The Emergence of Mark Twain’s Missouri: Regional Theory and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

by Robert Jackson

The contribution of regional criticism to studies of American literature and culture has been held back in our time by the assumption that the region enforces a very limiting provincialism upon its communities and, thus, its literary products. Such an assumption has emerged, perhaps understandably, in a cultural context in which the question of what constitutes a more universally American identity dominates thought nearly to the point of obsession. And yet there is a persistent sense that the individual region in the United States remains, somehow, a crucial unit of culture. Considering this issue in the most general spatial and cultural senses, the critic W. H. New points out that the very question whether “authors can ever not be in space yields either absurd answers or openly political ones—political statements that constitute new definitions of the relation between spaces in a society” (14). Regarding literature in particular, New writes:

Defining the significance that particular spaces have for us, we parenthetically define or at least hint at our preconceptions about the significance of statements that will emerge from those given spaces, locales, regions. The notion of region, that is, contains within it a hidden notion of total structure, and it is often the artifice and the emotional reality of this implied total structure that literature encodes. (14—15)

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This statement formulates the capacity of notions of region, the knowledge of specific geographic landscapes and their cultures, and the explicit and implicit significance in their eventual representative voices, to inform literary texts. What I will call a regional reading of any literary text, then, if it is to apprehend the region’s “hidden notion” informing literature, will require an understanding of the region’s intricacies, of the singularities of its moment and topology, and also, of course, of its emergence from and within a national context. The potential value of this method would seem to reside both in a literary exposition that reveals new meaning in the text and also, somewhat incidentally but not unimportantly, in a qualification of the strains of national criticism that have attempted to frame any previous understanding of the literature.

In an American context, the national model of empire follows its own peculiar, profoundly complex set of relations within its national borders. And in this setting it seems that the region, either in seeking to reproduce the national model on a smaller scale or in fashioning itself in some other way, cannot avoid, at some point, a confrontation with that complexity, and the realization that America’s tangled national history and culture constitute a great measure of its inheritance, for better or for worse. It may be instructive in this connection to note that even the region’s attempt to claim some kind of authentic identity apart from the nation personifies exactly that paradoxically individualistic quality of the American national character.

Perhaps attention to a specific literary product, and to its grounding in a particular American regional context, will make this kind of complexity clearer. And since a highly suspicious reactionary motive has often motivated the tendency to retreat from nation to region, it is probably safest to consider a literary text that has been universally acknowledged as an archetypally American model, as an undisputed and permanent member of the national literary canon, and as a work that transcends the presumably narrow provincial limits of the region and engages the presumably larger national themes and concerns. Perhaps no American book could be more exemplary under these criteria, or provide a better case study for this kind of regional reading, than *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Twain’s novel, of course, is widely considered to be a definitively American literary text. And yet, if the arguments of New and others are to be taken seriously, if the region does indeed offer a particular and “appropriate” critical framework for studies of literature, a regional reading of *Huckleberry Finn* should be productive and valuable in the context of any understanding of the novel (New 13).
Descending from Twain’s native Hannibal, Missouri (renamed St. Petersburg in the novel) to Louisiana, the Mississippi Valley does indeed offer a singular, irreplaceable setting for the story, to the extent that any conception of its events elsewhere would seem, to borrow New’s term, absurd. In light of Twain’s fidelity in his writing to the actual geography of the river valley, this point hardly needs to be forced. But Huckleberry Finn offers an especially interesting case because of the unusual process of its writing, a process that also renders in some detail Twain’s own experiences of his Missouri youth and his later relationship to the region in which he would locate his story.

By 1882 Twain had lived away from his native region for more than twenty years—nearly half his lifetime and virtually all his adult life. Having spent the Civil War years primarily out West, and having settled in New England in the 1870s, his personal connection to the town of Hannibal, the state of Missouri, and the Mississippi River of his youth may be described as more tenuous and perhaps nostalgic than immanent and contemporary. His 1882 return to Hannibal, and his steamboat journey down the river he had not traveled since his brief career as a pilot ended in 1860, are documented in Life on the Mississippi, which he completed upon returning to his adopted home in the Northeast. And while no reader will confuse Twain’s erratic, uneven writing in this volume with the incendiary performance of Huckleberry Finn, it provides a fortuitous expression of Twain’s own complex, often misunderstood or ignored relationship with the region’s peculiar identities. And it is his experience of this primary relationship, which is the object of consideration here, which sets the stage for his spectacular success in the writing of Huckleberry Finn. Even more importantly for any regional reading of the novel itself, the nature of this central relationship between Twain and his native region addresses many critical questions within the text itself, and, perhaps also, will contribute to a vital overall reading of the novel, especially in light of the vast body of national criticism that has accumulated since its original publication.

The best counterexample to this regional methodological approach is constituted by what might be called the more prevalent national thesis, emerging from a clearly and consciously national gaze, and attempting to formulate and extend a comprehensive theme across all internal delineations of genre and space. Leo Marx offers just such a thesis in his 1956 essay, “The Pilot and the Passenger: Landscape Conventions and the Style of Huckleberry Finn.” Marx advances the claim that Twain’s various narrative strategies in his Mississippi River writings—The Adventures
of *Tom Sawyer, Life on the Mississippi,* and *Huckleberry Finn*—reveal his struggle to express, in ways more complete and satisfying to himself, his relationship to the region where these books are set (51). This argument hinges on the head-on collision between a kind of Edenic pastoral ideal and the increasingly threatening technological realities intruding into that natural space. As is suggested by the title of Marx’s great national opus on the same theme, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America,* the direct conflict between these binary forces comes to be viewed as the primary and shaping force in American culture. Marx sees the nation subjected, over and over, to versions of this eternal, recapitulated struggle, and to the revealing, often uneasy compromise of these two driving forces.

Marx applies this thesis directly to Twain’s work by contrasting what he considers Twain’s two dominant ways of viewing the landscape: the pastoral and the industrial. The pastoral view is likened to that of a steamboat passenger enjoying the beauty afforded by the leisurely river journey. The industrial view, by contrast, is likened to that of a veteran steamboat pilot whose gaze is no longer free to indulge in such a sentimental, superficial image of nature, but who must constantly interpret the landscape warily and see it explicitly in terms of dangers to be avoided. The conclusion Marx reaches from this basic dichotomy has important implications:

In *Life on the Mississippi* each of these ways of apprehending the river characterizes a particular mode of life. One might say a particular culture. One culture is exemplified by the uninitiated spectators and the ignorant novice pilot; the other is reflected in the melancholy wisdom of the older man who tells the story. There are many differences between these two ways of life, but the most important is the relation to nature fostered by each. The passengers are strangers to the river. They lack the intimate knowledge of its physical character a pilot must possess. As spectators, well trained to appreciate painted landscapes, they know what to look for. They enjoy the play of light on the water. This aesthetic response to nature, given the American geography, Clemens inevitably associates with the cultivated, urban East. But the pilot, on the other hand, is of the West, and his calling such that he can scarcely afford to look upon the river as a soft and beautiful picture. He is responsible for the steamboat. To navigate safely he must keep his mind on the menacing “reality” masked by the trail that shines like silver. (“Pilot” 51)
With these two regionally representative views battling for Twain’s full recognition, Marx suggests, *Life on the Mississippi* stands as a testament to his struggle to find a balanced narrative voice without betraying or abandoning either view. Such a reading also implies one explanation for the book’s notoriously inconsistent quality of writing: Twain, having been both passenger and pilot, eastern tourist and western native, simply never found an adequate authorial perspective, a single voice that could respond to the challenge of expressing the contradictions of the landscape, and the unevenness of the text reflects this formal difficulty.

But in his formulation of the pastoral/industrial, or passenger/pilot, dilemma, Marx implicitly and drastically oversimplifies the character of Twain’s relationship to his Missouri background. In explaining the style of Huck’s narrative voice as the product and resolution of two warring social visions, Marx also fails to acknowledge the inestimable psychological influence on Twain of his 1882 return to the region. Marx reads *Life on the Mississippi* primarily to compare its descriptive passages with those in *Huckleberry Finn*, but he seems virtually blind to what the former text reveals about Twain’s profound emotional experiences during the journey, and how the intensity of Twain’s return to his native region prepared him to resume work on the previously shelved manuscript that would become *Huckleberry Finn*. Ultimately, Marx’s particular national thesis, having set out to prove its own ambitious claim concerning the pastoral and the industrial, falls short of providing a satisfying reading of *Huckleberry Finn* in part because of its failure to appreciate the complexity of the Missouri of Twain’s childhood and Twain’s evolving, lifelong emotional relationship to his native region.

The complicated, often contradictory identities of the Missouri of Twain’s youth are almost entirely ignored in criticism of his work; Marx’s oversight in this area is more the rule than the exception. Critics variously refer to the state as part of the North, the South, and the West—everywhere, it seems, except the East where Twain settled in adult life—often to suit their purposes in the advancement of a specific argument. Consider, for example, Marx’s comparison, quoted above, of the region’s western cultural mentality in contrast to that of the aesthetic East. But even when this kind of rhetorical appropriation on the part of many critics is exposed, it must be admitted that Missouri, approached as a regional construction, has indeed predisposed itself to such uncertainties, both geographically and culturally.

Missouri had always been a home for slavery, and its entry into the Union wrought havoc for the latitudinal symmetry of the country’s
North/South division. The clearest and most literal expression of this disorder came in 1820 with what would become known as the Missouri Compromise. The compromise attempted to deal with slavery in two ways that appear almost ridiculous in their contradiction to one another. First, national leaders agreed that the southern border of Missouri would forever—that is, as the nation edged farther to the West—demarcate the limits of slavery: all new states north of the border would be admitted as free states, and those to the south would be slave states. Second, and rather absurdly from a strictly geometric surveying perspective, Missouri itself was constituted as a slave state, and thus bulged out on the north side of the slave border. This exception would allow Maine to enter the Union as a free state at the same time, and thus preserve the tenuous balance of power between North and South in Congress.

As a political act, the compromise seemed to suit everyone in power, at least for the time being. As a cultural act, it served only to illustrate the diverse nation’s irreconcilable and messy realities which no single leader or group could resolve, and which, indeed, the very constitution of the national government appears to have been inadequate to confront. Of course, the compromise was successful only as a temporary measure, delaying the crisis that would culminate, forty years later, in the Civil War. Missouri’s role in this kind of temporary compromise, the uniqueness of its geographic placement before and after the 1820 national remapping, and the singularity of its particular cultural identities that made such an internally contradictory act of legislation desirable or even possible, testify to the complexity native to the state and its relationship to the nation as a whole.

Most Missourians did not own any slaves during Twain’s youth, and those who did generally had no more than one or two. By 1890, only those with a sentimental attachment to the institution or to individual slaves had resisted the lucrative opportunities to sell slaves to planters in the Deep South. There was little plantation culture in Missouri, with the minor exception of a few counties north of the Missouri River in the central part of the state and along the upper Mississippi River (which included Twain’s boyhood homes); thus the southern half of Missouri, with generally inferior soil and hillier, rockier terrain in the Ozarks area, was in a crucial cultural sense the least “southern” part of the state. During the years just before the Civil War, slaves accounted for a mere ten percent of the state’s population, a figure far lower than in Deep South states. In addition, the population growth of the state during Twain’s youth included vast numbers of anti-slavery German immigrants and
pragmatic New England business families, important waves that followed earlier settlements by the slaveholding (or at least pro-slavery) Virginians, Kentuckians, and Tennesseans of which Twain's own family had been a part. These groups further complicated Missouri's sentiments about slavery, forging new industrial and political alliances and producing increasingly complex and diverse visions of the state's future. This does not suggest that most people acted or even spoke out against slavery, but simply that the simmering ambiguity of the state during Twain's early youth should not be grouped clumsily with the much more confrontational secessionism of Deep South states like Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

A brief glance at the "supercharged atmosphere" of the cultural and political life in St. Louis during this period, and increasingly in the later 1850s, gives the impression of an almost guerrilla chaos (Primm, Lion 227). With countless ideological factions, several competing political machines, a citizenry of diverse origins and languages, a vigorous and prolific local press with perspectives and languages as various as its readers, and an explosive business economy with interests in farming, industry, and river and railroad trades, the only thing absent during this period was any kind of consensus on key cultural and political questions. Twain's travels during his early years as a riverboat pilot enabled him to witness much of this culture firsthand, and to view it alongside the more polar regional distinctions of the industrial North upriver and the southern plantation culture of the lower Mississippi. This experience may also have left him with an increasingly problematic sense of his own place, his own kind of border status, in a national context that was seeking more and more to define itself in the strictly binary terms of northern unionism or southern secessionism.

In its own moment of crisis, finally, a deeply fractious Missouri remained loyal to the North during the Civil War, with economic motives and fears about the risks of war taking precedence over the state's historical connection to slavery. During the war itself, the state provided the setting for countless local skirmishes, often highly intramural in nature, including many among hardy civilians who distrusted their neighbors. The state never gained anything like the single-minded momentum that expressed the fervor and decisiveness of less ambivalent states on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Missourians had spread their votes widely among the four presidential candidates in 1860, with the moderate, or, as some charged, absurdly contradictory, Stephen Douglas carrying the state by a narrow margin. Abra-
ham Lincoln’s unconditional Unionism, perhaps too absolute a stance in such a state, won him a mere eleven percent of the statewide vote and last place in Missouri. In effect, what historian James Neal Primm says about the inestimably consequential 1860 elections may be applied more generally to the state’s identity and overall history during this period: “Missourians had chosen the middle ground” (“Missouri” 13).

The “middle ground” here is indeed a paradoxical conception. It is a construction that is both central and devoid of precise location; both centered and, somehow, lacking a firm center. The phrase seems to express aptly Missouri’s desire to maintain the status quo in its public affairs, and to suggest that its individuals would rather negotiate each new moment improvisationally, as they had no doubt been doing all along, without recourse to a histrionic, potentially cataclysmic confrontation of national armies. This suggests, for my purposes here, that the Missouri of this period, with all its historical and geographic uniqueness, may be considered as a distinct region in the cultural life of the larger nation.

Mark Twain’s own behavior during the war was notoriously erratic and, to say the least, improvisational; it may be summarized as a series of failed attempts to participate in the increasingly public or collective national culture, followed each time by a kind of ritualistic, and very personal, escape from such developments: a lighting out, of sorts. Without endowing Missouri with a wholly deterministic power over the identities of its residents, Twain’s behavior does seem quite consistent with his native region’s own erratic, often contradictory character. Dissatisfied with each and every single voice in the increasingly partisan crisis, the indecisive Twain seems that much more representative of the very culture within which and against which he is struggling for his own identity and humanity. Considered in this way, Twain’s literary persona, traditionally canonized, quite publicly and nationally, for its typically and consummately “American” character, can be seen as a most revealing, ironic marvel in its own right.

It should be clear by now, even after a survey of Twain’s Missouri as admittedly brief as this, that as a region it cannot be narrowed into simple terms or characterized by categories of pastoral and industrial, as Leo Marx tries to do. And as the region itself demands a more faceted understanding of its unique qualities, so do Twain’s relationship to it and, eventually, his literary work influenced by it.

By the time Twain journeyed down the Mississippi by steamboat in 1882, he was feeling the stress of more than one blocked narrative voice. His work on Huckleberry Finn had simply stopped, the unfinished manu-
script had been shelved for several years, and he despaired of making any headway. His travel writings that would become *Life on the Mississippi* were slow in coming, and he found the small bits he did write to be so forced and unwilling that he was casting about for other material to fatten that manuscript. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, his most recently published work, had gained him recognition and some financial success, but Twain himself had never found the book itself entirely satisfactory, and since that time he had felt increasing pressure to meet his own and his readers’ heightened literary demands.

As it went, Twain did not experience the trip in either of Marx’s senses, aesthetically attuned passenger or wary pilot. In fact, these designations seem almost embarrassingly narrow in the face of what Twain referred to as “this hideous trip,” and in the context of the subsequently published *Life on the Mississippi*, whose subject matter and authorial tone range from the merely pessimistic and unhappy to the outright morbid and terrifying (Bridgman 107). “Even if Mark Twain had not been congenitally disposed to look apprehensively on existence,” Richard Bridgman writes, “his experience of the trip and during the composition of the *Life* would have encouraged uneasiness” (117). Twain’s journey down the river he had not traveled since before the Civil War, his visit to Hannibal and reunion with many people, living and deceased, from his childhood, and his explorations of the entire region which he had left behind for good nearly twenty years earlier, rocked him with a chorus of memories, emotions, and visceral associations whose power over him was more authoritative than ever. And while he probably anticipated a sense of nostalgia or even a jarring loose of certain long forgotten memories before the trip, it seems unlikely that he could have foreseen the engulfing intensity and particularly dark character of this experience. Had he in fact been able to foresee such turns, the question of whether he would have taken the trip at all would become a very real one, exposing Twain to charges of masochism and an almost bottomless despair.

Perhaps this overstates the subjective nature of the trip. But throughout his own account of the journey, Twain seems to be touring a gallery of demoralization and decay. From the presence of bridges and other unhappy reminders of encroaching industry along the upper Mississippi, to the grotesque particulars of burial practices in New Orleans, his view is predominantly negative. Overall, his visual landscape is encoded with countless symbols and reminders of death itself. His initially hopeful visit to Hannibal frustrates him because its people appear to sag with age and failure, and he suggests that the town’s superficial image of health
only masks its underlying fatigue. His worst prejudices about the Deep South and its corrupt, moribund society systematically prove themselves true. The steamboat, beloved and transcendent icon of Twain’s youth, is now so rare that its few remaining dinosaurs appear almost unbearably grotesque and prehistoric to his eyes. The landscape itself, especially as Twain penetrates deeper and deeper into the heart of the South, is littered with ugly associations of the Civil War. He encounters many battle sites whose terrain serves, literally, as a monument to a scarred, even tragic, history. No wonder Twain used the term “hideous” to describe his trip. One wonders how he managed to survive the interminable ordeal at all and senses the great relief he must have felt upon returning to his adopted home in the Northeast.

In his discussion of the narrative style in *Life on the Mississippi*, Bridgman plots the course by which Twain’s account of his experiences as a steamboat pilot deliver him back to earlier and earlier recollections of childhood. As if to suggest a kind of original source for the sorts of dark and deathly forces that Twain seems everywhere during his 1882 trip, the common image in such recollections is that of a child whose most basic and elemental fears are often realized but never placated by others. Bridgman writes:

Mark Twain’s hardest task as a cub pilot had been to force himself to steer his boat directly into “a solid straight wall” of darkness, trusting that it would fall back and make way for him. That imaginary bluff, which still produced nightmares, was associated with his profoundest fear—and guilt. “Solid blackness—a crackless bank of it”—generated unnerved terror for him, and although it was specifically associated with the river, it also went back to childhood fears. When Twain was a boy, the night after a companion had drowned, “a ferocious thunder-storm” struck, there was “inky blackness,” then lightning, “then the solid darkness shut down again.” On this nostalgic trip, that black wall loomed over him, again and again.

(107)

On this “nostalgic trip,” Twain’s native region literally whips up storms whose blinding flashes of light serve only to punctuate the ever-threatening, deathly darkness. Bridgman even goes so far as to suggest that a more appropriate title to Twain’s volume might have been “Death on the Mississippi” (107). But Twain’s particular fears are more disturbing because of the yawning time lapse between the events of his early childhood and the 1882 journey. And while the book never reaches a fully con-
conscious sense of the location of these primal fears in Twain's youth or of their subsequent lack of resolution (instead, and perhaps because of a self-protective refusal or inability to recognize such fears in himself, projecting those fears upon the geographic and cultural landscapes of his native region), there is a strong sense in Twain’s narrative voice that the 1882 experience of his native region touched him at his deepest and most vulnerable (and most heavily defended) levels, and in ways only hinted at by the book’s uneven writing and ubiquitous flirtation with death. Without attempting a more in-depth reconstruction of Twain’s psyche with his travel writings as a map, it is enough to state at this point that Twain’s journey, along with the writing and 1883 publication of Life on the Mississippi, constituted powerful influences on him just at the moment he was returning to the now dusty opening chapters of Huckleberry Finn. Bridgman again:

[Life on the Mississippi] is an exceedingly uneven performance, broken backed, evasive, patchy, but with some extraordinary segments in it. Most remarkable is its demonstration of Mark Twain’s reflecting first on his apprenticeship and then moving further back into his youth, releasing memories of humiliation and terror. The sense he revivified in the Life of the anarchic dangers of the world, of men’s untrustworthiness, and of his own uncertain role in this threatening environment carried over into the middle reaches of Huckleberry Finn. Although the trip down the river had made him a boy again, this boy was no longer the confident, comfortable fantasist Tom but the homeless indigent Huck, on the run from a world that gave him nightmares at night and then embodied them by day in a sordid and frightening reality. Writing the Life had been less a trip down the Mississippi than one down into Twain’s psyche.

(119-120)

Bridgman’s conclusion here, about the fundamentally self-referential, psychological aspect of Twain’s Life as he was returning his attention to Huckleberry Finn, suggests the potential value of a regional reading of the latter novel. Recalling New’s formulation that “the notion of region . . . contains within it a hidden notion of total structure, and it is often the artifice and the emotional reality of this implied total structure that literature encodes,” Bridgman’s assessment of Twain’s work provides clues to both the “hidden notion of total structure” that is revealed in Twain’s own conception of his native region during that period of his life and the “emotional reality” imbedded in that highly subjective conception.
In light of the region’s curious and complex history in the United States, with all the distinctly American connotations of empire and colony, republicanism and individualism, determinism and freedom, characterizing its space; now that Twain’s native region has been considered with some small appreciation for its complex and often ambiguous geography, history and culture; and now that Twain’s own return to and experience of that region, after some twenty years and one thousand miles had divided the spaces of his youth and adulthood, have been seen in their immediate influence on his authorial sensibility in Life on the Mississippi; here, finally, something of the weight and momentum of the region, in all its history and paradoxical force, may be felt in the turning of Twain’s attention to Huckleberry Finn. New’s earlier point, on the absurdity of the question whether “authors can ever not be in space,” is well taken in such a context, and informs also the critical attitude of the regional reading which can, at last, and like Twain the author was finally able to do, turn to the novel itself.

The premise of Huckleberry Finn—a raft journey down the Mississippi around 1845—should be understood in the context of all the regional concerns discussed above. Were it simply an anti-slavery novel, in the vein of the many produced before the Civil War primarily by northeastern abolitionists, Huck and Jim could have just crossed the Mississippi, fled into the interior of Illinois, and gone directly to Canada or the upper Ohio Valley. Were it simply a dystopian critique of society in general, Huck could have gone west to the territory right away. Of course, Huck does neither of these things. Instead, his journey is designed to resemble, on many levels, Twain’s own 1882 steamboat tour. The obvious parallels between the latter trip and Huck’s journey scarcely need mentioning by now: Huck’s travels in Huckleberry Finn reconstruct the central portion of Twain’s trip with a consistency easily fathomed in the natural progression of the river’s southward flow. The symmetry of these journeys, and Twain’s desire to travel the same river not as passenger, not as pilot, but as author, inform a very specific kind of narrative.

The differences between Twain’s narrative, experiences and emotions in Life on the Mississippi, and those of Huck in Huckleberry Finn, are also striking. Consider Twain’s recollection of the nightmares he suffered as a child, nightmares which his 1882 journey recalls and which he never seems to have overcome emotionally. In Huckleberry Finn, the very structure of the novel leaves no space for nightmares as Twain knew them: Huck and Jim are awake during their nights, cruising the surface of the glassy river. The weather remains largely clear and placid, and instead of
risking the intrusion of unfriendly dreams, the two travelers are free to meditate on the beauty of the starry skies. This setting even brings the famously irreligious Twain to the brink of metaphysical inquiry, qualified, of course, by the unique perceptions and articulations of Huck and Jim. Relaxing on their raft securely in the middle of the night, they discuss the genesis and laws of the stars, exchanging hypotheses on the origin of the heavens.

To suggest that this aspect of the novel's structure rescued Twain from the problem of his nightmares is only to understand his authorial strategy partially. For in inverting time as he did, in turning the night into day for Huck, Twain also turned day into night. So while Huck's opportunity to experience the night comfortably and securely, in the protective presence of Jim, created a kind of healing or redemptive vision for Twain, it also allowed him to channel his nightmarish associations into Huck's days, into the often ugly civilized society that serves as Twain's satirical target throughout the journey. On their best days, Huck and Jim sleep the daylight hours away rather than interacting with anyone from society: each foray onto dry land precipitates a more foreboding and risky feeling than the previous one. Twain's masterful inversion of day and night thus frees him to utilize his own convoluted, ambivalent intimacy with his native region as a brilliant literary device, with important narrative implications.

This authorial strategy makes it clear that Huck's journey is guided, to some degree at least, by a kind of ritual repetition of unresolved emotional trauma, in which Twain's novel is being constructed from the past experience in healing, redemptive terms. One of the finest examples of this guiding force comes in chapter fifteen, when a thick fog descends on the river during the night and separates Huck, in his canoe, from Jim and the raft. Not only does this episode directly articulate Twain's own intense fear of the solid, visually impenetrable wall of darkness into which he was forced to venture alone as a child and again as a cub pilot, but it also reveals the extent to which the author's narrative reconstructs, in ritual fashion, a similar emotional experience, with important differences in outcome and tone that directly respond to the needs of his psychological condition.

At the beginning of the chapter, Huck paddles ahead of the raft in order to fasten a line to a tree and thus secure the raft for the night. He prefers dry land, with all its treacheries, to the prospect of facing down the fog. Even with Huck on land, the distant sight of the fog incites an immediate, overwhelming, mortal fear in the boy:
I see the fog closing down, and it made me so sick and scared I couldn’t budge for most half a minute it seemed to me—and then there warn’t no raft in sight; you couldn’t see twenty yards. I jumped into the canoe and run back to stern, and grabbed the paddle and set her back a stroke. But she didn’t come. I was in such a hurry I hadn’t untied her. I got up and tried to untie her, but I was so excited my hands shook so I couldn’t hardly do anything with them.

As soon as I got started I took out after the raft, hot and heavy, right down the towhead. That was all right as far as it went, but the towhead warn’t sixty yards long, and the minute I flew by the foot of it I shot out into the solid white fog, and hadn’t no more idea which way I was going than a dead man. (Twain 78–79)

This passage describes an experience of fear that is rare for Huck; even his basic desire to rid himself of the uncomfortable apparel of society seems a minor inconvenience by comparison. Huck’s defining characteristic, his industrious improvisation in any situation before him, is tested so severely that he finds himself unable to react creatively to the approaching wall of fog, to respond at all, which is a condition he associates with death itself.

What follows is a harrowing struggle in the thick fog. Huck knows that his options, to paddle aimlessly with no sense of direction or to sit still while the fear courses through his veins, are equally bad. He bemoans the difficulty of locating Jim and the raft, and mourns, rather existentially, the fact that that one’s sensory information is so unreliable in a fog. Finally, upon realizing that an island has split him from Jim and the raft, struggling to avoid the dangers of the eddying currents, and noting his desolate condition, “dismal and lonesome out in a fog that way, by yourself, in the night,” Huck collapses with fatigue, and the river carries him sleeping downstream (80).

After envisioning Huck’s experience with the terrifying unknown and surpassing the limits of the boy’s courage and ability to endure such a fear by himself, Twain follows with the mercy of a loving parent and rescues Huck from his hopeless fate. Huck reports:

When I waked up the stars was shining bright, the fog was all gone, and I was spinning down a big bend stern first. First I didn’t know where I was; I thought I was dreaming; and when things begun to come back to me, they seemed to come up dim out of last week.

(69)
This is no dream for Huck: reality is kinder—the reality, that is, with which Twain is able to endow Huck’s narrative universe. And Twain’s device for distancing and softening the fear is, in a profoundly revealing stroke, Huck’s sense that the pain of the experience took place in the far off, and now harmless, past. It is time, not space, that separates one from such horrors. Twain, perhaps, would know.

But the supreme measure of Twain’s ritually repetitive narrative impulse in this episode comes soon after Huck awakens, when he paddles on and finds the raft and Jim. This reunification of the boy with his friend, protector, and surrogate parent, comes at a crucial moment. Jim’s simple presence here, to say nothing of the concern and love he expresses when he himself awakens to find Huck safely back on the raft, works in direct rebuttal to Huck’s nightmarish suffering in the fog. It is as if the boy had awakened from a bad dream, only to find himself under the soothing, protective gaze of a comforting parental figure. In providing this episode with just such an outcome, Twain fashions an emotional presence with obvious personal relevance.

How then to read the chapter’s final exchange? Huck invents a tall tale and convinces Jim that he had merely dreamt the fog and their separation. Jim, whose ignorance and gullibility are exposed when he sees the tattered raft as evidence to the contrary, angrily denounces Huck for shaming him, and stalks off into the raft’s shelter. Finally, Huck apologizes for his deception, which is the last of its kind, and feels great relief, not regret, in doing so. Considering the intensity of the preceding emotional struggles in the chapter, it seems this final exchange deserves comparably serious critical attention.

The fact of Huck’s evolving conscience is made plain in the exchange, but the nature of this evolution, in light of Twain’s complicated authorial motives, deserves close consideration. Perhaps, in his attempt to convince Jim of the unreality of the fog and their resulting separation, Huck is actually celebrating the fact of their reunification in his own prankish, playful way. By telling Jim that it had all been a dream, just a dream and nothing more, Huck reaffirms his triumph over the horrors of the fog. His story belittles the threat of the fog as dreamlike, fictional; like Twain himself, Huck is energized by the power of his own authorial, narrative act, by his ability to ritually rewrite, reconstruct, and thus demonstrate his mastery over a very real experience of trauma. Even though he preys on Jim’s ignorance here, Huck fully expects him to share the joke, the glorious conclusion of which is their emergence from the nightmarish ordeal together.
In any case, it upsets and genuinely surprises Huck to witness Jim’s anger and offense at the elaborate lie, and the final emotional reality in his apology is that Huck needs Jim in the manner of a child who needs, in psychological as well as physical senses, its parents. Twain seems acutely aware of this as well, making sure to unite them again, by way of the apology this time rather than the clearing away of the fog, before the chapter is concluded. Huck’s deceptive fiction-making seems to be, in its roundabout, adolescent, Tom-Sawyerish way, nothing less than a testament to his sheer emotional investment in the person of Jim. Strange as the idea strikes him, Huck seems to want to submit, he seems to desire the kind of fixed authority and moral center provided by Jim’s presence in his life. And the fact that the apology repairs their friendship, especially on the heels of such an overpowering experience of terror, reveals a great deal about the specific manner in which Twain’s own redemptive psychic journey coincides with Huck’s evolving conscience, particularly in its crucial racial aspects, in the narrative.

Most essentially, what Huck seeks from Jim is love, that most universal of human needs. *Huckleberry Finn* at this moment and several others achieves quite a remarkable expressiveness of the boy’s potential to experience love. Considered in light of Twain’s own emotional associations of youth and his native region, the often cited elements of moral awakening and social satire in the novel fade somewhat in prominence, at least by comparison to this less critically discussed but clearly more driving and underlying emotional presence. And the racial implications of Jim and Huck’s relationship are given a more appropriate grounding in the novel, especially in light of Twain’s own boyhood trauma and unrecognized need for relief and comfort.

In the very next chapter a steamboat appears literally out of nowhere and crashes through the raft, and Twain abandoned the manuscript for several years. Two general explanations for this sudden accident and prolonged writer’s block are possible, and they both seem to emerge from the same experience that shapes so much of Twain’s emotional identity in chapter fifteen. Perhaps the experience of reaching this level of emotional intensity unnerved Twain himself in the fog episode; perhaps, that is, his narrative method and material struck so close to home that he sensed a threat to himself, and thus destroyed the raft as soon as possible, as a kind of self-protective precaution to prevent other intense fears from surfacing and demanding conscious attention. The other possibility is that the reunited Huck and Jim constituted such a glorious emotional moment that Twain felt a certain closure or completeness in what
had just passed. The steamboat here would serve effectively to provide an end to the story, to get out, perhaps, while the getting was good.

Several facts make the former hypothesis more attractive. The first is Twain himself: without even pointing to his legendary cynicism in life and his aversion to the neatness of happy endings, it should be clear that his basic associations with the worlds of his youth and his fiction were deeply problematic. Of course, the attempt at ritual redemption in his narrative method, whose aim is eternally hopeful or, at least, pragmatically therapeutic, assumes a vision and prior experience of life that is damaging and severe. Twain’s tendency would clearly be toward evasive action, favoring flight over any final triumph. In addition to this, the steamboat is characterized as a fiendish monster rising from the depths of hell. Emerging suddenly from the gray fog, “she bulged out, big and scary, with a long row of wide-open furnace doors shining like red-hot teeth, and her monstrous bows and guards hanging right over us” (91).

This is, incidentally, the kind of image Marx places at the center of his national thesis on pastoral and industrial conflicts: the steamboat as machine, that relentless, intrusive force crashing through the middle of the pastoral American Eden. Marx is right, of course, to recognize both of those elements here. But it should be clear also that the steamboat in this episode is weighted down with a great deal more meaning than Marx is willing or able to concede. In addition to its obviously industrial connotation, the steamboat has an infernal and threatening significance to Twain which, as his use of it at this particular moment in his narrative makes quite obvious, is directly connected to the contested psychological and emotional terrain of his youth. Likewise, the raft that is smashed (but not destroyed, only to return several chapters later, rather too conveniently, along with Twain’s renewed interest in the novel) is no mere symbol of a pastoral dream, no simple Eden, but retains what can be understood now as an almost impossibly overdetermined, and often contradictory, complex of meanings in the space of Twain’s love story.

So far, there has been only slight mention of the regional influence upon what is perhaps the single most defining characteristic in Huckleberry Finn: Huck’s first person narrative voice. This is not an oversight meant to downplay the possible impact of the notion of region on Twain’s use of this voice. On the contrary, it seems undeniable that Huck’s very localized vernacular style, providing the formal structure of the novel through which everything is experienced, is itself the best evidence for Twain’s experience of his native region. The author’s explanatory note at the beginning of the novel, pointing out the care and preci-
sion with which the various dialects of the characters have been recorded, is especially significant because it follows the famous “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” (2). Even through his humor, Twain seems to be telling his readers that the fictional world they are about to visit will be less accessible by way of events than by way of the language and voice in which they are related. He defends his vernacular narrative on the grounds of careful research and “personal familiarity” with its subtleties, a gesture that expresses again Twain’s intimacy with his fictional world (2).

Critics, including Marx, generally see in Huck’s narrative voice the key Twain used to unlock his greatest literary powers. Marx himself considers Huck’s voice to be a kind of golden mean between two contradictory and mutually exclusive views of the world. And criticism rightly points to the physicality of evocation achieved in Huckleberry Finn, noting also that most of Twain’s other writing fails to match this level of intensity. But considering the increasingly complex view of the region itself and Twain’s equally complex relation to it, as have been discussed here in some detail, it should become clear that Huck’s voice plays a much greater number of roles than is often realized or acknowledged. For example: the opportunity for Twain to assume Huck’s persona, most directly in the use of his narrative voice, has major emotional repercussions of the kind revealed in the fog episode in chapter fifteen. Marx’s identification of the celebratory tone of certain passages and the foreshadowing tone of others is certainly true, but even within these Huck’s voice operates in subtle ways. He is able to express sadness and loneliness within ecstatic set pieces like his description of the sunrise. He infuses his sense of justice with a humane pity at the sight of the tarred and feathered scoundrels who had so recently taken advantage of Jim and himself. And it is Twain’s unequivocal triumph to express this paradox of such a complex human identity and range of personal expression within a specific geographic milieu so well with the language of his native region. Or perhaps Twain had less to do with such success than is generally granted, and the accumulation of his personal relations to this region gained its own momentum and emerged spontaneously as Huck’s irresistible voice. In any event, Twain’s original suspicion, that “Huck Finn’s autobiography,” as he originally envisioned it, would be, on the basis of its narrator’s unique point of view, a more successful venture than Tom Sawyer’s externally narrated tale had been, proved itself true to
a degree that, as with so many other aspects of his novel, Twain himself probably could not have understood in advance.

Another native Missourian wrote the introduction to a 1950 edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, though as writers and thinkers, T. S. Eliot and Mark Twain may seem at first to have come from different planets. In fact, Eliot and Twain shared the same native state, with the differences that Eliot was born some fifty years later, had no personal memory of the region before the Civil War and Reconstruction, and spent his early years in an affluent household in the urban and increasingly industrial city of St. Louis. He hints at his own relationship to the Missouri of his early youth in his introduction to the novel, recalling his own experience of the Mississippi River’s unpredictability: “In my own childhood, it was not unusual for the spring freshet to interrupt railway travel; and then the traveller to the East had to take the steamboat from the levee up to Alton, at a higher level on the Illinois shore, before he could begin his rail journey” (198). This is not, to say the least, the voice of a young boy about to light out for the territory. Eliot’s experience of Missouri seems to have had the reverse effect on him, and he set off from there to the East, and later to Europe, in search of older places, more traditional institutions, more centralized orders. In a related sense, two famous statements from his introduction to *Huckleberry Finn* seem to say less about Twain’s novel itself than about Eliot’s own desire for it to meet the preconceived formal and critical requirements he believed were required for canonization of any literary work. And overall, it might be added, one of the most striking aspects of Eliot’s introduction is his repeated emphasis on *Huckleberry Finn* as Twain’s only masterpiece, as a work worthy to share the company of other acknowledged classics. The impulse to classify, prioritize, and rank the novel, to isolate and quantify its status as a literary monument in some rarefied and idealized critical space, competes, fiercely, with the boyish impulse simply to read and enjoy it.

In the first of these two statements, “For without some kind of God, Man is not even very interesting,” Eliot is attempting to apply a kind of mythological standard to the story’s “strong brown god,” the Mississippi River (201). Such a contentious statement would face immediate questioning in virtually any circumstances, but especially here, in the context of Twain’s entirely different intentions, it only seems to reveal the awkward imposition of Eliot’s monolithic and abstract critical imperative in the face of the novel’s own particular reality. In the second statement, “Huck Finn must come from nowhere and be bound for nowhere,” Eliot invokes a similar kind of mythic status for Huck simply in order to jus-
tify aesthetically the novel's deeply problematic final chapters, in which Tom Sawyer's intrusion causes the intensity of the central portion of the narrative to dissipate (202). This instance of Eliot's totalizing impulse is damaging on two levels: not only does he attempt to canonize and defend the novel with his own strict formal categories, as he also did in the first statement above, but in doing so he actually conceals what most critics perceive as the novel's most flawed element, and simply dismisses the frustration experienced by most readers in that section of the novel.

Eliot's reading of *Huckleberry Finn* expresses, perhaps unintentionally, a great deal of internal tension between his most immediate emotional response to the novel, which is quite urgent and might even be called childlike, and the ways in which his critical sensibility is willing or able to account for that experience. That Eliot embraces the novel at all is perhaps a tribute to its expressive voice even within such a reactionary atmosphere. At the same time, however, in attempting to force *Huckleberry Finn* into such rigid and preconceived categories in order to elevate it to canonical status, his critical method does great injustice to the novel's unique and particular identity and achievement, which are made visible through a regional reading, and this mutes Eliot's overall reading significantly.

The theoretical and ideological motives for Eliot's well-known transmigration to the Old World are revealed to some degree in his critical approach above. Similarly, the elitist and purifying yearnings of his religious impulse are apparent in his model of the literary canon. In the end, Eliot's deepest impulse toward the fixed center, toward the authority of a conservative-imperialist England, seem traceable—in different ways of course, but no less so, than those behind Twain's urgent outpouring of intensity in *Huckleberry Finn*—to his Missouri experience. His is in a sense an entirely appropriate response to that most American ailment: the desperate anxiety, the almost Sartrean nausea in the face of such complexity of place, of what seems such a lack of central authority and unity, of the disturbing difference between the American region, in all its ambiguity and seemingly careless intuition, and the more reassuring (that is, to Eliot) European model, with its fixed borders and immutable hierarchies. And although Eliot's endpoint is Europe, his journey remains characteristically American: like Huck, he prefers to travel as an individual, although he clearly longs for good company; like Huck, he repudiates what he views as an inauthentic social milieu, and takes on an awakened moral identity through his new vision.

As his reading of *Huckleberry Finn* shows, Eliot's critical landscape
buries something native to the novel, as all imperialist methods do, in order to construct and present its own mythic face. As in Leo Marx’s national thesis, which subordinates the object of its critical attention to the subject of its own advancing materiality, there is a clear and recognizable pattern in which Twain’s novel fails to receive the critical attention it deserves on its own terms. But what, in particular, might this buried something, this repressed presence, be?

“Canon building is Empire building,” remarks Toni Morrison in an essay that seeks to unearth and examine “the Afro-American presence in American literature” (“Unspeakable” 207, 201). Morrison’s study attempts to identify the strong connection between the repression of Afro-American culture and the maintenance of a dominantly imperial model of the American national literary canon as “the protected preserve of the thoughts and works and analytical strategies of whitemen” (202). Sharing Morrison’s general assumption about the fundamental connection between the canon and imperialism, I want to suggest that my own theoretical model of the region be considered in a way that parallels Morrison’s critical notion of race. Perhaps what is buried in the “analytical strategies” of critics like Leo Marx and T. S. Eliot, and what must be repressed in order for such methods to maintain their own credibility, is nothing less than the region itself. Certainly the extraordinary richness and resonance of *Huckleberry Finn*, and the crucial personal connections between Twain and his native Missouri, freely emerge in the context of the region and through a regional reading that acknowledges and privileges its discrete and individualistic cultural identities. Rejecting the “protected preserve” of a reactionary and repressive, highly limiting literary canon in favor of what Morrison envisions elsewhere as a “wider landscape” that has the ability to remap the American “critical geography . . . without the mandate for conquest,” the region compiles an important aspect of this reconstruction (*Playing 3*).

**NOTES**


2. Twain’s father, John Marshall Clemens, was born in Virginia in 1798 and lived in Kentucky and Tennessee from 1809 to 1835. Jane Lampton Clemens, Twain’s mother, was born in 1803 in Lexington, Kentucky, like her husband into a family of refugees from Virginia. Both regarded themselves as heirs, at least culturally, to Old Virginia aristocratic gentry, despite the ongoing inability of John
Clemens to provide the financial resources necessary for such a lifestyle. The family’s resettlement to Florida, Missouri, in 1835 (a few months before Twain’s birth), and their later move to Hannibal, were motivated primarily by dire economic circumstances. In this sense the Clemens family was typical of many southern transplants in Missouri, people who retained many of the values of the Old South, including pro-slavery sympathies, but had difficulty preserving the balance of their southern culture in the more complex and economically challenging frontier society west of the Mississippi. And while both the Clemens and Lampton families had owned slaves in the South, and Twain himself grew up in the care of a household slave named Jennie until he was six years old (at which point his father sold her, much to his son’s despair, to settle debts), the Clemens family in Missouri never accumulated the kind of wealth that would have enabled them to own a large number of slaves and sustain an aristocratic life.

3. See Primm’s Chapter 7, “For the Union,” for an excellent general account of the city and state during the Civil War era.

4. For more on Eliot’s anxiety in the face of modern industrial society’s complexity, see “After Strange Gods: Conclusions to the Literature of Place and Region” by Roberto Maria Dainotto in Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000), 163–173. Dainotto notes the explicitly racial aspects of Eliot’s own regional model, as well as the manner in which Eliot’s “regionalism” symbolically takes the place of a discredited nationalist ideal (172).

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