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Seven Recent Commentaries On Mark Twain

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ESSAY-REVIEW:

SEVEN RECENT COMMENTARIES
ON MARK TWAIN

PETER SCHMIDT

Jonathan Arac. *"Huckleberry Finn" as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

Ken Burns. *Mark Twain.* Television documentary, 2002.

Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua. *The Jim Dilemma: Reading Race in "Huckleberry Finn."* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

Leland Krauth. *Proper Mark Twain.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999.

Stacey Margolis. "Huckleberry Finn; or, Consequences." *PMLA* 116.2 (March 2001): 329-43.

Elaine Mensh and Harry Mensh. *Black, White and "Huckleberry Finn": Re-imagining the American Dream.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000.

Carl F. Wieck. *Refiguring "Huckleberry Finn."* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000.

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It seems like such a simple scene: two white boys and a black man whose name is Jim escape to a raft, but one of the white boys and the black man decide to stop their flight because the other boy has been wounded and needs a doctor. The passage has no Melvillean hieroglyphs or Jamesian secret codes. Surely late-twentieth-century literary criticism, with all its state-of-the-art sophistication and jargon, would be able to establish interpretive norms for a plausible reading—explaining why the characters behave as they do, and what it all means. Yet just the opposite is the case. Critics cannot even agree on why Jim says what he does, much less whether the whole scene is ironic or not, or what kinds of historical contexts should help us have a coherent conversation about it.

The book in question, of course, is *Huckleberry Finn*, and the scene the ending of chapter forty. Consider the following excerpts from recent books attempting to interpret this passage. Each is intelligently argued, but together they are about as mutually incompatible as two readings can possibly be.

Vowing to risk his freedom for Tom, Jim asks, rhetorically: if Tom were being set free and “one er de boys wuz to git shot,” would Tom say, “save me, nemmine ‘bout a doctor f’r to save dis one?” You can *bet* “mars Tom Sawyer” wouldn’t. Having evoked his torturer as his model, Jim swears fidelity to him: “No, sah—I doan’ budge a step out’n dis place, ’dout a *doctor*; not ef it’s forty year!” (chap. 40). That Jim identifies himself as “one er de boys” reveals a self-image acquired from the black image in the white mind. Once a man with plans to bring his wife and children out of slavery, he is now too young even to think of family. He is also young enough to assure the junior master forty more years of servitude. Bizarrely juvenilized, he is also grotesquely feminized. In a dress again when captured, he is praised by his captor, the doctor, for his faithfulness and exemplary nursing. . . . [W]hile the slaveowners may believe blacks are encoding dangerous messages, the reader knows it is Tom who decides what Jim will say, blocks out the letters, and . . . leaves him “nothing to do but just follow the lines.” (chap. 38)

If one considers only the behavior of the whites during the ending, one might agree . . . that the ending “satirize[s] the principle and practice of white supremacy.” In reality, though, it is impossible to satirize/subvert the myth of white supremacy while reiterating the myths of black gullibility, passivity, dependency, and so forth. (Mensch and Mensch 93-94, 97)

Their faith in Tom was properly placed, degrading though it was. In this respect, Tom accomplishes more than the region he represents accomplished as an integrated “new South.”

But Twain pushes us into a second reversal so rapidly that we race past this point. Tom has been injured, and Jim and Huck’s rejoicing quickly ends. The pair turn their immediate attention and concern to Tom. How characteristic of these two, as we have come to know them! Opponents have asserted that it is not incumbent upon Jim to sacrifice here the very thing for which he has been questing since the narrative’s beginning. Some critics, particularly African American parents, cite this scene as especially racist

because Twain describes Jim as relinquishing his freedom for a white boy who really does not have his best interest at heart to begin with. . .

But we must believe all that has happened in the novel up to this point. We have exhilarated with Jim's evolution in previous chapters. We believed Huck's ultimate sacrifice [in choosing to be damned for befriending Jim] . . . [W]e have seen intimately their loyalty, their faith, their honesty, their naivete, their fortitude, and their self-reliance. How could Jim have done anything but what he did? It is exactly what we expect of him as the man, the free man, the husband, and the father we know him to be . . . [I]t is Jim the fully rounded character who empowers himself to risk sacrificing his freedom for what he feels to be right. (Chadwick-Joshua 126-27)

Both these readings attempt to give us a clear and consistent way to interpret Jim's apparent willingness to give up his chance to escape. For the Menshes, all interpretation of Jim's behavior must be understood primarily in reference to white models of the "good nigger," in contrast to whites' views of rebellious slaves or postwar freemen arrogantly claiming their rights. If Jim's behavior appears to fit this historically verifiable "good" stereotype (and the Menshes argue that it certainly does), then Twain cannot be challenging that stereotype, but reinforcing it. Even if Twain makes light of white fears (most clearly in chapter forty-one, where friends of the Phelpses make quite a "clack"—Huck's word—about crazy niggers scaring them to death). Even if Twain clearly has portrayed a different and more rebellious Jim elsewhere in the novel.

Chadwick-Joshua, on the other hand, places the possibility of Jim's free will at the center of the scene, not Twain's or whites' stereotypes. She stresses the consistency of Jim's evolution as a free man throughout the novel, including in this final raft scene, highlighting the tension between his refusal to give up his dream of freedom and his caution and cunning—he will wear even the humiliating mask of deference when necessary. Jim's behavior, of course, is notoriously difficult to interpret as expressing an ever-present drive toward freedom; his actions often appear at odds with that goal, whether it be his passivity, or his superhuman patience during Tom's "Evasion" scenes late in the novel, or Jim's gushing to Huck much earlier that he didn't care any more what became of him or the raft after he lost Huck in the fog. In each case, Chadwick-Joshua deals with such anomalies in Jim's behavior by reading them either as cunning strategies to make whites treat him better, or signs of Jim's inner patience and goodness—inveterate strengths of character that she argues are not Uncle Tom-like but rather a kind of heroic stoicism analogous to Albert Murray's celebration of the blues hero. For Chadwick-Joshua, Jim's decision not to leave Tom behind in chapter forty is a principled act—the act of a truly *free* man—that transcends any historical context we might place it in and makes secondary any stereotypical behavior we might mistake it for. Jim knows he cannot pursue his freedom if his sound heart tells him he left behind

a human being who might die; his decision to aid Tom is not mere passivity but an active choice of great moral power, consistent with almost everything Jim has done in the novel.

In Chadwick-Joshua's eyes, the "Jim dilemma" for many of Twain's readers comes because, ultimately, they cannot fully grant Jim agency, even though they criticize Twain for not doing so. For such readers, as soon as Jim appears to be performing a stereotype, that becomes what Jim *is*, not just what he appears. Unlike the Menshes' model for Jim's portrait by Twain, in which stereotype will always trump the illusion of agency, for Chadwick-Joshua the opposite occurs: Jim's character evokes transcendent norms of moral behavior that will normally trump any stereotypes they may evoke. Chadwick-Joshua's defense of the novel also implies something else: when critics of any race attack the novel for its portrait of Jim, instead of exposing Twain's inadequacies what they most often reveal is their own reluctance to grant Jim freedom.

Another way to state this dilemma—which readings of *Huckleberry Finn* have exacerbated over the years rather than solved—is that two incompatible understandings of satire (and the function of literary genres in general) bedevil Twain criticism. The first (eloquently represented in its latest incarnation by the Menshes) holds that satire is always already historically situated; although it may criticize some assumptions of its world, it is ultimately enmeshed within it, valuable to us because it reproduces in narrative the contradictions within the society itself. Thus Twain may be "antitraditionalist" (96) in his satire of whites, but he grounds that satire on a black character whose behavior mostly conforms to whites' stereotypes of what "goodness" will look like. The second position is equally well represented by Chadwick-Joshua, and is in line with many earlier commentators who have read the novel as a satiric allegory of unfinished moral development. Such a reading of the novel assumes that a great work of art transcends its historical context and its culture's (and author's) limitations in certain very specific ways that it is the moral imperative of literary criticism to define. For Chadwick-Joshua, both Jim and the novel itself must be granted agency—a will to freedom (no lesser word will do)—that cannot be fully contained either by Tom's scripts to "rescue" Jim nor by readers' attempts to rescue the novel from its supposed faults. Art, in other words, can never be thoroughly imprisoned in the nightmare of history. Furthermore, the reason why Twain critics cannot agree on how to read the novel is because—despite the proliferation of "theory" in the twentieth century—they cannot agree on even the basic principles of how to identify and interpret irony and satire, much less the myriad other tonal and ideological complexities of a work of literature.

Neither the Menshes nor Chadwick-Joshua make such broad claims about literary interpretation as I have made here, but I believe one of the reasons why they come to such opposite conclusions studying the same evidence is that they are using entirely different models for what literature is and how to

interpret it—models that I have tried to foreground here. Both books honorably extend the two main schools of *Huckleberry Finn* criticism, those critiquing the novel and those defending it, and both will prove indispensable for Twain criticism in broadening our discussion of the novel's engagement with genres (satire, "Southwest" and minstrel humor, ex-slave narratives, etc.) and their historical contexts. Ironically, these two books achieve forcefulness, in part, because they don't engage thoroughly enough with counterarguments to their own theses. This tendency makes both books consistent but also less daring than they might have been.

There is a deeper level of irony. The Menshes seek to question Twain's much-celebrated understanding of irony and satire. Yet in the passage excerpted above they do their own not wholly successful imitation of Twainian ventriloquism, merging their own critical voice with an imagined version of Jim responding to Tom ("You can *bet* 'Mars Tom Sawyer wouldn't"). They are drawn into this imitation of Jim even while they seek to alienate readers from succumbing to Jim's eloquence, as Huck does. Chadwick-Joshua, similarly, becomes caught in rhetorical strategies that are full of troubling ironies. Seeking to persuade readers to see strategy in Jim's argument rather than self-enslavement to Tom, she constructs an ideal interpretive community that has no dilemmas, only consensus ("we must believe," "we have exhilarated," etc.).

Huckleberry Finn is renowned for its pairing of scenes, where a later incident will thoroughly expand or revise, even undo, the meanings of an earlier one. So it should not be surprising that the novel generates the same patterns of paired opposition in its interpreters—particularly when the issue of racial stereotypes and American history are involved. This dilemma in Twain criticism—call it the Huck/Jim dilemma—is arguably the central difficulty facing all cultural analysis: how to strike the proper balance between free will and determinism.

Whatever doubts I feel about the Menshes' and Chadwick-Joshua's conclusions, it should be clear that the issues they raise and the friction and light their opposed ways of reading generate must be counted among the *strengths* of Twain criticism, not a sign of confusion regarding method or goals. It's pretty much true, after all, that the greater the writer, the more he or she generates opposing ways of reading. We can't imagine the kind of vigorous debates that bedevil and enlighten Twain studies in, say, Timrod criticism. (Though contemporary American studies could use some new readings of Timrod's *Ethnogenesis*!) Twain is "powerful" strong that way, as Huck might say.

Along with Shelley Fisher Fishkin's work, the *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on "Huckleberry Finn"* anthology (ed. Leonard, Tenney, and Davis), and the essays collected in the Bedford/St. Martin "Case Study in Critical Controversy" edition of the novel edited by Graff and Phelan—to list just a few—these studies of *Huckleberry Finn* by the Menshes and Chadwick-

Joshua should be required reading for any one who has the responsibility of leading readers through Twain's novel and the troubled American history of racism that roils in its wake. Teachers must use articulate but opposing readings—even via brief photocopied excerpts or their own study questions—to help readers question their own assumptions, get beyond simplistic labeling, and explore new ways of interpreting our past. I think of it as the “Sankofa” principle of teaching, and Chadwick-Joshua and the Menshes (indeed, all of the authors whose books are considered here) are part of our necessary journey back in order to move forward.

The other commentaries on Twain under consideration here do not so neatly focus on the Huck and Jim dilemma.

Jonathan Arac seeks to become the Socratic gadfly of Twain criticism. In *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target*, Arac is incensed with how Twain's commentators have idealized Huck and Jim's relationship as they have made the case for the novel's canonization and its alleged embodiment of primary American values. Arac wittily uses Huck's being tormented by his “conscience,” his culturally conditioned ways of evaluating good and bad, to suggest that such a shared cultural memory is “not necessarily a good thing” (216). That is, we need constantly to be skeptical about the ways we are reading both this novel and its engagement with American cultural history. Arac seeks a “contrapuntal” criticism, a countertradition to mainstream voices in Twain criticism primarily celebrating the ways in which the novel is subversive. (Arac rightly notes the tension here: the novel supposedly both embodies universal values and eternally questions them. His point is not that this is contradictory, but that this tension is too timidly explored by the majority of Twain's commentators.) After reading Arac, particularly the eloquent jeremiad of his introduction and opening chapter, Twain's readers should never again easily slip into the too-familiar ways in which the book has been praised. On this count alone, his book is invaluable.

I also found much to think about in a number of Arac's other central topics. To mention several, I would cite memorable set-pieces on Twain's reception by the French, the relevance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, critics' frequent use of the phrase “Nigger Jim” even though that phrase is never found in Twain's novel, and the importance of the popular *Century Magazine* for the boom in Twain's reputation that occurred in mid-career. (For a more thorough meditation on Twain's accommodations to the genteel tradition, however, see Leland Krauth's book discussed below.)

One of Arac's topics that has rightly received much attention is his critique of the connections between nationalism and the complex politics of canonization. Arac is correct, I believe, to argue that certain works are hypercanonized. That is, if what is canonized is equated with the proper shared “memory” that all Americans should have, hypercanonization means that a single book supposedly embodies the values of the entire canon itself—it becomes “quint-

essential,” a kind of miniature memory-chip. Arac, of course, is hyperskeptical about such a process, both in general and in the particular case of Twain’s *Huck*. He quite rightly links the pressure to hypercanonize certain texts with attempts to assert hegemony over contemporary crises about the USA’s cultural identity and direction. Arac gives a provocative survey of over fifty years’ worth of arguments that have been made for the centrality of *Huckleberry Finn*, including a skeptical look at those critics who themselves have been canonized within the mainstream of Twain studies, vs. those accorded more marginal status. In one of the book’s strongest chapters, he undertakes a stimulating re-reading of Lionel Trilling’s famous introduction to *Huck Finn*, placing the essay in the context of Cold War cultural politics.

Arac is helpful as well when it comes to evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of different classroom approaches to teaching *Huck Finn*. (In general, I think professional Twain critics need to take even more responsibility providing teachers of grades 8-12 and undergraduates with new approaches toward helping students understand the strong reactions the book provokes.) Perhaps too briefly, Arac gives critical assessments of a number of such guidebooks for teachers, including one published by the National Council of Teachers of English. Above all, Arac urges teachers of Twain to take seriously statements by some students and parents about the pain caused by the way *Huckleberry Finn* is taught in many classrooms—objections that are much too often glibly dismissed by “experts” as ignorance or censorship or racism. Here I could not agree more with Arac. A good teacher can turn anguish and rage about the book into a way to understand Huck’s and Jim’s emotions, not to mention re-evaluating how we ourselves make judgments, particularly about “race.” Most good teachers have to learn how to “teach the conflicts” and show students what is excluded by a text; it doesn’t come naturally. Complacent language about *Huckleberry Finn*’s sound heart often shows more arrogance than insight. In many high school curriculums, *Huck Finn* may be the only book in which “race” is emphasized. This puts an impossible burden on the novel’s teachers. If students came to the novel after reading (say) some Douglass or Jacobs or Swift, or if they read it in the context of contemporary narratives dealing with racial issues, they will become better readers of Twain. The antidote to hypercanonization is to broaden the company of authors read when students first encounter Twain.

That said, I must register many objections to individual points Arac makes, both about particular scenes in the novel and about the failures of Twain criticism as a whole. In general, Twain criticism is far more diverse and contentious than Arac admits; its “mainstream” may flow mostly one way (toward acknowledging Twain’s centrality in the American literary landscape), but like the Mississippi it has many different currents and colors, and someone like Arac intent on plowing upstream against the flow needs to take more cues from Twain the riverboat pilot about how to avoid snags and tow-heads. Arac

is often too dogmatic to steer his craft well—he bulls too straight ahead and, fixated on showing us the wrecks of other riverboat critics, smashes into some shallows himself.

Take, for instance, Arac's critique of Fishkin's now-famous thesis and evidence regarding Huck's use of black English (186-94). Arac makes a number of criticisms of Fishkin, but his attack on her use of linguistic evidence centers on the issue of whether particular words and phrases of Huck's are indeed black English, as Fishkin contends, or are widespread American usages not associated just with black speakers. Arac does show that this issue may be more complicated than Fishkin acknowledged in 1993, but Arac's own logic seems to me to be excessively narrow and thus flawed. To show that some whites (English as well as Americans) use words such as "powerful" as an adjective does not necessarily refute Fishkin's contention that this usage was characteristic of nineteenth-century black English and, even more importantly, recognized as such both by Twain and by nineteenth-century linguistic experts. Arac may quote a few citations from Shakespeare and Swift and the OED, but that can only reduce the valid scope of Fishkin's generalizations; it cannot refute the fact that Twain, the author of "Sociable Jimmy," his most extended portrait of a black story-teller, demonstrably associated many of these debated words and phrases with the expressive capabilities of black speakers and then used their linguistic creativity to help shape Huck's.

I also have space to take issue with certain elements (not the whole) of Arac's attack on what he feels are absurdly inflated claims about Huck's moral nobility in the famous "I'll go to hell" scene in chapter thirty-one (37-62). Arac justifiably warns readers against attempts to turn the novel into "a talisman of self-flattering American virtues" (62), but several of his central claims about chapter thirty-one are questionable. Arac castigates Huck (or rather his creator) for never acting publicly to express his support of Jim, thereby creating "no place that citizens can work together in resistance" (as if that should have been a major purpose of Twain's novel). He continues: "to keep pure a reader's sense of Huck's individual autonomy, Twain had to purge from Huck's consciousness the available alternative languages of value in post-Jacksonian America" (61). But this is a surprising claim to make, given that Arac dismisses Fishkin's suggestion that Huck's speech is inflected with black speech and, thus, not autonomous or pure. Furthermore, as we will see below, other Twain critics see important parallels that Arac is blind to between Huck's points and, say, Frederick Douglass's, surely one of the "alternative languages of value" to which Arac alludes. In addition, how many readers would agree with Arac's premise that Twain was determined to emphasize Huck's "autonomy"? Perhaps not even Arac himself, who admits elsewhere that, in chapter thirty-one, Huck displays "a mind, a style, open to the voices of others" (54). Arac's point about the deceptiveness of Twain's religious language in the "I'll go to hell" speech is an intriguing one (he says it encourages the illusion that Huck's

moral choice is absolute and self-determined). However, many of Arac's other claims in this chapter and elsewhere are ill-conceived.

A discussion of the larger historical context of *Huckleberry Finn* should compare and contrast anti-slavery arguments that are different from Huck's, using the kind of research Arac presents and that Twain critics have long been providing. But when Arac suggests that in chapter thirty-one "the notion of justice is a culturally valued abstraction that could support Huck in his moment of need" (61), he reveals himself to be a critic with a deaf ear—not to mention one who refuses to accept Twain's epochal decision to write the novel from *within* Huck's consciousness and language, and to use irony as his primary mode. If Arac is so insistent on damning *Huckleberry Finn* for what it excludes, he should consider the results of applying such a critical method to other novels. How seriously, for instance, would he take a critique of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that censured its author for focusing on the consequences of a girl's murder by her mother, rather than on the many available "positive" stories of the Underground Railroad's success, or the "culturally valued abstractions" from anti-slavery writings that could support Sethe in her moment of need? (Stanley Crouch grouched just this kind of unsound objection to the canonization of *Beloved*.) Arac dismisses with a wave of the hand Morrison's reading of "Huck's ultimate act of love, in which he accepts the endangerment of his soul." Instead he offers the unimpressive conclusion that in chapter thirty-one "religious satire outweighs experiential pathos" (54).

In the end, Arac's mistakes do not invalidate his project of taking seriously "Bakhtin's idea of a 'dialogue' among socially antagonistic languages as the basis for the form and accomplishment of *Huckleberry Finn*," as well as his goal of attending to what the novel does not do as well as to what it does. These approaches just need to be handled more subtly than Arac can manage. (For further assessment of Arac's critique of both the novel and its history in American culture, I especially recommend Margolis and Wieck, both discussed below.) The central questions Arac dares to ask about chapter thirty-one still resonate profoundly: "if other voices can sound through [Huck's], why so limited a repertory? What were the social alternatives, even within slave society, that Twain excludes from this scene?" (54). But why not also ask how such absences (if we can hear them) contribute to the pathos of Huck's crisis?

Carl F. Wieck's *Refiguring "Huckleberry Finn"* contains a lifetime's worth of reflection about the novel condensed into eleven succinct, and often elegant, adventures in reading, from pondering the references to two's and doublings (all a pun on "twain"), to the list of items found in the floating house, to the influence on Twain of Jefferson, Lincoln, and Douglass. The best chapters are the ones on Douglass (chapter two); on the language of "right" and "rights" (chapter three); on references to the figure forty in the context of Reconstruction promises (chapter seven); "On Black and White in *Huckle-*

berry Finn” (chapter nine); a chapter on lying and truth-telling (10); and the concluding essay on “Knowledge and Knowing.” Wieck in general positions his own close readings very well within and against the currents of Twain scholarship past and present; the notes are meticulous and generous, though he also will not back down from a fight when needed. Wieck’s book is one of the first to take issue with Arac. He gives a detailed refutation of Arac’s claim (54ff) that references to Fourth of July rhetoric are absent from *Huck Finn*; he focuses closely on the presence rather than absence of Douglass and Lincoln; and his chapter three may very well have been written to refute Arac’s claim that “the only person in the book to use the language of ‘rights’ is Pap” (55).

Without stating so directly, Wieck makes a strong case for reading Douglass’s *Narrative* and Twain’s novel side-by-side; in his view, Douglass’ influence on Twain’s book “was stronger and more profound than has hitherto been understood” (39). Wieck shows how Douglass’s analysis of arguments about spoiling slaves can help us read the early scene in which Jim is “most ruined as a servant” in Huck’s eyes. He traces motifs of darkness and refuge in both texts, critiques of religion, and parallels between Master Thomas’s advice to Douglass and Tom’s advice to Jim. A number of critics have recently encouraged us to read skeptically Jim’s supposed joy at Tom’s gift of \$40, but it is Wieck who draws attention to the relevance of Douglass’s wry reflections on the “wages” he earned as a slave. The chapter on “rights” usefully opens with a discussion of pre-Civil War debates on civil rights and makes a provocative case for the influence of the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker on both Lincoln’s Gettysburg address and Twain’s *Huck Finn*. Wieck then turns to illuminating brief discussions of differing views of natural rights relevant to Pap, the King and the Duke, Huck’s confusion over Jim’s feelings toward his family, Huck’s dilemma on the sinking *Walter Scott*, and Tom’s appropriation of Jim’s rights in the Evasion chapters.

In chapter seven, on why the number forty gets several notable references in the novel, Wieck well synthesizes and extends the work of Doyno, Light, Chadwick-Joshua and others to connect this reference to Twain’s coded satire of the debacle of Reconstruction, especially the negated promise of forty acres and a mule for freed slave families. Wieck’s reading is less original but more sound than Stacey Margolis’s in the March 2001 *PMLA*. Margolis provides a fascinating discussion of postwar negligence and liability law and claims that *Huck Finn*, like tort law, argues for the necessity of assessing effects over intentions, a standard that would implicate both Tom and the nation as being collectively accountable for what is done to Jim. Wieck, however, never pushes for the kind of structuralist distinctions Margolis advocates when she dubiously argues that “the interest of the novel lies precisely in its attempt to think about the problem of American racism in structural rather than personal terms,” or, even more simplistically, that Tom’s \$40 “looks instead like formal, legal recognition of [Jim’s] personhood . . .” (340, 339). (“Looks” to whom?

Would she also make such a statement about the \$40 paid to Huck in the “small-pox” episode in chapter sixteen?) All those interested in *Huck Finn* and/or law and literature should ponder Margolis’s article carefully, particularly her claim that it is “a novel in which your effects on other people rather than your feelings about them define what you have done and, more important, what you can be held accountable for” (334). But Wieck’s chapters four and seven synthesize in a more reliable way much current critical thinking on the novel’s ending as a veiled denunciation of America’s postwar betrayal of black freedom and the government’s constitutional and legal obligations.

The chapter “Black and White in *Huckleberry Finn*” would be a fine choice for teachers who needed to require their undergraduates read just fifteen pages or so of commentary on “race” and the novel. (In contrast, neither the Menseh nor Chadwick-Joshua arguments are so condensable, nor are other collections of recent views on the subject.) Wieck stresses Twain’s repeated technique of irony, inversion, and omission when engaging with racist stereotypes, and like Frederick Crews, among others, Wieck makes a strong case for the validity of Twain’s decision to attack racism indirectly, through humor and irony. He documents the low number of the usual demeaning physical descriptions of blacks; shows how whiteness is often portrayed as unclean and disturbing; soberly analyzes how the notorious minstrel-like details in the portrait of the slave Nat may be more complex than has been realized; and gives excellent suggestions for interpreting Huck’s comment that Jim was “white” inside (on the last point, see also Chadwick-Joshua 128-29). Wieck reads the Sherburn episode as being full of reversals of the “normal” lynching scenario and justification, yet also revealing Twain’s ambivalence regarding the violent “manhood” that thwarts a mob’s attempts at vigilante justice. I do wish there had been more focus in this chapter on Huck’s own assertions of racial privilege (his whiteness), and also that Wieck had not been so ready to agree with Earl Briden’s argument that the Kemble illustrations were accepted by Twain in order to make less threatening the disturbingly close relations between Huck and Jim.

Chapter ten, on lies and telling the truth “mainly,” may be my favorite. It gives a superb overview of humor, irony, and paradox in the wily prefaces that Twain wrote throughout his career, from *Prince and the Pauper*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *Huck Finn* through *Connecticut Yankee*, *Pudd’nhead*, *Joan of Arc*, and *What is Man?*—particularly how Twain delighted in satirizing popular nineteenth-century claims to truthfulness and sentimental fidelity. (Interestingly, the *Tom Sawyer* introduction is an exception to this pattern.) Wieck even demonstrates that the opening of *The Gilded Age* engages with Hawthorne’s famous introduction to *A Marble Faun* lamenting about the lack of subjects the American scene provides for novelists. All of which is a preface to Wieck’s shrewd and profound reflections in chapter ten on truth, lies, and

consequences in Huck's story. Wieck's conclusion sees a prophecy of Twain's post-1885 development as a writer "cunningly cloaked in the fact that *Huckleberry Finn*, the novel in which Twain appears to have undertaken a major onslaught on the long-respected custom of pretending to deal frankly and truly with the reader, closes with the words, 'The end, yours truly Huck Finn'" (145-46).

Wieck's concluding chapter does not mention once the pretentious word *epistemology*, yet it gives a quite thought-provoking reading of the novel as a dramatization of different kinds of knowledge and ways of learning or refusing to learn. False assumptions or incomplete knowledge make for humor in many scenes, trauma in others. Sacrificing to others one's right to assert what one knows or guesses *always* has bad consequences. There are myriad characters who can't be knocked out of their comforting delusions, plus a precious few—most notably Huck and Jim, at least some of the time—who are much more flexible and open. Wieck quips that the book could be called *The Education of Huck Finn* (though Huck would never give it such a title himself), and he usefully points out that the more Huck learns, the more tolerant he becomes, not the reverse: Huck is generous far beyond the level acceptable to the social rules he knows and tries to respect.

The weakness of Wieck's short essays are related to their strengths. They can be too simplistic and too adept at making all details fit that chapter's thesis. I was initially prepared to dislike the book because (with the exception of a fine anecdote about *Huck Finn*'s influence on a boy growing up with a Nazi father in the 1930s) its opening paean to a boy-hero speaking a "universally understood language" representing American freedom (19) reminded me all too well of Jonathan Arac's rightful warnings against such language. Wieck's opening passages seem in part written expressly to refute Arac and invoke both Jefferson and Lincoln as crucial muses for Twain. Wieck certainly makes a case for their relevance, but his brief reading of Lincoln's and Jefferson's lives and writings is too simplistic to provide an effective counterargument to Arac. Only in the second chapter in Wieck's book, the one on Douglass, does he really begin to hit his stride.

Another caveat I have is that Wieck proves more adept at stressing the coherence and consistency in Twain's portrait of Jim than he is at probing its contradictions. Ditto for his portrait of Huck, which adds yet one more voice to the many readers who have interpreted Huck's tale as a kind of halting pilgrim's progress away from racism. Such readings ignore too many of both Huck's contradictions and Twain's, and they make Twain's use of irony seem so controlled—and the "right" way to read the book so obvious—that they can't account for a reader's identification with Huck's and Jim's trauma and confusion (and that identification—indeed, that reenactment of trauma—is crucial). Nor can Wieck's defense of the best ways to "refigure" the novel really explain why the book has from the moment of publication been read in

such painfully contradictory ways. It so touches American cultural insecurities and guilt that we keep trying to make it into an icon or a target, a dangerous lure or a pastoral hymn, a coolly calculated satire or a model of democracy in action—or even (cf. Margolis) a kind of legal brief concerned solely with effects, not intentions. Could it be that it is not just the “Jim dilemma” but Huck’s crisis of *whiteness* that so provokes? An American dilemma indeed. It could also be that the novel poses dilemmas about freedom and determinism that are so unsettling commentators rush in to try to solve Twain’s riddle.

If Wieck shows the virtues of many years of reflection on Twain, the author of *Proper Mark Twain*, Leland Krauth, well represents the new generation of Twain scholars who came of age in the 1990s. This generation had to face synthesizing deconstruction and the new historicism, intertextuality’s dissolution of form vs. the “return to form,” an emphasis on the aesthetic and ideological workings of genre and convention that characterized some of the most innovative American studies work of the last decade. One of the many younger scholars who have been inspired by (and had their books blurred by) Louis J. Budd, Krauth has written a fine book that strives to give us a new synthesis of the whole of Mark Twain’s career.

Krauth’s thesis is relatively simple yet yields superbly nuanced discussions. He wrote his book to counter what he felt was an over-valuation of the transgressive Mark Twain. Rather, he argues, we must learn to see the proper vs. the improper Mark Twain as being mutually constitutive—the satiric sensibility that performs its social role by subverting social pieties, vs. the side of Twain drawn to sentimentality, melodrama, and the use of humor to reaffirm certain core values, domestic truths, and conventions. The first chapters test Krauth’s thesis on Twain’s earlier career in the West, when he rewrote his actual Western experiences into more respectable narratives (*Roughing It*), and on Twain’s early travel books *Innocents Abroad* and *A Tramp Abroad*. The middle of the book offers readings of *Life on the Mississippi* and Twain’s boy books. Krauth then turns to Twain’s complex impersonation of a “Victorian Sage” in *Connecticut Yankee*, *Pudd’nhead*, and the “Mysterious Stranger” variants, and concludes with a close reading of selected late texts, including *Following the Equator* and the autobiography. He traces productive tensions in all of these texts, not just between the different social functions of humor, but also between standard vs. vernacular diction, melodrama vs. realism, sentimentality vs. satire, and didacticism vs. description with a minimum of commentary. Each chapter presents a balanced mix of close readings and broad historical and biographical scope. None of these are exactly new topics or approaches in Twain studies, but Krauth gives them an invigorating and succinct rethinking. And he is surely right that the “subversive” Twain has been too one-sidedly stressed. If one were teaching a course devoted to the

whole of Twain's career and could assign students to buy just one secondary source, this slender, well-written volume would not be a bad choice.

Chapter two gives an immensely useful overview of the history of Western travel narratives from the Renaissance on, and places Twain's early work within the proper context of Victorian travel narratives that judged other cultures in terms of "progress, hygiene, women, morality, and religion" (55) in order to stabilize the self and assert the superiority of one's "home" culture. Krauth's readings are decently informed by developments in contemporary anthropology (such as Mary Louise Pratt) and postcolonial theory, as well as earlier consideration of these topics in Twain scholarship. He argues that *Tramp Abroad* is under-discussed, perhaps because it is more circumspect in judging other civilizations than *Innocents* and more domestic, with little wrestling with the large philosophical, religious, or cultural topics that often occupied "serious" Victorian travel writing. Krauth reads *A Tramp* as a comic anti-travel narrative in which all of Twain's announced goals (including hiking the Alps and learning German) are undone in favor of re-discovering the virtues of domesticity and gentility. There are compelling readings of the Knave of Bergen and "lost sock" episodes, plus a shrewd emphasis on the contrast between Twain's love of exterior incident vs. an inward journey reluctantly taken into hidden anxieties, especially about his own professional competence as a writer and cultural commentator.

Of Krauth's middle chapters, it makes most sense given the other works discussed in this omnibus review to focus on his reading of *Huck Finn*. In *Life on the Mississippi* and his pre-Huck boy books, Krauth claims, Twain affirmed sentimental values but was "uneasy about the aesthetic by which he represents them" (12). He found the solution in *Huck*, whose greatness derives from the ways in which the book's languages (emphasis on the plural) hold all of the dichotomies of Twain's aesthetic in productive tension. "Jim's dialect refashions the clichés it uses; Mary Jane's intensity squeezes the saccharine from her sentiments . . . and Huck's vernacular, with its incorrect grammar, odd phrasings, and poetic rhythms, vivifies his feelings. Different as Twain makes these characters . . . in making them all susceptible to the heartfelt, he establishes the moral center of the novel" (183-84). Krauth's concentration on his thesis gives him much less to say about issues of "race" than the other books under discussion here, but when he does broach the subject he is astute. For example, consider his take on the last chapters:

Although concern over the treatment of Jim has obscured it, the fact is that the Phelps household is presented—its tolerance of slavery notwithstanding—as a pretty good country place. Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas are good country people. The hypocrisy of Miss Watson, the brutality of Pap, and the pretension of the Grangerfords are all replaced here with honesty, kindness, and simplicity. (186)

In chapter seven, one of the best in the book, Krauth takes on Twain's impersonation of a Victorian "Sage"—the dispenser of bon mots, traditional morals, and reformist ideals in the midst of a money- and machinery-mad age via his public speeches and texts such as *Connecticut Yankee* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Many commentators have focused on why the tension between vernacular and genteel languages is demonstrably less successful in *Yankee* than it is in *Huck*. Krauth's take on this issue argues that "Hank looks contemptuously at aristocrat and commoner alike, denouncing them with a cynicism that reflects Twain's own darkening views"; moreover, "style and value remain divided" throughout the tale, with Twain consistently resorting to fairly formal and proper diction "as the medium for Hank's pronouncements as Sage" (198). Satiric energy is canceled by overly genteel language handled without irony. *Pudd'nhead* is read as an attempt to solve this problem at the core of *Connecticut Yankee*. *Pudd'nhead's* Sage is cryptic, covert, ironical and misunderstood, the opposite of Hank, and the text's exploration of radically fragmented selfhood shifts from the farce of "Those Extraordinary Twins" to the darker implications of the published novel. Krauth makes sensible use of earlier studies of the novel and has fine things to say about the role of the epigrams and the tension between the dog joke at the beginning vs. the use of Wilson at the end to rationalize the status quo and apparently solve the identity questions the novel raises. Valid, too, is the observation that *Pudd'nhead* is Twain's most sustained work in an ironic mode—yet one that contains ironies lost on Twain himself, especially the text's latent sexism, racism, and elitism (cf. 207-08). Krauth also gives us a fine overview of textual and interpretive issues relating to the three "Mysterious Stranger" manuscripts, and wryly concludes: "Ironically, the ideas that Twain took so seriously, and thought shocking [humans as cruel and machine-like, etc.], are commonplace" enough to be found in the sermons of Victorian preachers (218).

Krauth proves that his generation of scholars can shape a working synthesis between its impulse to stress transgression and its need to emphasize cultural boundedness. The one certain flaw in Krauth's study I saw after one reading is his odd treatment of Justin Kaplan. The thesis of Kaplan's 1966 biography *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* is in many ways parallel to Krauth's, though Krauth hardly personifies Twain's opposing personae so neatly, nor does he divide art and life as Kaplan does. Kaplan is cited in Krauth's bibliography but slighted in the text and footnotes, and the index omits him entirely. (For the record, the index should include Kaplan citations at least on pp. 190, 252, and 255-56; I may have missed other references.) *Proper Mark Twain* deserves to sell well and be reprinted, and when it is, this Oedipal slip should be properly corrected.

Ken Burns's four-hour television documentary *Mark Twain* (along with its obligatory coffee-table book) has, of course, recently raised the presence of this writer and celebrity in the public eye far more than any work of literary criticism could do. To some degree, Burns's approach to the meaning of Twain's life is a welcome diversion from the other way in which Twain has recently been in public consciousness, as a silent spectator to narrow and shrill debates about whether *Huckleberry Finn* is racist. In his documentary, Burns takes the same approach to Twain that he did for the history of jazz and baseball; that is, he emphasizes how aesthetic forms embody democratic values and undermine racism. The documentary achieves a decent amount of nuance and complexity when it involves Twain's life, especially the tension between his Samuel Clemens and Mark Twain personae. However, the only literary text of Twain's that is discussed beyond just a few sentences, *Huckleberry Finn*, is treated in an extremely simplistic way—as a satire against racism that straightforwardly celebrates the friendship between a white child and a Negro man. Burns's documentary claims that Jim is the first portrait in world literature of a “real” black person rather than a racist stereotype, one that will inevitably get readers to question their preconceptions about blacks in the same way that the book's action changes Huck. Tell that to Tom Sawyer. The audacity and simple-mindedness of such a claim is simply staggering. Perhaps it is explainable as a covert attempt to do an end-run around much of the recent arguing over *Huckleberry Finn*—but it is hardly excusable. The work of Frederick Douglass, Harriett Jacobs, and William Wells Brown—to name only three—hardly needs to be insulted to make a case for Twain's Jim. Any summary of the book's virtues that downplays its dangerous satire and dodges the controversy over the ending is just simply irresponsible. This is an especially grievous fault because Burns is a film-maker with the skill to handle nuance and contradiction, even though he is mostly drawn to hagiography. The documentary does dramatize well the recent discoveries in Twain scholarship about Twain's debt to black voices in shaping his art, and indeed uses two of those scholars, Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, as prominent commentators. Its recreation of the standard interpretation of Huck's psychological drama in the “I'll go to hell scene” in chapter thirty-one is also superb. But in making Huck's story a simple pilgrim's progress away from racism Burns insults most recent Twain scholarship and misses the only chance that will come in the mass media in years for a truly *democratic* debate about the roles the novel has played and continues to play in U.S. race relations. Teachers who use the documentary in classes will now have to provide supplemental material. Early in Burns's documentary there is a brilliant discussion about how the call “mark twain” signified to a steamboat pilot not so much safe water as the dangerous boundary between deep water and dangerous shallows. It's too bad that, in dealing with Twain's masterpiece, Burns thought he could achieve

safe passage by heading for the shallows. Twain loved controversy; why should his video biographer be shy of it?

Near the end of their swaggering and witty preface to *The Gilded Age*, Charles Dudley Warner and Mark Twain appear to be infinitely generous: “We do not even expect the critic will read the book before writing a notice of it.” Of course, a deeper game is being played. The authors have just called their critics’ bluff *and* planted the suggestion that both the negative and positive reviews of their book will contain a good number of stretchers. I don’t dispute that we are living in a second gilded age, nor that (at least within the confines of academia) some are also enduring a second “age of criticism” even more “unusual” than the one Warner and Twain tweaked. Within and without academia, Americans are so proud of our decadence we would need several contemporary Mark Twains to take soundings of our delusions—beginning with how we define decadence as virtuous. At the risk of angering the ironic ghosts of *The Gilded Age*, I will set down for the record that I have indeed read all of the works that I here give “notice” of, and, even more scandalously, enjoyed them and intend to read and consult them again. I suspect I won’t be the only one doing so, particularly those of us who are hired scouts leading students through Twain’s landscape. And—*contra* Burns—I’ve also found that several different and conflicting points of reference are best if you want to mark twain. The six authors discussed here certainly give us that. The current state of Clemens commentary shows that the death of literary criticism has been somewhat exaggerated.

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