"I am never serious [said K.], and therefore I have to make jokes do duty for both jest and earnest. But I was arrested in earnest."

--Franz Kafka, deleted fragment from The Trial

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is funny. That's one of the few points of consensus, amidst all controversies over its meaning. But what's funny about the book? We may ask (as many critics have) if we should laugh at certain jokes, but that's a different, prescriptive order of inquiry. Whether we should or shouldn't, the fact is we cannot help but laugh at Huck's adventures, and the question is why. A simple question, and it warrants a simple answer. What's funny about Huckleberry Finn is that it's a humorous story. But then again, what's humorous? Here's the way Twain himself defined the term, in a late essay entitled "How to Tell a Story":

The humorous story is American, the comic story is English.... The humorous story bubbles gently along, the other bursts.

The humorous story is strictly a work of art--high and delicate art--and only an artist can tell it; but no art is necessary in telling the comic ... story; anybody can do it.

The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it; but the teller of the comic story tells you beforehand that it is one of the funniest things he has ever heard, then tells it with an eager delight, and is the first person to laugh when he gets through.

Very often ... [the] humorous story finishes with a nub, point, snapper, or whatever you like to call it. Then the listener must be alert, for in many cases the teller will divert attention from the nub by dropping it in a carefully casual and indifferent way, with the pretense that he does not know it is a nub. (1)

My essay is about the nubs or snappers in Huckleberry Finn, and more broadly about a distinctive and (according to Twain) a uniquely American mode of being funny. My focus, that is, is not on humor in general--not on theories of humor, from Aristotle through Northrop Frye--but on a mode of humor which Twain developed over the course of his career and perfected in his greatest work. My concerns are historical and critical: the practice of "the humorous story" as Twain conceived it (in contrast to the "comic story"), within the particular context of late-nineteenth-century America.

So considered, Twain's concept of humor refers above all to what we have come to call deadpan, an "origin[al] US slang" term (2) that covers a wide range of American folklore, from Yankee Peddler to riverboat Confidence-Man and the Western tall tale. There are differences of course between these forms--deadpan, the con game, and the tall tale--but within the tradition of American humor I just spoke of, all three types are fundamentally related. The basic formula is standard throughout. The story is told "gravely," as Twain says; the teller is
straightfaced--he recounts in earnest detail how Davy Crockett at age eight killed the biggest bear in Arkansas (a tall tale) or how you can get the Brooklyn Bridge dirt-cheap (a con job)--and what's funny is the listener who believes.

Of the three forms, the tall tale is the most cheerful: its exaggerations express and celebrate the values of the social group. The con game is relatively serious, sometimes dangerous: it evokes shared values in order to prey on the social group. But here too the rules of the game express a shared community. As in satire, the con game presupposes that those rules are normative, universal.

Deadpan is the loosest and most malleable of these forms. It denies all claims of the normative, and so refuses to indicate how the listener is supposed to receive the story (except as funny in some way). No signals are given--no winks or smiles, as in the tall tale; no changes of attitude, bearing, or expression, as (for example) in Melville's Confidence-Man. In deadpan, all clues are repressed, strategically concealed in the flow of humor. Thus the narrative centers on the listening or reading audience rather than on the gull in the tale. Or more accurately, we are the gulls in the tale; the larger text, so to speak, includes its reader or listeners as the suckers. Our interpretation becomes the subject of the story, and, so construed, the flexibility of deadpan allows it to go one crucial step further than the tall tale or con game. The humorist's exaggeration and satire (incorporated from the tall tale and the con game) may issue in a savage mockery of belief itself, a form of nihilism whose nubs stretch laughter at social norms and ideals beyond the breaking point.

The term "deadpan" was the last of the three branches of indigenous humor I've described to be officially labeled. Although we know that it had long before been current as slang, its first recorded appearance comes in the November 1927 issue of Vanity Fair, where it is defined by analogy to a card-shark who is "holding four aces and you wouldn't suspect it," and as late as March 1957, the English Sunday Times found it necessary to explain that "what is known [in the USA] as `dead pan' humor [requires a] ... facial expression [which] gives no warning of the thrust to come." (3) For reasons I suggest later, it is a remarkable coincidence that, in the mainstream American literary tradition, the first official entry of deadpan (in its full threatening implication of the "thrust to come") appears in Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts (1933), in a chapter entitled "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Dead Pan," where, as we shall see, the pun--"pan" as "face" and as the joking, death-threatening Greek god--is entirely appropriate to the method of Huckleberry Finn.

In relation to Mark Twain, then, deadpan is a definition from hindsight. I highlight it nonetheless as an illuminating perspective on forms of the past. I would call it historicist hindsight, an exemplary case where the contemporary view, far from being anachronistic, was and remains part and parcel of its subject--more so, I daresay, than the terms then in vogue. As a rule, such terms are descriptive; the view from hindsight is analytical. It helps illuminate what we now recognize as important cultural continuities. Thus what I mean by deadpan is an analytic category that is neither abstract, universalist, nor comprehensive, but, on the contrary, culturally conditioned, socially grounded, and aesthetically specific. It emerges out of the history of the genre or mode it represents, as being inherent in the origins and evolution of that genre or mode. It offers a temporal, non-transcendent vantage point from which to explore the creative forms at issue: in this case, the fluid, volatile qualities of a certain kind of humor which was dominant in Twain's time--which, indeed, bridged all areas of nineteenth-century America, East and West, North and South, rural and urban, and all periods, from the Federalist and Jacksonian through the Gilded Age, from Timothy Dwight to Artemus Ward, George Washington Harris, James Kirk Paulding, and Owen Wister--and which has persisted ever since, on every, level of culture, from literary classics to stand-up comics (or as Twain would have it, stand-up humorists).

Tall tale, con game, deadpan: in all three cases, the humor that Twain inherited reflects the particular conditions of the southwestern frontier. These are well known but worth rehearsing, since they help explain the distinctive connections within the deadpan mode between the tall tale and the con game. Consider first Henry Wonham's description of the turbulent context of the tall tale:
Tall [Tale] Humor is American not because it is incongruous--all humor is that--but because it articulates incongruities that are embedded in the American experience. A country founded, settled, and closely observed by men and women with extraordinary expectations, both exalted and depraved, could not help but appreciate the distance that separated the ideal from the real, the 'language of culture' from the 'language of sweat,' the democratic dream from the social and economic reality of the early American republic. (4)

The social group, then, which the tall tale expresses and celebrates, is characterized by instability, defined by extreme alternations between exaltation and despair. Its rampant incongruities, its raw discrepancies between real and ideal, make it a con-man's paradise. Recently, Hilton Obenzinger has amplified Wonham's description in a way that extends this link between con man and tall tale and clarifies the relation of both to the deadpan mode. Following Wonham, he points out that the "gap" between culture and sweat found in frontier experiences--which characteristically included Indian wars, slave-dealing, herrenvolk white racial solidarity, endemic violence, economic instability, fluidity, humbuggery, and speculative fantasy--cultivated a vernacular humor of extremes, along with pleasure in horror and depravity....

Tall [tale] humor was a form of initiation and survival in response to radical physical and social uncertainties on the edge of settler-colonial expansion. This humor thrived at the borderland of displacement, migration, and violence, finding much of its pleasure in dethroning the condescension of gentility at the thickly settled Eastern core, while at the same time reproducing the radical incongruities and discrepancies at the root of all American experience. (5)

These are the social and psychological uncertainties of a new capitalist nation in the process of emergence. It makes for a world of physical turbulence and shifting identities where one way of being funny slides naturally into another.

A handy way to see the different kinds of fun involved in this process is through what (according to the OED and the American Heritage Dictionary) are the three basic meanings of the word: (1) Funny as in "just plain fun"--the childlike humor we designate as "kidding around," a humor commensurate with the traditional tall tale, "designed to amuse." (2) Funny in its antiquated meaning of "befool," as in "tricky or deceitful"--a satiric form of humor that plays upon social norms, and thus relates closely to the confidence game. (3) Funny as in "strangely or suspiciously odd, curious," the chilling sense of some sinister hidden meaning, as when we say there's "something funny" about that con man; he might be a killer. This sinister humor, which characterizes a certain form of deadpan, and which is latent in all deadpan modes, tends towards "horror and depravity." In our post-frontier times (the era of Beavis and Butt-Head and Pulp Fiction) it's the pleasure we take in sick jokes and the absurd.

Usually humorists specialize in one way or another of being funny--let us call them cheerful, satirical, and sinister. But as we've seen, these modes slip readily into one another; and American deadpan reaches its highest pitch, the finest turn of its "high and delicate art," when the joke reverberates with all three layers of fun, from (laughingly) "that's funny" to (suspiciously) "that's funny."

Mark Twain's humor is deadpan at its best, and Huckleberry Finn is his funniest book, in all three senses of the term. Accordingly, in what follows I use the terms tall tale, con man, and deadpan reciprocally, fluidly, on the grounds that Twain's deadpan--the third, sinister, "odd or curious" sense of funny--incorporates (without submerging, indeed while deliberately drawing out) the other two forms of humor.

His method involves a drastic turnabout in deadpan effect. In order to enlist the tall tale and con game in the service of deadpan, Twain actually reverses conventional techniques. That is to say, the novel overturns the very tradition of deadpan that it builds upon. As a rule, that tradition belongs to the narrator. Huck has often been said
to speak deadpan-style; but the funny thing is, he is not a humorist, not even when he's putting someone on (as he does Aunt Sally, when he pretends to be Tom Sawyer). In fact, he rarely has fun; he's usually "in a sweat" (6); and on the rare occasion when he does try to kid around (as when he tells Jim they were not separated in the fog) the joke turns back on itself to humiliate him. Huck's voice may be described as pseudo-deadpan; it sounds comic, but actually it's troubled, earnest. The real deadpan artist is Mark Twain of course, and what's remarkable, what makes for the inversion I just spoke of, is that this con man is not straight-faced (as Huck is), but smiling. To recall Twain's distinction between the English comic story and the American humorous story, the author is wearing the Mask of Comedy. He hides his humor, we might say, behind a comic facade. The humor, a vehicle of deceit, is directed against the audience. The tale itself, however, is constantly entertaining, often musing, sometimes hilarious; apparently the storyteller is having a wonderful time, laughing through it all--and actually so are we.

So here's the odd or curious setup of Huckleberry Finn: the deadpan artist is Mark Twain, wearing the Comic Mask, doing his best to conceal the fact that he suspects that there's anything grave, let alone sinister, about his story, and he succeeds famously. Then, as we laugh, or after we've laughed, we may realize, if we're alert, that there's something we've overlooked. We haven't seen what's funny about the fact that we've found it funny. This artist has gullied us. He has diverted our attention away from the real point, and we have to go back over his story in order to recognize its nub.

The nature of re-cognition in this sense (understanding something all over again, doing a double take) may be simply illustrated. Consider a culture like the late nineteenth-century Southwest, which was both racist and egalitarian. The minstrel show was a genre born out of precisely that contradiction. So imagine a deadpan minstrel act that goes like this. The audience hears a funny story about a stereotype "darkie" and they smile and laugh along. The nub of course is that they are being laughed at: they've been taken in and made the butt of a joke. Once they see that, if they do, they understand what's truly funny about the story, and they're free to laugh at themselves for having laughed in the first place. That freedom may be compared to the shock of the funny bone. It's a complex sensation, engaging all three meanings of funny, not unlike the odd tingling, vibration you feel when you're hit on the funny bone. A light touch might mean no more than a bit of healthy fun--say, the wake-up call of the tall tale (the joke reminds you of your egalitarian principles). A sharp touch might be unnerving--a satire directed against the system at large (you recognize that this self-proclaimed egalitarian society is fundamentally racist). A direct and vicious cut would be painful, a sensation of violence, as in the sinister sense of "funny" (you realize that egalitarianism itself is a joke and that you're a sucker for having believed in it).

Twain's humor, to repeat, spans all three forms. Huckleberry Finn is the apotheosis of American deadpan, a masterfully coordinated synthesis of all three layers of the meaning of funny, with the emphasis on the sinister. It is worth remarking that the novel is unique in this regard. Twain achieved this feat only once. His earlier works are rarely sinister, not even when they're brimful of violence, as in Roughing It (1872), or for that matter Tom Sawyer (1876). His later works are rarely funny, not even when they're brimful of jokes, as in Pudd'nhead Wilson (1892) or the tales of terror collected posthumously as The Great Dark. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is Twain's great synthetic work, incorporating every stage of his development as "America's Humorist," from the unalloyed cheer of "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" through the fierce satire of The Gilded Age to the David Lynch- (or Robert Crum-)like world of "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg." Twain's mode of coordination in Huckleberry Finn, the dialectic behind his fantastic synthesis, is a drastic reversal of effect: the deadpan artist with the Comic Mask. And the procession of nubs or snappers he delivers constitutes the most severe shocks in our literature to the American funny bone.

The first shock is that the novel is funny at all. The slave hunt serves as both metaphor and metonymy for the world it portrays: Huckleberry Finn describes a slave hunt undertaken literally, collectively, by a society which is itself enslaved--a culture in bondage to all the Seven Deadly Sins (in addition to the sin of chattel slavery), and accordingly characterized by violence, mean-spiritedness, ignorance, and deceit. A fair example is Pikesville, a
shanty town somewhere along the river:

All the streets and lanes was just mud; they warnt nothing else but mud--mud as black as tar and nigh about a foot deep in some places, and two or three inches deep in all the places. The hogs loafed and grunted around, everywheres. You’d see a muddy sow and a litter of pigs come lazing along the street and whollop herself right down in the way, where folks had to walk around her, and she’d stretch out, and shut her eyes, and wave her ears, whilst the pigs was milking her, and look as happy as if she was on salary. And pretty soon you’d hear a loafer sing out, "Hi! so boy! sick him, Tige!" and away the sow would go, squealing most horrible, with a dog or two swinging to each ear, and three or four dozen more a-coming; and then you would see all the loafers get up and watch the thing out of sight, and laugh at the fun and look grateful for the noise. Then they’d settle back again till there was a dog-fight. There couldn’t anything wake them up all over, and make them happy all over, like a dog-fight--unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him turn himself to death. (183)

Readers of the novel remember Pikesville not for that bit of "fun" (though that's the town's main source of laughter), but for the Shakespearean soliloquy delivered there by the Duke and the King:

To be or not to be; that is the bare bodkin That makes calamity of so long life ... 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. (179)

That's what we laugh at, as we should. Consider, however, that image of a sow on the run, "squealing most horrible," of a dog running himself to death. And now think of the nub concealed within the Shakespearean parody: the Duke and King are debased men, the townspeople are debased, and debasement in both cases is a metonym for the slave trade. The stray dog is Jim on the run, or it's Huck hounded by civilization. The animal kingdom is paraded before us as in a deadpan Eden: pigs, dogs, and people mingling contentedly in mud, and the joke lies in the calamity we humans make of "so long life." Clearly, this is the world of what scholars have termed the Late Dark Twain: the world of The Damned Human Race, The Great Dark, and the satanic Letters from the Earth, where man, the lowest of all animals, is "first and last and all the time ... a sarcasm" (7) --a world of Calvinism without God.

Question: What's funny about Huckleberry Finn? Answer: the con-man teller of this tall tale has persuaded us that he's a Comic Writer. I mean to explore his method of persuasion through three typical jokes, each of them marking a crucial connective, a major unifying link, in the narrative. The first joke is Twain's first: his opening "Notice" to readers:

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.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR, Per G. G., Chief of Ordnance (xxv)

This is a kind of quick preview of the main characters in the story. It introduces the reader to the text and connects Mark Twain ("THE AUTHOR") with Huck Finn, who has authored "this narrative." The deadpan connective, "G. G.," who orders the Notice, links all the above (narrative, reader, author, and protagonist), and the Notice itself is a directive concerning interpretation. Overtly, to be sure, it's a directive against interpretation, but (we must never forget) it's a deadpan directive, which therefore requires interpretation. For obviously the Notice is a form of kidding around, a tall tale of sorts; and then, too, there's a satirical edge to it, a con-man's laughter directed against pompous authority. And then again, there's the violence within the subversive tone--think of the penalties for trespassing (prosecution, banishment, death), and the deadly pun that reinforces them: "ordnance" is not just a colloquial misspelling; technically, it means "cannon or artillery." A "Chief of Ordnance" in this case is a military officer ready to blow you to bits. And to do so, be it noted, for the least of interpretive offenses: not for seeking motive or moral, but just for finding a plot.
All this makes for an especially funny predicament. We're not allowed to interpret (not even on the most elemental level), but the story Huck tells demands interpretation, demands it unrelentingly and all the time. We can't get any of its jokes without figuring out motive and plot, and we can't possibly do that without assuming a moral position. Take even the simplest joke: say, the story that Huck tells Jim about Solomon and the disputed child. No reader has failed to laugh cheerfully at the incident and no careful reader can fail to notice that it points satirically to key themes of the novel: the cultural connectives between fatherhood, the Bible, schools, and civil authority. It's perfectly natural, then, for Huck to "slide" from Solomon to kings in general. He tells Jim about European ex-kings who migrate to America and teach French; he then shows off his French ("'S'pose a man was to come to you and say Polly-vo franzy--what would you think?"), and proceeds to explain why people need to have different languages (humans are different from one another, as dogs are different from pigs, pigs from horses, etc.). Jim's famous rejoinder is that all people are alike (all people, universally, are different from dogs, pigs, etc.). If he's a man, says Jim, "Well, den! Dad blame it, why doan he talk like a man?" (97-98)

This has key elements of the tall tale, but basically it's a parody of social pretension: Huck, the master of the colloquial style, is bragging in the language of the elite, as French then was. And in turn the parody is a sick joke about southern history: Jim, the victim of chattel slavery (so-called because slave-society rhetoric built on the comparison between blacks and animals)—Jim, the example of man-reduced-to-beast-of-burden, is articulating the self-evident truths of human equality. How can we not interpret? And our interpretation is prodded, if we need prodding, by Huck's concluding response: "You can't learn a nigger to argue. So I quit" (98). Huck doesn't see the fun in all this; he's simply frustrated. We do see the fun because we know we're hearing a comic tale (by Mark Twain, humorist); but in order to take that step we have to interpret. In short, we interpret because Huck doesn't.

I will return to that hermeneutic twist later on. First, let me repeat what's funny about the Notice. Officially, we're prohibited from interpreting on pain of death, but the narrative demands interpretation. So the nub lies in the inversion: far from forbidding interpretation, the Notice is calling attention to it. It's reminding us of our compulsion to look for plot, moral, and motive, and then the narrative itself does the rest of the work: it forces us to interpret. Having recognized that much, we should feel uneasy. There's something funny about this emphasis on interpretation—it's a deadpan artist's emphasis. What's his motive? What's the plot?

To explore the question I turn to my second example, the last joke in the novel. I refer to what is surely Huck's best-known line—his decision to light out for the territory. The long-standing consensus on its meaning is that Huck leaves because he wants to be free. And no doubt he does; but the text itself tells us something else:

... then Tom he talked along and talked along, and says, le's all three slide out of here, one of these nights, and get an outfit, and go for howling adventures amongst the Injuns, over in the Territory, for a couple of weeks or two; and I says, all right, that suits me ...

So Huck decides to light out "ahead of the rest" (362), and the nub is: he's just kidding around. He plans to get an "outfit" and leave for a while ("a couple of weeks or two"), which we interpret as a flight to freedom—and then, if we follow critical tradition, we proceed to allegorize it as the freedom of the spirit. Over the past century that allegory has established itself as a cultural icon: Huck Finn, the rebel hero of the open road.

It's a startling flight of interpretation. Just think of the deadpan connection here between African Americans and Native Americans: Jim dressed up for "howling adventures amongst the Injuns!" This joke is akin to (I'd say, sicker than) that of the Duke and King when they dress Jim up as a "Sick Arab—but harmless when not out of his head" (203). Huck reports that they used "King Lear's outfit" for the occasion, and, since Jim-in-disguise is a recurrent theme (from the Bewitched World Traveler in the first section to the Romantic Prisoner in the last), it may not be too much to see a link between Shakespeare's outcast king howling on the heath and Jim "howling ... amongst the Injuns." In any case, Twain's deadpan play in the novel's final scene (tall tale and confidence game combined) should alert us to the intricate narrative pattern he has developed. Huck is about to light out from the
Phelpses for the Territory: this liminal moment joins two crucial dimensions of Huck's culture, and ours. First, the dimension of space: the "settlements," as defined emphatically by the N-word, are being linked to the Territory, as defined explicitly by the I-word, Injun territory. Then, there's the dimension of time: "Injun" is a clue to the cultural connections implicit in the novel's double time frame. The fictional time, the period of Huck's adventures, is the antebellum South, the slavery era. The authorial time, the decade in which Twain wrote the book, was the era of Indian-killing. What joins both time frames is nothing less than the most sinister line of continuity in American history, from slavery to genocide—in the pre-Civil War period, the country's economic growth through slavery; after the Civil War, the country's territorial growth through Indian Removal, mainly in the deadly sense of the word "removal"—"skinned alive," as Twain punned in a satirical tribute to "Plymouth Rock and the Pilgrims" (1881), speaking in the guise of a solitary survivor ("Where are my ancestors? ... Whom shall I celebrate? ... My first ancestor, gentlemen, was an Indian.... Your ancestors skinned him alive"). (8) For between the time when Huckleberry Finn was begun and when it was completed, the territories provided the setting for the final wars against the Native Americans—from Wounded Knee (1876) to Little Big Horn (1890)—under the notorious banner, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian."

Huck's "escape to freedom" is a con-man's sinister tall tale which suggests how much can be excluded in the act of interpretation. And it suggests further what this kind of exclusion makes room for. I refer to the cultural commonplace ("lighting out") that draws its force from a powerful set of national self-definitions: the notion that "the territory" in the United States means (and always meant) not other peoples' land, but freedom; the familiar interpretations of "open land" not as expropriation but as promise, opportunity, and hope. What a sweeping act of mockery is embedded in this deadpan nub! I spoke earlier of a minstrel show audience being mocked for laughing along with racist stereotypes. In Huckleberry Finn we are being laughed at for buying into the American belief system.

To put it starkly, the snapper which ends the novel is that interpretation may be a trap of culture. I mean interpretation now in a special sense—special but central. We usually think of interpretation as a more or less independent act, an assertion of what something or someone means to me, sometimes in opposition to prevailing beliefs. I agree that interpretation can work this way—that it can lead towards skepticism or revision or disruption—and obviously I hope as much for this essay. But the fact is that interpretation is also, and far more characteristically, a cultural institution. And on this institutional level, interpretation is neither skepticism nor revision nor disruption but, on the contrary, a form of acculturation. It is a process carefully nourished by society, from our first Dick and Jane reader to our latest America-is-muticultural handbook. Through this cultural process we learn to confirm, each of us—inwardly, privately—our beliefs in what our culture has taught us to believe. And we do so with deliberation. Scrupulously, voluntarily, step by analytical step—or anxiously, avariciously, and sensuously, like Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye—we imbibe social aprioris, and so consent to the limitations inherent in the culture we inhabit.

Through this process, interpretation directs our deep and abiding need for meaning, towards socialization. It turns our world, imaginatively, into a system; it organizes our fantasies in ways that accommodate us to things as they are; it forges the foundational links between subjectivity and society. And typically in the U.S.A. it does so individualistically, in the manner of the American do-it-yourself kit. Each of us labors self-reliantly to arrive at what turns out to be more or less the same interpretation.

One might go so far as to say that interpretation, so understood, is culture; but that would be to stretch the term beyond its proper limits, or in any case beyond what I intend. Culture is made up of rituals, habits of thought, and networks of meaning that persist (like ideology) as communal apriories, designating the boundaries of our conscious deliberations. It is also made up of disparate traditions, diverse practices, and contradictory beliefs. Those conflicts are mediated—which is to say, defused, deflected, or resolved—by what I just called networks of meaning, whose center and mainstay are society's official institution of interpretation.
Over the past two centuries, the institution of literary interpretation has proved spectacularly effective in this regard. Most remarkably, perhaps, it has served as a pivotal factor in the formation and coherence of national identity, first in Europe and then in America. As an editor of the first major collaborative History of American Literature (1917) put it, "In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred [the] astounding transformation of immigrants into citizens ... [as well as] the transformation of ... the native born into Americans ... is very largely accomplished by inculcating American ideals through the language and literature of America.... [We] teachers of American literature are [thus] ... special custodians" of society. His charge was elaborated thirty years later in the next standardized American literary history. "Increasing power and strength are extraordinarily characteristic of [our nation]," declared Robert Spiller and his coeditors. "Never has nature been so rapidly and so extensively altered by the efforts of man in so brief a time. Never has conquest resulted in a more vigorous development of initiative, individualism, self-reliance, and the demands for freedom." Hence the "Americanness of our major authors." Ours has been a literature "profoundly influenced by the ideals and practices developed in democratic living. It has been intensely conscious of the needs of the common man, and equally conscious of the aspirations of the individual.... It has been humanitarian" and made "virile by criticism of the actual in comparison with the ideal." (9)

Huckleberry Finn is a great example of this enterprise in socialization, perhaps the great example. Consider these facts about the state of the novel over the past three decades (our current period of multiculturalism, ideological self-consciousness, critical diversity, and the hermeneutics of suspicion). In 1990, the aggressively revisionist Heath Anthology of American Literature gave special prominence to the novel, actually printing it in its entirety. During the 1990s, Huckleberry Finn "was taught [in our high schools] more than any other novel, more than any other long work (such as a play by Shakespeare), and more than any other work in American literature." After 1970, the very debate over Twain's racism provided a vehicle for consensus. With "ritual repetition" the authorities of academia defended the book as a model of "integration, and the importance of this cultural work overrode the offense the book generated among many of its newly authorized, but [now] also newly obligated African-American readers." "Even though his society was racist," went the argument, Twain "was not, and so `we' are not. For African Americans to challenge this view [was] to challenge ... the America he `quintessentially' represent [ed]." (10)

If we read the novel's last scene closely, those facts come as a violent cut at the funny bone. They indicate how in this country, during one of its most volatile periods, the institution of literary interpretation helped conceal the single most unsavory aspect of our past: the incongruity between national realities (slavery, genocide) and national beliefs (open road, free opportunity). Technically, the tall tale (or con man) frame of Huckleberry Finn is, first, the subtitle, Tom Sawyer's Comrade, concerning the character we try desperately to dissociate from Tom, and, secondly, the monologue signature, "Yours Truly," by the novel's most conspicuous liar. Within this framework, the joke about Huck's lighting out is funny enough, in the sinister sense, to provide the finale to the greatest deadpan act in the history of American sick humor.

Interpretation may be a trap of culture: it may be well at this point to recall the differences and continuities between the tall tale, the confidence game, and deadpan. The tall tale delineates the bounds of communal interpretation. The confidence game plays upon those common grounds, draws out the need for belief, in order to prey on the community. Deadpan incorporates both forms in ways that make interpretation itself--the very stuff of credulity--the subject of the narrative. So understood, Twain's final snapper is especially striking in context of the current critical scene, with its obsessive search for subversion. The artist, in this perspective, becomes something of an Eternal Disrupter (as Christ had been the Eternal Reconciler in the old New Criticism); his or her methods of reversal, miming, riffing, and inversion constitute a network of escape routes from cultural oppression. And of course that archetype extends by implication to the subversively discerning critic of art.

The impression this conveys of the powers of interpretation is as flattering as it is familiar. Conversely, Twain's joke about Huck's flight to freedom is as discomforting--and as deflating--as it is surprising. The misfit it reveals between the text before us, literally, and the meaning we assign it, spiritually, should remind us once more--but
now in an entirely new, genuinely threatening sense—of Twain's opening warning: Beware of Interpretation. As I've been arguing, our official institutions of interpretation, including that of literary interpretation, serve above all as centers of social control. And I would venture that statement as a cross-cultural generalization. Historically, across time and place, the status quo has defended itself precisely at its points of conflict, its potential weak points, by means of interpretation. One need only think of the immense integrative force of the four-fold method of medieval exegesis, with its levels of meaning ascending as in a Jacob's ladder from earth to heaven, from literal and political to moral and mystical. It is hardly too much to say that for a millennium in the Christian West the doctrine of the divine right of kings thus fortified every segment of society, securing the status quo precisely at the intricate, potentially vulnerable intersections of gender, class, and religion, spiritual imperative and civil law, public and private life.

In America, of course (Twain's and ours), the process of official interpretation works differently. Medieval exegesis was instated hierarchically, by the literate elite. Our forms of exegesis work by democratic consent. They are based on doctrines of individualism, contract, pluralism, and the separation of church and state. These are the apriorities of our personal and social lives, the ideological limits of our polity. And insofar as earlier modes of Christian hermeneutics persist in spite of these doctrinal limitations—as indeed they do (that legacy is a main butt of Twain's humor)—they are Protestant modes: basically individualist, grounded in personal conscience rather than papal bull. But the results are no less binding and systemic. Chairman Mao missed the mark when he wrote that power comes out of the barrel of a gun. Guns are not even the most effective instrument of state power. They merely force us to submit; interpretation gets us to consent. And consent—voluntary, self-affirming—is the American basis not only for association (as Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out) but also, ipso facto, by association, for socialization. Society works through civic and economic mechanisms; culture, through the circulation of alluring artifacts and stories. These constitute the moral lifeblood of the body politic, whose heart is the process of interpretation. The effect of a sound cultural heart in a healthy body politic is that what's most personal—our capacity for independent judgment, our power of consent—becomes a source of social revitalization. The success of society in the fragmented, decentralized body of the United States (the fact that this past one hundred years has proved to be the American century) is due in no small measure to the fact that, well before 1900, the culture had developed a distinctive network of literal-political-moral-spiritual meanings, together with a complex set of interpretative techniques appropriate to a modern, free enterprise, open market way of life.

This elemental, conservative power is what Twain's deadpan compels us to recognize. He himself came to recognize it gradually, and in some measure through psychic stress and personal loss. According to his biographers, the decisive years fall between 1876 and 1885, when his "grievances piled so rapidly upon previous griefs that they surfaced visibly, undeniably." A short list of those griefs and grievances include "a fatal break with [his close friend] Bret Hart, fatal troubles with his publisher, [Elisha] Bliss ... financial troubles, ruinously expensive involvements with the Paige typesetter and other patents; a bitterly disappointing return to the Mississippi River, Hannibal, and boyhood scenes; and the beginnings of chronic ill health for the four [deeply loved] female members of his family"—all this precisely at "the height of his creative powers," through the decade of the stop-and-start making of Huckleberry Finn. By the time the novel appeared in 1885, Twain had developed a series of "deterministic principles" that accounted for all values and beliefs as the product of cultural "training." In 1883, in an essay entitled "What Is Happiness?," he declared that "the human machine gets all its inspirations from the outside and is not capable of originating an idea of any kind in its own head"; and two years later, in an essay called "The Character of Man," he added to his definition of "the human machine" a certain agency—an instinctive, inalienable tendency toward "malice, cruelty, servility, and nastiness." He named this tendency the "Moral Sense" and saw in it the "source of man's incorrigible depravity: it enabled man to distinguish right from wrong so as to choose the wrong, which he chose from a vicious predisposition." Thus, Twain concludes jokingly, man "tarries his little day, does his little dirt, commends himself to God, and goes out into the darkness to return no more, and send no messages back—selfish even in death." (11)

In short, man's fate is acculturation, a vicious predisposition, and the exit into darkness: that's the nub of the
greatest American "humorous story." The deadpan point of Huck's adventures is that we're ensnared not only in the joints of the social body, but in the movement of history: trapped, that is, within the very cultural transitions—from slavery to Reconstruction, from civilization to the Territory (and back again)—through which we had hoped to escape. As Twain put it four years later, "Training—training is everything; training is all there is to a person.... We have no thoughts of our own, no opinions of our own; they are transmitted to us, trained into us." (12) This is Hank Morgan's lament for medieval England in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court—and by training (his Gilded Age blinders) he cannot see that he is the chief victim of that process. In fact, the crimes of Camelot function much with the conman effect of the crimes of slavery in Huckleberry Finn: representing as they apparently do the evils of a bygone age, they work to lull us past the nubs of the crimes of the present (the feudal baronies of 1889, the nigger-hunts of Reconstruction). In A Connecticut Yankee the narrator, Hank Morgan, is the butt of a deadpan joke directed against the myth of progress. In Huckleberry Finn, we are the objects of humor and the joke is directed against our faith both in progress and in interpretation. It makes for a very unnerving shock to the funny bone; but we can't stop there. We owe it to ourselves, and to Twain's art, to account for our laughter.

To that end, I turn to my third and main example. The passage comes when Huck lands at the Phelps Plantation, where he meets Sally Phelps, who mistakes him for her nephew Tom Sawyer. Huck reflexively goes along with his new identity, but gets confused in explaining what now turns out to be his late arrival: Tom had been expected by steamboat some time before. Huck at first explains that the boat had been grounded; then can't think of which grounding—but, (resourceful liar that he is),

I struck an idea, and fetched it out: "It warn't the grounding—that didn't keep us back but a little. We blowed out a cylinder-head."

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt. Two years ago last Christmas, your uncle Silas was coming up from Newrleans on the old Lally Rook, and she blowed out a cylinder-head and crippled a man. And I think he died, afterwards. He was a Babtist. (279)

Again, we're at a structural crux of the narrative. The arrival at the Phelps Plantation unites all three sections of the novel (Hannibal, the river journey, and the Phelps episode), and it connects all three layers of Trickster fun (cheerful, satirical, and sinister). It also demonstrates Twain's hermeneutic imperative—we must interpret this scene (its humor leaves us no alternative)—while offering a model example of what's funny about our habits of interpretation. I take the joke to lie in the infamous one-liner "No'm. Killed a nigger." Actually it's a one-liner divided into two parts: "No'm [full stop]. Killed a nigger." We are then diverted from its nub by Aunt Sally's story of the Lally Rook. To recall Twain's instruction: when the joke comes, "the listener must be alert, for ... the teller will divert attention from the nub by dropping it in a carefully casual or indifferent way, with the pretense that he does not know it is a nub." The "Babtist" is a decoy; it allows the story to bubble gently along. In fact, to keep it bubbling, just in case the reader doesn't laugh straight off, Twain extends Aunt Sally's ruminations: "Yes, I remember now, he did die. Mortification set in and they had to amputate him. But it didn't save him. Yes, it was mortification—that was it. He turned blue all over, and died in the hope of a glorious resurrection. They say he was a sight to look at." A very funny sight, but its nub is encoded in Huck's two-part throwaway line: "No'm. Killed a nigger." In what follows I mean to decode Twain's deadpan by outlining eight points about Huck's response to which we should be alert, if we're courageous enough to want to get the joke.

First, the episode is a model instance of the way Twain combines the tall tale and con game through the sinister aspect of deadpan. Huck's response is a comic-fiction exaggeration, defining the values of a certain social group, which then serves as a successful con job, confirming Huck as Tom. And as such it stands as one of the most
vicious jokes in the entire literature of prejudice. Huck's "No'm" reflects back through the narrative, in ways that undermine vitally all of the novel's "good characters," such as the kindly frontierswoman, Judith Loftus, who cuts short Huck's visit to join the "nigger hunt." And it serves as a fit prelude to the long Phelps episode, where Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas are portrayed as warmly hospitable people, the salt of the earth, even as the search for Jim reaches its climax and the "no one" joke is fully enacted, most dramatically, perhaps, when a group of men decide to lynch Jim for all the trouble he has caused--a "raft of trouble," is the way Twain humorously has one of them phrase it (352, my italics)--but relent when they realize that, as unclaimed property, Jim is worth more alive than dead.

Second, Huck's use of "nigger" is profoundly racist. We can't argue (as too many critics have) that it's just slang--a poor, ignorant boy's way of saying African American. What Huck means is far worse than what a bigot means by "wop" or "wasp." Huck is saying that a "nigger" is a no one, a nonhuman. It's worth noting in this respect that in 1900 the first professor of American literature at Harvard, Barrett Wendell, focused on this passage in his standardized Literary History of America. Huck's "No'm. Killed a nigger," he writes, is a serious statement of relative merit, not only accurate but prescient of what right-minded people believe: not only "an admirably compact expression of [the] temper" of the antebellum South, but "more consonant with New-England temper today than it was seventy years ago. Modern ethnology seems to recognise [sic] a pretty marked distinction between human beings in the Stone Age and human beings as developed into the civilization of the nineteenth century." (13) Wendell's case is extreme, an open white supremacist, but he was giving an academic stamp to attitudes that were pervasive in Twain's America, North and South. His interpretation suggests the full scope of the joke (from the ebullient Pan in deadpan to his sinister incarnation as deadpan) in Huck's response to the straight-man query, "anybody hurt?"

Third, Huck's response is gratuitous, totally unnecessary. That's the joke in the forced pause at the center of the line. Huck could just as well have stopped at "No'm." And be it noted that that kind of gratuitous remark, in all its racist implications, is typical of Huck. The casual N-word is fundamental to his vocabulary. As critics over the past three decades have pointed out, the word "nigger" occurs on virtually every page of the novel, and it's worth emphasizing that it took three generations of readers before them to take offense. The first debates about Huckleberry Finn centered on issues of class, not race. The complaints had to do with Huck's delinquency, bad habits, and poor grammar. The N-word went largely unnoticed until the 1960s, and I believe that the not-noticing was basic to Twain's deadpan. Part of the joke is that the word was woven into the very fabric of Twain's self-proclaimed democratic culture, at once a vicious slur and a ubiquitous, unexamined byword ("catch a nigger by the toe"), ubiquitous because unexamined and unexamined because ubiquitous. Once again, Huck's response is entirely appropriate, to him and his readership alike.

It's also appropriate to the plot of the novel. That's the fourth point to make about Huck's remark. His joke concerns a dead person, or rather a dead nonperson, and death is a main narrative thread--death in the deadpan mode, gilded over by humor, as in the early passages concerning Tom's gang:

... Tom got out a sheet of paper that he had wrote the oath on, and read it. It swore every boy to stick to the band, and never tell any of the secrets; and if anybody done anything to any boy in the band, whichever boy was ordered to kill that person and his family must do it.... And if anybody that belonged to the band told the secrets, he must have his throat cut, and then have his carcass burnt up and the ashes scattered all around, and his name blotted off the list with blood....

Everybody said it was a real beautiful oath ...

Some thought it would be good to kill the families of boys that told the secrets. Tom said it was a good idea, so he took a pencil and wrote it in. Then Ben Rogers says:
"Here's Huck Finn, he hain't got no family; what you going to do 'bout him?"

"Well, hain't he got a father?" says Tom Sawyer.

"Yes, he's got a father, but you can't never find him these days ... hain't been seen in these parts for a year or more."

They talked it over, and they was going to rule me out, because they said every boy must have a family or somebody to kill, or else it wouldn't be fair and square.... Well nobody could think of anything to dry--everybody was stumped, and set still. I was most ready to cry; but all at once I thought of a way, and so I offered them Miss Watson--they could kill her. Everybody said:

"Oh, she'll do. That's all right. Huck can come in." (9-10)

This is funny, although not to Huck (he's "most ready to cry"). It's Tom who's having fun, along with us.

But Twain has a different point in mind. And (as in the case of Huck's N-word, in response to Aunt Sally) the point is obvious once we're on to his method. Death and violence are writ large throughout the novel, in virtually every scene and episode. The blood bond that Tom invents is a mirror reflection of the world of Huckleberry Finn. It foreshadows the death hoax that Huck thinks up when he leaves for the river ("I pulled out some of my hair, and bloodied the ax good" and made a track so that they'd look "to find the robbers that killed me" [41]); and the horrific scene earlier, when his blind-drunk father chases him around the shack with a "clasp knife" (laughing with "such a screechy laugh"), cursing and roaring that Huck is the Angel of Death, and that he will now kill him once and for all (36). These sorts of fantasies and facts are the adventures of Huck. They come to life in the Boggs murder, in scenes of lynching and tar and feathering, in the Grangerford-Shepherdson clan massacre, even (and in a way most tellingly) in the wreck of the Walter Scott when Huck steals the robbers' skiff, acting as he imagines Tom Sawyer would have--thereby, presumably, leaving the robbers to drown. According to Twain scholars, there are thirty-three corpses in Huckleberry Finn, and that does not include either those probably drowned robbers or the ghastly corpse in the section Twain omitted, surely one of the most vivid and morbid he ever wrote, describing Pap's dead body. One early review (and in this single respect a uniquely discerning one) complained that Huck's adventures were simply one "bloodcurdling" adventure after another; (14) and indeed it's not too much to say that dead bodies, real and imagined, are the anatomical links of his story. It's appropriate that G.G., the deadpan link between Twain and Huck, reader and narrative, should be a Chief of Artillery--appropriate, too, that his Notice should warn that anyone seeking a plot would be shot. Getting killed is a key to the novel's plot line.

The fifth point to make about Huck's "joke" concerns the cause of death. On the river he travels, explosions are a common experience. Aunt Sally confirms this in the case of the poor Baptist, and we can find many other examples in the novel (steamboats grounded, blown up, cutting rafts in two). The point is: this river is sinister. Critics have tended to sentimentalize it--T. S. Eliot called it the "River God that gives to Man his dignity"--and to be sure such sentiments are invited by its deadpan author. But if we pay attention Twain makes it all too plain that this "great brown god" is a deadly con man. "Kill, kill, kill," Satan reports in Letters from the Earth, Nature "is murder all along the line," and Huckleberry Finn might have been his proof-text. (15) The river is the source of storms and water snakes, it calls up the fog that keeps Huck and Jim from reaching Cairo; it is "dangersome" to those on it and those who live near it. One example of many:

the houses was sticking out over the bank, and they was bowed and bent, and about ready to tumble in.... People lived in them yet, but it was dangersome, because sometimes a strip of land as wide as a house caves in at a time. Sometimes a belt of land a quarter of a mile deep will start in and cave along till it all caves into the river in one summer ... the river's always gnawing at it. (183)
This river affords Huck and Jim some wonderful moments together, and to underscore these, critics like to quote Huck's description of life on the raft: "what you want ... is for everybody to be satisfied, and [to] feel right and kind towards the others" (165). But they have failed to take stock of Huck's far more typical melancholy on the raft and his overriding sense of loneliness: "there wouldn't be nothing to hear nor nothing to see," he comments about the river, "--just solid lonesomeness" (157). They have failed, too, to add that Huck's desire to please "everybody" registers Jim as a "nobody" once again: how Huck rationalizes allowing the King and Duke to have their way ("it warn't no use to tell Jim" [165]). And perhaps most important, critics have never yet to my knowledge noted that for most of the river journey (almost two-thirds of it) life on the raft is controlled and directed by those "rapscallions" (204), as Huck charitably calls them. There are about three pages devoted to the happy idyll of Huck and Jim on the river, most of them at the start of chapter 19. Albert Bigelow Paine rightly commented long ago that "[t]his is the Huck we want, and this is the Huck we usually have, and [have] ... been thankful for"; although in the standard edition these three pages--on the basis of which critics have repeatedly asserted (as a claim "not worth arguing") that "life on the raft is idyllic, and Huckleberry Finn is a pastoral fiction that looks back nostalgically to an earlier and simpler America"--these three pages occupy less than one percent of the book. (16)

And in what might well be viewed as a deadpan joke on Twain's part, they directly precede the Duke and King's invasion of the raft. Huck and Jim may be in flight on the Mississippi, but the Mississippi is the natural habitat of the Duke and King, just as it is naturally the cause of mud slides. This river is emphatically not an emblem of Nature's Nation; it belongs to the world of Hobbes, not Emerson. Nothing is more natural about Huck, nothing more clearly shows how close he is to the river, how well he knows it, than does his spontaneous invention of the exploding cylinder that (only) "Killed a nigger."

Not that Huck needs the river to prompt his invention; he always thinks in terms of death and disaster. That's the sixth point to note about his casual response. It alerts us to the fact that he's a death-haunted young boy. I'm referring now to the way he thinks and imagines rather than to what he experiences. Twain provides two clues to Huck's inner world: the lies Huck tells and the images he conjures up when he's alone—in other words, the reality that Huck himself makes up, for others and for himself. In both cases, it's the reality of the grotesque. Huck talks not so much "gravely" (deadpan-style) as grave-ly. The stories he invents for strangers are a series of horror tales: families dead, dying, or diseased. And he thinks grave-ly too—except that in his solitary musings the dead return as ghosts. Consider his arrival at the Phelpses' plantation:

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 fries in the air that makes it seem so lonesome and like everybody's dead and gone; and if a breeze fans along and quivers the leaves, it makes you feel mournful, because you feel like it's spirits whispering—spirits that's been dead ever so many years—and you always think they're talking about you. As a general thing, it makes a body wish he was dead, too, and done with it all. (276)

Or consider Huck's first long meditation, sitting alone in his room at Miss Watson's:

I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars were shining and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl away off, who-whooing about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me, and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods that kind of sound a ghost makes when it wants to tell something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave, and has to go about that way every night grieving. (4)

What's funny about these descriptions is that actually, to all appearances, it's a lovely Sunday morning, a starry summer night. There's no reason for Huck to think this way, except that that's the way he thinks.

But of course he's not alone when he invents the cylinder explosion; on the contrary, he's trying hard to please
someone else. He's being led on by Aunt Sally, who prods him about the grounding. He knows what she'd like to hear, and he knows she'll think a "nigger" is "no one," just as he knows she'd like him to be Tom. And naturally he complies. That's the seventh point to note about his response. Huck wants to conform. More precisely, he's a conformist who can't make it. Huck would like to please everyone, including Miss Watson. He would even like to live with Pap, if Pap would let him live; he tries as best he can to "satisfy" the Duke and King; he tells us he'd gladly join the Grangerfords (at the expense of abandoning Jim); and he'd love to be Tom Sawyer—but he can't. Huck Finn is Woody Allen's Zelig in reverse: a deadpan artist's Zelig. Zelig may not want to be a Chinese chef or a Nazi, but he can't help becoming just like whomever he's with. Huck's dilemma is just the opposite: he can't help being different. Certainly we sympathize with his difference, we applaud it, but the nub remains. Huck's desire to fit in is underscored by his inability to do so. That's because he so totally believes in society. He believes in racism, class hierarchy, Southern aristocracy, Sunday school religion. Why else would he be so disappointed, towards the end of his adventures, in Tom's plan to "steal" Jim? "Well, one thing was dead sure," he says, crestfallen, after trying to persuade Tom otherwise,

one thing was dead sure, and that was that Tom Sawyer was in earnest, and was actully going to help steal that nigger out of slavery. That was the thing that was too many for me. Here was a boy that was respectable, and well brung up; and had a character to lose; and folks at home that had characters; and he was bright and not leather headed; and knowing, and not ignorant; and not mean, but kind; and yet here he was, without any more pride, or rightness, or feeling, than to stoop to this business, and make himself a shame, and his family a shame, before everybody. I couldn't understand it no way at all. It was outrageous.... (292-93)

If this were a children's book eyed Tom Sawyer, we could read this passage ironically, as a salutary bit of social satire. The white-trash boy is at once denouncing (when he shouldn't) and looking up to (when he needn't) the respectable head-of-the-gang. But Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is something else altogether. It's a complex, sophisticated narrative about a black-white relationship. To recall Twain's phrase, it's a work "of high and delicate art ... [as] only an artist can tell it"—one in which an African American takes on extraordinary human force. Jim, we learn, is the noblest person in Huck's life; virtually the novel's hero, if we could get beyond the minstrel-show humor to which (in one of the most vicious cuts of Twain's deadpan) Jim himself is subject; the father we feel Huck deserves and never had; and by any measure the novel's most sympathetic adult figure. Can it be funny that Huck thinks like this after his long experience with Jim on the river? After all he has seen of Jim—having acknowledged, however reluctantly, Jim's goodness, intelligence, and caring; having felt so ashamed of his behavior towards Jim, on one singular occasion, that he actually apologizes for it (though "it was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger" [105])—after all this can Huck believe that it would be "leather headed" for Tom to "stoop to this business"?

In order to explain this nub we need to rehearse its context. The last narrative section, occupying almost a third of the novel, has become a familiar critical crux. Twain scholars have debated its merits ever since Hemingway advised readers to skip it altogether. Evidently Tom's tricks at the Phelps' did amuse the Reconstructionist audience of the time, and in the decades following (the world of Barrett Wendell, of the minstrel show, and of D. W. Griffith's epic celebration of the Ku Klux Klan, The Birth of a Nation, filmed in the decade after Twain wrote "The United States of Lynchedom"): Jim shackled in a wood-shack (into which Tom and Huck "smuggle" rats, spiders, and snakes), rolling a grindstone uphill with a chain "wraapt ... round and round his neck," writing messages "with his blood," biting into a corn pone with a candlestick hidden in it. "It most mashed all his teeth out," Huck reports, and then explains, straight-faced: "Jim he couldn't make no sense it but he allowed we was white folks and knowed better; so he was satisfied" (329, 323, 309-10). Tom's higher knowledge comes from the romances of Alexander Dumas (whose African ancestry, if Twain knew of it, would add another dimension to the satire); he names his scheme the Great Evasion; and the joke, it turns out, is that Jim has already been freed. If we carry the logic of the joke to its absurd end, we could say Jim was lucky he didn't get to Cairo and the North, since he would then never have known that he was a free man.
To their credit, critics over the past half century have roundly denounced the hoax and all it implies. We can now safely say that it's a grand sarcasm on Twain's part directed against Tom Sawyer. The usual critical term here has been irony. But in the ironic situation, classically defined (from Sophocles through Jane Austen), the readers know, or gradually learn, what's actually going on; they are the author's accomplice. In the deadpan situation, they are the author's victims. That's precisely the case in the Great Evasion. The irony of the Good Bad Boy, whose mischief-by-the-book we see through and scorn, deflects us from the snapper. It's as though our eagerness to interpret Tom as reader (applying the rules of Dumas's Count of Monte Cristo to Jim in bondage) preempts a view of ourselves as readers of Huck's complicity. For what's really funny about Tom's hoax is that the Bad Bad Boy, our Huck, goes along. Fundamentally, he's no different at the end from the racist, death-haunted, would-be conformist he was before he set out on his adventures. That's what makes it appropriate for him to respond to Aunt Sally as he does, in spite of all he has learned about Jim. Or rather, because of all he has not learned, for (as his gratuitous "Killed a nigger" should shock us into re-cognizing) Huck never develops. Far from being a moral and aesthetic collapse, as critics have lamented, the novel's third and last section is perfectly in keeping with Twain's design—although for reasons antithetical to those usually proffered by his apologists. Huck's final adventures are substantively no different from all his others, as far as he himself is concerned, just as his attitude towards Tom Sawyer remains constant throughout, and just as his subservience here to Tom resembles his subservience to the Duke and King on the raft. Huck speaks and thinks and feels at the Phelps' pretty much as he does at Miss Watson's or at the Grangerfords'. The great middle part of the novel, the so-called journey to freedom, is the deadpan center piece of a triptych—Tom Sawyer's gang, a precarious raft on a treacherous river, and a wood-shack prison at the Phelps plantation—whose three panels are variations on a nub.

Now, there's a technical reason for this: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is Huck's personal retrospective, specifically intended to set the record straight. He wants to retrieve the true story, he tells us, from Mr. Mark Twain's stretchers. If he had realized what we'd like him to have realized, he would have written an entirely different book. He would have felt different not only about Jim but about Tom and all others, including himself at that time. The boy who might have emerged from his adventures chastened and humbled, as critics have told us he did, would never have said, not even early in his river journey, that "you can't learn a nigger to argue," or later, after one of his particularly horrific experiences, "Well, if I ever struck anything like it, I'm a nigger" (210); he would have felt obliged to explain why he abandoned Jim to live with the Grangerfords (and he would at least modified the values which he tells us here and elsewhere he learned from his father about the importance of social class). he would have expressed regret for not having confided to Jim what he knew about the Duke and King—or to put this another way, he would have applied to this situation something of what he learned at the Wilkses, where he does report that the Duke and King are frauds, and feels better for it ("I'm blest if it don't look to me like the truth is better, and actually safer, than a lie" [239])—and surely he would not have expected Jim, this grown man eager to free his wife and children, to join him and Tom in the territory. That is to say, if Huck Finn had really grown morally, Twain the deadpan artist could not gull us into thinking that he does. There would be no snapper to the story. Humorously speaking, his tale would be un-American.

Huck doesn't develop so that we can be conned into believing he does: this eighth aspect of the snapper reminds us that what we believe in ultimately is Huck's integrity. He has the same poignant purity from start to finish. He's always the lovable boy with the "sound heart"; from the outset his innate decency is set in contrast to society's "deformed conscience." And to draw out this con game, it's precisely that admirable aspect of him, the potential we discern within Huck's innocence, which invites us to interpret his narrative. That much-discussed, much-celebrated innocence—that echt-American innocence which links United States popular culture, high culture, and global politics—lies at the very heart of the con game. For Huck is emphatically not innocent of the world around him. Quite the contrary: he has been thoroughly socialized into it, as his reply to Aunt Sally demonstrates. He is not innocent, for example, of the abolitionist cause, which he roundly denounces. Nor is he innocent of the values of the Southern class system, as he demonstrates by his awestruck admiration for the pseudo-sentimental, phony-aristocratic, meretricious life at the Grangerfords. Nor of course is he innocent (or critical) of how those he respects will judge him. What will the people of Hannibal "think of me!" he trembles, when it gets "around that
Huck Finn helped a nigger to get to his freedom[?] ... if I was to see anybody from that town again I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame" (268). We may say, however, that Huck is innocent insofar as innocence means ineducability. Huck is innocent of alternatives to the way things are. Therefore (to repeat) he doesn't develop, and therefore we do it for him. We know him better than he knows himself. Indeed, we know him as he cannot know himself, since his naivete, his forever-unrealized potential, is what we know about him, and what we cherish.

The con game this involves posits two contrary responses on our part: first, our superiority to Huck; and second, our identification with him. The deadpan link in this opposition lies in Twain's directive for interpretation. I said earlier that the deadpan Notice goads us into seeking moral, motive, and plot. I would now add that the snapper is then meant to guide us into a certain mode of interpretation--one that compels us to miss the nub, so as to keep the humor bubbling gently along. Just how this works is well illustrated by the scene that critics have rendered the locus classicus of Huck's moral progress. It is perhaps the most frequently cited passage in the novel, along with the river passage at the start of chapter 19, and always with the same heartening interpretation. Huck learns that the Duke and King have disclosed Jim's whereabouts, and he decides that rather than see Jim sold to "strangers," he should return him to Miss Watson, "his true and proper owner." Then he succumbs, conscience-stricken, to memories of how he himself helped this "runaway nigger" so that now "people would [rightly] call me a low down Abolitionist" (52; cf. 124):

I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, "There was the Sunday school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire.

It made me shiver. And I about made up my mind to pray; and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of a boy I was, and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come.... You can't pray a lie--I found that out.... At last I had an idea; and I says, I'll go and write the letter--and then see if I can pray.... So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down and wrote:

Miss Watson, your runaway Nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send. HUCK FINN.

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking ... [and went on thinking] and then I happened to look around and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling.... I studied a minute, ... and then says to myself:

"All right then, I'll go to hell"--and tore it up.

It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said and never thought no more about reforming ... (269-71)

What's funny about this scene is: (1) cheerful--it's a mock-conversion that turns into a Devil's Pact; (2) satirical--it's a sweeping indictment of the ravages of Southern Evangelical Calvinism; and (3) odd, curious, and sinister--it's a mockery of our relation to the text. For in order to get the joke we have to interpret, and yet we feel sure that our interpretation is voluntary. This comes straight out of the American conman's interpretation-by-consent bag of tricks. The meaning we find seems purely subjective, a meaning from the heart, and yet it's entirely predictable, a meaning directed step by step by Twain's deadpan. For notice that we are led to interpret in a perfectly
consistent--a suspiciously consistent--pattern of inversions. Huck says "conscience" meaning the Right Thing to Do, and we think "source of evil"; he says "wicked" and we think "kind"; Huck laments that he was "brung up wrong" and we're glad that he has held fast to his virtues; he tells us he shivered with fear and we think he's brave and independent; he says, trembling, "I'll go to hell" and we think "he's saved!"

Is this a tall tale on Twain's part, or a con game? In either case his deadpan point is that our pattern of inversion is an act of protection. Whether or not we're aware of it, we're reaching between the lines to save Huck from everyone around him, from Tom and Miss Watson and the Grangerfords and the Phelpses. And our act of protection is in turn a claim to ownership. It makes Huck ours. The opening gang-oath is worth recalling in this regard. The question that Tom raises about family hostages opens into a much larger question: to whom does Huck belong? The narrative plays out a series of options--Pap, Miss Watson, Tom's gang, Jim, the river, the Territory--until it becomes obvious that Huck belongs only to us. We adopt him; we take him into our hearts; we interpret him in our likeness; we rewrite his text, figuratively (and sometimes literally, as in the novels of John Seelye and Richard Slotkin or in the many filmic adaptations of the novel, direct and indirect, from children's movies to Shawshank Redemption); we appropriate Huck as the child-in-us. The interpretive plot, then--that is, the process of interpretation carefully elicited from us, with all the sly diversions of deadpan art--leads inexorably from inversion to protection to adoption to, triumphantly, appropriation.

Let me name the snappers. First, there's the issue of style. Huck Finn is a great writer; his grammar and spelling are faulty, but that simply accentuates the beauty of his expression, which is extraordinarily simple, spontaneous, and vivid. And yet we have to protect him all the time from his own text. We have to explain away his words, to redefine the emotions he records, to reverse the convictions he sets out. Huck is a master of the literal statement; he writes with unfailing lucidity and directness; he's the prime example, as Hemingway declared, of the American plain style. And yet we have to save Huck at every turn from his own plain meanings. (Think of what fun it would be to read Hemingway this way!) We have no choice, as it were, but to recast "shiver," when Huck says "it made me shiver," into something positive, to deny the import for Huck (the stated effect) of his decision to choose hell, to white out his numerous N-words. Once we've done all that, we can laugh along with Huck, our Huck, the uncorrupted child in us who (we're certain) does not believe, would never really think, that a nigger is a no one. To paraphrase Jim: we're sophisticated folks, and so we know better, and can smile contentedly, and be satisfied.

Still, we should be very uneasy by this point about the process we're engaged in. Our act of appropriation ends with the child-in-us--who is us? As Huck tells the story we come to feel that his conscience is the object of Twain's expose. It's conscience that makes Huck a racist, conscience that keeps leading him astray, and we interpret his conscience, properly, as an indictment of the values of the antebellum Southwest. But there was no need in 1885 to indict slave society. Primarily Twain's deadpan is directed against his readership, then and later, even unto our own time--against, that is, the conscience-driven forms of liberal interpretation. To a certain extent, his project here reflects the frontier sources of tall-tale humor that I quoted at the start of this essay: the storyteller's "pleasure in dethroning the condescension of gentility at the thickly settled Eastern core, while at the same time reproducing the radical discrepancies and incongruities at the root of all American experience," Eastern-intellectual as well as roughneck-Southwest. What better, and more cutting, way to accomplish these ends than to get the Eastern gentility to identify condescendingly with this con-man's outcast-redneck hero?

And it's precisely in this sense, I submit, that a distinct liberal theme permeates the discourse about the novel, a critical main current that runs through virtually all sides of the argument (provided that the critic does not dogmatically, foolishly, condemn the book for being racist). To judge from a century of Twain experts, Huck is "sell-reliant," "an Adamic innocent," "exemplifying the ... strong and wholesome [individual that] ... springs from ... the great common stock," exemplifying too the heroics of "the private man ... [for whom] the highest form of freedom [resides in] ... each man's and each woman's consciousness of what is right," and thereby, in its absolute "liberation," "ultimately transcend[ing] even anarchy as confinement"--in sum, an independent spirit," "the affirmation of adventure," "enterprise," and "movement," the soul of "toleran[ce], and common sense." More than
that: Huck and Jim on the raft have been taken as an emblem of the ideal society. In contrast to the settlements, they represent the "spiritual values" of "individualism compatible with community"--not just the proof of "Twain's commitment to black civil rights" (and his appeal to "compensate" the blacks on "the national level" for "injuries" done them during the slavery era), but his summons to the "cause of freedom" in general. Huck and Jim together forecast "a redeeming hope for the future health of society"; they stand for the very "pinnacle of human community"; they provide "a utopian pattern of all human relationships." Critics have reiterated these "great redemptive fact[s] about the book" over and again, with what can only be called reflexive adoration. As Jonathan Arac observes, "it is as if 'we' uttered in self-congratulation: 'Americans have spiritually solved any problems involved in blacks and whites living together as free human beings and we had already done so by the 1880s.'" (17) I would add that, beyond smugness, what this attests to is the process of interpretation as self-acculturation--a striking example of what I called the literary enterprise of socialization, in compliance with the charge bequeathed to "teachers of American literature" (society's "special custodians"), to inculcate the values of "enterprise, individualism, self-reliance, and the demand for freedom."

More interesting still, this process of interpretation reveals just how socialization works. The abstractions I've just rehearsed are admittedly "American ideals" but they are applied as universals, as though Huck represented not just what America but what all humanity ought to be. Thus a particular cultural vision--individualism, initiative, enterprise, and above all personal freedom ("What Huckleberry Finn is about is the process ... of setting a man free")--becomes a sweeping moral imperative. And as moral imperative it is then reinstated, restored as it were from heaven to earth, from utopian "alternative world" to actual geographical space, as a definition of the quintessential American. As Norman Podhoretz, editor of the conservative journal Commentary, has written: "Sooner or later, all discussions of Huckleberry Finn turn into discussions of America." Or in the words of the late Irving Howe, writing in his leftwing journal Dissent: "Huck is not only the most American boy in our own literature, he is also the character with whom most American readers have most deeply identified." Or once again, according to the centrist Americanist scholar Eric Sundquist, Huckleberry Finn is "an autobiographical journey into the past" that tells the great "story of a nation." Harold Bloom accurately summarizes the tone of his collection of "best critical essays" on the novel when he remarks that the "book tells a story which most Americans need to believe is a true representation of the way things were, are, and yet might be." (18)

That "need to believe," is the core of the "American humor" of Huckleberry Finn. It may be true that in its magnificent colloquialism the novel marks "America's literary declaration of independence ... a model of how one breaks free from the colonizers culture." But as a deadpan declaration the model it presents is, mockingly, the illusion of independence. It reveals our imprisonment within what Lewis Hyde, in his sweeping overview of the Trickster figure, calls the "joints" of culture. For Hyde, this concept involves a heroic view of the possibilities of interpretation. He pictures the Trickster's cultural work in physiological terms, as an assault upon the vulnerable parts of the social body, most tellingly its "flexible or movable" joints, where variant spheres of society (home, school, church, job) intersect. (19) At these anatomical weak points, he writes, Tricksters come most vividly to life, unsettling the system, transgressing boundaries, exposing conflicts and contradictions--thus freeing us, he contends, as sympathetic interpreters of their subversion, from social constraints. If so, Mark Twain is a kind of laughing anti-trickster. It's not just that he's mocking the tricksters in the novel: Tom, the Duke and King, Huck himself. It's that he's mocking our would-be capacities for Trickster criticism. What's funny about our interpretation of the novel--both of the narrative and of its autobiographical hero--is that what begins as our independent assessment, and often our oppositional perspective, leads us happily, of our own free will, into the institutions of our colonizing culture.

Thus it was all but inevitable that in our multicultural era, Huck should be discovered to be (in addition to everything else that's positively American) multicultural. This is not the place to discuss Huck's blackness--or for that matter the possibility of his ethnic Irish-Americanness--but it's pertinent here as elsewhere to recall Twain's warning that interpretation may be a trap of culture. He speaks abundantly of the nature of that trap in his later writings--in letters to friends, for example, reprimanding them for presuming that "there is still dignity in man,"
whereas the plain fact is that "Man is ... an April-fool joke played by a malicious Creator with nothing better to waste his time upon"; and in essays protesting that he has "no race prejudices ... [nor] color prejudices, nor creed prejudices ... I can stand any society. All that I need to know is that a man is a human being; that is enough for me; he can't be any worse"; and in journals documenting how "history, in all climes, all ages, and all circumstances, furnishes oceans and continents of proof that of all creatures that were made he [man] is the most detestable ... below the rats, the grubs, the trichinae.... There are certain sweet-smelling, sugarcoated lies current in the world.... One of these ... is that there is heroism in human life: that he is not mainly made up of malice and treachery; that he is sometimes not a coward; that there is something about him that ought to be perpetuated." In his posthumously published novel, The Mysterious Stranger, Twain exposes the nub itself--lays bare the mechanism of the trap of hope. Here his stand-in deadpan artist, Satan, pairs up with a poor-white, innocent, sound-hearted little boy, a boy not unlike Huck--befriends him and conjures up for him a variety of alluring spectacles and promises, only to reveal, at the end, the absurdity of each one of them. "You perceive now," Satan declares, that it "is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream." And then the boy's epiphany: "He vanished, and left me appalled: for I knew, and realized, that all that he had said was true." (20)

That's the humorous point of Huckleberry Finn, if we're alert. The novel's underlying moral and motive, its deadpan plot, is that this grand flight to freedom--black and white together, the individual regenerated by nature--was all a dream. Not a grotesque dream, to be sure, but a foolish one because it is a dream that befouls. Recall the image of the novel with which critical tradition has left us. The plot is a river story, the style is a flow of humor, and our interpretation is a raft that promises protection (from conscience, from civilization, from all the slings and arrows of outrageous adulthood). Now consider the facts. The river keeps returning us again and again and yet again to the settlements, the raft proves to be a con-man haven, and on this "raft of trouble," on this river that betrays and kills, we're left with two mock-symbolic figures. One is Huck Finn, bond-slave to society, mostly scared to death, speaking a language we don't trust, and (as Pap puts it, in a drunken flash of insight) an Angel of Death. The other is Jim, the fugitive black who need never have run off, and who leads Huck into what Jim himself, early in the novel, calls the Black Angel's hell's-pact. So the nub is: the Angel of Death and the Black Angel, on a deadpan raft-to-freedom, drifting deeper and deeper into slave territory. It makes for a savagely funny obituary to the American dream.

Before, however, we confront the full import of that dead-end humor, we should account for an abiding paradox in our response to Huckleberry Finn. I have in mind the odd, curious fact that even after we get Twain's devastating nub--after we've struck through the comic mask and seen the deadpan leer behind it--even then our experience of the novel is exhilarating. From this perspective, what's funny is that the novel leaves us in good humor, as in some uncanny return of the cheerful and satiric layers of "funny" which the deadpan had sought to repress. For all our powers of re-cognition, in some sense the narrative resists that sinister ultimum--resists, that is, its own deadpan moral, motive, and plot.

Let me try to set that resistance in a larger literary perspective. The bleakness of Huckleberry Finn is not a unique instance in the history of American humor. There's a great line of the sinister deadpan mode, one that runs from (say) The Confidence-Man--Melville's absurdist-apocalyptic caricature of a world where, as the "waning light [of the last lamp] expired," "truth comes in with darkness"--through the Depression-era novels of Nathanael West, the self-styled "laughing mortician" of America's consumerist "dream dump," and the postmodern novels of Thomas Pynchon, all of them obsessed with "the legacy America," and all lamenting (laughingly) that the one way "to be at all relevant to [the legacy, is] as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed circle into some paranoia." (21) Within this persistent tradition--embracing the tall tale and the con game under the aegis of deadpan--Mark Twain is the American Funnyman. His vision and method are related to Melville's, West's, and Pynchon's, but he differs from them in the quality of his humor. That difference lies in what I called at the start his strategy of inversion (reversal, concealment). Twain plays out his deadpan while wearing the Mask of Comedy, but because he succeeds the Mask comes to life, as it were. His novel is genuinely funny. The other humorists in this tradition make us shudder, wince, or squirm even as we laugh. Twain makes us laugh outright, with an almost childlike delight.
Somehow the novel does cheer us up, in the manner of the tall tale; it even manages at times to reinforce normative ideals, in the manner of con-game satire—as Pierre and The Confidence-Man, Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust, The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity's Rainbow emphatically do not.

Perhaps the best way to describe that paradox of exhilaration is through the affective sense as distinct from the analytical. I refer to the fragile, brittle link between authorial intention and textual intentionality. Think of the disjunction between what Twain meant to do and what he wrought—between the terrible story he tells and the radiance of Huck's monologue—and now recall D. H. Lawrence's famous dictum, "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." That's surely the anti-deadpan principle of interpretation, and it may legitimately be objected that it's out of place here as being inimical to Twain's art. But we might recall the allegations of Twain's "inadequate control over his materials" and his inelegant manipulations of plot. (22) And even if we simply discount these charges, as I believe we should, we must take account of the complexity of Twain's strategy, which requires us to focus not just on his (the author's) tricks, but, equally, on the dynamics of humor that Huck (the narrator) sets loose. Thus up to a point we have a critical obligation to attend to Lawrence's injunction. An important distinction between Twain and his contemporaries may help clarify that obligation. Twain's is a humor of extremes, in the manner of Southwestern humor; but the extremes in other tall tales and con games highlight discrepancies within the culture: they build upon the gap in frontier experience between civilized language and "the language of sweat."

Huckleberry Finn speaks at once from inside and outside the culture: inside it, because it pivots on the conjunction of Huck's vernacular and our civilized interpretation; outside it, because the deadpan nihilistically makes fun of both sides of that conjunction. On one hand, there's an extraordinarily daring con game at work: we're being sold on the American dream-works, all of it, lock, stock, and barrel. On the other hand, there's a correspondingly daring tall tale in process: we're being asked to fall in love with Huck. And one game depends on the other. We must buy into the dream-works if we are to preserve our love for Huck, and the other way around: we must preserve our love for Huck in order for Twain's design upon us to work.

The result is a simultaneity of contrary effects, hence a constant volatility of perspective. And--here's the Lawrencian snapper, if I may call it so--that volatility undermines the deadpan mode, since deadpan is basically systemic. It depends on a comprehensive, bottom-line meaning: the nub, the realization, that explains (even as it undoes) everything that has come before. In other words, deadpan humor, incorporating as it does both the tall tale and the con game, implies a hierarchy of levels of meaning, leading to an ultimate meaning, not unlike the medieval four-fold method or Renaissance Protestant allegory. Ultimately, Dante's Jerusalem is anagogical; ultimately Bunyan's Pilgrim represents the Redeemed Christian. By contrast, the term I have used throughout, layers of meaning, signifies meanings that are mobile, shift-shape, like a kaleidoscope. It depends on which way you turn them; and by definition they are always subject to another turn, or series of turns.

Twain's art entwines both strategies. His humor, as I've been arguing, builds simultaneously on hierarchical levels and volatile layers of meaning. It thus translates into a bifurcated language that for all its cunning works at cross purposes. By Twain's design, the novel's levels of meaning depend on cause and effect: first there's the joke we laugh at, then the shocking re-cognition. But Twain's design also demands that we bubble merrily along, moving from sick joke to tall tale, from the imaginary nigger to the Baptist on the Lally Rook. Thus the layers of meaning within (and inseparable from) what I called the analytic process involve a pattern of affective inversions. As we read and reread, conscious of the humorous nubs and yet flowing happily with the currents of comedy, our response keeps shifting from cheerful to satirical to sinister, sinister to satirical to cheerful, back and forth, and (in mood) up and down, down and up. So although the plot leads deterministically downward—affectively, down in hope; geographically, "down the river"—the strategy behind it requires an anti-deterministic flow of aesthetic give-and-take. As the stakes are raised in the narrative snappers (that is, the sinister mental game directed against us), they must be raised proportionately, for the trick to work, in the love-game (that is, the effervescent monologue through which Huck becomes ours). In other words, the very process by which Twain the deadpan artist controls both satire and exaggeration, con game and tall tale alike, keeps Huck alive and well—within his own world (his monologue), alive, buoyant, on the go.
I mean linguistically on the go. In fact, Huck had nowhere to go, as Twain's dismal attempts at continuity (such as "Huck and Tom among the Indians") demonstrate, and as his notes for a "true sequel" make plain: "Huck comes back, 60 years old, from nobody knows where--& crazy." (23) In this sense we may speak of an excess of language in Huckleberry Finn, an overabundant (or even indeterminate) humor that, up to a point, allows Huck to slip out of Twain's control. We might then proceed to posit a Derridean monologue: a Huck Finn who deconstructs in the very process of storytelling. Or (my own preference) we might posit a Levinassian presence: a protagonist whom we can never fix or label, a Huck Finn who is neither merely what he says he is (poor white trash), nor merely a version of the American ideals we project upon him, nor (again) merely the laughing stock of a humorous story, but towards whom we cannot help feeling protective in some way. That protective feeling is the result neither of superiority nor of identification. Quite the contrary: it comes from our recognition of difference. We might even argue that on some unarticulated (because culturally inaccessible) level a similar protective relation, a felt mutuality based on respect for otherness, springs up between Huck and Jim. In any event, we are compelled by Huck in this version because he's not like us; and we come to appreciate him best precisely when we laugh at our urge to appropriate him. Such laughter is directed at ourselves, it's self-incriminating; but what's funny about it is that it enlarges our capacity for love. It helps us see in Huck what Emanuel Levinas calls a "height of the good" that transcends categories of logic--the logic of critical analysis no less than deadpan logic and the logic of culture--so that the novel provides a kind of lifebuoy (a coffin-lifebuoy) to the ethical like.

We might call this the serious alternative--normative, satirical, universalist--as distinct from the cheerful alternative I outlined earlier, involving the sheer-fun volatility of language-play. But here as before, alas, we can follow the prospect only up to a point. The problem in both cases is that the alternative entails a comic resolution, and any such resolution, however we frame it, diminishes Twain's fantastic achievement: the high and delicate art by which he takes us in, and through which he offers us the opportunity to have a good laugh at ourselves, good enough (in the sinister sense) to do the job he believed all laughter should do, which is to "blow [history] to rags and atoms at a blast." (24) More important: to indulge in those dreams of transcendence, formalist or philosophical--those flights from textual-historical meaning into some free territory elsewhere--is to return in a metaphysical or aesthetic (or anesthetic) fog to the Humorist's raft once again, drifting into precisely the traps of culture which the novel works to expose and explode. Nor will it do to seek a political resolution in that act of expose as in the neo-Marxist forms of ideological critique advanced by Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramci, and Raymond Williams. In this perspective, the fact that Twain's snappers distance us from Huck (and the American belief system he represents) attests to the radical potential of interpretation. Although we cannot transcend ideology, we have critical resources within the culture at large which allow for resistance, which indeed prod us toward alternatives to the dominant culture. Again, a happy prospect, perhaps; and again, Huckleberry Finn is meant to disabuse us of precisely such visionary or utopian expectations. What's positive for Twain is our capacity for humor in clear-sighted despair--which is to say, for the laughter of realism, in all its bleakness, as against the illusions of progress.

Freud offers a helpful insight into the contrast I'm suggesting. As a rule, he observes, the comic serves to distance us from the "distressing effects" of humor--the kind of humor that "does damage" and "causes pain"--to the point where we are entirely disengaged from the painful situation. "The victim of the injury," he writes, "might obtain humorous pleasure, while the unconcerned person laughs from comic pleasure." (25) That's the core of the difference between Twain and those who would find ways out of the predicament he describes. To disengage from the injury is to slight both form and content in Twain's art. Huckleberry Finn exploits the pleasure principle in order to shock us, painfully, into self-recognition.

In effect, Twain's inversion of traditional deadpan is a general disavowal of comic modes. I said at the start that my concern was with his concept of humor rather than with theories of the comic; but as I've indicated by my references to Althusser and Freud, Derrida and Levinas, I believe that his concept can be sharpened by contrast with certain theories of our time. The most relevant of these involves the current interest in the skaz, the Russian vernacular monologue, where the humor lies partly in the vernacular itself, as in Huckleberry Finn. According to
Mikhail Bakhtin, the skaz is characterized by irony, satire, and parody, all of which either advance social norms or else offer spiritual or intellectual alternatives—a prospect, in either case, which is precisely the object of Twain's ridicule. That ridicule applies, too, to the sort of "liberating magic" which Walter Benjamin attributes to the folktales of Nikolai Leskov: tales told in a vernacular which evokes "the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare of which the myth had placed on its chest." (26) Twain, on the contrary, exposes liberation (as in Jim's last-minute emancipation by Miss Watson) as con-game magic, or as one of those mirage-like points of light (such as Huck's apology to Jim, or the river idyll, or the respite on Jackson's Island) that flicker briefly from time to time in the ever-darkening journey back into slave country. Twain's deadpan foregrounds the unshakable burden of history—the nightmare into which we are forever locked by training and human predisposition.

More telling still (considering the novel's slavery-era context) is the laughter-through-despair mode of Jewish humor. I think particularly of Holocaust humor and its related forms in the Yiddish skaz—notably the monologues of Sholem Aleichem—describing the besieged shtetl. To begin with, Huckleberry Finn pointedly refuses what David Roskies claims for pogrom jokes: to fortify us against "the trauma of history" by "laughing [them] off," hence providing a sort of enclosed communal garden "against the apocalypse." Concerning Sholem Aleichem (with whom Mark Twain has been compared), Roskies argues that his monologue technique "gives us the laughter that results from the clash between languages and life ... [and the] greater the discrepancy, the funnier it is, and the funnier it is, the more fortifying"—a technique which is the target of Twain's snappers. Secondly, Huckleberry Finn ridicules the notion that humor can "embrace" so as to "diffuse hostility," as Terrence Des Pres says of "Holocaust laughter." In fact, Twain's deadpan does just the opposite: it turns our laughter into hostility—at society, at ideals, and at ourselves for wanting to embrace either one or the other. His snappers (as the humor bubbles along) do not save; they annihilate. Finally, Twain's deadpan reverses the effect of what Henri Bergson calls the "bisociated contexts" of comedy. Peter Berger argues that theory to the general "tragedy of man," claiming that, by highlighting discrepancies in context, humor "relativizes" the tragic, and so "provides yet another signal of transcendence." Arthur Koestler speaks in this vein directly about gulag and concentration camp jokes. The subversive writer, he argues, manipulates events that are "capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" so as to ridicule authority. Twain too manipulates the bisociated contexts of comic meaning (including the contextual parallels between the slavery and Reconstructionist periods); but he does so in ways that reject signals of transcendence and make us the objects of ridicule. (27)

In an important recent essay that builds on most of these Holocaust commentators, Sidra Ezrahi defends Holocaust humor (as in Roberto Benigni's film Life Is Beautiful) as an "aesthetics of deferral" developed by Jews over the course of their long diaspora, one that balances recurrent disasters against scriptural promises of millennial redemption. Twain's case is very different. He has been said, accurately, to invoke the American redemptive dream—the river idyll as "an anticipation of the Messianic time (which is called the time of the 'continuous Sabbath') of ... peace and harmony"—but it's a deadpan millennium. And the nub this involves points to one of the darkest aspects of Twain's humor. I refer to the fact that the American promise is precarious—open-ended, forever provisional, and therefore potentially an anticipation of its opposite, doomsday. That's the potentiality which American dark humorists have traditionally seized upon. The Jewish "theodicy [of] ... the happy end" is guaranteed, absolute, inscribed from eternity in the Bible. (28) For the Late Twain, the vision of a New World paradise is the last and greatest of history's con jobs. To recall the first recorded definition of deadpan (someone "holding four aces in his hand and you wouldn't know it"), the game being trumped by this card-shark—his poker face lit up in a broad and cheerful (or is it satiric?) smile, setting out one shocking snapper after another—is the American millennium.

Holocaust laughter is thus the obverse of Twain's. It may be that all laughter, even Satanic laughter, is a sign of hope, since it implies continuity; and continuity, even within the bounds of culture, testifies to human agency and will. But there's a world of difference between the Jewish context and that of Huckleberry Finn. Indeed, if we can allow the analogy, a Holocaust Huck would be a derelict, sound-hearted German boy—call him Heinz Pfin—running away from home and teaming up accidentally with an adult Jew just escaped from a concentration camp, an
empathetic, loving, extremely capable, and enormously grateful man, desperate to reunite one day with his family. In spite of himself, Heinz sometimes treats the escapee as an equal (though far more often as his "benign superior" (29)), all the while feeling ashamed for doing so (how will he explain all this back in his Bavarian hometown? he keeps thinking). And he feels ashamed because fundamentally he believes that the Jew is what his Nazi culture has taught him (a "nobody," a nonperson). Accordingly, he refers repeatedly to "Jew-vermin" ("you can't learn a kike to argue"; "if I ever struck anything like it, I'm an Ungezeifer"), or, in his most generous gesture, directly after the escapee has saved his best friend's life, at the risk of his own, "I knowed he was aryen inside." Imagine reading a genuinely funny book of this kind and concluding that this boy is not just forgivable (for his sound heart and ostensible innocence), but a moral hero, the very model of what boyhood should be. That would be deadpan on the author's part. And to follow Twain to the bitter end, the book would have to be addressed to a German readership that was still very much anti-Semitic, as Twain's Reconstructionist readership was still very much racist. So imagine, further, members of that readership laughing at themselves for having been taken in by the deadpan, but, according to the author, having no alternative--no way out of the process of acculturation (and an inherently vicious predisposition) that made them admire the boy in the first place.

What to do, then, with that paradox of exhilaration? We must leave it simply as paradox, I believe, and find the courage to confront the import of Twain's deadpan. Those who have hitherto evaded it betray a certain desperation, well expressed some forty years ago in Perry Miller's rhetorical question: "Can Americans imagine what they would take themselves to be if ... Huckleberry Finn were expunged from the national recollection? How, without that book, would even those of us who had never seen the Mississippi River know who we are?" How indeed, except by somehow meeting the challenge of Twain's devastating American humor? Other writers found a way out of despair--Wordsworth, for example, who recalled his "utter loss of hope itself/And things to hope for" with the tranquillity of faith restored. Twain never recovered; on the contrary, he made contempt for hope his ground of creativity. To the last, he maintained that an optimist was a "Day dreamer more elegantly spelled"; to the last, he claimed that there were no thoughts, no opinions, except those that were "transmitted to us," so that (as he lamented in his final autobiographical dictations) there "was no escape from [our social and] natural environment, not even for someone [like himself] who recognized it." (30) Miller's question entails a comic view of Huckleberry Finn. But at the very least the comic mode calls for a celebratory reunion at the end, if only as a fiction to accommodate audience desire. By contrast, the proposed reunion that ends Huckleberry Finn is a snapper directed against the convention of happy endings, and the laughter it provokes is designed to change desire to distress. In Freud's terms, it turns our protective "comic pleasure" into a self-ridiculing "humorous pleasure." Twain seeks to demonstrate through our laughter the process of our victimization.

The laughter of the victim: a bleak prospect, none bleaker. It's like imagining Job laughing at his misfortunes, before (or rather without) the author's cosmic resolution. Perhaps even that grim comparison is inadequate. "Though He slay me," says Job (13:15) in his darkest hour, "yet I will maintain my integrity." In the deadpan version, we would be invited to laugh at Job's belief not only in God's concern but in his own integrity. No comfort here; but then, there are always plenty of comforters at hand, secular and religious, nationalist and universalist, left and right. We owe it to Twain's art to attend to his disconcerting nubs and snappers. Could we not find in them something enabling after all? Enabling, not ennobling: a wisdom without consolation, a strategy for survival in a world bereft of comic resolutions. We don't have to endorse this stance in order to acknowledge its insight, even its heroic quality--which involves the integrity to confront dilemmas as dilemmas, no end in sight, the fortitude to laugh at the traps that beset us, without seeking refuge in our laughter. So understood, what's funny about Huckleberry Finn is that its most positive feature--the one aspect of the novel that may be said to promote interpretation, rather than mock it--lies in its denial of comic relief.

Notes

(1) Mark Twain, "How to Tell a Story," in Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays, 1891-
This essay incorporates materials from a talk delivered at an American Literature Association Conference on the Trickster, and published as "The American Humor of Huckleberry Finn," in Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction, ed. Jeanne Campbell Reesman (Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 2001) 53-83. A shorter version of that talk appeared as "What's Funny about Huckleberry Finn?" in New England Review, xx (1999) 8-28. Here I take issue with both of these earlier (wholly inadequate, as I now think) efforts on my part to explain the humor of Twain's novel. I would like to express my gratitude to Lewis Hyde for his astute editorial guidance, and to Susan L. Mizruchi for her brilliant and generous critical insight. For important bibliographical references, my thanks to Louis J. Budd of Duke University and to Joe Lockart and Victor Fisher of the University of California at Berkeley.


(6) Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, ed. Walter Blair and Victor Fisher (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 2; see also 7, 77, 84, 125, 141, 167, 174, 233, 234, 334. The parenthetical page numbers for Huckleberry Finn within the text are from this edition.


(8) Mark Twain, "Plymouth Rock and the Pilgrims" in Collected Tales ... 1852-1890, ed. Budd, 782.

(9) Stuart P. Sherman, "American and Allied Ideals: An Appeal to Those Who Are Neither Hot Nor Cold," War Information News, no. 12 (Washington, D.C: Committee on Public Education, 1917) 6. (This is a succinct, if crude, summary of the Introduction to the History); the editors' "Address" to The Literary History of the United States, ed. Robert Spiller et al. (New York: Macmillan, 1948) xx-xxi.


(11) Jay Martin, "The Genie in the Bottle: Mark Twain in Huckleberry Finn," in One Hundred Years of Huckleberry Finn; The Boy, the Book, and American Culture, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer and J. Donald Crowley (Columbia: U of Mississippi P) 56-57 (Hart and Bliss are the appropriate deadpan names in this context); Paul Baender, Introduction to What Is Man and Other Philosophical Writings, ed. Baender (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973) 4-5, 9, quoting Twain's essays; Mark Twain, "The Character of Man," in Collected Tales ... and Essays, 1852-1890, ed. Budd 858. The precise dates of Twain's Dark Period have been a matter of contention, and even during this period Twain continued to write and speak (for money) in the lighter satirical or tall tale vein but even biographers who date his full despair only after 1890 concede that it begins in the early 1880s.

(12) Mark Twain, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, in Mark Twain: Historical Romances, ed. Susan K. Harris (New York: Library of America, 1994) 326.

(13) Barrett Wendell, A Literary History of America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900) 342. Wendell later
calls Huckleberry Finn a "masterpiece" (477). I am uncomfortably aware of my own position in the descent of Harvard professors of American literature, all of whom have contributed significantly to the consecration of Huck Finn as the quintessential American. The line runs from Wendell through Perry Miller and his students, such as Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx; and in all its variations, from Wendell's praise of Huck's racism to Marx's denunciation of what he considered to be Twain's betrayal of Huck's cause of freedom. My own iconoclasm in this respect is not consciously prompted by an anxiety of influence, but I should note that I first elaborated my views in my first class on Huckleberry Finn at Harvard in 1983. My sense then was that my (indignantly received) interpretation was prompted by my relative innocence—my lack of acculturation—as an immigrant in the United States of Huckdom. In retrospect, I feel that my interpretation also registered an era in academia marked by a suspicion of all rhetorics of nationalism and a globalist deconstruction of traditional forms of Americanism. Ironically, this was also the beginnings of what may be called the Americanization of the world; and I venture to predict (since the process of Americanization has long since come to incorporate literary studies as well) that the mythic-liberal-heroic Huck will prevail, in one form or another—not just in the U.S.A., but, in due time, and with due training, globally.


(19) Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture (New


(22) D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1951) 13; Jeffrey Steinbrink, "Who Wrote Huckleberry Finn? Mark Twain's Control of the Early Manuscript," and Victor Doyno, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: The Growth from Manuscript to Novel" in One Hundred Years, 89-95. These sorts of objections reflect mainly the critic's view of what he or she thinks the text ought to be, as when Doyno criticizes Twain for the "loopy logic" of Pap's diatribes (95).


(28) Tony Tanner, The Reign of Wonder (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1965) 162; Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?" Yale Journal of Criticism, xiv (2001) 306-07. This point warrants a brief elaboration. Twain's deadpan, I am arguing, invokes a broad nationalist rhetoric of all or nothing: millennium or doomsday; America either as humanity's "last, best hope" or else as its "last best hope." Thus in two antithetical yet complementary surveys of classroom experience, Eric Solomon sees the novel as a composite dream-image of ultimate "hope in America" while Hamlin Hill discusses it as a "nightmare" vision of cosmic collapse ("My
This choice is something of a ritual refrain throughout our literature and as such it constitutes a bipolar symbolic strategy (dream/nightmare) through which the culture has sustained itself, in effect foreclosing any alternative to national ideals—which is to say, keeping all interpretative options locked within the basic premises of the dominant culture. (See my discussion of the "anti-jeremiad" in The American Jeremiad [Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1978] 191-97). Does Twain himself fall into this hermeneutic trap? I suggested above that he seeks to avoid it through the opposition between interpretation as illusion and what he might call the realism of the nub. Of course, Twain's realism is itself an interpretation but this does not discredit the claims he makes, or the challenge they pose to our own sanguine views of the powers of interpretation.

(29) Waddlington, Confidence Game, 267. Together with James Cox and Hamlin Hill (in the essays quoted above), and Alan Trachtenberg, "The Form of Freedom in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," Southern Review, VI (1970) 954-71, Waddlington comes closest to recognizing the nature of Twain's nubs, but he too sees in them a "quintessentially comic vision" (250), or as Trachtenberg puts it, a "negativity [that] implies an ideal" (971).


Sacvan Bercovitch is Powell M. Cabot Professor of American Literature at Harvard University. He is the author of many books and essays on American literature, general editor of the multi-volume Cambridge History of American Literature, and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Bercovitch, Sacvan


Gale Document Number: GALE|A94121141