The Dramatic Unity of Huckleberry Finn

The Outrageous Logic of the Ending

I

For Bernard De Voto, one of the first modern critics to take Twain seriously, the ending of Huckleberry Finn was a deep disappointment, “inharmonious burlesque,” “a separate episode, unrelated to the rest, self-contained but improvised”\(^1\)—an opinion shared by a great many critics and readers. I hold that the ending is just the opposite. It follows the rule that Twain himself later postulated: “There is only one right form for a story, and if you fail to find that form the story will not tell itself.”\(^2\) The one right form for the ending of Huckleberry Finn is a final devastating demonstration of the principles developed earlier in the novel: the power of situation, the need for reciprocal activity, the need for dramatic organizing of situations. The ending is such a demonstration. Only a child or a sadist, I repeat, could find elements of such an ending thoroughly enjoyable; but Huckleberry Finn is serious art, not entertainment, and the question of
conventional enjoyment is, in the last analysis, irrelevant. At any rate, who can deny that in some ways it is a happy ending? Huck and Tom get as much as they could expect from a given situation, and Jim gets what he must have, his freedom.

In the following pages, then, I will be trying to show that the ending is meaningful burlesque, is not a separate episode, and is related to the rest of the novel. The relations of Tom and Huck, which I will deal with in some detail, are, to be sure, preposterous on the surface, but they are logical in terms of the hidden laws of relationships developed throughout the novel and suggested in the terms “reciprocity” and “deep structure.” The hidden laws of situationalism apply: good resolutions and verbal formulas give way to the demands of Huck’s situation and the need for drama. Events that are crazy and chaotic in themselves are orderly when seen in the light of the hidden structures of emotional response and drama. There is continuity of technique and tone. Twain fulfills his prefatory brag about his mastery of southwestern dialect. The bizarre, sometimes magical, sometimes sinister tone of the ending concentrates and intensifies qualities found elsewhere in the novel. Twain boxes us in here the way he boxed us in with Huck in the widow’s parlor, Pap’s cabin, and the Wilks house. The ending is serious work. Though Twain had little in common with Henry James, he managed in this ending to obey James’s warning that an author must control the “stream” of improvisation lest it become a “flood” and lose “the great effect of keeping on terms with itself.”

The ending, whether carelessly improvised or not, has been seen as a distortion of what goes before. As a
neutral description, the term is correct. If one uses the word "distortion," as Ronald Paulson uses it, to mean the twist of a common literary form to convey a satiric message, then *Huckleberry Finn* takes its place as a modern novel.\(^4\)

One of Frank Kermode's most acute observations is that modern literature denies apocalypse, the final ending of an action.\(^5\) By rejecting stasis or any clear permanent change for Huck, Twain makes *Huckleberry Finn* a modern work, an account of an eternal transition, toward what we do not know.\(^6\) Such an ending is for Kermode the triumph of "common sense" over "free imagination," which panders in conventional fiction to the reader's urge for "fantasy gratification." A really modern novel, according to Kermode, disappoints one's "schematic expectations"\(^7\) at the very beginning; but because this expectation is founded on the tradition of peripeteia, *Huckleberry Finn* manages very well by apparently offering a turning point in chapter 31 and then withdrawing it. Twain here is more modern and more honest than his great contemporary George Eliot, who twists the end of *The Mill on the Floss* to make it a conventional novel: "The novel refuses the prose realities, and saves its heroine from the pains of fresh starts and conflicts by invoking the very narrative consolations it has been concerned to analyze and deny."\(^8\)

Twain avoids "narrative consolations"—there is no dispute about that. The novel is full of premonitions of disaster; the ending is that disaster. Though not a true picaresque, *Huckleberry Finn* moves, as picaresque does, "not toward a happy ending or moral wholeness, but toward strictly prudential knowledge."\(^9\) The end of *Huckleberry Finn* succeeds, I believe, because it gives us that kind of knowledge; that is, it demonstrates the
dismaying nature of man and his world as Twain saw them and reaffirms the dismaying demonstrations of the earlier chapters. By doing that and by denying the consolations of a pleasant ending, the ending for which most readers and critics yearn, Twain outrages them.

II

Although not emotionally consoling, the ending is logically consoling. Its differences from the earlier sections are less in kind than in degree. Like the beginning and the middle, the ending is a demonstration of human qualities and the world in which they exist; the differences lie in the situation, which makes Tom Sawyer unpleasantly visible and puts the burden of the demonstration on Huck, in a way that most readers find unpleasant too. It is easy to make Tom look bad—the cave scene (chap. 2) alone suffices to reveal his noisy aggressiveness—but it takes most of a book to prepare a situation in which Huck can be made to look bad. The incidents are much the same in the beginning and in the ending, but our reactions to them are different—a tribute to Twain’s handling of the middle sections. In their wildness the incidents of the ending join in a series beginning with the tricking of Jim in chapter 2. Now, though, Twain makes us question that wildness. In chapter 1 Huck gets Tom when he needs him; in the ending Huck gets Tom twice, so to speak: he becomes Tom, and he meets him again. But rather than applaud Huck’s double luck, or take the whole matter indifferently (as most readers take the early chapters), we are troubled by that luck, because between chapters 1 and 32 we have learned something about Huck’s world and the consequences of acting like Tom Sawyer. Tom’s
dramas at beginning and end resemble each other remarkably: each is unreal, highly contrived, and basically riskless for Tom, and each runs afoul of authority (represented by the Sunday-school teacher and the posse). These similarities draw one's attention to the differences that give the ending its point: a Sunday-school teacher yelling is hardly comparable to a posse shooting, and pestering children is not the same as playing with a man's life.

On the level of detail the similarities of the two sections reinforce differences in meaning. The arguments of the boys over the sleeping Jim and in the cave are almost identical to those during the ending. Tom wins in both cases; but in the ending Huck should win, and it matters that he does not. In chapter 2 it is funny that Huck should worry more about his itching nose than about Jim's reaction to being tricked; in the last chapters Huck's self-centeredness and indifference to Jim are not funny at all. We applaud Huck when he quits Tom's gang because there is no "profit" in it, and we assume that Huck is through with "profit," psychological satisfaction, as he was with prayer; but in the conclusion Huck pursues "profit" as if he had been hungry for it all along. We are driven to realize that this is true of Huck as it is of any man; we acquire "prudential knowledge" about the unity of the damned human race.

Other incidents bind the ending to the early episodes of the book. Though Huck fears Pap, he is Pap's son and listens without comment to Pap's familiar anarchist diatribes. Even if Huck's slave-stealing reflects Pap's hatred of the propertied classes in terms of action rather than attitude, Huck is nevertheless fulfilling Pap's intention.
Huck's absorbed activity during the early part of the ending (chaps. 34–38) suggests his controlled intensity during his own escape from a cabin (in chap. 7), with the difference that the later example seems "pointless" to the observer of the surfaces of the novel, and that Tom, wished for in vain before, is very much present throughout the ending. The simplicity and similarity of the two imprisonments throw a glaring light on the complexities of the ending. If the problem is simply to get a person out of a cabin, why cannot Huck just do it? He did it once, with ease. Like so much else in, or suggested by, the ending, such a question serves to bring us back to the central problems of the novel.

The center of the novel has fewer links to the conclusion, as befits a circular structure in which beginning and end are closely related. The end does continue from the middle, though. When Huck abandons Jim for the fun with Tom, we should recall that he did much the same thing at the Grangerfords and did it again at the Wilkses, and that however little he does for Jim during the evasion, he does nothing at all for him in the other two cases and is actively cruel to him elsewhere. Huck's submission to Tom at the end is not as complete as his earlier submission to Buck and the feud. Buck is proud that the feud has gone on for years and will go on indefinitely, as it would but for Huck. Tom hopes to keep up the evasion so it will involve the next generation and last "as much as eighty year" (chap. 36)—an ambition no greater than Buck's. Huck's repeated references to Tom and his "style" (chaps. 7, 12, 28) make us keep in mind his appetite for drama. The King and the Duke reinforce it. Just before the evasion the Wilks episode gives Huck a taste of the pleasure of
acting, and adds lessons in scheming, risking the truth, trusting to Providence, and driving hubristically beyond limits. Huck is thoroughly ready for the ending that Twain gives him.

Like the links to earlier parts of the novel, the internal qualities of the ending serve to reinforce and reemphasize Twain's meanings. The length of the ending suggests its importance, especially for Huck. For the first time in the book Huck is completely secure and relaxed, and, despite his pledges to Jim, he is going to enjoy himself; for he is, we are constrained to see, an easygoing white boy first of all and the dedicated friend of the black slave Jim second. "There ain't no hurry; le's keep on looking around," says Tom (chap. 34); and Huck, as he often does, acquiesces silently. During the ending Twain also is in no hurry. He has arrived at the point in his book where he can, and indeed must, work out his ideas, and use the world and the implications that he has built up during thirty-odd chapters of fiction. Even if Huck is not exactly where he aimed to be when he set out, Twain is—right in the middle of the respectable middle classes, where he can examine "man," the people who count and who counted for him, on a large scale in relation to a controlling cultural drama (slavery) and on a small scale in their responses to a gratuitous drama (the evasion) experienced from beginning to end. The agonizing length of the evasion further rubs in a moral that Twain has been suggesting through the book: the best gratuitous drama is the longest. (For obvious reasons, survival dramas should be short.) The length of the evasion is internally determined only by an intrusion of reality (the Phelpses sending out notices about Jim) that Tom cannot control.
Sticking closely to this pattern, Twain avoids complexities that his fabled love of "improvising" might have led him into. He passes up the interesting approach, suggested by Sister Hotchkiss, of having the slaves help Jim, either surreptitiously or by raising a rebellion. By including Tom Sawyer, Twain solves the problem of developing Huck's common and inferior qualities in a situation that would tend to make Huck heroic and impressive, the Cooperesque situation of the lone wolf fighting to save his friends from a horde of enemies. (Professor Seelye, in his rewritten version of the novel, gains added sympathy for Huck by keeping him solitary.) If Tom's presence is acceptable, the problem then is to get him back into the story at this point. Avoiding elaborate maneuvers ("improvisations"), Twain assaults the problem head on, suggesting that he knows what he wants to do and wants to get at it, however crudely.

It is coincidence that Tom has relatives in Arkansas, that they are the ones who take Jim, that Tom is visiting at just that time, and that Huck meets Tom on the road to town. We are now in a different world, a world of coincidences and rigged symbolic situations, a world of romance. If Bricksville is hell on earth in terms of human behavior, the Phelps farm is hell on earth in terms of imagery. Fox fire, witches, witch-pie, nighttime skulduggery, a tireless charismatic leader of the revels in Tom Sawyer: we are in a demonic world. The slave Nat is right—the dogs that bulge in under Jim's bed are witches. If Nat were more analytical, he would realize that Tom's domination of the dogs makes him the chief witch and thus a version of Satan. The insanely pointless digging, the rapid sequence of absurd and irrelevant
activities, the steady speeding-up of the pace—all this creates the effect, characteristic of demonic imagery, of being trapped in a maze designed by ingenious sadists.  

When Twain tries to emphasize the wildness of the chaos, the turbulence, he characteristically overdoes it, and piles on scenes like the episode of the rats and snakes that escape the boys and overrun the house. Yet even the hysterical humor of this episode has a certain logical significance; a gratuitous drama like this one, left free to shape itself, inevitably escapes, overruns its makers, and winds up imitating the chaos it was designed to order. Twain caps this effect, and redeems any errors he has made, in the final presentation of the interior of Jim’s cabin as seen through the eyes of the Phelps’ drama-hungry neighbors. Here is pure chaos, experienced, reported, discussed, and turned into legend, the most durable form of drama.

The boys add to the chaos by their behavior, which is “goofy,” in the sense that Nabokov uses the word in Lolita to describe a self-centered, disorganized, ignorant, gum-chewing, comic-book-reading American adolescent of the 1950s. Just as Lolita fails to rise to Humbert Humbert’s lofty ideal of love, the boys fail to rise to the reader’s lofty ideal of loyalty to Jim. To us, the ending is melodrama, unwanted and exasperating; to Tom Sawyer, a privileged and arrogant child, a kind of male nymphet, the ending is farce; for he cannot see, and at any rate cannot suffer from, the element of danger that turns farce into melodrama. Because Huck, like any child, does not think of himself and his friends as children, we tend to forget that Huck and Tom are children, or no more than the kind of early adolescents who lapse easily from
their adult pose into childish behavior, goofiness. One function of the ending is to restore us from romance to the level of “prudential knowledge,” or, in simple terms, to remind us of the consequences of sending a boy to do a man’s job. Some of the foolishness is Huck’s, and follows from his inability to make up stories outside a narrow range (imaginary family troubles). When he tries to conceal his visit to the cellar (chap. 40) or the reason for his prolonged absence from the Phelps house (chap. 41), he flubs the job, with comic results.

The goofiness is actually functional, though, to a cultural treatment of the material. Huck is at last sharing in the harmony of a culture; his isolation, dissatisfaction, anxiety, and harassments are over, after more than thirty chapters. Because he is a boy, his assigned role in the Phelps household is that of a harum-scarum prankster, and he plays it well. This may be intensely irritating to a reader who assumes that Huck exists for the sake of Jim, but it is all highly satisfying for Huck. He lives through it all naturally (that is, according to the laws of his culture) and reports it all to us in a tranquil spirit. Thus when he and Tom tell Jim they will not free him right away and Jim says it is “all right,” Huck says nothing and later reports the conversation without comment. At the time Huck is not aware of Jim’s feelings, his pathetic dependence on the boys and his need to keep control of himself in this desperate situation. Neither is Huck aware later, when he writes the book. A sensitive adult narrator could make much out of that quiet “all right.” The novel is epitomized by Huck’s failure to do so.

This goofiness has its ironic side. It is not entirely childish or adolescent. Huck can fail to understand Jim during the evasion and still fail to understand him during
the writing of the book, because Huck is for the first time acting as a man, in full harmony with the laws of his world. He acts mature; but because adults in this world act like foolish children when they can, Huck now acts like a foolish child. Earlier he had to act like a model Victorian adult: shrewd, prudent, reserved. Now Huck is not merely observing dramas blankly, or judging them out of hard-earned knowledge; he is acting them out himself and making a real impact on people and events. Even if the details of the evasion are Tom’s, the basic idea—stealing Jim—is Huck’s, and some of the key touches are his. A natural end for an autobiographical narrative comes when the author-narrator “comes to terms with himself, assumes his vocation.” Huck never consciously understands his nature, of course, because he is insensitive to it, and his world does not stimulate him to introspection; but he is nevertheless assuming his vocation, which in the simple vision that Twain is projecting means less that he is a certain kind of man than that he is simply a man. And when a youth assumes manhood and enters upon his vocation, he preserves a certain distance toward outsiders. Even when he is helping Jim, Huck must do so at a formal distance; for Jim is now an outsider, an object in a drama rather than a participant in it. Thus the apparent indifference toward Jim. Gone are the leisurely arguments and intimate silences of the raft voyage, when Huck, too, was an object in dramas rather than an instigator of them and participant in them. Huck’s contentment is now with the Phelps family, and his role as indulged nephew feeds his goofiness.

III

At the beginning of the final episode none of these
general truths are apparent. We can become aware of them only after experiencing the ending as a series of scenes and statements. The ending has been attacked on this level as an incoherent jumble. Here if anywhere De Voto's accusation of "improvising" is relevant, and here I must face the accusation that the progress of the episode not only is illogical in itself but destroys the promise inherent in chapter 31. My thesis is that chapter 31, despite its internal flaws, has a logical if ironical relation, in terms of Twain's view of things, to the last chapters, and that these chapters are an orderly progression of incidents arising from the relations of the characters and the laws of the world of the novel.

In *What Is Man?*, which so often expresses what the earlier works imply, Twain's spokesman says, "The fact that man knows right from wrong proves his *intellectual* superiority to the other creatures; but the fact that he can do wrong proves his *moral* inferiority to any creature that cannot." Chapter 31 of *Huckleberry Finn* illustrates the first part of this statement; the last chapters illustrate the second part. As Ovid more elegantly phrased it, "Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor." In relation to chapter 31 the ending shows us what Twain says to us in *What Is Man?*: "[Will] has nothing to do with *intellectual perception of right and wrong*, and is not under their command" (p. 201). When Huck says, "All right, I'll go to hell," he sincerely wills the idea, but he does not know the difference between willing and acting. His creator, though, demonstrates in the ending the importance of that bit of "prudential knowledge," which he later formulated explicitly: "[What makes us act] is merely the *latest* outside influence of a procession of preparatory influences..."
stretching back over a period of years. No single outside influence can make a man do a thing which is at war with his training. The most it can do is to start his mind on a new track and open it to the reception of new influences. "Huck's "training" is in drama. The single outside influence is his weeks, off and on, with Jim, and the effect of this influence is his vow to steal Jim. The new track and the new influences—the approach to the Phelps farm, the new identity there, the reappearance of Tom—lead him far from that vow. Thinking as he apparently does that he can easily translate his vow into action, Huck is committing the "sin" or error of setting himself up to be transcendent, to be beyond the law of man and nature. The events of the ending, especially its early events, give a sharp answer to Huck's temerity.

The ending may be divided into a preparatory and transitional section (Huck's rebirth, Tom's reappearance, and Tom's establishment of domination), which irrevocably changes Huck's direction; the growth and climax of the evasion; and "the end," in which Huck tidies up loose ends and prepares for the future. The transitional section is the most important and interesting one, for once the evasion is established, it follows the usual laws of drama. Huck's introduction to the Phelps farm and his rebirth create an effect of shock; they throw Huck off balance and suggest a different world in which strange things can and do happen, like the reappearance of Tom Sawyer and the glimpse of the lynching of the King and the Duke. These events also prepare Huck and the major characters at the farm, Aunt Sally especially, for the drama to follow.

When Huck arrives at the farm he is still caught up in
the ecstasy of his dedication—"I reckoned I better start in on my plan straight off, without fooling around" (chap. 31)—but within a few minutes he is reduced to mumbling, "I didn't rightly know what to say" (chap. 32), and a few paragraphs later he is a different person. What has happened is that Huck has gone through what Kenneth Burke calls an "abyss," a radical shift in identity. First he is reduced to a death-like state by contact with the unbearable reality underlying man's frantic succession of dramas, with the added touch of the spinning wheel. Then he is truly reborn on the level of his humanity, his consciousness, though his body has maintained its continuity across the abyss. (This continuity counts for little because we are never given any sense of the physical Huck except as a near-reflection of Buck Grangerford.)

Huck enters this transition abruptly, with the opening words of chapter 32: "When I got there it was all still and Sunday-like, and hot and sunshiny—the hands was gone to the fields; and there was them kind of faint dronings of bugs and flies in the air that makes it seem so lonesome and like everybody's dead and gone. " In describing this atmosphere, Huck draws on the capital created in the scene of misery at the end of chapter 1. The impact comes in two waves. The first introduces the feeling of sadness and the thought of death; the second, in the third paragraph of the chapter, completes the experience of horror through the use of Twain's obsessive image, the wailing sound of the spinning wheel. The two-part structure of the experience suggests Twain's later analysis of traumatic shocks in terms of a brick's first being soaked slowly and then disintegrating at a slight final touch.¹⁴ Between the two waves comes the description of the
Phelps farm, which is sound social history on one level but has more serious literary functions. The description stops the action (here the movement of Huck as center of consciousness) and provides a moment for the first effect, the impact of nature, to “soak into” Huck for a while, before the final shock of the spinning wheel. The elaboration and precision of the description serve not only to locate the shenanigans to come but to slow the pace of the action, which has been rapid for several chapters and especially for the last chapter. Like the Grangerford house, the Phelps house is isolated from humanity by “the woods” (the natural nonhuman world). It is a stage on which special events are to take place, but its modest appearance suggests that whatever takes place will not be as terrible as the Grangerford massacre.

The spinning wheel reasserts the reality that chapter 31 denies. Human events are controlled not by conscious, righteous decisions but by basic laws of existence and human need—that is, by something resembling the “Providence” that Huck ironically puts his trust in at this point. Despite unfortunate experiences at the Wilkses, Huck “goes right along, not fixing up any particular plan, but just trusting to Providence to put the right words in my mouth when the time come” (chap. 32). The words that “Providence” puts in his mouth are “Yes’m,” as a reply to Aunt Sally’s greeting, “It’s you, at last!—ain’t it?” “Providence,” that is, turns out to be the laws of drama; Huck assents automatically to being cast, to the assertion that he is “you”—whoever that may be. He does not know who “you” is, and neither do we; but of course it cannot be Huck Finn.
Huck thus begins his rescue of Jim by consenting to the destruction of his own identity. This death is reinforced unobtrusively. He has already wished he were dead; and when the dogs start to attack him, he dies as surely as if they had killed him, because the person rescued from the dogs is someone else, Aunt Sally’s “You.” The moments of anxiety that follow (“I wanted to find out who I was”) are a kind of limbo that Huck must endure helplessly. He is now cut off completely from the shining moment of chapter 31. The ruling principles of change and activity, and of man’s need to adapt himself to such a world, have reasserted themselves. “Huck Finn” and his resolution are in the past. Now he must do something else, which under the laws of drama means that he must be someone else.

When Aunt Sally exclaims, “It’s you, at last!—ain’t it?”, she suggests less a simple case of mistaken identity than the fulfillment of a destiny that has been waiting for Huck. On a precognitive level Huck seems to have been waiting for it too; he comes out with that polite “Yes’m” before he can think. Huck is now ready for his rebirth, the emergence from limbo. The muddle into which his loss of identity has put him begins to resolve itself, first in general terms: he becomes an ordinary person, which, in the terms of his culture, means that he becomes an ordinary white person (blacks are not persons). This definition is indicated and tacitly accepted in the interchange, “Anybody hurt?” “No’m. Killed a nigger.” By thus aligning himself with conventional (white) culture and denying the humanity of blacks, Huck formally completes the separation from the anarchistic humanist Huck of chapter 31.
Next Huck is reborn in specific terms. This is Huck’s ironic anagnorisis, a twist on the climax of the classic Bildungsroman. Huck has finally “made it.” He is one of the quality, one of those who can spurn ordinary standards and limitations (like those of friendship). When Aunt Sally tells Huck who he is—“It’s Tom Sawyer!”—he not only accepts the situation realistically—“there warn’t no time to swap knives”—but seizes it joyfully—“it was like being born again, I was so glad to find out who I was.” Aunt Sally’s being the source of knowledge, the giver of identity, is important. She is the center of the Phelps household, the only household in the novel that we see operating on a day-to-day basis, and the necessary scene of any attempt to rescue Jim. By naming Huck “Tom Sawyer,” she is not just telling him that he is the Tom Sawyer, she is authoritatively telling him that to succeed in this little closed world Huck must be a Tom Sawyer—he must be an aggressive maker of gratuitous dramas. The elements of the boy Huck Finn, even (or especially) the elements that make him noble, are irrelevant to practical affairs. From what we already know of Tom’s habitual way of treating Jim, Aunt Sally’s statement promises ill for a neat, self-effacing, humanitarian rescue, or for any rescue.

Some kind of rebirth is logical because Huck’s feeble performance since approaching the Phelps farm has made Huckishness look painfully inadequate. At the same time this particular rebirth is ironical because no amount of naming Huck “Tom Sawyer” will ever give him Tom’s malice, ingenuity, and energy. As it turns out, the irony is double, for Huck gives up the advantages of being Huck (simplicity, practicality) and in return gains nothing. As Huck becomes “Tom,” we are reminded once
again of the unity of the human race under surface differences. At the beginning of the novel Huck wanted “him and me to be together” in “the bad place.” Now, they are “together” or one, in name, as they soon will be together in the flesh; and as for “the bad place,” by the time Tom gets through with the Phelps household it is a very reasonable facsimile of hell. The manner of Huck’s rebirth is also logical from the point of view of the dominant subculture, Tom’s world of the quality glimpsed in the opening and now solidly reasserted. To this world Huck can be reborn only as a Tom Sawyer; for Tom to them is the norm if not the ideal of boyhood, and Huck to them not only is legally dead but never existed in the first place, except for a few months as the widow’s embryo Tom.

Huck’s rebirth as Tom also determines the immediate course of the novel. It commits him to Sawyerismus before Tom arrives, and prepares the reader for Tom’s literal reappearance. Nothing can conceal the clumsiness of that coincidence. The encounter must occur at some time, so that Huck can test his recent development against Tom. (Twain undercuts this point: he has Huck crumble and disappear before he can be put to the test against Tom.) And of course the two boys cannot meet again in St. Petersburg. Huck “died” at Pap’s cabin; Huck is terrified of encountering Pap again; Huck is deeply involved with a slave who believes that he never can return home, and his home was Huck’s too.

Though Twain does not bother to try to make the apparition of Tom logical, he handles the event so that its impact comes not when Huck encounters him on the road but when he marches up to the Phelps house. The first encounter merely prepares the scene for the second, formal
one. Here Tom is a god, or perhaps a devil. Whereas Huck really was a stranger when he approached the Phelps house but could only mumble until he was given a familiar label, Tom is not a stranger but easily persuades the Phelpses that he is, and thus becomes, in the super-reality of drama, the central Twain character. Even when Tom’s “identity” is known, he still remains concealed, more the stranger than ever. Huck is forced to accept a literally false but grimly appropriate identity; Tom forces the Phelpses to accept an identity false in every way. Tom is neither literally nor figuratively Sid Sawyer. Here Twain depends on the reader’s supposed memories of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, for Sid appears only there. Sid, the embodiment of sterile conformity and caution, was the opposite of Tom in every way. Even the spite and vengefulness that he shared with Tom were made to look like mere nastiness in Sid. Behind the mask of Sid, Tom can remain himself, keep himself strange to the Phelpses, and do anything he wants. He struts around the Phelps farm as Satan walks disguised and arrogant around Eseldorf in *The Mysterious Stranger*. From the reader’s point of view the concealment of Tom behind Sid identifies Tom with the conventional culture and reflects Sid’s and its hypocrisy. If the story returned to St. Petersburg and Tom, necessarily, remained Tom, it would be difficult to avoid renewing too much of the atmosphere of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and of the first chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*. In *Tom Sawyer* the atmosphere was not serious, and man could not be seriously examined in it; in *Huckleberry Finn* the same atmosphere was essential for the preliminaries but otherwise irrelevant.

The reunion (or fusion) of Huck and Tom returns Huck
to the world of gratuitous drama that he rejected early in
the book, but which, with his growing experience, he has
been moving slowly back toward, especially in the
Wilks episode. What inevitably happens next is a struggle
for domination between the would-be dramatists, Huck
and Tom, and beyond that, a struggle between anarchistic
selfishness and the vision of ordered decency glimpsed
in chapter 31. It is a struggle that Tom wins easily.
This outcome is thematically a final comment on the
relative strength of good and evil in the world of the novel,
and structurally a preparation for the rest of the ending.
Chapter 34, and chapter 35 to a lesser degree, determine
what will happen in chapters 36–40, the core of the
“evasion” and the part of the ending that has exasperated
readers and critics more than any other. If the reader
accepts Tom’s domination, and the process that leads to it,
he must also accept the antics that Tom initiates, so a
close look at chapters 34 and 35 is advisable.

The glimpse of the King and the Duke tarred and
feathered moves Huck later (when he is writing) to remark,
“Human beings can be awful cruel to one another” (chap.
33), and at the time to brood on the uselessness of
conscience. Huck’s moral insight is admirable, to be sure.
It has provided strong evidence for critics who see
Huck’s moral growth as the novel’s principle of coherence.
But in the given situation—and everything in Huckleberry
Finn exists in terms of given situations—Huck’s admirable
reverie has disastrous consequences for his relations
with Tom and Jim. To attack conscience, even if conscience
is unreasonable, is to attack responsibility; and for
Huck to tamper with his sense of responsibility in the
presence of Tom Sawyer is to lower himself to the level of
that psychopathic personality, for whom all that counts are energy and charisma—"style." And most important, to brood about cruelty and conscience is not to think about other things. For his own sake and Jim's, Huck should be thinking about practical things at this moment of all moments. "We stopped talking and got to thinking." Huck is thinking about abstractions, but Tom is thinking about the practical matter of dominating Huck so that he can control the situation at the Phelps farm. To dominate Huck, Tom at this moment solves a crucial problem, the problem of Jim's location.

This small incident puts Tom ahead of Huck. Tom stays there for good. As he goes along, he maintains and reinforces his advantage any way he can. Huck never catches up, never can catch up. He is beaten at the start. Tom approaches the problem of Jim's location "detective fashion" and presents the solution in terms of a sharp Socratic quizzing of Huck; he is thus able to show up Huck as unfashionable and dense. Huck is overwhelmed: "What a head for just a boy to have! I went to thinking out a plan, but only just to be doing something; I knowed very well where the right plan was going to come from" (chap. 34). When Huck does broach his plan, Tom redoubles his attack. Tom does not bother to point out the plan's obvious weak point, that continuing "down the river on the raft with Jim, hiding daytimes and running nights" would leave the final solution of Jim's problem farther away than ever. No, Tom yields completely on Huck's ground, the ground of conventional practicality, but attacks the plan and Huck on Tom's own ground, the ground of real practicality, the ground of dramatic "style." When Huck objects that nice boys do not steal slaves,
Tom will not argue that point either, and actually turns the situation to his own dramatic advantage by leaving Huck with the awed feeling that Tom has some mysterious quality that transcends the proprieties. “It warn’t no use to say any more; because when he said he’d do a thing, he always done it. If he was bound to have it so, I couldn’t help it.” Tom has raised himself to the awful level of a Colonel Sherburn. Tom clinches the matter by abasing Huck, forcing him to give carte blanche in meek reply to a harsh, repeated question:

“Don’t you reckon I know what I’m about? Don’t I generly know what I’m about?”
“Yes.”

Tom has now shifted the basis of the rescue from Jim’s simple need for freedom, into Tom’s world, the world of gratuitous drama. Now Huck is reduced to ineffectual squawking, which Tom defeats with derision rather than argument; now the crazy logic of Tom’s world shapes Huck’s few “practical” ideas, like the suggestion that Tom should walk up the stairs and pretend they are a lightning rod. Huck’s defeat is not the result of “his humility toward his own prowess” as a storyteller, as Richard Poirier puts it in A World Elsewhere; it is the result of his lack of prowess as a gratuitous dramatist, an occupation that involves much more than Huck’s ability to tell stories in self-defense, that is, to create survival dramas.

Tom continues to control the situation and Huck, largely because he never lets up and Huck does. It is too easy to laugh comfortably with Huck at Tom’s absurdities.
Huck misses the point when he condemns as "romantical" Tom's determination to climb the lightning rod. Tom makes it on the fourth try, thereby showing that he has the very important (and very Victorian) virtue of "sand," a virtue that Huck admired in Mary Jane Wilks. Tom's domination is clinched by his control of a crisis the morning after the lightning rod incident. When the boys enter Jim's cabin with Nat, the Phelps's slave, Jim cries out with joy. "I didn't know nothing to do," Huck admits. But Tom coolly pretends that it was witches who spoke and even finds a moment to whisper to Jim. Later Tom similarly turns to advantage a potential crisis, "the hounds bulging in" under Jim's bed (chap. 36).

The wrangle about "the authorities" in chapter 35 also helps Tom to dominate. No obvious "practical" point is involved in these arguments, but Tom's stream of pedantries serves to upset and amaze Huck, and for Tom that is a practical effect. The tactic that worked with the boys in the cave works well again. In both cases domination of the situation is the aim, and domination is achieved. Huck cannot argue about the "authorities" on literary grounds, because he knows nothing about them, as Tom realizes. Neither does Huck, with his easygoing temperament, like this kind of jangling argument. Tom knows that very well, so he goes on and on with it. By citing irrelevant "authorities," ad nauseam, and by forcing Huck to listen to such nonsense and wrangle fruitlessly about it, Tom again demonstrates and solidifies his power. Were Huck learned in books and really skilled in dialectic (his earlier triumphs over Jim do not count), Tom would adopt another tactic. The means are secondary to the end, domination and its inexhaustible satisfactions.
There is another important benefit of all this for Tom. Huck is made more and more willing to *do* anything that Tom wants to do or wants him to do; any action is a relief from talking and from Tom's relentless verbal pressure. "You're always a-wandering off on a side issue," says Tom, with *Alice in Wonderland* logic. "Why can't you stick to the main point?" And Huck is reduced to saying, "All right, I don't care where he comes out, so he *comes* out; and Jim don't either, I reckon" (chap. 35). As Huck's comment shows, the feelings of Jim do not matter at all by this time. Tom has won. His drama casts Jim as a prop (the right role for a culturally defined nonhuman to play). In the most vivid way these sequences in the early parts of the evasion provide "prudential knowledge" of the tactics of power politics.

IV

Tom's perfect gratuitous drama is now well-established. All that keeps it from lasting thirty-seven or eighty years (Tom's ideal on different occasions) or two years (his grudging compromise) is, Tom thinks, the rate of Uncle Silas's activity in advertising Jim for sale. As Tom fails to realize, however, his drama, like any other, is shaped by its own needs and by the general laws of drama. It cannot be static; it must be active and constantly growing. Tom's domination of Huck is also not a static thing. It requires constant attention from Tom, and an endless round of activities to keep Huck busy. The result is that the evasion expands until it generates its own antithesis, the farmers' posse, the actual moment of counter-pressure being hastened by Uncle Silas's final move to advertise Jim in St. Louis. In this expansion first Nat is involved,
as we have seen; then Aunt Sally and the whole Phelps household are entangled. Tom ignores Uncle Silas, who is so inane that he has no discrimination and cannot properly appreciate drama. Aunt Sally, however, is at the center of things and must be assimilated to the drama. Fortunately she is drama-hungry, as we learn from her rapturous interest in the man who died horribly after a steamboat explosion: “They say he was a sight to look at” (chap. 32). Tom is seldom more masterful than in his operations on this receptive, malleable personality (chap. 37). By degrees, by stealing shirts and sheets and silverware and putting them back and taking them again, he brainwashes Aunt Sally and turns her into his complement, a maniac who accepts anything, no matter how anomalous.

“So we was all right now,” says Huck (chap. 37), realizing the possibilities of the situation and identifying himself with Tom, as he identified himself with the King and the Duke in their great days. Tom is so careful with Huck that Huck is largely content. When the case-knives are seen to be inadequate, Tom shrewdly yields a minor point and uses picks rather than risk a real rebellion, but maintains his control over Huck by forcing him not only to accept the pretense that picks are case-knives but to take part in creating the pretense. Tom asks for a case-knife; Huck hands him one; Tom drops it and repeats, “Gimme a case-knife” (chap. 36); Huck takes thought and hands Tom a pickax. Huck is left not just beaten but admiring: “He was always just that particular. Full of principle.” A few hours later, Huck, now fully Tom’s creature, volunteers the idea of letting the stairs stand for the lightning rod.
By this quick-wittedness and activity Tom keeps Huck well in line. After Tom handles the crisis of Nat and the hounds, Huck says with relief and satisfaction, "That was all fixed" (chap. 37). The sequence that follows—the preparation for the witch-pie—and some of the other activities—making the pie, "smouching" the grindstone—are described in a style distressingly reminiscent of the style used for Huck's great drama of survival, his escape from Pap's cabin: "We fixed it up away down in the woods, and cooked it there; and we got it done at last, and very satisfactory, too; but not all in one day; and we had to use up three washpans full of flour before we got through, and we got burnt pretty much all over, in places, and eyes put out with the smoke" (chap. 37); and, "So he raised up his bed and slid the chain off of the bed-leg, and wrapt it round and round his neck, and we crawled out through our hole and down there, and Jim and me laid into that grindstone and walked her along like nothing; and Tom superintended" (chap. 38).

Tom may well superintend. He has succeeded in releasing Huck's drive to participate with others in activity—the basic human drive that creates man's world. Though many times frustrated by bullies and bunglers like Miss Watson and the King, Huck retains this basic instinct, lets it out a bit in the Wilks episode, and finds a perfect outlet for it in Tom's schemes.

Tom's control and the elegant balance he has created are soon lost as the need for dramatic activity drives him on and drives Huck to follow. Tom bullies Jim, devises more and more fantastic schemes, and at last gives Huck little to do, thus ensuring the eventual onset of boredom. It is at about chapter 38 that the whole affair becomes
too much for the characters and for patient readers, even though it is still all quite logical in terms of the laws of drama. The foolishness of the boys is now largely verbal; the activities are simply more and more fantastic variations on the same dramatic concept of the model prisoner. The affair has become cancerous, out of control, because of the insatiable demands of drama. Tom is in much the same situation as the King and the Duke when they pass the zenith of the Nonesuch. None of this is apparent to the three inside the drama. When Tom calls Jim "a prisoner of style" (chap. 39), he has no idea that the phrase applies ironically to himself and to Huck as well as to Jim. When Jim stubbornly refuses to keep rattlesnakes (chap. 38), Tom suffers one of his few defeats; but neither Huck nor Jim refers to the snake motif that has run through the novel, and Tom has no way of knowing about it. The escape of the garter snakes (chap. 39), the last defeat by snakes, suggests the maddeningly evasive nature of reality, which even Tom cannot control in the long run, but no one sees the ominous portent. Huck simply remarks, "I minded the trouble we had, to lay in another lot" (chap. 39). As in his early adventures with the King and the Duke, Huck has been swept into uncritical identification with the excitement.

All of the trouble is meaningless and irrelevant on the practical level, not that that means anything to Huck now or to Tom at any time. The drama that is "real," in terms of the culture, is going on in the mind and actions of that apparent bumbler, Uncle Silas, as he advertises for Jim's owner and reacts silently to the lack of replies. The relative value of the boys' and Uncle Silas's dramas is seen when the old man says quietly that he will advertise in
the St. Louis papers and Huck reacts violently: “I see we hadn’t no time to lose” (chap. 39).

Stimulated by this external catalyst, Tom’s drama, which has been growing at a slowly increasing rate, now follows the pattern of the Grangerford and Wilks episodes. It fulfills its potential with a speed and violence that seem impossible until one realizes that this chain of events is following established laws. Some of the materials even have precedents within the novel: dressing Jim up like a girl recalls the Loftus incident (Jim’s idea and also a failure); the “nonnamous letters” parallel the notes sent by Huck to Mary Jane Wilks or the note from Harney Shepherdson carried by Huck to Sophia Grangerford. The exponential increases in size and intensity have their reasons and parallels too. The Grangerfords measure the success of the feud in terms of the number killed (“right smart chance of funerals,” says Buck); the Wilkses’ neighbors see excitement as a function of the size and noise of the crowd, and reject the real Wilks heirs for promising to reduce both and return everyone to unbearable tranquility. When Huck asks Tom why he must write the letters, Tom says, “If we don’t give them notice, there won’t be nobody nor nothing to interfere with us, and so after all our hard work and trouble this escape’ll go off perfectly flat: won’t amount to nothing—won’t be nothing to it” (chap. 39).

Tom’s idea of “giving notice,” the sending of the “nonnamous” letters, parallels Harney Shepherdson’s sending of the anonymous note “Half past two” (chap. 18), or Harvey Wilks’s asking about the mark on Peter Wilks’s chest. In each case a small stimulus releases enormous latent cultural forces waiting for the dramatic
vehicle that will produce an apocalypse. Harney’s three words lead to a massacre, the logical end of the feud; Harvey’s suggestion allows the mob to take control and move rapidly toward the supreme southern dramatic climax, the lynching of everybody. Tom’s letter provokes a response that he cannot anticipate because he has never encountered it and because he is too deep within his culture to imagine it. His mysterious allusion “Trouble is brewing” and his specific statement “There is a desperate gang of cutthroats from over in the Ingean Territory going to steal your runaway nigger tonight” touch off a panic connected obviously with the Deep South’s paranoid fear of slave insurrections. Tom’s instructions in the second letter call for no more than one or two people to lock the cutthroats in Jim’s cabin, but “fifteen farmers, and every one of them had a gun” (chap. 40) are what Huck encounters when he goes into Aunt Sally’s sitting room the night of the evasion.

Huck realizes Tom’s error at once: “I did wish Aunt Sally would come, and let me get away and tell Tom how we’d overdone this thing, and what a thundering hornet’s nest we’d got ourselves into, so we could stop fooling around straight off, and clear out with Jim before these rips got out of patience and come for us” (chap. 40). Huck fails, however, to recall a further law of drama, that only accident can keep it from its logical climax. No male Grangerford escaped the slaughter. Huck escaped the Wilks debacle thanks only to a sudden crisis and bad weather. Only a few scraps of luck save the boys here: it is dark, the hysterical farmers shoot badly and make too much noise, and the Phelps dogs do not bother their friends the boys. The bullet in Tom’s calf
is in a sense a gesture from the fates that rule drama, a cuff from the mother cat telling the kitten to watch its step. Tom, caught up in the hysteria, cannot grasp the meaning of the wound, but Huck expresses the idea well when he tells the doctor, “He had a dream and it shot him” (chap. 41). “Singular dream,” says the doctor, aptly, for Tom’s dream was the dream of the perfect drama, one that would end in perfect success rather than collapse and bloodshed. Twain does not face the issue as squarely here as he does a few years later in *A Connecticut Yankee*, where Sir Boss’s colossal dream-drama, the remaking of medieval England into his version of modern America, ends in a chaos of bullets and blood.

*Huckleberry Finn* does, though, have a splendid absurd final gesture of its own—Jim’s surrender, in which he becomes a “white man,” a southern man of honor, a veritable Grangerford. It is Jim’s one chance to play a public role beyond the necessities of survival drama (in which he did well as a recaptured runaway and a “sick Arab”). He does it splendidly. And Jim’s action, as the reader can see even if Huck cannot, is also a dramatic and existential triumph over the demands of his situation. He knows the fate of the escaped, hunted slave in the Deep South, and he chooses, in effect, to die in “style” and in his own way, rather than messily and undramatically.

V

Since no one can remain on a high level for more than a short time, Jim, in the last chapter, falls back into the mass of humanity. Driven by the common human yearning for aesthetic completeness, he accepts Tom’s forty dollars as proof of his prediction that he will be rich
because he has “hairy arms en a hairy breas’” (chap. 8). The rest of the final pages find Twain likewise falling back on tradition, the literary tradition of the *deus ex machina*, to clear up the remaining loose ends so that he may expeditiously reach what interests him, the last paragraph of the book. This rapid forward thrust involves Twain in some clumsiness, most of all the handling of the brief disclosure that Miss Watson freed Jim in her will. The disclosure itself is absolutely necessary, in order to put Tom’s behavior during the evasion into the class of pure gratuitous drama, and to destroy any lingering sense of moral authority; the point is, moreover, in character for Miss Watson, as a dramatic gesture (see above, pp. 129-30). Though Twain does allow Tom to make the announcement of Jim’s freedom into a little performance in itself, and has Tom define gratuitous drama (“I wanted the *adventure* of it”) in reply to Aunt Sally’s obvious question, he hurries over the episode as he hurries over the straightening-out of identities and the announcement of Pap’s death. It is all just a necessary bother to him.

Twain’s real goal is to set up the ending in terms of the impression of its structure. He manages to make “The End” a triple end. It is “The End” of Huck’s writing, as the first edition shows, with its picture of a very boyish Huck doffing his straw hat above the caption “THE END. YOURS TRULY, HUCK FINN.” This is the writer’s conclusion, underlining his statement in the last paragraph, “So there ain’t nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I’d a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn’t a tackled it, and ain’t agoing to no more” (Chapter the Last). These are the phrases that remind us that the novel is Huck’s
own lyric cry, his struggle to say something about existence as he knows it. By saying "a book" he reminds us of what we have just seen and of its existence as a solid, successful gesture, similar in kind to "the adventure" for which Tom strives so hard, but enormously greater in degree. Huck may well stop writing; he has proved himself superior, in the last analysis, to Tom Sawyer, and after that what is there left to do?

If we move back from Huck the writer to Huck the character, we find him equally conscious of "a book," that is, of taking an overview of his experiences of the past year. We arrive with him at the final sentence, "I been there before," given as the reason why he must "light out for the territory ahead of the rest." The four words, "I been there before," have the whole weight of the book behind them. "There" is the world created by, and contained in, the book. With our experience of that world we can accept the brief, unsupported statement. Huck had to persist with his labor and "trouble" so that he could write those four words and make us accept them.

Thus in one sense the novel comes to a satisfying formal conclusion because the aim of the novel, the projection of Huck's reality, has been achieved. This is not exactly the same as saying, as some critics do, that the novel reveals Huck's "growth," or did reveal it up to the clownish final episode. In terms of "growth" the last chapter is dismal. It shows that though Huck may reject "civilization," a certain set of patterns that put pressure on him without rewards in return, he nevertheless accepts both the general qualities of culture, the human way as he knows it, and certain patterns for realizing cultural values. The whole chapter, except for the paragraphs on the
death of Pap, is about drama; it opens with Tom’s plans for taking Jim back to St. Petersburg in style, continues with the Phelpses’ stylish treatment of Jim and his gloating over the fulfillment of his predictions of wealth, and goes on to Tom’s plan for “howling adventures amongst the Injuns.” Huck accepts Tom’s proposal (“all right, that suits me”) and the whole sequence; there is much more accepting than rejecting of Tom in the chapter. As for any improvement in Huck, there is no evidence of it. His only objection to Tom’s scheme is that he does not have enough money to go along with Tom. When Huck learns that he is still rich because Pap is dead, he makes no comment at all—the question of money is closed, and he has no feeling, no gladness or sorrow or relief, about Pap’s death. At the beginning of the novel Huck has a flat, practical, anaesthetic temperament; at the end he still does. “The territory” is not a place; it is a huge blank by definition, being off-limits to whites in Huck’s time and in the 1880s. “The territory” promises nothing except potentialities and absence of form, plus trouble. Huck remains what he was in chapter 1, an ordinary situational man, with no positive desires. His restlessness here repeats his restlessness at the end of chapter 1. In his day-to-day life he remains doomed to be pushed around by the Tom Sawyers, those who have strong drives, who want to organize life dramatically and need material and accomplices.

At the same time Huck triumphs over Tom and the rest of the mad dramatists. They can use him, but he can describe them. Their dramas are temporary, and are carved out of the uncontrollable medium of reality; Huck’s dramas are permanent, and are carved out of the difficult
but rewarding medium of language. When Huck says he “ain’t going to [write books] no more,” he is perfectly sincere; but he lives in a turbulent situational world, and given sufficient need—the kind that he feels at the Phelps after the evasion—he may “tackle it” once again. Art is always available, as it was for Twain in the crises of his own life.

When Jim says that he will be rich because he has “hairy arms en a hairy breas’,” he goes on to explain why he must believe that: “You see, maybe you’s got to be po’ a long time fust, en so you might git discourage’ en kill yo’sef ’f you didn’ know by de sign dat you gwyne to be rich bymeby” (chap. 8). Huck’s book is his “sign.” It is the sign that he has the means to be “rich” in the way that counts in his world and counted for Twain—not, that is, in terms of money, which Huck had at the beginning of the story and which gave him no psychological benefits, no real “profit,” but in terms of the security that comes from ordering the turbulence of reality and from the demonstrated knowledge that one can order it. In this security, rather than in Tom’s frantic and ultimately useless scrambling, lies what power a man can have. That is why Huck can relax at the end and let Tom do the planning and worrying. There may be, as Fitzgerald said, no second acts in American lives, and Twain himself in later years had to worry about the loss of his artistic potency; but Huck, as a timeless projection of that potency, has no anxieties about himself and the future that cannot be handled in some satisfactory way.
1. *Mark Twain at Work*, pp. 91, 89.
6. Ibid., p. 28.
7. Ibid., pp. 164, 56, 19.
15. E.g., *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer*, pp. 114, 122ff.; Marx, "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and *Huckleberry Finn.*"