

HUCKLEBERRY FINN FOR OUR TIME

By SPENCER BROWN

IN THE introduction to *The Portable Mark Twain*, speaking for almost all responsible critics before and since, Bernard DeVoto says of *Huckleberry Finn*, "There is no greater book in American literature, but critics agree that the last quarter of it is impaired by the extravaganza that begins when Huck gets to Uncle Silas's farm. It is typical of Mark Twain that he felt no difference in kind or key between this admittedly superb extravaganza and the searching of American society and human experience that precedes it. In fact, the delivery of Jim from the dungeon was one of Mark Twain's favorite platform readings."

It is typical of critics to agree that Mark Twain is a great unconscious force, a Mississippi rolling powerfully and beautifully to the Gulf and then puttering around in a Delta, not knowing what to do or how to end a book—"Nothing More To Write"—a foil'd circuitous wanderer, forgetting the bright speed he had. A pathetic picture—Brother to the Oxus.

Let me offer a contrasting reading of the novel and its conclusion as primarily an attack against slavery. Such an interpretation of the novel as a whole, though not common, is not new. For example, Louis J. Budd, in *Mark Twain: Social Philosopher*, finds in *Huckleberry Finn* the influence of George Washington Cable's fight for Negro rights (Indiana University Press, 1962, p.

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93). "The reader who comes to it without a thesis is keenly interested in the fate of its runaway slave (p. 94). . . . In 1885 it unmistakably read as a commentary on the Southern question; to believe this was accidental is to be naïve (p. 106)." But I wish to suggest in addition that the last chapters are integral to the attack on slavery, are indeed its envenomed point; and that furthermore they are deliberate and sophisticated.

Let us review the alleged defects of the last quarter of the novel, from "The Pitiful Ending of Royalty" on. The swift and economical narrative becomes slow and repetitious. Mark Twain handles snakes and rats and spiders fondly; he lingers on spoon-stealing. He makes each humorous point twice at least. The boys "let on" that picks are case-knives; then they must "let on" that the stairs are a lightning-rod. Jim can't write, but in order to be "regular" he must write notes. He must write them with spoons on a grindstone. He must write them with blood on a torn-up shirt. "Every time a rat bit Jim, he would get up to write a line in his journal whilst the ink was fresh." He must write not only, "Here a captive heart busted," but three other literary gems as well.

We may laugh the first time; are we likely to laugh the fourth? Evidently Mark Twain thinks so, for in these ten chapters he sacrifices everything for hokum. He loses the silent, strong, symbolic power of the great river flowing through his novel—for we are off the river now, stranded. He loses the devastatingly honest, observant character of Huck and gains instead a mere puppet in the hands of Tom Sawyer. Huck becomes a cipher with a picturesque style. And above all, Jim: Jim's human kindness, his dignity, his good sense, his humor, all vanish; and he