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Huckleberry Finn (9/1/2014)

Here is another of those bogus ranking questions, derivative of a pseudoproblem that used to be commonplace — i.e., how to write the Great American Novel. Because the great American novels were written long ago, and they are two: *Moby Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Of course neither can be compared to the other, and it is pointless to argue which is better.

But there was only one way to conclude *Moby Dick*, and there is no obvious way to conclude *Huckleberry Finn*. Thus the way Twain went about it is often felt to have been a mistake, some kind of failure. — Eliot argued the contrary,¹ but unconvincingly; it reads as though his love for the story clouded his judgment.

And what is the problem? It is the problem of trying to turn a romance into a novel. *Huckleberry Finn* is a romance of the River, and the River, properly, should go on forever.² — Or if it ends, it must end in the Sea, which can only represent (Tennyson on Ulysses) a kind of ellipsis.

If (as MacLane would say)³ you reverse all arrows, as in Conrad and/or *Apocalypse Now*, you work backward to an origin, and can invent some conclusion out of Frazer to put a period to the quest; but taken in the other direction, there can be no conclusion.

Accordingly the way Twain chose to wrap things up looks artificial; it is as if he took the whole of what preceded as a kind of first act, and

¹ Cf. his essay in the Norton critical edition. Eliot was born in St. Louis and grew up beside the river; understandably he loved Twain and was willing to defend him to the death.

² By which I mean, how could there have been a final episode of *Route 66*? I assume there was one, but it had to have been a kind of contradiction in terms.

³ See his definition of categorical duality.

conjured up a threshold guardian to prevent any further progress. — Though really the separation of Huck and Jim is typical of the fourth act of every Road Movie that followed it. — Still, what happens thereafter is supposed to tie it all up in a tidy package. So what can he do?

What inhibits the progress of the voyage of discovery — the endless progress down the River — the tale of nomadic escape — the escape from civilization, literally, an escape from slavery — are the limits of the imagination: here that of Tom Sawyer, but more generally of the Old South, of the civilization which Twain has been describing. The River ends in the Gulf, at the boundary of the continent; but this is also the boundary of the people and their form of life. Jim is imprisoned, according to the laws of this society; Tom is also imprisoned, by the constrained forms of his imagination, which is profligate, but programmed by the conventions of romance (Walter Scott) — a shout-out to *Quixote* here, for sure. So there is this weird cosplay taking place, Tom trying all manner of ridiculous schemes to free the captive; which all end abruptly, *Deus ex machina*, when it is revealed that Jim is a free man — crushing irony here, as if he hadn't really been all along — and there is an overriding sense — the truth of the satirist, the ironist — that the natural evolution of the story, to follow the River to the Gulf, and to the great Ocean of Truth that lies beyond it — has been confounded and cut off by the stupidity, the brutality, the boneheadedness of the culture through which they have been passing and in which they are now finally trapped and from which they cannot escape.

Perhaps this is realism: they reach the limits of their language, the limits of their world — the end of the Mississippi, the Gulf, the Sea, the period to the presuppositions of the Quest — and what can happen then? This is a question that has no answer. Twain understood that perfectly, and in a grand gesture of ironic detachment turned the

whole thing into a Road Runner cartoon.⁴ — Because what lies at the end of the world? at least at the end of *this* world, the world of the antebellum South? — Well, why not farce. It deserves no better.

The perfection of the postscript is thus underscored: Huck *will* light out for the Territory, sooner or later; his adventures will continue. But that will be another story: in another time, another place, another world.

⁴ There is, actually, a parallel with the conclusion Mel Brooks drew to *Blazing Saddles*: a complete lapse into slapstick surrealism. Because after all what else could have followed what came before it.