"THE END. YOURS TRULY, HUCK FINN"

POSTSCRIPT

By Roy Harvey Pearce

In the last chapter of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Huck speaks twice of going to "the Territory." The first time he is reporting Tom's plans, now that the evasion has been managed successfully, "to slide out of here, one of these nights, and get an outfit, and go for howling adventures amongst the Injuns, over in the Territory...." The second time he is speaking of his own plans: "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before."

I suppose that the obvious irony of the two passages has not been pointed out precisely because it is so obvious. The Territory is, of course, the Indian Territory, which was to become Oklahoma. From the 1820's on, it had been organized and developed as a region to which the Indians could be safely removed away from civilized society, since their lands were needed for higher purposes than those to which they could put them. The cruelty and deprivation of removal was generally taken to be a price which had inevitably to be paid as American society passed through its God-ordained stages of development. One part of this price was said to be the yielding of a certain amount of freedom or, to put it as an article of faith in Manifest Destiny, the surrendering of a "lower" for a "higher" freedom.¹ It seems fairly evident that the man who was to write "To a Person Sitting in Darkness" and other such stories would be fully aware of the removal episode, with its justifications and consequences, and that he meant his readers to be aware of it too. Read in this light, what for Tom is yet another willful adolescent fantasy becomes for Huck a compelling actuality. Tom's willfulness effects a parody which points up some of the grotesqueness of the historically authentic pioneering, civilizing spirit. Huck's compulsion effects a satire which simply denies that that spirit is authentic, despite its historical actuality. Huck will seek the freedom of the Territory just because it is an uncivilized freedom. (A better word, perhaps, is noncivilized freedom.) It is, indeed, the only true freedom for the authentic human being which Huck eventually comes to be—in spite of himself.

Yet there is more to the passages, particularly the second, than this. Huck speaks of lighting out for the Territory "ahead of the

¹ See my Savages of America (Baltimore, 1953), particularly pp. 56-61.
rest." These last four words comprise a crux which, so far as I know, no commentator has yet recognized. I suggest that here, at the end, Mark Twain introduces his own point of view, which, of necessity, is more encompassing than that of his character, Huck; and as a result Huck is given more to say than he could of himself possibly know.2 From Huck's simple point of view, the allusion is to Tom's vague plans to go to the Territory; for Twain, it is to the boomer movement which was a prime factor in the taking over of Indian lands, "civilizing" the Territory, and creating another American state. The effect is that Huck, all unknowing, is given a kind of prescience which his adventures at this point surely justify. No matter where he goes, he will be one step ahead not only of the Tom Sawyers of this world, but of the sort of people into whom the Tom Sawyers grow.

After the Civil War, there was constant agitation in Kansas and Missouri to open up the unsettled parts of the Indian Territory to whites. To this end, bills were repeatedly, if on the whole unsuccessfully, introduced in Congress. Pressures were put on the so-called Five Civilized Nations (Cherokees, Creeks, and Choctaws principally) to cede part of their lands in the Territory to be used as reservations for other Indians and, for due payment, to make them available for settlement by whites. In the late 1870's and into the 1880's, white incursions into the Territory were numerous enough to call for the use of troops to defend Indian rights. Moreover, in 1879, a court decision found that even those lands in the Territory which had been ceded to the government by Indians could not be settled by whites, since such lands had been ceded conditionally for future settlement by other Indians.

Inevitably, however, white incursions—by groups who came to be known as boomers—increased in tempo and number. Invaders were not jailed but fined. When they could not pay the fines, they were simply escorted to the territorial border by soldiers. The economics of the situation was complex: railroads encouraged and propagandized boomers; cattlemen, wanting to use the lands for grazing, opposed the boomers, who were farmers, and defended Indian rights—which included the right to rent their lands for grazing. The story (one of confusion, broken promises, and violence—all in the name of "civilization") moved toward its resolution in 1889, when the gov-

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2 Henry Nash Smith (Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer [Cambridge, 1962], pp. 134-37) points out that the Colonel Sherburn episode derives from Mark Twain's point of view and thus is intrusive, a "flaw" in the structure of Huckleberry Finn. I should think, however, that one could argue for Huck as a "reporter" in this and in other episodes (particularly the long "evasion") where he is in no position to participate in, much less dominate, the action and so render it in terms congruent with his sensibility and understanding. The question is: how much irony are we to allow Mark Twain? An incidental burden is that, in the end, we must allow him a good deal and demand only of Huckleberry Finn that it "contain" the elements of irony.
ernment bought certain lands from Indians and opened them to settlement as the Territory of Oklahoma. 8

Boomerism, then, was the most recent expression of the westering American spirit. In the words of an 1885 petition to Congress, drawn up by B. L. Brush and John W. Marshall in Howard, Kansas, on behalf of boomerism:

Resolved, That we are opposed to the policy of the Government in using the army to drive out or interfere with actual settlers upon any of the public domain, as being foreign to the genius of our institutions. . . .

Resolved, As this selfsame, bold spirit, that is now advancing to the front, has ever existed since the Pilgrim Fathers set their feet on Plymouth Rock, and will ever exist so long as we remain citizens of this grand Republic, that we, the citizens of Howard and vicinity, pledge ourselves to firmly support this grand element—the vanguard of civilization. . . .

Resolved, That we are opposed to the settlement of any more bands of wild Indians on the Indian Territory. 4

Although I know of no direct allusion in Mark Twain’s writings to the troubles in the Indian Territory, I think it most likely that he was well aware of them, for they were widely publicized and debated and of great interest to Congress. A considerable amount of boomer ferment developed in Twain’s—and Huck’s—Missouri, although Kansas was a more important center. The summer of 1883, when Twain was writing the last part of Huckleberry Finn, 5 David Payne and his boomers were particularly active in promoting their cause. One historian of Oklahoma reports that the general whose responsibility it was to turn boomers back declared that in 1883 “the whole affair had become simply a series of processions to and from the Kansas line.” 6

Thus it would seem that in 1883, Mark Twain, now finally committed to a conception of a Huck Finn whose fate it must always be to seek a freedom beyond the limits of any civilization, ended his novel by contrasting Tom’s and Huck’s sense of the Territory. Note that Huck is willing to go along with Tom, if he can get the money to outfit himself for those “howling adventures amongst the Injuns. . . .” Jim tells Huck that, now that his father is dead, he does have the money. But he will, however, have to claim it himself. The matter of the money and the “howling adventures” is then dropped. Since Tom is “most well” now, Huck says, there “ain’t nothing more to write about.” He will “fight out for the Territory ahead of the rest.” In one sense, perhaps, he simply means ahead of Tom and Jim; in a larger sense (so I think we must conclude) he means

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4 Quoted in Gittinger, pp. 272-73.


6 Gittinger, p. 131.
ahead of all those people whose civilizing mission boomerism actualized in fact. The realities of the case are, as ever, contrasted with Tom’s fantasies.

The Huck who seems willing to go along with Tom is, of course, not the Huck who, against the dictates of his conscience, has helped Jim in his quest for freedom. It is altogether necessary that this latter Huck must, alone, “light out for the Territory ahead of the rest.” With the curious prescience which Mark Twain gives him, he knows that in antebellum days (as Mark Twain surely knew that summer of 1883), even in the Territory, he will be only one step ahead of the rest: boomers, dukes and dauphins, Aunt Sallies, Colonel Sherburns, and Wilkses—civilizers all. Certainly we are not to assume that Huck self-consciously knows the full meaning (even the full moral meaning) of what he says here. Yet we cannot conclude that this allusion is simply a matter of Mark Twain speaking out in his own person. Huck’s view and Mark Twain’s, in a culminating irony, here become one. Huck’s prescience is, within the limits of the narrative, a matter of intuition, forced into expression by his hard-headed sense that he has almost always been one step “ahead of the rest.” He can say his final “Yours Truly” and yet must be willing to go to hell for saying it.7

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7 Henry Nash Smith (Mark Twain, p. 115) takes the ending of the novel as a “bare fact [needed] to resolve [the] plot,” and goes on to say: “the notion that a fourteen-year-old boy could make good his escape beyond the frontier is... unconvincing. The writer himself did not take it seriously.” Smith then points out that Mark Twain, soon after he finished Huckleberry Finn, wrote a sequel he never published. “Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians.” As Smith describes this sequel, it is wholly stereotyped and gives Mark Twain a chance to make a few more “gibes at Cooper’s romanticized Indians.” It might be well that Mark Twain, with his low opinion of Indians—romanticized and real—could conceive of no authentic adventures for Huck when he should get to the Territory. But I cannot see why knowledge of this failure should be a necessary condition for our understanding the ending of the novel as it stands. One could as well argue that Mark Twain’s failure in the sequel puts an even heavier burden of resolution on the ending as I have annotated and interpreted it. The point is that Mark Twain ended the novel as he did, and that it is a rule of literary interpretation that the “integrity” of a work be judged in terms of what it contains, not in terms of what it does not contain. Only if the ending were not at all interpretable in the former terms would we be justified in applying the latter terms. Successes are nonetheless successes because a writer, trying to consolidate and build upon them after the fact, fails in the attempt. The problem of method here is difficult. And I must say that I could not put it so sharply if Smith—who knows much more about Mark Twain than I—had not put it as sharply in generous correspondence with me.