he or she could endlessly and effortlessly do this thing and nothing else—be funny, say, or verbally brilliant, or write lush nature vignettes, or detailed descriptions of the interiors of rich people's houses—and then be declared Wonderful, and buy a nicer car. But all writers soon find that their Dirt is not enough. Yes, their readership stands at the far end of the people mover, eagerly awaiting this Dirt, but if

the writer simply dumps shovelful after shovelful of Dirt onto the people mover, the people mover grinds to a halt, and the readership walks away to see a movie. Three hundred pages of descriptions of rich people's houses will not cut it: the writer must connect the dots of Dirt with something else, something narrative, something that imitates forward motion. The people mover must be fed Dirt a little at a time, so that it will keep moving, and in this way, and this way only, the readership will in time receive all the Dirt the writer wishes to administer.

Now, to extend this already rickety metaphor, let us say that what keeps the people mover moving is what we will call the Apparent Narrative Rationale. The Apparent Narrative Rationale is what the writer and the reader have tacitly agreed the book is "about." In most cases, the Apparent Narrative Rationale is centered around simple curiosity: the reader understands that he is waiting to learn if Scrooge will repent, if Romeo will marry Juliet, if the crops will be saved, the widow rescued. While the reader waits for that answer, the writer gets a chance to create the Three Christmas Ghosts and compose the Balcony Speech, and in the end, the reader finds that this—the Dirt—is what he or she has wanted all along.

The Apparent Narrative Rationale, then, can be seen as the writer's answer to his own question: "What exactly is it that I am doing here?"

I now skillfully segue back to Mark Twain, aka Samuel Clemens.

Twain is the funniest literary American writer, and his funniness is so energetic and true and pure that it must have been a great pleasure to be him, sitting there dressed all in white, smoking cigar after cigar in your hexagonal study, with the pure funniness pouring out

of the top of your head, helping you combat your native grouchiness. Like many lower-class writers (Chekhov, Dickens, Gogol come to mind), he started his career being purely funny, in comic sketches that were mostly Dirt and very little people mover, and all his writing life struggled with the question of what his Apparent Narrative Rationale should be, which is why he left behind such a long trail of abandoned manuscripts. He was not an outliner, not a planner, did not establish an agenda and carry it through, but wrote as the spirit moved him, in as improvisatory a manner as any writer ever did. "Mr. Clemens," wrote William Dean Howells, his friend and editor, "is the first writer to use in extended writing the fashion we all use in thinking, and to set down the thing that comes into his mind without fear or favor of the thing that went before or the thing that may be about to follow. . . . [H]e would take whatever offered itself to his hand out of that mystical chaos, that divine ragbag, which we call the mind, and leave the reader to look after relevancies and sequences for himself."

Huck Finn was written in three or four distinct bursts of creativity, between which Twain put the manuscript away and wrote plays no one has ever heard of and invented machines no one has ever used. Each time he stopped, he apparently did so for the simplest of reasons: he didn't know how to keep going. He lost faith in his Apparent Narrative Rationale, or interest in it, or found that it had led him to some seemingly insoluble narrative problem, and so put the book aside and invented an Invisible Ink Typewriter or a Systematic Noodle Identifier. Each time he came back to the book, he did so with renewed enthusiasm and a new plan on how to proceed: a new Apparent Narrative Rationale. This sequence of Apparent Narrative Rationales may

be roughly described as follows: (1) I Will Rewrite *Tom Sawyer*, but from Huck's Point of View; (2) I Will Take Huck and Jim Up the River, Ostensibly to Freedom; (3) I Will Write a Treatise on the Mores and Manners of the American Southwest; (4) I Will Build This Whole Deal Up into One of the Most Beautiful Moments of Impending Action Ever, in Which We See That Huck Must Risk His Life to Single-handedly Save Jim; and (5) I Will Let Tom Sawyer Come Inexplicably Back into My Story and Ruin My Ending.

Now, all fiction writers labor under this burden of not-knowing. "The writer," said Donald Barthelme, "is one who, embarking upon a task, does not know what to do." In this mode of not-knowing, the thick-torsoed, literal, and crew-cut conscious mind is moved to the sidelines in favor of the swinging, perceptive, light-footed, tutu-wearing subconscious. We surprise ourselves, and make something bigger than we could have imagined making before we started trying to make it. But as Twain wrote *Huck Finn*, his not-knowing seems also to have been operating on a second and more profound level. All those adjustments of his Apparent Narrative Rationales took place in part because his book was making him uncomfortable. His comic novel was doing things a comic novel was not supposed to do, and yet he sort of liked it, and yet, come to think of it, it was really pretty darn uncomfortable, and he didn't yet feel like fighting the battles his story was presaging. In effect, his subconscious was urging him to do things his conscious mind didn't know could be done, or didn't particularly want done, and so my Tentative Narrative Theory is simply this: the tension between various warring parts of Sam Clemens—the radical and the reactionary; the savage satirist and the kindly Humorist; the raw hick and the

aspiring genteel Literary Figure—is what makes *Huck Finn* such a rich and formidable book.

That is all the narrative theory I have at the moment, but I will return to this question of Twain's understanding of his own book later, after I dispense with the question of whether *Huck Finn* is indeed a Great Novel or if, on the other hand, the millions of people who have read and loved it and felt that it was morally important and gorgeous have all been stupid and deceived and hopelessly old-fashioned and dupable.

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT IT?

Twain started the book in 1876, as a companion piece to one he had recently finished, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but with a critical difference: he would tell the new story from the point of view of its main character, Huck Finn, son of the town drunk. "I shall take a boy of twelve & run him through life (in the first person)," Twain wrote to Howells in 1875. This first-person voice turned out to be one of the most natural and poetic literary voices ever devised, a voice still startling in its ability to bring the physical world (predawn birdcalls, a tin drainpipe on a moonlit night, the mud-smell of a river at dawn) off the page and into our heads, making us feel as if we hadn't merely read the scenes but lived them, over and over, in some parallel and primal universe. It is this voice that first gets us, and it is this feeling of love for the voice—our delight in Huck's common sense, his original way of thinking, the perfect roll and cadence of these odd sentences, so unliterary by the standards of Twain's time—that first, I expect, put into some early critic's head the idea that the book was not just a boy's book,

not just a quasi-naughty work of low comedy, but in fact, a great and seminal work of art. With this voice, Twain threw open the door on an America previously unrepresented in our literature: its lower classes, its hustlers and religious con men, possessed of equal parts Spirit and Lust; its leaning frame houses, inside of which corpulent men, tended by slaves, read aloud from Bibles. In an era when Whitman and Emerson were linking the health of the American democracy to its downward inclusiveness, along came *Huck Finn*, which was so terrifically downwardly inclusive that it was banned by the Concord Library for "dealing with a series of experiences not elevating."

The voice is what hooks so many young writers on the book, and inspires them to attempt to do for our time what Twain did for his, which is why every few years there appears some new work described as "a *Huck Finn*-like reverie on freedom and constraint, set in a convent, in which Sister Gertrude, like Huck, dreams of climbing out the window and having a smoke" or "like *Huck Finn*, if Huck Finn was raised in Cleveland and Pap was not a cruel drunk but a sort of cranky rabbi." But this tendency of *Huck Finn* to cause other writers to write books extremely similar to it but worse is telling; the voice of the book reminds us of the beauty of the world, and of the fact that that beauty can indeed be gotten at by the word, and that our language, English, that old dowager, has not yet begun to fight. As long as there is a new reality, the voice tells us, English too will be new, and it is you, the young writer, who will make it so. And so off the young writers go, trying to figure out what their River is, and who their Jim is, and what America's current most noxious trait is, so they can lampoon it. And although—at least the three or four times I've tried it—the final

product is not a book at all, but a pile of papers you fling across the room; the final product is also a new respect for the originality and genius of the book, and for Twain, of whom F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, beautifully: "His eyes were the first eyes that ever looked at us objectively that were not eyes from overseas."

In *Huck Finn*, the landscape appears to us on a strangely human scale: we feel ourselves actually moving through it. I don't know if this is true for anybody else, but when I read, my inner eye is normally situated about ten feet off the ground. I look down on Dostoevsky's characters as if perched beside some icon on a beet-smelling shelf; when Bob Cratchit tests the Christmas pudding, I'm up on the stove, which fortunately for me is one of those instantaneously cooling Victorian stoves. When I read *Huck Finn*, though, I am Huck's height, looking up at all these unkempt hostile people looking down at me, grazing a tree with my arm, running a finger through the dust that has settled on an end table in that magnificently described Grangerford parlor, killing an actual pig, letting the hand that killed the pig trail behind me in the green waters of the Mississippi.

The person who tries to list all that is wonderful about *Huck Finn* will soon find that his family has fled, the grass has overgrown the sidewalk, the dog has starved to death, and his life is over. There is wonderfulness everywhere you look, and from whatever angle you look. I would guess that a person could wade into the book with any idea in mind ("Christianity," or "the forest," or "concepts of feminine beauty") and find that idea not only represented in *Huck Finn* but metaphorically developed, and metaphorically developed in a way that simultaneously sheds light on Twain, the reader, and the cosmos. Try it yourself; read it, say, with "concepts of feminine beauty" in mind, and you will soon find yourself convinced that Twain only invented the stuff about the kid and the slave and the big river and freedom and democracy as a diversionary tactic so he could really sink his teeth into the concept of feminine beauty.

Such metaphorical suppleness comes, I think, in proportion to how purely the artistic product proceeds from the subconscious, and from the quality of that subconscious. Twain's subconscious was a formidable thing—he had been just about everywhere in America, usually at a time when something big was happening, had done that most purely American thing, namely work himself above his original station, had begun his life as a lower-middle-class kid in a slave-owning household, which situated him squarely on the twin issues that make every American sweat and frown and burst into defensiveness and begin spouting groundless platitudes, namely race and class—and when this subconscious took charge, emboldened by a temporarily perplexed conscious mind, the book wrote itself out of any known genre and into this wild new thing we are still trying to classify and make sense of.

So there is the voice, and the created world along the river, and the amazing assortment of characters, and the constantly shifting skein of metaphors, and the rich stinging humor—but what truly animates the book, and makes it so dangerous and transcendent and even prescient, is the relationship between Huck and Jim.

THE CENTRAL MORAL VECTOR

Huck is an ignorant white-trash boy. Not only is he white trash, he is the lowest of the white trash, sort

of White-Trash Trash, because his father is the town drunk. And this town drunk is not of the Amiable Nostalgic school of town-drunkery but of the Brutal Violent school. Huck flees town, to escape Pap and the equally oppressive if less flamboyant Righteous Spinster Duo, Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas, and soon is faced with a dilemma: this dilemma is named Jim, and Jim is an escaped slave, and all of Huck's training thus far has been that slavery is good, biblically sanctioned even, and that he should always do what is right, which in this case means he should turn Jim in. Bearing in mind our human fondness for establishing ourselves as Worthwhile by kicking someone beneath us simply because we can, especially if we ourselves have been repeatedly kicked, it would not be surprising if Huck, who has no mother and no real home and a father who locks him in a shed and beats him, were to take a little pleasure from mistreating Jim. (Imagine a sort of contemporary Huck-equivalent: a little community-despised white-trash boy, son of an American Nazi Party member who periodically beats him and locks him in the garage for days, comes upon a sleeping and vulnerable homeless black man—what might he do?) And yet all of Huck's instincts tell him that Jim is a man, and a friend, and we come to see that Jim cares about Huck more genuinely, with more real affection, than anyone else in the book, and so the Central Moral Vector lies in the question: Will Huck turn Jim in?

Huck struggles with this question, and watching this struggle we come to love him, and conducting this struggle, he becomes one of the great figures of world literature. "No one who reads thoughtfully the dialectic of Huck's moral crisis," Lionel Trilling said, "will ever again be wholly able to accept without some question and

some irony the assumptions of the respectable morality by which he lives."

Anyway, this is what we are told, and taught, and what we remember about the book years later: the book is about the question of whether Huck, this probable nascent racist, will transcend himself and help Jim realize his dream of freedom. This question hangs over the entire book and, to the contemporary mind, gives it the shape that allows us to argue for its noble moral intent, and to assess its artistic triumph or failure, but the truth is, there are entire sections of the book that behave as if this question had not been asked. Jim spends a good deal of the middle portion of the book effectively neutralized as a narrative player, hidden on board the raft or in the woods, with his face painted blue and/or tied hand and foot and/or dressed up like King Lear. There are other places where Jim fades into caricature, and in these places it seems as if Twain—involved in the writing of the book and not in its analysis many years later, flailing around in search of his Apparent Narrative Rationale, still emerging from the slog of his childhood racial attitudes, trying on different models of what his book was, inventing and reinventing his Upside-Down Lapel Reinstator—has forgotten what his book is about, or at least has forgotten what, many years later, we will claim his book is about.

All of what is debated and sometimes deplored about *Huck Finn*—its structural problems, its weak ending, its racism—can, I contend, be traced back to the fact that Twain only dimly and imperfectly understood that his book had a Central Moral Vector. Or rather, he knew, but sometimes forgot. Or rather, he knew, but periodically got interested in other aspects of the book and lost

sight of it. Or maybe, and most interestingly: his Central Moral Vector was too hot to handle, and would have required him to simultaneously invent, understand, and complete his book in an entirely new genre, a genre that neither Twain nor the world was quite ready for.

THE ENDING, OH MY GOD, THE ENDING

Twain's failure to love, honor, and obey his Central Moral Vector is most gut-droppingly apparent in the ending. "In the whole reach of the English novel, there is not a more abrupt or chilling descent," wrote Bernard DeVoto, one of our great Twain scholars, and since we are heaping scorn on the ending, I may as well quote Leo Marx, another one of our great Twain scholars, who said that the ending "jeopardizes the significance of the entire novel." Even Hemingway, who loved the book, and whose famous quote about it ("All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. It's the best book we've had. . . . There was nothing before . . .") is required for any introduction (and so I have now discharged that duty, with apologies to Melville and Poe and Hawthorne, who might feel that their books had at least a little something to do with modern American literature)—even Hemingway suggested that the reader stop reading before the end of the book, which, since Hemingway is no longer with us and therefore cannot beat me up, I have to say strikes me as a bit of a cop-out: the book has an ending, and Twain loved that ending, and wrote it in what was basically a transport of ecstasy in the summer of 1876, sometimes working from breakfast to dinner, and never disclaimed

it afterward but proudly and successfully read from it on the book's reading tour.

Having said all this, I will also say that there is a kind of perverse greatness in the ending, in the sense that Waterloo was a great last battle for someone as considerable as Napoleon. Some part of Twain realized what he had brought himself to the brink of, and great talent that he was, he did not tarry on the brink of that cliff, or pretend there was no cliff, or that he was not standing at the edge of it: instead he ran at high speed back the way he'd come, causing a disaster, but one that is on as grand a scale as the novel itself.

SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH IT, EXACTLY?

For me, the most moving part of the book is the scene at the end of chapter 23. Jim tells Huck about the time he slapped his young daughter in the head for not obeying him, only to find that she had never actually heard him: she had gone deaf from a recent bout with scarlet fever. It's a heartbreaker, as I was reminded just now when I went to get the chapter reference, reread it, and started bawling. Any parent reading this is sickened with the magnitude and hurtfulness of Jim's error, with the impossibility of ever really erasing it, and—this is a particular manifestation of Twain's moral genius—with the fact that, horrible as this mistake would have been for any parent, this parent is a slave, a thousand miles from a home he will probably never get back to, if the prevailing national culture has its way.

We leave this scene with our sense of the Central Moral Vector confirmed: Huck's dawning realization

of Jim's humanity is essential to the story, and Twain knows it.

Eighty pages or so later, Huck finds out that Jim has been sold and is being imprisoned, and has to decide what to do. There follows one of the most famous and wonderful passages in any literature, in which Huck decides, finally, to purposely do what he knows to be wrong—free Jim—and thus doom himself to hell. It is a brilliant hymn to clear-sightedness and against hypocrisy, and when you read it with the memory of the above-mentioned scene still fresh in your mind, the effect is to be slingshotted toward what now feels like the inevitable ending: Huck, who has lied and tricked his way down the river, will now lie and trick Jim free, or will try to.

Twain has written himself into a tough and very serious spot. Jim is being held prisoner in the Deep South by people used to holding prisoners, people who do not have wishy-washy opinions about slaves, or what to do with them, or what to do with people, even little boys, who help them escape. Three ideas, which Twain has skillfully nurtured throughout the book, come together: (1) Huck has transcended himself; (2) Jim is the best and most genuine human being in the book; and (3) the violence that has been intensifying and coming closer to Jim and Huck throughout the novel is now nearly upon them. And suddenly we feel, as perhaps Twain did, that the book has written itself out of its rollicking comic tradition and into something else, something more tragic and frightening, that would indict America in a way America would not soon forget.

Because what should happen is something deeply sad. Jim cannot escape, not for long, and Huck cannot remain unpunished for having helped Jim escape: the

country Twain has made is too cruel and sure of itself and methodical in its slavery for either of these things to happen. And Twain understood the book—as we do—to be a comic novel, and the prospect of Jim being sold down the river or lynched, and Huck being bullwhipped and/or sent to a reformatory, say, does not gibe with our expectations of a comic novel, where violence happens only to side players, and generally off-camera, and usually because they deserve it.

So what does Twain do? This literary purist, who had lambasted James Fenimore Cooper for his too-lengthy canoes and exaggeratedly hearing-gifted Indians, commits one of the worst Coincidences in the history of writing. Huck approaches the house where Jim is being held, planning to enact another swindle, and a woman comes out, mistakes him for another little boy (we flinch a bit at this; mistaken identity has been used maybe once too often in the book), and then—horror of horrors—we learn that this other little boy's name is Tom, and we begin whispering to ourselves, *No way, no way, Mark, Sam, don't do it*—but our worst fears are soon confirmed: this woman is Tom Sawyer's aunt, and she—here, eleven hundred miles upriver—is expecting a visit from Tom himself *any minute now.*

Now, a coincidence is all right, life is full of them, but a reader's willingness to ingest one is inversely related to how badly the writer needs one, and Twain needed one very badly at this point, to avoid stepping into the dangerous trap his subconscious had set for him.

So at the moment when Huck seems most complete, heroic, and alive, Tom Sawyer, that Europhile, that conceptualizer, that American Philistine, comes flying up the river to save Twain from his own book.

A WORD ABOUT TOM, THAT STINKER

Tom Sawyer is likable enough in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, tolerable in the opening chapters of *Huck Finn*, where he serves mostly as a marker for how much more humane and sensible Huck is. In those early chapters, Huck grows increasingly skeptical of Tom's imitative and book-toadying and derivative style of adventure, and seemingly leaves him behind forever in the famous line "It had all the marks of a Sunday School." Then it's out on the river for Huck, eleven hundred miles of adventure and tricks and self-reliance and encounters with grown men, from which he emerges triumphant, saved again and again by his own common sense and wit, while presumably Tom is back home, dipping pigtails in inkwells and whining about how Sid is teasing him too much and so forth.

The difference between Tom and Huck is that Huck believes in the reality of what he sees and feels, and Tom does not. Tom believes in what he has read in books, or, more correctly, in the concepts that have arisen from what he has read in books. Huck believes in the reality of the people and things he sees, whereas, to Tom, these things are only imperfect imitations of the people and things about which he has read. Because Huck believes that other people are real, he also believes in the reality of their suffering; he grieves when he hurts Jim, worries about the drunken rider at the circus, feels bad for betraying Miss Watson, and, most importantly, understands how much Jim needs his freedom. To Tom, Jim is not real, nor is Jim's suffering; Jim's suffering is

simply an opportunity for Tom's ego and cleverness to exert themselves. He prolongs and worsens this suffering by putting Jim through an insane ritual of escape à la those in Walter Scott novels (the low-comic riff that was Twain's Apparent Narrative Rationale at that time) and by withholding from Jim the staggering truth: Jim has been free for most of the novel, because Miss Watson emancipated him on her deathbed.

Tom and Huck, of course, correspond to different parts of their creator. Tom, perhaps, to that part of Twain that longed for acceptance from the Snooty East, and Superior Europe, and distrusted the Huck part—so crude, wild, backwoodsy, and unschooled. Literary characters can come only from their creator's psyche, but in this case—maybe because Twain's psyche was such a specimen psyche, and because he had such unfettered access to it—his personal binary was also a critical national one: Huck and Tom represent two viable models of the American Character. They exist side by side in every American and every American action. America is, and always has been, undecided about whether it will be the United States of Tom or the United States of Huck. The United States of Tom looks at misery and says: Hey, I didn't do it. It looks at inequity and says: All my life I have busted my butt to get where I am, so don't come crying to me. Tom likes kings, codified nobility, unquestioned privilege. Huck likes people, fair play, spreading the truck around. Whereas Tom knows, Huck wonders. Whereas Huck hopes, Tom presumes. Whereas Huck cares, Tom denies. These two parts of the American Psyche have been at war since the beginning of the nation, and come to think of it, these two parts of the World Psyche have been at war since the beginning of