

SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 270 pp.

Responding to Toni Morrison's call for an examination of the African-American presence in mainstream American literature, Shelley Fisher Fishkin's study of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* wants to provide a case study of "how African-American voices have shaped our sense of what is distinctly 'American' about American literature" (9). Fishkin's point of departure is a valid one. In the vast literature on the various literary models and cultural influences that shaped *Huck Finn*, the role of the African-American oral tradition has been constantly ignored or obscured. Through nine chapters, Fishkin traces this influence with an impressive wealth of detailed research. Her starting point is an interesting "find," a long neglected sketch by Twain, called "Sociable Jimmy." This sketch was known and already reprinted twice before but never appreciated in its possible importance for understanding Twain's version of the vernacular. "Sociable Jimmy" was published in the *New York Times* two years before Twain began working on *Huckleberry Finn*, and is, as Fishkin claims, Twain's first attempt to tell a story from the perspective of a child. What distinguishes Fishkin's search for African-American influences on *Huck Finn* from other approaches, then, is to look for traces of this influence not in Jim but in Huck and, by implication, in the style of the novel which is, after all, the main source of its strong aesthetic impact.

Fishkin's claim that "Sociable Jimmy" served as "a model for the voice with which Twain would change the shape of American literature" (15) is supported by a careful linguistic comparison between the main characteristics of Huck's vernacular and Jimmy's speech that reveals striking similarities between the two and that I find, on the whole, quite convincing. As Fishkin herself makes clear, this does not necessarily mean that Twain was wrong or lying when he later referred to a poor white boy from his native Hannibal, Tom Blankenship, as the main model for Huck. However, in fleshing out this character in fiction and providing him with an original voice, the notoriously eclectic Twain obviously drew on other sources as well. (In "A True Story," for example, he used another real-life African-American character for a highly praised performance "in the vernacular"). That African-American speech played an important role in shaping Twain's particular version of the

vernacular, gains additional plausibility when one considers that the Southern vernacular which Twain picked up during his childhood was in itself already a language heavily influenced by African-American speech patterns.

Huck Finn, then, would seem to be shaped by elements of African-American culture to a much larger extent than formerly acknowledged. As Fishkin rightly observes, "in the thousands of books and articles written on *Huckleberry Finn* . . . the role of African-American oral traditions in shaping Twain's achievement gets virtually no attention" (133). In an excellent analysis of Huck's style published in 1985, Janet Holmgren McKay, for example, quite confidently and obviously without sensing a problem, still claims that "Twain drew on two sources for vernacular models. His primary inspiration was the oral tradition of the frontier. . . . In addition, he frequently praised the naive qualities in young people's writing. He saw the fresh perceptivity of children mirrored in their composition."¹ After Fishkin's book, one will have to add another, perhaps even more important source.

Is Huck black, then, as the title of Fishkin's book suggests, if only with a question mark? Fishkin herself seems to waver on what conclusions can be drawn from her evidence. Clearly, it is one thing to point out "that African-American voices play a major role" in *Huck Finn* and that "Mark Twain helped open American literature to the multicultural polyphony that is its birthright and special strength" (5), but it is quite another thing to claim that the "voice we have come to accept as the vernacular voice in American literature . . . is in large measure a voice that is 'black'" (4). The first claim helps us to recognize the plurality and hybrid nature of American culture, the second implies questions of origins, birthrights, and politically correct genealogies. Fishkin's formulations constantly suggest the possibility of such a claim but she never addresses the question head-on. Several times she speaks of the African-American roots of *Huck Finn*, for example, but this new myth of origin is never fully articulated, only cautiously suggested. One reason for this caution may be that the actual evidence she can present for her "roots-theory" remains limited and, in the final analysis, conjectural. But an-

¹ Janet Holmgren McKay, "An Art So High": Style in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *New Essays on Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Louis J. Budd (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 61-81; 63.

other, perhaps even more important reason may be seen in the fact that such a claim would put her in conflict with the ambivalent reception of the novel by African-Americans themselves.

In order to come to terms with that problem, Fishkin extends what must have been initially an essay on a possible source for Twain's literary characterization of Huck into an extended argument on Twain's views on, and, more specifically, *Huck Finn's* representation of, race. It is at this point that the phrase "troubling questions remain" begins to crop up at crucial moments of the argument. Fishkin's discussion of Jim is a case in point. For pages, she tries to demonstrate the relative merits of Twain's portrait of Jim, particularly the (relative) accuracy of his speech which can be seen as a pioneering attempt in comparison with other dialect writing of the time. Yet a troubling fact remains: Most critics have characterized Twain's portrait of Jim in the early Tom Sawyer part of the book as that of a minstrel ducky. Fishkin finds a way out: "If we posit African-American folk traditions as the frame of reference rather than white minstrelsy, Jim's utterances reveal an alternative set of meanings" (83). Jim's superstition, as well as the "Negro witch-riding tale," are recurring features of African-American folklore. Thus, "some dimensions of Jim's character . . . interpreted as clearly products of the whites-in-blackface minstrel show may turn out to have their roots in his African-American and African past" (86). In this case, instances of behavior that struck critics "as most artificially 'white' projections may turn out to have pedigrees that are certifiably 'black'" (86). How could black readers then be deceived for so long? Clearly, the often irritating meaning Jim has assumed for readers and critics over the last one hundred years is not the result of possible sources but of the literary use Twain made of these sources. One does not have to be a formalist, in other words, to see that it is not a politically correct pedigree that matters but its specific function in a text. This, however, is the one question Fishkin never asks. Again and again, she ingeniously and often convincingly discusses possible sources but she never discusses their changing meaning as effects of a particular organization of the text.

One dilemma of Fishkin's type of political criticism is that in trying to erect a line of defense which would allow her to hold on to a writer like Twain, she is already acknowledging the priority of criteria for evaluating literature that, if consequently applied, must undermine

this very attempt. At the end, in spite of her best efforts to exculpate Twain on matters of race, and after quoting Booker T. Washington's praise of Twain, Fishkin thus has to admit that another troubling fact remains: "Despite Washington's encomiums, however, a troubling fact remains: reading *Huckleberry Finn* in an American secondary-school classroom can be an enormously painful experience for a black student. Twain's sympathy for Jim may have been genuine, but Jim's voice retains enough of minstrelsy in it to be demeaning and depressing" (106f.). In a way, Fishkin has offered a solution by insisting on Huck's blackness: "Given our awareness now of the extent to which Huck's voice was black, black students who find themselves identifying with Huck may feel somewhat less ambivalence. After all, they are not identifying 'against' their race: rather, they are choosing which of two black voices in the book they find more appealing" (107). Why is the more sympathetic black white, then? Somewhat disconcertedly, Fishkin has to admit at the end that "Jim, the major figure in the book who sounds black, looks black, and is black, is still there . . ." (107). Only one solution remains: "The only way to counter the demeaning experience of encountering Jim's voice is by adding others, by exposing students to the eloquence of Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois, to the 'signifying' wit of Charles W. Chesnut and Paul Laurence Dunbar, to folktales and folk sermons, to the rhetorical power of Sojourner Truth, to the lucid anger of Ida B. Wells" (107). What started out as an impressive piece of scholarship, ends up as a failed political lobbying effort. If one were to follow Fishkin in defending Twain against the charge of racism, one would have to proceed by a three-line strategy of defense: first, to claim that Huck is the actual black of the novel; second, if this claim is not fully accepted, to point out that Jim is not as bad as he looks, because even his minstrel traits have antecedents in African-American culture; and, third, if this claim is not accepted either, to admit defeat and to switch over to politically more acceptable texts.

Why is it so difficult to admit the obvious? Like almost any other white American of the nineteenth century, including many of the Abolitionists, Twain held deeply ingrained convictions of racial superiority and was, in this sense, racist. Some of his comments on Native Americans are atrocious. At the same time, Twain was a deeply engaged (and quite often admirably enraged) democrat who fought against bigotry and racism

where he conceived them as such. His anti-imperialist record and his democratic credentials are impressive. Twain's relations with African-Americans were often characterized by traces of paternalism, yet they are also case studies of an unwavering anti-segregationist attitude. Obviously, such views and attitudes can coexist. In fact, such a "plural identity," as one may claim with good reason, is by no means the exception but the rule; if so, the way in which individuals are able to negotiate these often contradictory attitudes and ways of making sense of the world is in itself an interesting manifestation of the possibilities and limitations of a particular culture and period. Ultimately, the question in handling the charge of "racism" in a case like Twain's is whether one is interested in understanding these historical conditions and limitations or whether one is only interested in an act of ideological classification for the sake of one's own contemporary agenda.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn reflects Twain's contradictory attitudes towards race. In his characterization of Jim, especially in the beginning and end of the novel, Twain employs minstrel stereotypes in a casual, "unreflected" way. At the same time, in creating a dehierarchized fraternity of black and white on the raft, and in Huck's decision "to go to hell" for Jim, the novel provides one of the most impressive and daring treatments of interracial contact and solidarity in the nineteenth century. Again, a conventional racial symbolism and the subversion of racist assumptions coexist. In contrast, there is a tendency in the term racism as a concept of cultural analysis to become an either-or category, providing a new, updated version of the old us / them dichotomy. The consequences for literary interpretation are interesting. One of the most striking of these consequences is the necessity to homogenize the text in ideological and textual terms. Discussions of the heterogeneous textuality of *Huck Finn*, which defies all attempts to attribute a single meaning or political position to the book, are therefore consistently ignored by Fishkin. The thought that, as a literary character, Jim may have changing functions in the book, depending on the changing genre contexts with which the novel experiments, never seems to have occurred to her. The portrait of Jim is treated as representation of a political position; as such, he must be made coherent in order to determine whether, or to what extent, his characterization is racist or not.

With her book, Fishkin does not only want

to add to ongoing research on *Huck Finn* and enrich our understanding of the book. Her main purpose is to make a contribution to the ongoing controversy about whether *Huck Finn* is racist and whether it should be removed from school curricula. This recent debate was started by several decisions of American school boards which were denounced as censorship by the liberal press. In this debate, as it is, for example, documented in the critical anthology *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*, there seems to be one point of agreement.² Not even those in favor of a removal question Twain's good intentions and deny that he employed a subtle rhetorical strategy of deadpan inversion in *Huck Finn*, which was a major achievement in American literary history. What is questioned is whether a 12-year-old reader can be sophisticated enough to realize this rhetorical strategy. What many of these critics recommend, therefore, is to have the book read only under guidance of a teacher who can provide historical information which would show that Twain, despite ingrained notions of racial superiority, was still one of the more enlightened Gilded Agers on this issue. For such a teacher, Fishkin would provide useful help in the area of historical information. But I think that this teacher would also have to equip the young reader with enough knowledge about the technique and working principles of fiction, so that he or she will be able to grasp the purpose of the novel's rhetorical strategies.

In this second respect, Fishkin's book is not helpful at all. One consequence of her type of political criticism is a naive interpretative literalism. There is never a consideration of literary effects that are not produced by direct identification or a literal reading of fiction. There is no acknowledgment of a rhetorical game on Twain's part who, in a calculated gamble, tries to invert ingrained cultural conventions by deadpan, hyperbole, and a continuous series of humorous confrontations. Fishkin implies, in other words, a certain type of reader—and, inevitably, also a certain theory of literary effect. Such implications, however, also function as acts of cultural construction. In its reading of literature, the New Criticism, for example, implied a highly sophisticated reader, the student as Wayne Booth, so to speak. The implied

²James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis, eds., *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1992).

reader of Fishkin's book is, in contrast, a literalist who must be warned against, and protected from, incorrect political representations and ill-advised acts of identification. The theoretically interesting result of such decisions is that, if made the basis for teaching, these opposite approaches must play their own role in creating the very reader they imply.

The recurrent problem of censorship that *Huck Finn* encounters is an unforeseen consequence of its major achievement: its radical de-hierarchization of auctorial and cultural guardianship. By shifting the perspective to that of a young, uneducated boy, the novel's meaning can no longer be secured by the narrator's ironic voice or comments (as in *Tom Sawyer*). Instead, Twain's craft and skillful rhetorical strategies have to do the job and the reader, who is also liberated from Victorian guardianship, has to do his or her own part. This reader has to know something about history. But he or she also has to know something about rhetorical strategies, their purpose and possible effect. I think that, in the final analysis, this would be a better protection against misunderstanding a book like *Huck Finn* than counting instances of blackness in the novel.

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