

Motives in the Narrative: Some Remarks on *Huckleberry Finn*

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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.

This "Notice" by the author prefaces the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and is followed by an explanation that the dialects rendered in the novel are true to the speech of the region—the Mississippi Valley, of forty or fifty years before. Despite Twain's facetiousness in presenting them, these notes are worth considering seriously, as indications of his purposes and of his consciousness of the context in which he was writing. With them, as with Huck's introductory remark that we would not know him unless we had read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, "made by Mr Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly," Twain is putting his cards on the table as an anti-literary realist.

As a Southwesterner who had gone to Nevada and California during the Civil War, and become a newspaperman, a humorous lecturer, a popular entertainer, Twain was conscious of not being perceived as a serious, that is a "literary" writer. Instead, he was a "Western humorist", one of the writers of comic vernacular monologues, and burlesques of literature and "spread eagle" oratory, like Petroleum V. Nasby, Orpheus C. Kerr and others who had assumed often outrageous pseudonyms. Twain's regional and generational distance from the writers of the antebellum New England "Renaissance" came out in his disastrous after-dinner speech in Boston before Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Charles Eliot Norton in 1877.¹ The cultural differences between the "genteel tradition" surviving in the North East and the "local colour school" that had emerged in the West after the War provide the immediate context for Twain's proclaiming himself an anti-literary realist in *Huckleberry Finn*, but

1 Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer*, Cambridge, Mass. 1962, Chapter V. My debts to this, and to Walter Blair's *Mark Twain and Huck Finn*, Berkeley 1962, will be obvious to those familiar with the criticism. These remarks on the novel were intended for a different audience, however, and references to criticism have been kept to a minimum (and made in passing in the text).

there is also a wider, indeed international, literary context.

This was the general, and controversial, shift during the second half of the nineteenth century from romanticism, with Sir Walter Scott as the dominant influence on the novel early in the century, to realism (and naturalism), with Flaubert and Zola epitomizing what was found to be so contentious about the new mode. In American terms over the same timespan, it was the shift from Fenimore Cooper, "the American Scott", to Henry James and the realistic novel of contemporary life. William Dean Howells, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and later an editor of *Harper's*, and also the leading American publicist of the new realism, was a friend of both James and Twain (he serialized them simultaneously in the *Atlantic*). The year *Huckleberry Finn* appeared, 1884, was a highpoint in the transatlantic controversy over realism: Sir Walter Besant delivered an address on "The Art of Fiction", which was published in both England and America; Henry James replied in his essay with the same title in *Longman's Magazine* for September; and Robert Louis Stevenson followed in the November issue with his "Humble Remonstrance" which advised the young writer to choose his motive, construct his plot carefully, and pitch his dialogue "not with any thought of how men talk in parlours, but with a single eye to the degree of passion he may be called on to express".

In its April issue of the previous year, the *Atlantic*, the magazine that had provided Howells with a platform to promote realism during his long editorship, had run an attack on "Modern Fiction" by Charles Dudley Warner, Twain's collaborator on *The Gilded Age* (1873). Although he could hardly have been unaware of it, Twain did not enter the debate to theorize over the merits or deficiencies of realistic as against romantic fiction, or at least not in the formal, essayistic way of these more "serious" writers. But the note to *Huckleberry Finn* repudiating "motive", "moral" and "plot"—key terms in the controversy—can be taken to be a statement of his commitment to realism. He is rejecting the romanticist's idealization of life—the creation of exemplary heroes and heroines, and the imposition of poetic justice—and (when the two prefatory notes are taken together) defying expectations that the author's lofty purpose, or "motive", and respect for conventional morality would be conveyed through a refined "literary" language. Later, in 1895, Twain was to itemize "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences" in the *North American Review*, a most serious journal, as readers of James will know, but his

most explicit statement of his stand on the issue of realism versus romance before he completed *Huckleberry Finn* appears in *Life on the Mississippi*, published the year before the novel.

Life on the Mississippi is a rambling set of reminiscences that in its first half contains Twain's autobiographical "novel of education". Considered in isolation, the chapters recalling his apprenticeship to a steamboat pilot constitute one of the classic portraits of the artist as a young man. They show, with oblique artistry, his coming to know intuitively how to interpret the ever-changing course of the river—or life. The second half of the book, about Twain's revisiting in middle age the Mississippi Valley of his childhood and youth, contains his famous attack on Sir Walter Scott, who "did more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual who ever wrote":

Most of the world has outlived good part of these harms, though by no means all of them; but in our South they flourish pretty forcefully still. . . . There, the genuine and wholesome civilization of the nineteenth century is curiously confused and commingled with the Walter Scott Middle Age sham civilization and so you have practical, common-sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works, mixed up with the duel, the inflated speech, and the jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead, and out of charity ought to be buried. . . . It was Sir Walter who made every gentleman in the South a Major or a Colonel, or a General or a Judge, before the war; and it was he, also, who made these gentlemen value these bogus decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste down there, and also reverence for rank and caste, and pride and pleasure in them. Enough is laid on slavery, without fathering upon it these creations and contributions of Sir Walter.

Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war. (Chapter XLVI)

After Huck and Jim flee the wrecked steamboat and the gang of *real* robbers and murderers (Ch. XII), they find out from the watchman further down the stream that the name of the boat is the *Walter Scott*. This suggests the cross-fertilization between the two books; in fact, a chapter from the novel ended up in *Life on the Mississippi*. In its third chapter, Twain includes another from a book he had been working on "by fits and starts, during the past five or six years", which explains how Huck and Jim miss Cairo in the dark. Twain had started the novel in 1876, but broke off before Chapter XVII, in which the Grangerfords are introduced. The *Walter Scott* episode and the related material on feudalism in Chapters XII, XIII and XIV were added last of all (in 1883) after his trip down the river the previous year. The

Grangerford-Shepherdson feud chapters had been written before the trip, but "the duel, the inflated speech, and the jejune romanticism", the characteristics of Southern society that Twain holds Scott responsible for in *Life on the Mississippi*, are the same as he satirizes in the novel. The *code duello* is satirized in the local guerilla war between the two families and Colonel Sherburn's later, and later written, chilling "affair of honour" with Bloggs. And although inflated speech and jejune romanticism pervade the novel, with Tom Sawyer being the chief source of the latter, Emmeline Grangerford's relics provide some memorably morbid examples; as, shortly afterwards, do the duke and the king with their mock-Shakespeare and "yellocution", and the king's ability to win the sympathies of the camp-fire meeting with his tale of being a reformed pirate.

In the passage already quoted from *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain is casting himself in the part of the enlightened, progressive Northerner, the modern. Language is the focus for his attack on the self-deceptions and delusions of the South, because it has generated and preserved the values of this retarded society, imprisoning its members within its institutions, which bear only a perverse relationship to reality. So, the honour, the chivalry, the pious respectability the Grangerfords pretend to bear no relation to the reality of their lawless behaviour; and Emmeline's self-indulgent meditations on mortality ("I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas") lack the sincerity of Huck's simple reaction to the immediacy of death ("I cried a little when I was covering up Buck's face, for he was mighty good to me."). As Twain continued in *Life on the Mississippi*, the South still clung, half a century later, to "the wordy, windy, flowery, 'eloquence', romanticism, sentimentality—all imitated from Sir Walter", and he finished Chapter XLVI by contrasting the good done by *Don Quixote* in sweeping "the medieval chivalry-silliness" out of existence with the harm done by *Ivanhoe* in restoring it.

Tom Sawyer has missed the point of Cervantes's satire of the romances of chivalry. In Chapter III, he tells Huck that he would understand all about enchantments, and see A-rabs and elephants instead of a Sunday school picnic, if only he read *Don Quixote*. But to Huck, for whom this advice in itself has "all the marks of a Sunday school", romance is another false language code, like the religiosity of the Widow and her sister (and the association of the corrupted languages of romance and religion is sustained throughout the novel). Twain's motives as an anti-

literary realist are dramatically presented through this contrast between Tom the romancer and Huck the realist. The contrast also structures the novel linguistically. Opposed are the escapist realm of romance and the "actual" world; the knowledge drawn from books and the knowledge gained through experience; the language of literature (and ideology)—conceived of as sentimental, evasive, false—and the language of life, in the novel's here and now. But to speak of the *novel's* here and now is to observe that one has to be highly conscious of literature and language to be an "anti-literary" novelist.

Tom's infatuation with romance, amusingly immature in the opening chapters, becomes self-indulgent and menacingly irresponsible in the last fifth of the book, with the "evasion" he plots for Jim (and "evasion" reveals language turning against him, because he has evaded recognition of the possibly fatal consequences for Jim). The fancifully idealizing language of romance which is burlesqued in these evasion chapters is, however, only one of the debased language codes that operate in this society, and have their consequences. There are not only the Grangerfords, whose notions of chivalry doom them to act out a travesty of *Romeo and Juliet*; but also the duke and the king who, with their different rhetorical appeals, expose the conditioned sentimental responses of this society; the Widow and her sister, from whom Huck has received approved notions of Providence and of civic responsibility in a slave-owning community; and even Pap, whose befuddled grasp of the democratic social contract is outraged when "they" would not arrest a free nigger. All draw on a lexicon which, whether literary, religious, ethical or political, is at odds with reality.

Huck, though, has his own language and individual imaginativeness that are independent of robber and pirate books, of Scott and Dumas. He has a large lore gathered from experience and observation—he "knowed mighty well that a drowned man don't float on his back"—and he can turn this lore to account in constructing his fiction, not to escape from reality, like Tom, but to survive within it. His language is not that of books, and the institutions they enshrine, but of experience; and it is a language that often seems freshly minted in response to the experiences he is recounting:

A melodeum is 'pretty skreeky', a watchman refuses to be bribed by 'spondulicks', Huck 'smouches' a spoon, he has 'clayey' clothes, and he notices 'shackly' houses; he speaks of an undertaker's 'softly soothing ways', and to him a thunder clap is a 'sockdolager';

Colonel Grangerford is said to have no 'frivolishness' about him; and another man had a 'startlish' way; after the duke 'hove a sigh', the king inquired what he was 'alassing about'; and when an imaginary horse-ferry bumps a real steamboat wreck, Huck describes the action by saying it 'saddlebagged' on the wreck; he guts a catfish by 'hagglng' it open with a saw; and finally he says that a certain surprise would make 'most anybody squash' by which he means 'squashed won like a bluff bank that the river has cut under'. (Chs. 27, 13, 37, 2, 21, 27, 20, 18, 13, 19, 13, 8, 29)

This list of some of Huck's striking words and phrases is taken from Richard Bridgman's *The Colloquial Style in America* (New York, 1966). My point in taking his examples instead of selecting others from the many that offer themselves is that this list appears in Bridgman's chapter on "Henry James and Mark Twain". Considering the "serious" James and the "popular" Twain together as stylists might not have occurred to their contemporary readers; but Bridgman's comparison shows how both drew on the colloquial, not only its vocabulary, but also its rhythms and repetitions to create their own distinctive, and influential, styles.

Accepted as the "author" of these adventures, Huck is a realist. His story opens with his grudging admission that Mr Mark Twain told the truth, mainly, in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but his adventures are to be a record of experience, a slice of life, rather than fiction, a romance; and at the end he is "rotten glad" to have finished recording them. Within this conventional pseudo-autobiographical record (a realistic device at least as old as *Robinson Crusoe* in English), we are reminded of Huck's role as an "author" by the stories he invents to get himself out of difficult situations, the fictional strategies he adopts to further his purpose of smuggling Jim to freedom. As in the stories of another realist, Laura in Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom*, not a word is true literally, but every word might be. His mother and father could be dead, and he could have been bound over to a mean old farmer, as he tells Mrs Loftus; or his family could be trapped aboard the wrecked *Walter Scott*, as he tells the watchman; or they could have smallpox, as he tells the two men in the skiff; or dead, as he tells the duke and the king; or, and best of all, as he tells the Grangerfords (an example of Twain's own advice on "How to Tell a Story"), it could be that his sister

"run off and got married and never was heard of no more, and Bill went to hunt them and he warn't heard of no more, and Tom and Mort died, and then there warn't nobody but just me and pap left,

and he was just trimmed down to nothing, on account of his troubles; so when he died I took what there was left, because the farm didn't belong to us, and started up the river, deck passage, and fell overboard." (Ch. XVII)

Walter Blair has pointed out how these stories reveal a lot about Huck psychologically. The fantasies he creates of a lost family life, compensations for the deprivation he must have felt in having only Pap, also reveal "his" imagination at work. It is an imagination that has its correspondences with that of the true author; for like Huck in his stories, Twain the realist is drawing on experience—indirectly for the most part, though the tone in the descriptions of Bricksville and the Phelps's farm are reminiscent of, respectively, the first half of *Life on the Mississippi* and the *Autobiography*. As he wrote in a letter, recounting the advice he had given a young authoress:

Literature is an *art*, not an inspiration. . . . its capital is *experience*. after you yourself shall have tried to descend a rain-water pipe, once, unencumbered, you will always know better, after that, than to let your hero descend one with a woman in his arms. . . . I wish to impress upon you this truth: that the moment you venture outside your *own* experience, you are in peril—don't ever do it.²

But although Huck's stories are, however obliquely, true to his experiences, they are still deceptions. They still have that much in common with Tom Sawyer's romances, even if Huck's are motivated by the higher purpose of helping Jim to freedom. The incident at the circus, when Huck is innocently taken in by the clown pretending to be a drunk might suggest that all art is mendacious. But behind Huck's art lies Twain's: the art that presents Huck's delight in the seemingly magical metamorphosis of yet another drunk into a god-like equestrian artist, the art that reveals rather than conceals and deceives.

Twain's is an art that asserts itself in moments: in the vivid incident (as at the circus), in descriptions, monologues, dramatic scenes. It proceeds through the accretion of such varied moments, rather than through consistent development of narrative and character, and those other rather mechanical requirements for a "well made" novel. Jim's story at the end of Chapter VIII, about Balum investing ten cents in the Lord and expecting to get it back a hundredfold, is "Jim Crow" minstrel-show patter, out of character with Jim as he is developed later, and with his moving monologue in Chapter XXIII about how he discovered his

2 *The Love Letters of Mark Twain*, ed. Dixon Wecter, New York 1949, Letter 228.

little 'Lizabeth was deaf. Like Mrs Hotchkiss's bemused outburst at Jim's apparently "plumb crazy" behaviour in Chapter XLI, these monologues appear excrescent when considered with the tenets of the "well made" novel in mind, but they answer to a different motive. The "misspellers" of the press and the lecture circuit, Twain amongst them, had established the conventions for exploiting colloquial speech as, in effect, an alternative *literary* language. In such passages, Twain is displaying the range of this "realistic" level of language. Many and varied moments such as these, as well as of inspired burlesque of the language of melodrama and sentimental and sensational fiction are strung loosely, and sometimes gratuitously, together in the book, or at least three possible books, that became the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The moments which have been commented on most frequently occur in Chapter XIX, with the descriptions of the dawn coming up over the "monstrous big river" and Huck and Jim lying on their backs at night, looking up at the stars and speculating whether "they were made or only just happened". These passages in particular make us aware that, however indicative of Twain's motives the contemporary opposition of realism and romanticism may be, it could not constitute any final nor absolute distinction (as James recognized in "The Art of Fiction"). Twain might lampoon the romances of Scott and Dumas and their host of imitators, and scorn the assumption that the language of literature must be more elevated than that of everyday speech, but in this passage there is an elevation of the colloquial into the poetic—even while this is combined with the low and comic (the woodyard "piled by them cheats, so that you can throw a dog through it anywheres"). In this moment the melancholy "lonesome" Huck experiences a sense of absorption into the landscape, the landscape which is itself a moment in the course of the vitalistic and protean river:

the nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh, and sweet to tell, on account of the woods and the flowers; but sometimes not that way, because they've left dead fish lying around, gars and such, and they do get pretty rank; and next you've got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the song-birds just going it!

Such a moment that dissolves the dichotomy between the self and the world, and resolves in an embracing image the contraries of life and death, the ugly and the beautiful, is of the essence of Romanticism, or, in its American version, of Transcendentalism. The spirit of Transcendentalism, which furnished the impulse for

the New England "Renaissance" of the mid-nineteenth century, was epitomized in Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and the famous passage in which the self finds identity with creation:

In the woods is perpetual youth. . . . I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. . . . In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

Or, as Emerson's disciple Thoreau wrote after meditating long on Walden Pond, "It is the earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature". Similarly, as Huck on the raft gazes towards the horizon ("the first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that was the woods on t'other side") he reveals his nature, his Adamic innocence that has escaped "sivilization".

Yet Twain is no literary innocent, and his narrator is not only the child of nature, but also of *Nature* in its Emersonian version: of the earlier American "Renaissance" rather than that of Shakespeare, Cervantes, Cellini, the foreign and feudal tradition that reveals its debasement and exhaustion in genteel memory through Tom Sawyer's romances. Emerson's earlier calls (around the time Huck, and Twain, would still have been in diapers) for "an original relation to the universe" ("*Nature*"), for forsaking "the courtly muses of Europe" ("The American Scholar"), for the celebration of America as itself a great poem ("The Poet") are answered by Huck. He sets a wealth of homely experience against Emerson's "dead bones" of the past, against feudal memory and second-hand culture, and asserts, through a language that brings this to consciousness, the primacy of first-hand knowledge, the truth that is won from experience and comes from the heart.

In these broad terms, Twain is not as discontinuous with the earlier Romantic tradition of New England as he thought when he saw them sunk into old age and gentility. Significantly though, Huck's idyllic moments are shared with Jim. Whereas Emerson celebrated the harmony attainable between the self-reliant individual and the natural world he contemplated (though society does disturb these simple correspondences between the self and the world in the writings of Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville), Huck's nature is revealed through his simultaneous involvement with another human being. He discovers mutuality not only with nature but with another refugee from "sivilization". But their

moments of transcendence are only moments, before the duke and the king arrive to disturb the idyll. One cannot live in the moment, but must go on down the river.

If Huck is granted his claim to be the "author", his adventures are a version of the portrait of an artist, showing his moving through one phase of development, leaving him to confront another. He has proved himself to be self-reliant and also morally responsible. Compared with Tom, who has proved ineducable, the complete conformist, Huck has advanced his education—and learnt silence, cunning, and inner exile. Yet at the end he has been brought full circle. He begins by telling us that he has "lit out" already, only to have been brought back by Tom's promise to start a band of robbers. At the end he has seen through Tom, and the society Tom is the product of; but I think we must feel his determination to light out again will bring him similar conflicts at the next stage of his life. These will be conflicts he cannot escape from but must face because of his nature: conflicts between his natural, instinctual self and "sivilization", between the truth as he perceives it and the conformist's unquestioning compliance with conventions, between self-reliant individualism and sympathetic involvement with others. These are traditionally very Romantic, or very American, conflicts and Huck is not likely to escape them even if he should reach the Territory. They constitute life for the authentic individual, define his individualism in fact; for as Emerson wrote in "Self-Reliance", "Who would be a man must be a nonconformist".