

Mr. Roets and Mr. Nicholas

11 Honors American Literature

The following selection is from Ron Powers' biography of Samuel Clemens, *Mark Twain; A Life*.

We have selected passages that pertain to the creative process that gave us *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and some history of the critical and popular reception of the book. The pertinent passages begin halfway thru page 471 and continue to page 478. Then there is a jump of several pages to the top of page 489, continuing to the top of page 497.

Powers, Ron. *Mark Twain; A Life*. Free Press, 2005.

Everything.”²⁷ He started writing a long burlesque, “1002d Arabian Night,” that turned out to be so bad that even Howells eventu-
 “I don’t mean to say that there were not extremely ki
 the whole it was not your best or your second-best; a
 kind of fun which you can’t afford to indulge in . . .
 fun” involved getting Scheherazade into bed with F
 Howells began scheming toward collaboration on a
 the popularity of Mark Twain’s great stage character
 for discovery; its title was *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist*.

Inspired by his efforts to teach history to Susy a
 upon page of his notebook with an idea for a new “his
 Improver” with 4,000 Historical Facts. Children v
 marked outdoor space by correctly naming kings, pre
 revolutions, “Memorable Earthquakes,” and so o
 “trumps”—Judas Iscariot, Guiteau, and Whitelaw R
 loses 3 points. It is called being smirched.”²⁹ He des
 Joe Twichell, and Twichell thoughtlessly repeated the
 ford *Courant*, a tacit invitation for others to pirat
 seethed, but spared his old hiking chum the friendship death penalty.

HIS MOST significant labor was the completion of the other great story that
 his river journey had reawakened in him. Finally, after seven years of ap-
 proaching and avoiding Huckleberry Finn, he was fully invested in the fugi-
 tive boy and his tale. To Jane, in May, he declared, “I haven’t had such
 booming working-days for many years. I am piling up manuscript in a really
 astonishing way . . . This summer it is no more trouble to me to write than it is
 to lie.”³⁰ On July 20 he bragged to Howells from Elmira, “I wrote 4000 words
 to-day & I touch 3000 & upwards pretty often . . . It’s a kind of companion to
 Tom Sawyer.”³¹ On September 1, 1883, Mark Twain notified James Osgood
 and his new British publisher Andrew Chatto in London that he was finished.

His burst of energy—695 handwritten pages in six weeks—was all the
 more astonishing given the sourness that had dampened the early, inter-
 rupted stages of the manuscript; as when he’d told Howells in the summer of
 1876 that “I like it only tolerably well . . . & may possibly pigeonhole or burn
 the MS when it is done.”³² His attitude had changed at some point in the years
 since he’d conceived the novel’s metafictional opening sentences: “You will not
 know about me, without you have read a book by the name of ‘The Adventures
 of Tom Sawyer,’ but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark
 Twain, & he told the truth, mainly.”³³ Now, with the river again fresh in his
 imagination, and his jilted-lover’s anger whetted by the profanation of his
 childhood Eden, Mark Twain finished the book at near stream-of-
 consciousness speed. The pace of his output would suggest little time for the
 meditative pauses that most writers require before producing a section, or

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even a word. Revision would come later, but the wildly complex grand scheme—the “evasion” chapters—form the conclusion to *Huckleberry Finn* seems never to have produced a moment of doubt.

This flow had required years to gain its momentum. Mark Twain breezed through the first 446 pages inside his gazebo at Quarry Farm before turning away from it in the late summer of 1876. The story to that point betrayed little more ambition than to divert young readers. The urchin Huck, rich on his share of the treasure that he and Tom discovered in the previous book, and in the throes of being “sivilized” in St. Petersburg, is kidnapped by his monstrous “Pap” and spirited to a cabin on the opposite shore of the Mississippi. (In his anti-“guvment” speech and angry-white-guy attitude, Pap is the book’s most recognizable character by today’s standards.) Huck escapes by faking evidence of his own death and slips off to Jackson’s Island, where he encounters Jim, on the run after learning that his owner, Miss Watson, intends to sell him down the river. By Chapter 11 the two are off on their raft, co-fugitives from the brutal order of the world ashore. They’re hoping to make it to Cairo, at the tip of Illinois, where the Ohio River merges with the Mississippi, and leave the raft there, heading up the Ohio for safety in the free states or Canada. But they drift past that village in the fog and awaken to find themselves in the South, where Jim faces certain capture, or worse.

That was where Mark Twain suspended the novel: in mid-chapter, with Huck wandering on shore, separated from Jim after the raft is smashed by a steamboat. He is on the verge of witnessing an episode of such gruesome depravity and symbolic power that it will change the novel’s fundamental purpose for *being* a novel, abolishing the “boy’s adventure” motif and launching the development of a dark national vision.

Huck is welcomed into an imposing household of an aristocratic gentleman, Colonel Grangerford. He worshipfully (and hilariously) records the décor fashioned by the Colonel’s wife and daughter. He limns the crockery cats and dogs, the fake oranges and grapes on the table, and the table’s “beautiful” oilcloth, with its painted spread eagle and fancy border. “It come all the way from Philadelphia, they said.”³⁴ He drinks in the painting of a young woman “leaning pensive on a tombstone,”³⁵ over the caption, “Shall I Never See Thee More Alas,”³⁶ and is moved by the daughter’s “very good poetry,” an ode to one Stephen Dowling Bots, dead from a fall down a well. (“No whooping-cough did rack his frame, / Nor measles drear, with spots; / Not these impared the sacred name / Of Stephen Dowling Bots . . .”)³⁷ “If Emmeline Grangerford could make poetry like that before she was fourteen, there ain’t no telling what she could a done by and by.”³⁸ The merciless chronicler of the Lick House Ball is back, disguised as a credulous rube. It is wonderful set-piece satire. But when Mark Twain returned to the story four years later, the function of this scene deepened, as the same family that surrounded itself with this kitschy Americana emerged as capable of another American pursuit, blood violence.

The other subplot that enlarged and drove the book to immortality—slavery and its enabler, the dehumanization of Negroes—had been introduced, but still hung at the edges of the narrative. Jim, deceptively innocuous, appeared little more than a sympathetic minstrel-darkey, bursting with laughable superstitions and speaking a generic blackface dialect.

Mark Twain had suspended the book with Huck's question ("What's a feud?") unanswered at the end of that summer, and returned to Hartford with new projects in mind. The Rutherford Hayes campaign absorbed him. He began outlining his Tudor romance before heading for Europe in 1878. He finished *A Tramp Abroad*, and then worked at *Prince and the Pauper* through the first months of 1880, while the Huck manuscript lay neglected. But not unused. The deep imaginings of boyhood adventure—of boyhood—that Mark Twain had invested in the river tale transmigrated to the court of King Edward VI. The Huck Finn a-borning infused the costume-tale prince and pauper with their essential connection to the human heart.

The two manuscripts were linked in a more explicit way: revealingly, Clemens made a "verbal agreement" with James Osgood in 1880 in which both novels would be published under the same cover.³⁹ Livy quashed this idea, insisting that *Prince and the Pauper* be issued free from contamination by its rough-edged cousin. But the very fact that Mark Twain envisioned the coupling shows that retooling himself as a polite Victorian was never a serious option of his. He would not be civilized.

Mark Twain revisited *Huckleberry Finn* for 216 pages in March 1880, while taking a break from *Prince and the Pauper*, and stayed with it through June. His shift from manuscript to manuscript was accompanied by a more important shift: from one writing provenance to another. This shift preserved his literary greatness. Turning away from the artificiality of *Prince*, he opened himself again to the wellspring of personal memory, inseminated by his imagination. He stormed back into what is now Chapter 18 armed with his deep knowledge of violence on the Mississippi River—and, by only the slightest extension, in America. Huck's brief respite amid the domestic torpor of the Grangerford farm is interrupted by gunfire: a reeruption of the family's bloody feud with the equally "high-toned" Shepherdson clan that lives a few miles upstream. Before Huck can escape the premises and rejoin Jim on the raft, he has seen his new friend Buck try to ambush a Shepherdson from behind a bush. A few days later he looks on in disbelief as the two warring families assemble in a common church, fully armed, to hear a sermon about brotherly love. Then he is eyewitness to the slaughter of Buck and his cousin Joe by four Shepherdsons who fire mercilessly into the boys as they try to escape by swimming in the Mississippi. The complacent décor of the Grangerford house, merely funny a few pages earlier, now stands revealed as ghastly evidence of a diseased culture's pretensions to gentility. (Luckily for Samuel Clemens's own pretensions, the Mississippi didn't flow through Hartford.)

This fictional vendetta had authentic origins: the so-called Darnell-

Watson feud in the vicinity of a Kentucky landing named "Compromise" in the late 1850s and '60s. Clemens claimed in later life to have nearly been an eyewitness to one of its episodes. Scholarly research supports the claim, making allowances for "nearly."⁴⁰ In August 1859 the young Sam witnessed a "row" at the landing at Compromise from aboard a Memphis packet. A month later, he was a co-pilot on a boat that steamed upriver past the same site, three days after the "row" was reignited with deadly results: a grisly struggle involving pistols, the butt of a shotgun, and bare hands that left one man drowned in the river and his enemy gravely wounded by bullets. This was but the latest face-off in a vendetta that left several men dead over many years. Sam assimilated the details from eyewitnesses, and learned of the feud's larger contours from the father of a fourteen-year-old boy who had been killed. Newspaper accounts added to his understanding. Mark Twain's imagination took over from there, as it always did with vivid real-life events. He tried out a version of it in *Simon Wheeler, Detective*, abandoned in 1878. By 1880, when he returned to *Huckleberry Finn*, he had conflated and shaped these events into story, and invested them with the power of metaphor.

The novel reaches its apogee with the "feud" chapters and their aftermath. Huck, reunited with Jim, admires the greatest sunrise in Western literature a few pages later, the river Eden counterpointing the fallen world onshore. They encounter another set of civilized predators, the fraudulent King and the Duke, who board the raft and direct it to Bricksville, Arkansas. After the comedy of the Duke's sideshow mangling of Shakespeare, a new macabre mood shift follows: the gunning down of addled Boggs by Colonel Sherburn, yet another specimen of Southern gentility. Mark Twain sketches a version of the consequences: "Well, by-and-by somebody said Sherburn ought to be lynched. In about a minute everybody was saying it; so away they went, mad and yelling, and snatching down every clothes-line they come to, to do the hanging with."⁴¹ But "they was too late. Sherburn's friends had got him away, long ago."⁴²

Not quite. Beneath that tentative chapter ending, Mark Twain, his contempt for the South apparently ripening by the minute, pencils a note to himself: "No, let them lynch him."⁴³

And then Mark Twain returned again to *The Prince and the Pauper*. Soon after that, he became preoccupied with the Paige device, and Kaolatype, and the birth of Jean, and investments in the house. Worldly matters beset him until the spring of 1882, when he walked away from all of it and revisited the great Mississippi of his youth, filling his tank with river water. In June 1883, Mark Twain was ready at last to throw himself into the labyrinthine finale of *Huckleberry Finn*.

The lynch mob storms Sherburn's house, only to be stared down by the Colonel with his double-barrel shotgun. He flays them all as pitiful cowards; the crowd washes back and then bolts in all directions; and then—with Boggs's body still cooling in the drugstore—Huck takes in the circus.

Deep in Arkansas, Jim is captured and held prisoner at the Phelps farm. It is at this point, perhaps, that Mark Twain's despised nights in the opera houses of Heidelberg pay their dividends: Huck, alone inside the wigwam on the raft, begins the Wagnerian aria that many believe to be the moral center of the novel. He debates with himself what to do; rationalizes that his social, even Christian duty requires him to write a letter to Miss Watson telling her of her property's whereabouts; regrets his lifelong apostasy; tries to pray his sins away; finds himself mute because he knows the prayer is false:

I was letting *on* to give up sin, but away 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 to that nigger's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowd it was a lie . . . You can't pray a lie—I found that out.⁴⁴

He writes the letter designed to seal Jim's fate, and feels washed clean of sin, until he thinks some more,

And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and 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 . . . somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him . . . 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 then I happened to look around, and see that paper.⁴⁵

He takes up the letter and studies it a minute—and delivers the purification lyric worthy of Brunhilde's immolation in the *Gotterdammerung*:

“ ‘All right, then, I'll *go* to hell'—and tore it up.”⁴⁶

From the mid-20th century on, the moral majesty of this moment has been almost universally assumed. It forms the novel's abiding claim as an oracle of the American soul. Norman Podhoretz's 1959 declaration that the scene “is one of the supreme moments in all of literature”⁴⁷ remains representative. What bedevils the proponents of this view—including those who posit *Huckleberry Finn* as a deliberately antiracist work—is nearly everything that follows.

Mark Twain himself sounded the first warning. Toward the end of his 1880 stint, he thought to write the novel's famous “Notice”: “Persons attempting to find a Motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a Moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a Plot in it will be shot.” And sure enough: within a dozen pages of Huck's stirring declaration, Tom Sawyer makes his flagrantly improbable reentry into the story; realism vanishes; measured satire gives way to borderline slapstick, and the shackled Jim endures a prolonged ordeal of pointless tormenting at the

hands of his avowed liberators, with Huck a submissive agent of Tom's wild-eyed scenarios. The meaning of Huck's response to his friend's high-spirited depravity, and, indeed, of his complicity in it, has been endlessly debated and never resolved.

Huck favors a quick and simple rescue plan: steal the key to the lock on the cabin, free Jim, and make a run for the raft. Tom, ever book-addled, is dismissive: "I should *hope* we can find a way that's a little more complicated than *that*, Huck Finn."⁴⁸ He has been marinating in stories of history's famous escapes, and wants to try some of the methods out on Jim. "When a prisoner of style escapes, it's called an evasion," he later explains,⁴⁹ using the word that now embraces the ten chapters explicating his tortuous scheme. Opera now becomes *opera buffa*, with a discomfiting sadistic edge. Tom wants Jim to free his chain from the bed leg, not by simply lifting it off the floor, but by sawing it through. He proposes digging a hole to the cabin floor—with case knives, not spades. He wants to leave "clews." Rope ladders are contemplated for the ground-level caper. Days pass. Absurdity reaches its height when the boys actually free Jim from the cabin so that he can help them lug a huge grindstone into his room, so that he can write inscriptions on it while awaiting his freedom. Then morbidity reaches its depth: for historical accuracy, Tom wants to fill the cabin with spiders, rats, and snakes. (Jim spoils the fun by rejecting Tom's pleas to include a rattlesnake.) Three weeks have now passed, with Jim now in bondage as much to the two boys as to the Phelpses. Tom fakes a letter warning that a gang of abolitionists is in the area, drawing a posse of fifteen armed farmers to the Phelps farm—as he'd hoped. The breakout ensues amid a riot of staged and stagey farce: Huck masking as Tom, Tom masking as his brother Sid, Jim and Tom-Sid in women's clothes, the farmhouse crawling with serpents, melted butter streaming down Huck-Tom's face, bloodhounds baying, bullets flying, a slug of lead in Tom-Sid's calf.

Later—Jim having been recaptured while watching over the wounded Tom, and brought back to the farm—Tom delivers the final pie-in-the-face: Jim is a free man, he announces. The Widow, who died two months earlier, liberated him in her will. Tom knew this all along, but played out the "evasion" charade because "I wanted the *adventure* of it."⁵⁰ In case anyone doubts him, Aunt Polly materializes in the doorway, all the way from St. Petersburg, to confirm the facts. The book ends with Tom proposing that the trio head out west for adventure among the Indians, and Huck allowing that he would "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."⁵¹

Huckleberry Finn endures as a consensus masterpiece despite these final chapters. Its greatness rests on its lapidary portraiture of America as encapsulated in a time and place; on its revelatory use of vernacular American dialect as the vehicle for its story; and for the authentic passion, metaphor, self-expression, and moral reasoning released via this dialect. This departure from high diction is what Ernest Hemingway had in mind in his 1935 pro-

nouncement that “all modern American literature comes from” this novel. As for the “evasion” chapters, early commentators have tended to excuse (or damn) them as a failed attempt to conclude an otherwise great tale whose perpetual-motion narrative defies conclusion. More recent analysis has been more respectful, perceiving a grand design: the chapters are, for instance, an allegory of the torments visited on former slaves during the post-Reconstruction era in which Mark Twain wrote. But nearly everybody agrees that it is one hell of a book.

ITS GREATNESS owes nearly as much to Mark Twain’s technical dedication as to his conceptual genius. Mark Twain always revised as he worked, scrawling his emendations in the margins and between the lines of his pages. This was especially true of *Huckleberry Finn*. After announcing from Elmira that he was “finished” with it in September 1883, the author took the great stack of pages home to Hartford and worried over it for six more months, refusing to surrender it until mid-April 1884. His improvements were pointillist: an accretion of small, sharp edits that greatly enhanced the diction and imagery of the novel entire.

In the summer of 1882, Clemens hired a pair of typists from Elmira—among the first professionals in that new skill—to copy his *Life on the Mississippi* manuscript. He liked the results so well that he directed the typists to start in on the first 663 manuscript pages of *Huckleberry Finn*. Typescripts absorbed and eliminated the clutter of an annotated draft manuscript. For the first time, Mark Twain could make a second round of revisions on clean pages, and he used that opportunity to full advantage. The typescripts are presumed lost, but in 1990 the first 665 manuscript pages reemerged in a Hollywood attic.* Now a sentence as Mark Twain first wrote it could be compared to its final version in the book, and the differences between them identified as changes on the typescript or proofs (including changes made inadvertently by the typist).

Certain myths immediately evaporated. Foremost among them was the accepted view that *Huckleberry Finn*’s voice flowed unaltered from Mark Twain’s raw imagination onto the book page. Far from it: the author constantly rummaged through Huck’s (and Jim’s) dialect, weeding out words and phrases that bore any taint of a mature well-read man’s syntax. “Always” became “awluz”; “never heard anything” became “didn’t hear nothing.” In draft, Huck might have remarked that “I had about made up my mind to stay there all night, when I heard horses,” but by the time the presses rolled, he’d

* The discovery was made by Barbara Gluck Testa, a granddaughter of James Fraser Gluck, a curator of the Young Men’s Christian Association in Buffalo, who in 1885 had asked Clemens to donate the manuscript to the library. Clemens consented, but found that he could send only the second half; he’d misplaced the first half and did not find it for some nineteen months. When James Gluck finally received this second bundle, in 1887, he neglected to put it on display alongside the concluding holograph, and died ten years later with it still stored in his personal possessions. It remained unrecovered for 103 years.

corrected himself to “. . . when I hear a *plunkety-plunk*, *plunkety-plunk*, and says to myself, horses coming.”⁵²

Mark Twain also fine-tuned Huck’s capacity for reasoning, especially moral reasoning. In Chapter 16, Huck suffers a guilty conscience after he fast-talks some slave hunters in a boat out of searching the raft where Jim is hiding, by leading them to think there is smallpox on board. The first draft reads

They went off & I hopped aboard the raft, saying to myself, I’ve done wrong again, & was trying as hard as I could to do right, too; but when it come right down to telling them it was a nigger on the raft, & I opened my mouth a-purpose to do it, I couldn’t. I am a mean, low coward, & it’s the fault of them that brung me up. If I had been raised right, I wouldn’t said anything about anybody being sick, but the more I try to do it right, the more I can’t.⁵³

Many novelists would be willing to ransom their agents for a passage of that caliber, but Mark Twain wasn’t satisfied. It became:

They went off, and I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn’t no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don’t get *started* right when he’s little, ain’t got no show—when the pinch comes there ain’t nothing to back him up and keep him to his work, and so he gets beat.⁵⁴

Mark Twain himself expressed the value of this system—and offered a glimpse into the near-tactile relationship between a writer and his words on the page—in a letter of recommendation for one of the typists, Harry M. Clarke. “THE EXPERIENCE WITH THE TYPEWRITER HAS BEEN OF SO HIGH A VALUE TO ME,” he wrote,

THAT NOT EVEN THE TYPE-WRITER ITSELF CAN DESCRIBE IT . . . THE PAGES OF THE [typewritten] SHEETS BEGIN TO LOOK AS NATURAL, AND RATIONAL, AND AS VOID OF OFFENSE TO HIS EYE AS DO HIS OWN WRITTEN PAGES, AND THEREFORE HE CAN ALTER AND AMEND THEM WITH COMFORT . . . [Books copied by pen] HAVE A FOREIGN AND UNSYMPATHETIC LOOK . . . ONE CANNOT RECOGNIZE HIMSELF IN THEM . . . MY COPYING IS ALWAYS DONE ON THE TYPE-WRITER, NOW, AND I SHALL NOT BE LIKELY TO EVER USE ANY OTHER SYSTEM.⁵⁵

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s and their three children returned from t as Mark Twain was tearing through the They took up residence in a rented house on abroad had restored Howells from his near- finishing *A Modern Instance*, the rather dar- memes of marital betrayal and jealousy, to partly because the obsessive female protago-

the damage at 250 copies, a fraction of the reprint costs that he estimated at \$2000. He ordered the story. Then it was all prompt.

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ADVENTURES OF Huckleberry Finn was published in Canada by Dawson Brothers and in London by Chatto & Windus on the same date, December 10, 1884. Both editions were authorized. Charles Webster & Company published it in America on February 18, 1885. The initial run fell 10,000 short of Clemens's "magical" figure of 40,000, but brisk sales obliged Webster to make up that deficit almost immediately, and he ordered another 10,000 in March. The first edition ran for six years, and the book continued to sell after that—worldwide and into the 20th and 21st centuries, exceeding the 20 million mark in the 1990s. The early reaction was sophisticated and enthusiastic, ratifying Gilder's instincts. William Ernest Henley in the London *Athenaeum*, which had often treated Mark Twain harshly, applauded the writer's turn away from pretentious "fine writing" and toward the "real creations" that were Jim and Huck.²⁵ "The skill with which the character of Huck Finn is maintained is marvelous," declared the rising American critic Brander Matthews in the London *Saturday Review*, adding that Huck's natural voice erased the need for "scenes which would have afforded the ordinary writer matter for endless moral and political and sociological disquisition . . ." ²⁶ The hometown *Hartford Courant*, probably in the person of Charles Dudley Warner, praised the author's "picture of a people, of a geographical region, of a life that is new in the world."²⁷

An intense conversation developed in the press over this transitional American novel. It began slowly, because not many copies had been sent to reviewers. At the end of January Clemens had ordered Webster to hold back: "What we want is a favorable review, by an authority—then immediately distribute the book among the press."²⁸ Now, indecision gnawed at him. As the publication date bore down, he reversed himself: send copies to the big New York dailies, and if the reviews looked good, *only* if they looked good, "then send out your 300 press copies over the land."²⁹ In the next breath: "how in *hell* we overlooked that unspeakably important detail [sending copies to magazines], utterly beats my time."³⁰ An exasperated Webster pointed out that "you told me in the start that press notices *hurt* the last book before it was out & that this year we would send *none* until the book was out."³¹

It was about then that the public conversation over *Huckleberry Finn* took a sharp turn, a turn toward denunciation that has laced debate over the book ever since. The Puritan scowl that Mark Twain seemed to have melted over his fifteen years in the East abruptly hardened again. In an unconscious rebuke to Mark Twain's 1865 embrace of "literature of a low order—*i.e.* humorous," the New York *World's* headline scolded, "'Humor' of a Very Low Order—Wit and Literary Ability Wasted on a Pitiably Exhibition of Irreverence and Vulgarity." Below that, the critic ended the suspense as to how he felt about the book:

“—[W]hat can be said of a man of Mr. Clemens’s wit, ability and position deliberately imposing upon an unoffending public a piece of careless hack-work in which a few good things are dropped amid a mass of rubbish . . .”³²

The Boston *Advertiser* sputtered about “coarseness and bad taste.”³³ The San Francisco papers were divided. The *Bulletin* took literalism to the extreme, scolding Mark Twain for “telling his juvenile readers that there are some lies in his book—that most people lie, and that it is not very bad after all.”³⁴ The *Chronicle* disagreed, praising the revealing power of the book’s dialect: “Mark Twain may be called the Edison of our literature. There is no limit to his inventive genius . . .”³⁵ Onto this combustible pile, the lighted match was tossed in mid-March 1885: the Concord, Massachusetts, Public Library announced that it would withhold the novel from its patrons because of its coarseness of language and questionable morals. Suddenly the press was fascinated with the book—not so much as literature but rather as a litmus test of civic standards. The library’s decision made headlines around the country. The far-off St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, from Clemens’s home state, sent a reporter to interview the board’s committee members. One told him,

While I do not wish to state it as my opinion that the book is absolutely immoral in its tone . . . it contains but very little humor, and that little is of a very coarse type . . . I regard it as the veriest trash.

Another committeeman remarked,

It deals with a series of adventures of a very low grade of morality, . . . and all through its pages there is a systematic use of bad grammar and an employment of rough, coarse, inelegant expressions . . . The whole book is of a class that is more profitable for the slums than it is for respectable people, and it is trash of the veriest sort.³⁶

Clemens’s first reaction was to laugh it off. “[The library committee] have given us a rattling tip-top puff which will go into every paper in the country,”³⁷ he told Webster, and predicted that the expulsion would be good for 25,000 sales. Even without the “puff,” *Huckleberry Finn* was enjoying the best start of any new Mark Twain book in the previous ten years, 39,000 as of March 14, Charles Webster reported. Ten days later the number would climb to 43,500. Sam’s financial problems were apparently over. Indeed, there were indications that he was on the verge of a fortune. One set of glad tidings came by way of James Paige. His long-awaited typesetter was perfected, the inventor claimed in April. (He had made similar claims in April 1881 and in February and March of 1883.) It awaited expert testing, the final formality before taking it to the manufacturing level! Paige would sell all rights to the machine to the stockholders for \$350,000 and royalties on each machine manufactured. Models in eight sizes would be sold at \$5,000 each. Clemens would realize

\$250,000 in cash or stock under the complicated terms. Even better: "Three years from now I calculate to have about 1000 of those machines hired out in this country at \$2,500,000."³⁸ It seemed as though Samuel Clemens's long-standing faith in the machine and its godlike powers was at last to be fulfilled. Charles Webster was instructed to summon experts, capitalists, and press to Hartford for a viewing. The viewing proved . . . inconclusive. Paige serenely took the machine apart and started over.

Clemens remained unfazed. A company was needed! With European subsidiaries! Millions in it! In the summer of 1885 he joined into a working partnership with William Hamersley, the Hartford lawyer who was president of Farnham typesetting, and prowled the offices and elite clubs of New York millionaires, including Jay Gould and his son, looking for investors. He had little luck. The businessmen, well aware of all the competing designs out there, had no reason to believe that the Paige was the best of them. A lot of smart money, in fact, was quietly moving toward a workshop in Brooklyn. There, a thirty-one-year-old German-born inventor, Ottmar Mergenthaler, a former watchmaker's apprentice, had formulated a highly rational approach to the setting of type: a machine operated via a keyboard, derived from the new typewriter. It set molds for typefaced characters along a line; hot lead was poured into the molds, and the resulting type was transferred to a galley tray: an early prototype for mass production. (The Paige also had a keyboard, but it was designed ponderously to set type by entire syllables and words—the product of "an analytical study of the language, covering all subjects," as an engineer connected with the project admiringly recalled it in 1916.³⁹ The Mergenthaler simply summoned molds for individual letters, fast.) Among the enthusiastic backers of this more promising machine was a syndicate headed by Whitelaw Reid.

Samuel Clemens chose to ignore Mergenthaler's device, convincing himself that it was hopelessly flawed, and scribbling down the Paige's tiniest advantages: "This type-setter does not get drunk . . . He does not join the Printer's Union . . ."⁴⁰

THE OTHER happy development touched even deeper chords of Clemens's psychology and personal history, and consummated a dream of three years. It concerned Ulysses Grant. Grant had exceeded Gilder's hopes with the first draft of his Shiloh essay. His untutored prose writing displayed all the cognitive strengths that had made him a great general. Unadorned and rather flat in the early draft stages, it nonetheless surged forward along a terse, logical, comprehensive narrative line. Richard Gilder dispatched Robert Underwood Johnson to Long Branch to guide the ailing former president in revising the effort, hoping to extract from him some traces of anecdote, character development, and personal feeling. Once again, Grant astonished. As Mark Perry has illustrated, the old soldier proved a writer nearly as adept in his factual way as the dreamy writer-to-be he'd once menaced in Missouri. Grant rewrote the article completely, pouring in vignettes of sound and sight: the shock of

musketry, a general losing his hat in the confusion of battle, Grant's own sword scabbard shattered by a ball. The great swell of interest in his published articles (the Shiloh issue sold 220,000 copies, Mark Twain remembered) led Gilder and Roswell Smith, the Century Company's president, to quickly open talks with Grant about expanding his memories into a book. Grant, who knew by this time that his days were numbered, found that he enjoyed writing—enjoyed it as much as he could write through his worsening throat pain. By the end of the summer he and the Century had reached a verbal agreement to produce a memoir. All that was lacking was his signature on a contract.⁴¹ Enter Mark Twain.

Clemens looked in on the general several times in October and November of 1884, at the house on 66th Street in New York where the Grant family had repaired after the summer in Long Branch. Grant was deteriorating. He kept his throat wrapped in a shawl and wore a knit cap pulled tightly over his head, but managed to write each day, with research help from his son Fred and editorial suggestions from Adam Badeau, a wartime aide who had written a three-volume account of the general's military career. The pain kept the dying man awake at night. A trusted doctor, George Frederick Schrady, came up with a suggestion for calming him down: "Pretend you are a boy again."⁴²

Although he deeply desired to publish Grant's memoirs, Clemens seems to have restrained himself on the topic at first during these visits; it was enough to spend time with the public idol of his life, who had now become an old friend. He dropped his reticence in the first week of November, shortly before he left on his reading tour with Cable. In another of the unlikely coincidences that peppered his life, Clemens was walking toward his hotel after lecturing on a foggy night in New York, when two figures stepped into his path from out of a doorway and fell to talking as they walked ahead of him.

I heard one of them say, "Do you know General Grant has actually determined to write his memoirs and publish them? He has said so today, in so many words."⁴³

Mark Twain pretended in his autobiographical dictations that the two figures were strangers, and that this was how he learned of Grant's intentions. This was not so; but the truth was eerie enough: one of the men was Gilder; and over dinner at his house a few nights later, Clemens listened with studied fascination as the editor laid out the details of the proposed contract. Privately, he felt contempt for the miserly terms—as he saw them—that the Century Company (parent to the magazine) offered to Grant: royalties of only 10 percent, and not a penny in advance. Through his indignation, he saw that Century, complacent in its ignorance of book-publishing realities, had made a bad miscalculation: if handled correctly, the memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant were almost certain to be a worldwide bonanza, and Gilder's people had made their lowball offer with no thought that someone else might gladly top it. Clemens was in Grant's library the following morning. As he later told it, the general

had taken up his pen to sign the Century contract when Sam intervened. He urged Grant to ink in 20 percent as the royalty rate, and added, "Better still, put seventy-five percent of the net returns in its place."⁴⁴ Grant was incredulous: no publisher would pay for a book on that scale, and besides, he had said he'd sign the contract; his honor required that he follow through. Clemens countered that buried in the Century contract was an "offensive detail": part of Grant's 10 percent would be withheld for "clerk hire, house rent, sweeping out the offices, or some such nonsense as that."⁴⁵ Grant should have three-fourths of the profits, with no deductions, Clemens declared, adding that Frank Bliss's American Publishing Company would doubtless jump at this chance.

Grant was beginning to understand the scale of what Clemens was talking about. Julia was faced with penury if Grant died in his present financial condition. Clemens extracted Grant's promise to wait twenty-four hours before making a decision. On the following day, Mark Twain took Grant like Grant took Richmond. Switching from his feint toward American Publishing, he suddenly proposed: "Give me the book on the terms which I have already suggested that you make with the Century people"—in other words, either a 20 percent royalty or 75 percent of the profits.⁴⁶ (He wrote in a \$10,000 advance, but Grant rejected it on principle.) His own profitability was assured, he believed, even on these terms: he would sell Grant's book by subscription, rather than over the counter as Century had intended, and the revenues would be incomparable. Grant pondered for several weeks, but hardly any doubt remained. On February 21, 1885, Mark Twain arrived in New York for his fourth-last performance on the "Twins of Genius" tour. He paid Grant a house call, and the thin and ravaged general confirmed his decision: "I mean you shall have the book—I have about made up my mind to that . . ."⁴⁷ Now Mark Twain had topped even his "victory" over Grant at the Chicago reunion banquet ("I shook him up like dynamite . . . I had measured this unconquerable conqueror . . . I knew I could lick him"). This was a victory that not even Robert E. Lee had been able to achieve: soon, the greatest general since Napoleon would pick up a pen and sign an agreement on his—Mark Twain's—terms.

What with the Paige typesetter, *Huckleberry Finn*, and Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs, the former printer's apprentice from Hannibal, Missouri, now bestrode the realms of technology, literature, and history in the legacy of a great general. Mark Twain appeared, at that moment in mid-March, indomitable, a god of his century. He had no way of knowing that his greatest work was now behind him, and that the fortune churning his way would be ground to dust in the Paige machine's malfunctioning parts. In his final quarter-century, life would never again be quite as sweet for Samuel Langhorne Clemens as it was at this moment, as he surveyed the American continent like the pilot of a steamboat looking out on an endless national banner.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY about *Huckleberry Finn* continued undiminished, until it became an essential subgenre of American letters. To trace the constantly mutating concerns of the novel's reviewers from the moment of publication onward is to watch the novel itself effloresce in the exact patterns of the nation's shifting ideals and anxieties. *Huckleberry Finn* is the Vandal of American literature: castigated as "trash" of varying categories; banned periodically; yet constantly reemerging to seduce the respectable folk; to break the rules and defy anyone to make something of it; to flaunt its capricious shifts of tone and mood and plot; to blow its outlaw jazz riffs of spoken language; and, finally, to stand immutable as a moral touchstone of the American saga by its simple offer to go to hell.

Concern over its "coarse" language and its antisocial protagonist—a lying, uncouth piece of white trash who couldn't spell—prevailed as a critical norm until the early 20th century. Then, the menace of an armed and destabilized world prompted critics to see in the novel the exaltation of the unconquerable American soul. H. L. Mencken in 1913 declared it "a truly stupendous piece of work, perhaps the greatest novel ever written in English," and its author "the true father of our national literature, the first genuinely American artist of the blood royal."⁴⁸ Waldo Frank in 1919 asserted, "*Huckleberry Finn* is the American epic hero. Greece had Ulysses. [Huck] expresses . . . the movement of the American soul through all the sultry climaxes of the Nineteenth Century."⁴⁹

Hardly anybody seemed to notice the wayward ending for half a century, until Bernard DeVoto declared in 1932 that the final chapters were "far below the accomplishment of what has gone before," theorizing that Mark Twain's lack of formal training made him unable to grasp that they were "a defacement of his purer work."⁵⁰ In the same year, Hemingway agreed, in the breath following his "All-modern-literature-comes-from-one-book" declaration: "If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating."⁵¹

These objections were recast two decades later under the new intellectual rubric of literary theory. Leo Marx, in a landmark 1953 essay, interrogated the "evasion" chapters in relation to the rest of *Huckleberry Finn*, and concluded that they jeopardized the novel's significance. Rebutting the approval of the ending implicitly conferred by T. S. Eliot ("a masterpiece"⁵²) and Lionel Trilling ("one of the world's great books"⁵³), Marx held that it was in fact a disaster. Tom Sawyer's grotesque and unnecessary contrivances to free Jim counter-vene the "coil of meaning" developed up to that point: a quest for freedom and dignity withheld by a corrupted social order. The hard-won stature that Jim has gained during the downriver voyage is discarded: suddenly he is a compliant darky, childishly enduring Tom Sawyer's manic torments. Similarly, Huck loses the moral consciousness that the river crises instilled in him. "The unhappy truth about the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*," Marx wrote, "is

that the author, having revealed the tawdry nature of the culture of the great valley, yielded to its essential complacency.”⁵⁴

The “evasion chapter” debate has continued, and grown ever more complex. Stephen Railton of the University of Virginia sees unworthy slapstick in much of Jim’s behavior, yet maintains that the book presents two Jims: the noble, suffering figure on the raft who illuminates the cruelty of a society that deals in human bondage; and the comic-minstrel Jim at the beginning and end. The latter, Railton suggests, is Mark Twain’s concession to the core of racism among his readers.⁵⁵

This theory tends to discount the historical truth that many blacks in the 19th century, and into the 20th, learned to deflect the aggression of racist white people by developing a day-to-day protective layer of comic shuffling and deference. This survival strategy, variants of which are practiced within all enslaved societies, was designed to preserve, rather than cancel out, the nobler human qualities of the individual—such as the impulse to stand beside a valued friend (Tom) at great personal risk.

In 1984, Charles H. Nilon introduced an arresting defense of the ending.⁵⁶ The chapters are in fact a masterstroke: a sustained ironic allegory of white America’s attempts to circumvent the Reconstruction by devising as many cruel and unnecessary roadblocks to Negro autonomy. Bruce Michelson argued that it was all about identity evasion: Huck was on a quest to avoid “the disaster of becoming,” a quest that puts him in perpetual flight “from both the dark angel *and* the white.”⁵⁷ (Dismissing the significance of “I’ll go to hell,” Michelson points out a decision by Huck that soon follows, regarding future struggles over right and wrong: “I reckoned I wouldn’t bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time.”⁵⁸) While intellectually fascinating, these notions would seem to assume a late 20th-century mode of thought—highly schematic, informed by sophisticated depth-psychology—in the mind of an intuitive 19th-century writer who’d previously shown no interest in allegory or Lacanian symbolism.

In 1957 an explosive new indictment of the novel swept aside the literary critics and established itself as the defining controversy over *Huckleberry Finn*. Amid the gathering force of the civil rights movement, the NAACP condemned the novel as racist—a condemnation that rested in large part on Jim’s diction, and on Mark Twain’s 211 uses of the word “nigger.” Although passionately rebutted by critics and writers of both races—who have maintained ceaselessly that “nigger” did not reflect authorial intention but authentic regional/period dialogue, and that its appearance frequently made a satirical case against the speaker—the “racist” charge has never lost its grip on the novel’s reputation. Pressure by antiracist advocacy groups led to new banings: in Virginia in 1982, Illinois in 1984, and Connecticut in 1995. Teaching of the novel survived challenges by parents and the courts in California, Washington, Arizona, and Oklahoma, and a student boycott in New Jersey.

Many African-American writers and intellectuals, of course, have defended the book. Walter Mosley remarks that “my memory of Huckleberry wasn’t one of racism. I remember Jim and Huck as friends out on the river. I could have been either one of them.” Toni Morrison, acknowledging her unease at “this amazing, troubling book,” whose imperfections include “the disproportionate sadness at the center of Jim’s and [Huck’s] relationship” and also Huck’s “engagement” with a racist society, nevertheless concludes, “the rewards of my efforts to come to terms have been abundant.”⁵⁹

The case against the “racist” accusers received its most innovative support in 1996, with the publication of Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s audaciously titled *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*. Fishkin, who champions the view that *Huckleberry Finn* is an explicitly antiracist novel, drew on a font of characteristics in Huck’s speech to argue that Mark Twain had modeled his dialect on that of “Sociable Jimmy.” Fishkin’s own critics have pointed out certain limitations in this argument—white and black children in the prewar South tended to share many nonstandard speech patterns, for instance—but the book remains a significant reminder that American literature, beginning with *Huckleberry Finn*, was irrevocably changed by African-American influences.

THESE AND many other controversies have left deep imprints on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, encouraging students and general readers to approach the work not so much as literature but as battleground in the American culture wars. Against this century-long tidal flow of overwrought diagnoses, the Mark Twain scholar Thomas Quirk has issued a replenishing call: an invitation to read *Huckleberry Finn* less for what its various claimants would have it be, and more for what it is: an act of imagination, and one so propulsive that it pulled the author himself along into its created verities. “Whether or not Twain the man was a racist,” Quirk writes, “his imaginative parts created a character [Jim] who challenged Twain’s own moral nature.” Imagination, not political courage or piety, is what finally ennobles the book: “We become less and less interested in the anti-Southern, antisentimental, antiaristocratic, anti-everything-under-the-sun elements . . . and more and more concerned with its affirmations, which is to say we become more and more concerned with Jim. Jim not as a representative of the Negro, the oppressed, or the wretched, but as Jim.”⁶⁰

Robert Hirst, the editor in chief of the Mark Twain Project at Berkeley, agrees with the “Jim-as-Jim” approach, but with an emphatic difference: no external suppositions of any kind need be raised regarding the writer who created him. Everything that one need understand about Mark Twain’s motives may be found in the work itself. Against the most invidious supposition of all—racism—Hirst cites the powerful scolding, in Chapter 15, that Jim administers to Huck for toying with his mind after the two became separated in the fog.⁶¹ (“ ‘ . . . 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 of old Jim wid a lie.' ”⁶²) After this tongue-lashing, Huck “humbles” himself to Jim.

Calling Jim the supreme imaginative character of the whole book, Hirst speaks for more than a few scholars by noting that Jim denounces Huck’s racist treatment of him, pointing out that no other American author of the 19th century dedicated his masterpiece to combating postwar racism.

END HERE

THE STRONG initial sales of the novel, and the soon-to-come reveal Grant’s memoir, were, amazingly, overshadowed by income from your source. The “Twins of Genius” tour proved a financial bonanza, a phenomenon, and a backstage psychodrama, befitting any American road show—what the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* recognized as “a new form of popular entertainment.”⁶³

Mark Twain and Cable opened in New Haven, Connecticut, on October 5, 1884, a month before the first excerpt of *Huckleberry Finn* appeared in the *Century*. A hundred and three performances later, after covering cities in the United States and Canada, they wound it up in Washington on the last day of February 1885. Before audiences of up to a thousand people, the two men performed some of their greatest hits and tried out new material for about two hours a night. Cable sang a little. They feuded with the press and with each other through the press. They had at least one confrontation. Exploiting Cable’s comparative stiffness onstage—like through his readings in a brisk, polite style—Mark Twain worked like the Vandal of yore. He memorized the text of each performance and prowled the platform, his eyes searching the faces in front of him, drawing his drawl and timing his snappers to bombastic effect; he had his “Golden Arm” mojo working. He fed on the “long roll of artillery-laughter all down the line, interspersed with Congreve rockets & bomb shell explosions.” He exulted when “the old Jumping Frog swept the place like a conflagration.”⁶⁴ He milked the applause for encore upon encore, and tried to figure out ways to curtail Cable’s face time. When it was over, Clemens had netted some \$16,000, and Cable, \$5,000. It would stand as Mark Twain’s last interlude of pure exuberant, prancing showmanship. But what an interlude—filled with marvels to overwhelm a noticing man’s senses. Things had changed along the lecture trail since the old days, a decade ago. Clemens noticed that hotels had dry towels now, and electrical buttons had replaced the bell handle for summoning the maid. The telephone had replaced the petrified messenger boy.⁶⁵ Most wonderful of all was the miracle of the new urban nightscape, bathed in electric light. In Detroit,

(This section)

[I] for the first time saw a city where the night was as beautiful as the day; saw, for the first time, in place of sallow twilight . . . clusters of coruscating electric suns floating in the sky without visible support, & casting a mellow radiance upon the snow covered