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Huck at a Hundred

Land o' goshen, time flies. It seems like only yesterday that he was just a sprout of a boy, and now look at him. Huck Finn is 100 years old. His story was published in America on Feb. 18, 1885.

Another boy from the banks of the Mississippi—downstream, at St. Louis—was T. S. Eliot, and no one was ever less like Huck, but he said Huck's tale was a masterpiece, in part because it was the first novel written entirely in natural speech. Natural? Darn tootin'. I, too, am a son of the middle border, hailing from about 150 miles due east of Hannibal, and I say Huck speaks pure American. People who speak otherwise are speaking dialects and should seek help.

We who write, and therefore think, in column-length chunks, are connoisseurs of concision, and my hat is off to Huck. Consider his one-sentence summation of all that needs be said about the art of cooking. He is complaining about the Widow Douglas's practice of cooking different parts of the meal in separate pots: "In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and things go better." Huck is pithy even when engaged in literary criticism, a craft that makes most folks garrulous. In an Arkansas house he sees some books: "One was 'Pillgrim's Progress,' about a man that left his family it didn't say why . . . The statements was interesting, but tough." That is a perfect précis, but it also is the kind of breezy talk that has gotten a lot of mud slung at our boy.

There always have been ninnyes who say that Twain's novel is disrespectful of blacks. But only someone suffering terminal solemnity can take offense from passages like:

"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."

Racism? Such talk still gets some people lathered up more than somewhat. But tar-nation, you knew which side Twain was on when Huck shouted to Jim, "They're after us!"—us. Accusing Huck of racism is cuckoo considering what caused some 19th-century moralists to say Huck should be kept from the tender eyes of children. It was the passage where Huck's conscience is nagging him because he violated church teaching and Missouri law and mores by helping Miss

Watson's slave escape. He writes a letter to her, telling her where Jim is. But he thinks about what a boon companion Jim has been, "and then says to myself: 'All right, then, I'll go to hell'—and tore it up." Some folks thought that passage would throw the nation spang off its moral rails. (T. S. Eliot's parents would not let him read the novel. He snuck off to London and read it.)

Huck choosing hell was Huck listening to his sound heart rather than his deformed conscience. Twain thought a conscience is a social product, as bad as society. Being a believer in a boy's pure heart, Twain was a sentimentalist and like most such was fated to be an angry man. He was angry about the violence of the river towns where there were

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bloody feuds and cruel murders and people were tared and feathered and it was considered fun to douse a dog with turpentine and set it aflame. He was angry about the coming of industrialism, which he thought was debasing the nation's physical and moral beauty. At the risk of torturing too much meaning out of the text, is the steamboat that wrecks Huck's raft—his pristine island of self-government—a symbol of the machine despoiling America's garden?

Huck's story resonates in America's heart because it is about freedom understood in a distinctively American way, as the absence of social restraints, and obedience to the promptings of a pure heart. Twain, like Tocqueville, feared the invisible shackles of social conformity almost as much as he feared oppressive institutions. And Huck? Heck, he did not even cotton to new clothes, which made him "feel all cramped up." And he took to the river when he found out "how dismal regular and decent the widow was" who was bent on "civilizing" him. Twain's novel about this shrewd boy is for grown-ups as much as children but it has a childish

notion at its core. It is that (in today's jargon) "authenticity" and "self-realization" are achieved outside of or against society, not through it. Huck is—dare I say it?—an "alienated" 14-year-old.

The American idea of freedom is Huck going down the Mississippi or Thoreau going up the Merrimac. To be free is to be footloose in a pathless wilderness, unbound by geography or history, utterly unconstrained by social bonds. But why must we speak of "bonds," in a way that suggests ropes biting into wrists? Human beings are social animals whose capacities, including the capacity for virtue, can be realized only in a social setting, not isolated on a raft borne ceaselessly past communities where individuals acquire only corrupt consciences.

Four decades after Huck's raft began its endless voyage through America's consciousness, there appeared, in 1925, another equally emblematic creation of America's imagination. Jay Gatsby was civilized but really more "civilized" than Huck. His story, like Huck's, is about integrity of personality. Huck, in flight from society, has it, or, more precisely, achieves it. Gatsby, the synthetic man, is a warning about one unpleasant possibility for a social animal.

Promise: As Gatsby's story ends, the narrator, Nick, looks out across Long Island Sound and thinks how "for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent." Gatsby had had a faint doubt about the quality of his happiness, and now Nick imagines the houses of West Egg, Long Island, melting away and the island once again being "a fresh, green breast of the new world." Pessimism about the ability of Americans to measure up to America's promise is, in its way, Twain's theme.

"I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock . . . Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us . . . So we beat our boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." I imagine Huck sitting on Daisy's dock, loafing and smoking and fishing, and thinking: I got to light out, the blue lawns of Long Island are too cramping. An American boy belongs on the river, the rolling road where the current carries you effortlessly away from confinement.