

# HUCK FINN — the picaresque saint

by James Tulin

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 civilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before.

Doubtless the emphasis deserves to be placed where it has traditionally been placed by readers of these final sentences to 'Huckleberry Finn': that is, on the image of Huck lighting out for the territory and on the figure he cuts as a defiant individualist rejecting the civilized life for the sake of his own independence and freedom. The emphasis deserves to be placed here since this image is in itself a vital truth of Huck; his claim on freedom, his faith in a future, and his will to light out are all essential parts of his being and of the quality of hope that he gives rise to in the novel. Besides this, the reader has little chance to question the values of Huck's declaration of independence because of the very open-endedness of the story.

The fact remains, however, that the values of this moment do need to be questioned. Not only for the reason that the moment stands isolated and outside of a context that might justify the assertiveness of Huck's manner, but also for the reason that within the moment itself Twain has admitted other and equally essential aspects of the issue of Huck that suggest that Twain himself saw the moment in a more subtle way than have many of his readers. If then we look closely at the statement, we see not a simple perspective on the future of Huck but a fairly complex sense of how his future is immediately contingent on his present and of how both future and present are ultimately necessitated by his past. And to isolate from this moment only its future reference is to reduce and, indeed, to ignore the qualities in Twain's writing that disclose to us his full meaning.

The two sentences simply do not carry equal weight. The first is dramatic only in the sense that everything in it pertains to a present moment in Huck's mind; the second is dramatic not only in this specific sense but in the added sense of Twain himself feeling the point as well. And to see this is to shift the focus off the future on to the dimension of Twain's whole understanding of his subject. Even within the first sentence a sensitive reader can see how contingent is the issue of "the territory" on the way in which Huck is thinking about it. That is to say, we accept the lighting out as a real possibility only because we accept Huck at this moment as a real person. The presentness of Huck is there at every point. He is rationalizing his intent to escape, and this in itself distances the sentiment; his reasons moreover are both too large and too small to convince us of anything but the humour of the mind that is advancing them. "But I reckon", and "Aunt Sally" act to let Huck be little; "because" and "and" act to let him be large, but hardly logical. "I can't stand it" works both ways; it is also the best sign of the distance between Huck and his creator, which means, without speaking derogatorily of Twain, that he is "writing down" to Huck. And even the phrase "to light out for the territory" contains the distinction between present and future in the

way the means of getting there carries the sharp idiom of Huck more so than does the place of destination.

But even granted this distinction derived from the writing itself, there still remains the fact of Twain's detachment from even this qualification of the sentiment for the territory. Where there is no qualification on his part is in the pregnant little sentence on which the whole book ends, "I been there before." So very abstract and yet so concretely felt, "there" and "before" sum up the whole dimension of place and time that Huck has experienced and now left behind. And "been", the very symbol of the passive voice in our language, here becomes active, judging as well as experiencing. The verb is peculiarly Huck's, and yet still larger in its connotation; it is Twain's and the vernacular culture's, and holds within itself the protest and the power of the individual human being to create, over against the pressures of polite society, his own life and language. In 'Huckleberry Finn' it is a symbol of all the qualities of the narrator's language, which create and concentrate all of the interests of the novel as experiences in the mind of one human being, who therefore matters.

Twain's deepest response is, then, to the past even at the moment when he appears to be sending his hero off into a hopeful future. Nor is this a contradiction of his purposes; rather the very basis of the necessity out of which the picaresque narrative grows. Huck's run for the future is really a race from the past; the picaresque narrative is in itself a central value, a moral value, of the novel; the series of happenings is a series of human detachments from a world which compels, constrains and constricts. The most vital image of Huck that the novel provides is not that of him lighting out for the territory, but that of him spontaneously improvising those "saving" lies to get himself and Jim out of trouble. And if we see here what we mean in calling Huck the picaresque saint, these moments also disclose the immense realism investing and, indeed, occasioning Huck's acts of grace. The lies Huck tells have a saving effect, but their cause and their content imply a world that is damned: his family are dead, the farm has been sold up, there's smallpox on the raft and so on; the things he dredges up from his mind's past create the past as a world of necessity, and it is this that necessitates Huck's run for freedom and a future. If ever he stops running, the past envelops him and discovers to him his own "lonesomeness" in life. His night-time fantasy in Chapter 1 establishes this theme. His enjoyment of life in the woods with his father, virtually as soon as he recognizes its value, undergoes a reversion into squalor. His time of peace on Jackson Island gives way to restlessness. And after his long journey with Jim on the Mississippi is over and he is back in the kind of society that the Phelps' family with their tie-up to St. Petersburg signifies, Huck has indeed come full circle back into his own past, back into a "Sunday-like" existence where "you feel like it's spirits whispering—spirits that's been dead ever so many years—and you always think they're talking about you". It is the theme of the St. Petersburg fantasy, only here occurring in broad daylight and in narrative rhythm and tone. "As a general thing it makes a body wish he was dead, too, and done with it all." Fortunately, Huck doesn't place too much weight on his own general truths; his situation throughout the narrative is more generally one of contingency, and his response is in kind—"poking along lonesome, and on the watchout".

The effervescence of the picaresque, then, establishes a moral order in the narrative itself. It is, however, an order which in its very quality of continual moments of release from the past is in no sense a triumph

over that past. The world of happenings cannot of itself sustain Huck in a state of happiness. But that there are elements within the novel that give the term "saint" a more positive aspect also must be understood, and in the light of Twain's total concerns in writing the book. Generally, these positive aspects revolve around what T. S. Eliot has called the issue of the Boy and the River. Many of them may be found in the following passage:

Mornings before daylight I slipped into corn-fields and borrowed a watermelon, or a mushmelon, or a punkin, or some new corn, or things of that kind. Pap always said it warn't no harm to borrow things if you was meaning to pay them back some time; but the widow said it warn't anything but a soft name for stealing, and no decent body would do it. Jim said he reckoned the widow was partly right and pap was partly right; so the best way would be for us to pick out two or three things from the list and say we wouldn't borrow them anymore—then he reckoned it wouldn't be no harm to borrow the others. So we talked it over all one night, drifting along down the river, trying to make up our minds whether to drop the water-melons, or the cantelopes, or the mushmelons, or what. But toward daylight we got all settled satisfactory, and concluded to drop crab-apples and p'simmons. We warn't feeling just right before that, but it was all comfortable now. I was glad the way it come out, too, because crabapples ain't ever good, and the p'simmons wouldn't be ripe for two or three months yet.

We shot a water-fowl now and then that got up too early in the morning or didn't go to bed early enough in the evening. Take it all round, we lived pretty high.

Relaxation and humour are everywhere in these lines. The tone and the point of view imitate the *hilaritas* of the angels. Jim philosophizes the issue much in the same way as he, the radical victim of life, had earlier, in the St. Petersburg world of chapter 4, with his hair-ball philosophized the fate of that other victim of necessity, Pap Finn: "De bes' way is to res' easy en let de ole man take his own way". The egoism of his "you is all right" is sublime—and sublimating.

But Huck's quality here is sublime, and *not* sublimating. His detachment is entire, and yet it allows him the condition of contemplation towards every aspect of his existence. His mind revolves around the concrete things of daily living; he can admit the dualism of his moral mentors, the Widow and Pap, without being disturbed by it or them; he can present his own actions, as he thieves and kills, as benign acts of grace; and he can, most significantly, share the society of the slave and sense the sympathy of the River. The drift of the river is, indeed, the drift of Huck's mind. He always takes on the qualities of the context in which he finds himself; this is his passivity; and this is why he makes so good a narrator. In this context, placed half-way between his experience of town-life in St. Petersburg and his most active experience later on of the larger Southern society, Huck finds himself in the presence of, to use the phrase that Eliot created with the Mississippi presumably in mind, a strong brown god, a presence that can be "sullen, untamed and intractable", but one that also can, simply because it is a god, allow to Huck the possibility to "take it all round".

Yet how contingent is this moment of release is obvious. The very drifting down the river, the source of Huck's detachment, holds its sorry ambiguity for Jim. And the river, for all that it is a saving presence, actively abets in its fogs, wrecks, steamboats and human society the irony

in which Twain is conceiving the attempt of small boy and slave to free themselves from the clutch of necessity. Indeed, the dualism touched on in passing in the above scene and written so large in the mutually constructive possibilities of life in St. Petersburg—in widow and father, spinster and slave, judge and pirate—grows as the novel proceeds to include the river itself as one of its terms. And Huck's largest experience in the book is to find himself caught between the liberation of the river and the demoralizing state of the human society along its shores; he alone throughout the novel has to carry the burden of the two worlds.

There is a dramatic quality to the narrative growth of 'Huckleberry Finn' in the way Twain's understanding of the life he is creating evolves to its full expression. For just as the dualism between freedom and necessity enlarges itself into the essential vision Twain unconsciously holds of life, so too does the viability of Huck, in whose humour and sympathy Twain has situated his own poise and equanimity such as it is to life, diminish. The one is the cause and converse of the other; and this is a point that calls for close attention since most readings of 'Huckleberry Finn' suggest that Huck develops in moral stature rather than diminishes as he goes along. Specifically, we see Huck becoming actively engaged in the ethical problem of what to do about Jim on the one hand and the King and the Duke on the other. Now the two situations are themselves opposed and embody in terms of personal relationships for Huck the underlying dualism of Twain's committed view of things. And looking at the whole context from a structural point of view, we can see that Twain by limiting Huck's engagement to one of immediate personal relations is at the same time preserving Huck's detachment from the full pressure of the larger context. These relationships act as buffers, then, to preserve the picaresque dimension of the narrative that slides right through the centre of the dualism.

And what appears to be the positive moral quality of Huck's engagement in these issues turns out to be, when the actual language of these moments is considered, more truly the inroads necessity has at last been able to make into his detachment. His engagement with Jim's plight in chapter 31 and with the King at the Wilkes' residence is rendered in the *indirect discourse* of the narration; the language is not simply of some external situation but of Huck's own involvement in the situation; and the language so used serves to show that in spite of having a good heart Huck has inherited from his past a deformed conscience and a sentimentalized sympathy.

When in chapter 31 Huck gives us the terms in which his conscience is grappling with the issue of Jim, we see that the language is betraying his heart and his feelings: it is the language of the Sunday-school, the language of the enemy; "you can't pray a lie" he discovers, and writes his letter to Miss Watson. And even the victory he then wins over this deformed conscience presents itself as a formal defeat for him: "All right, then, I'll go to hell". Huck simply does not possess a language of moral values that is his own. What he does possess, however, is his own language of experience: "... I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing". It is his inability to "harden" that is his true moral stature; his passivity has at this moment of crisis become an activity; and this is the picaresque Huck we have known right from the beginning of the story. Likewise too with the King, Huck's littleness discovers itself. "All that kind of rot and slush" and "all that soul-butter and hogwash" place Huck just as much as they place the King's hypocrisy. When the crowd strikes up "the doxologer" endorsing

the King, Huck shows by warming to the music that he cannot discriminate the role of the society itself in making the King's action possible.

The implication of Huck's revealed inadequacies in the book is that Twain's imagination is reaching out to a reality far beyond the capacity of Huck's articulation. Huck's essential values, apart from the values of his narration, are those of his detachment, passivity, unknowingness, and humour; the experience that the narrative integrity of the book unfolds tests these qualities as a viable human response and resolution, and finds them wanting. It is only in terms of the jejune sensibility of Tom Sawyer that Twain can then bear to press on to the end of his story. Huck does continue to have his small successes, thanks to his durable sympathy, late in the narrative, but the obvious point to make of his diminishment is that Twain has found "the picaro" to be a very contingent "saint".

It remains to be said, as the reading of 'Huckleberry Finn' here given makes it inevitable to say, that the most dramatic writing in the book is to be found in those passages where Twain "takes over" from Huck the role of hero-cum-narrator; that is to say, where the full depths of Twain's understanding of life are revealing themselves **unconsciously** and **immediately** in the prose; and these depths reveal themselves as a dualism, in a vision of human society that is melancholic to the point of being morbid and a vision of the freedom known on the river that balances but cannot redeem the other. The gothic and pictorial imagination that Twain evinces in chapters 21 and 22 during the Sherburn affair, renders the incident in a way that Huck, for all that he is present, simply cannot do; indeed, Twain sends Huck off at the close of the incident to the circus to let him experience and present in terms more appropriately his own a small analogue, in the transcendent clown, of the larger incident of these chapters. And the point to this larger incident is not merely the grotesque realism of the cold-blooded Sherburn shooting down the crass fool Boggs and scornfully waving away the lynching party with his shotgun, but the way in which the social values of the incident fix themselves as a formula of social existence in Twain's mind. His later fiction reverts again and again to a "transcendent" figure like Sherburn standing over "the damned human race", the Boggses of this world. And with "Huckleberry Finn" itself variations of this syndrome are pervasive; the King and the Duke playing to the crowds; Tom Sawyer having his fun with human lives; and even Pap Finn in his revulsion to the negro—all define a world of action premised in misanthropy.

It pays to recall Huck at this stage just to sense how necessary a creation he was in helping Twain detach himself from his own melancholia. It also pays to remember the river at this point to feel how essential its presence is to the buoyancy of the novel, supporting and enlarging and testing in sympathy all of the positive human aspirations of Huck and his maker. The river in this form appeals most forcefully in chapter 19 right after the Grangerford experience. Huck has just seen his young friend, Buck Grangerford, shot down, and covering up the boy's face escapes back to the redemptive life of the river. And in grace it receives him: the days "swum" and "slid" by; the water's surface is broad and smooth; there are always cottonwoods waiting to conceal the raft; and at dawn each day they swim. ". . . we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee-deep, and watched the daylight come. Not a sound anywheres—perfectly still—just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bullfrogs a-cluttering, maybe." The very "loneliness" that Huck most fears is taken over by the river and becomes the river's quality, which Huck can now watch and enjoy. The harmony of the River and the Boy is everywhere apparent and everywhere made real

by the idiom of Huck's mind; and yet there is a third presence to this scene, that of the Pilot or Twain affirming the experience, and his idiom too can be felt.

It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened. Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to **make** so many. Jim said the moon could 'a' **laid** them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn't say nothing against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. We used to watch the stars that fell, too, and see them streak down. Jim he allowed they'd got spoiled and was hove out of the nest.

Nothing is more real in this statement than the word "allowed". It pins the moment down dramatically as **theirs**, these two vernacular outsiders who yet hold to their right to make their statement on life; and the repetitions and inversions of the phrase suggest that they don't take their pronouncements too seriously. The word also carries a nice condescension to the life they are describing and a tolerance for each other's differing views. There is a wonderful equanimity to the word.

But while the style is theirs, the thought is Twain's; for in the enigma of the stars lies the enigma of the society that can see the enigma there. The discrimination between "whether they was made or only just happened" is just too exact and too pertinent to the large concerns of the novel to be incidental only. Whether life itself is made or only just happens, whether reality has to take the form of order with its concomitant tragic exclusions or whether reality may take the form of chance and its contingent comic inclusions, whether slave and picaro—these least creatures of the two worlds—can share the one society; these are the essential concerns of 'Huckleberry Finn'. It is only within the ambience of the river that such free contemplation is possible for Twain. He does not solve the issue of his metaphysics quite so simply as Huck does the issue of his melons; but the chance to do so is there, the chance of the freed mind to exist and to contemplate its own existence; and this is the true transcendent and comic affirmation of the novel.