

deeply implanted in him than in respectable children like Tom Sawyer.

In moments of crisis, accordingly, Huck comes up against the discrepancy between the standard conception of black people as "niggers"—a conception he shares—and what he has learned as a result of his direct experience with Jim. During such crises his inner struggle characteristically begins with an unquestioning endorsement of the culture's stock prejudices, but then, when he tries to enact them, he balks and, in consequence, he inadvertently reveals their inhumanity. When, for example, it suddenly occurs to him that his journey with an escaped slave will determine what people back home think about him, his first reaction is wholly conventional: "It would get all around that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was ever to see anybody from that town again, I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame." He knows what he is supposed to do if he wants the respect of law-abiding citizens, but the thought of turning Jim in calls up vivid memories of Jim's loyalty and friendship, and he finally decides that he can't do it; he would rather go to hell. The conflict between Huck's stock racist ideas and his compassionate nature exemplifies the way the controlling irony works: when he thinks he is behaving ignobly, we are invited to recognize his innate nobility. What makes the outcome so powerful is that the novel's readers are compelled to effect the ironic reversal. That Huck can acknowledge Jim's humanity only by violating the moral code of a racist society is an implication that the boy is unable to grasp or put into words. It is a thought that Mark Twain's readers must formulate for themselves.

But of course the centrality of that irony also explains why some readers consider *Huckleberry Finn* a racist book. For whatever reason, and one can imagine several, they mistake the hero's flagrant if erratic racism for the novel's—the author's—viewpoint. It may be difficult, admittedly, for admirers of this wonderful book to believe that an average, reasonably competent reader could fail to recognize that its satirical thrust is directed against slavery and racial bigotry, but it does happen. Leaving aside the incontrovertible evidence that some adult readers do miss the point, it must be emphasized that Wallace and those who share his views are not chiefly concerned about

the novel's effect on mature, competent readers. They are concerned about its effect on schoolchildren, all schoolchildren, but especially black American children, whose special experience might very well hinder their responsiveness to the ironic treatment of racial oppression. How much do we know, actually, about the ability of teachers, or of children of various ages and social backgrounds, to make sense of ironic discourse? I have taught this book with pleasure to hundreds of college students, but I'm not at all confident about my ability to persuade a class of inner-city adolescents—or any literal-minded adolescents, for that matter—that a book can say, or seem to say, one thing and mean another; or that in this case we should not be troubled by the fact that the hero calls black people "niggers" because, after all, that's what all white Southerners called them back then, and anyway, look, in the end he is loyal to Jim.

And besides, what does one say about Jim? There can be no doubt that Mark Twain wants us to admire him; he is a sympathetic, loving, self-abnegating, even saintly, "Christ-like" man. But what does one tell black children about his extreme passivity, his childlike credulity, his cloying deference toward the white boy? Aren't these the traits of a derisive racial stereotype, the fawning black male? To overcome objections on that score, one would have to stress Jim's cunning and his occasional refusal to play the minstrel darkie, especially the great episode in which he drops his habitual pose of docility, if it is a pose, and angrily denounces Huck for making him the victim of a cruel joke. "It was fifteen minutes," Huck says about his reluctant apology, "before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger—but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither." It is a splendid moment, but is it splendid enough to offset the inescapable doubts of black readers about Jim's customary pliancy? Is it enough that Jim, the only black male of any significance in the novel, asserts his dignity in this one moving episode?

To raise these complex issues, it need hardly be said, is not to condone the denunciation of the novel as racist trash. But even if that opinion is as wrongheaded as I believe it to be, it does not follow that those who hold it are necessarily wrong about the inappropriateness of requiring high-school

teachers to teach, and students to read, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The point at issue, then, is the justification for that requirement. To claim that it should be required reading because it is a great American book is unconvincing: we don't require students to read most great books. Objections to the requirement become more understandable if we recognize the unique character of the niche Twain's novel tends to occupy in the high-school English course. It often is the only book that is centrally concerned with racial oppression.

All of which suggests that educators could take a large step toward resolving the current controversy simply by eliminating the requirement. This would open the way for the ideal solution: allow each teacher to decide whether his or her students should be asked to read *Huckleberry Finn*. It is the teachers, after all, who are best qualified to make a sensible and informed decision, one that would rest on their confidence in their own ability to convey, and their students' ability to grasp, the irony that informs every word of this matchless comic novel. □

ART.

ARTHUR C. DANTO

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial

WE erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget. Thus we have the Washington Monument but the Lincoln Memorial. Monuments commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings. Memorials ritualize remembrance and mark the reality of ends. The Washington Monument, vertical, is a celebration, like fireworks. The Lincoln Memorial, even if on a rise, presses down and is a meditation in stone. Very few nations erect monuments to their defeats, but many set up memorials to the defeated dead. Monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life. The memorial is a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead. With monuments we honor ourselves.

Memorials are often just lists of those killed. Herodotus describes a megalith

that carried the names of all 300 Spartans slain at Thermopylae in a defeat so stunning as to elevate their leader, Leonidas, to what Ivan Morris once called the nobility of failure. Lists figure prominently in the hundreds of Civil War memorials, where the names of fallen townsmen bear the iconographic significance that those who were lost meant more than what had been won. The paradox of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington is that the men and women killed and missing would not have been memorialized had we won the war and erected a monument instead. Among the specifications for the memorial's commission was the stipulation that it show the names of all the U.S. dead and missing (the battlestone of Thermopylae only memorialized the Spartans, not their Theban or Thespian allies) and that it make no political statement about the war. But just being called a memorial is as eloquent as not being called a monument: not being forgotten is the thin compensation for not having participated in an event everyone wants to remember. The list of names, as a collective cenotaph, situates the memorialized war in the consciousness of the nation.

The Washington Monument is an obelisk, a monumental form with connotations of the trophy in Western art. Augustus carried obelisks to Alexandria, whence they were in time borne off to London and New York; Constantine brought one to Rome, where it was appropriated by Pope Sixtus V for San Giovanni in Laterano; Napoleon was obliged to cart an obelisk to Paris. The Lincoln Memorial is in the form of a classical temple, in which Lincoln is enthroned like a brooding god. It is a metaphor for sacrifice and a confession of the limits of human power. The Veterans Memorial carries no explicit art-historical references, though it consists of two symmetrical walls, mirror images of one another, right triangles sharing a common vertical base, which point, like a pair of long wings, east, to the obelisk of triumph, and west, to the temple of submission. Everything about it is part of a text. Even the determination to say nothing political is inscribed by the absence of a political statement. A third stipulation for the memorial was that it harmonize with its surroundings. It does more: it integrates the two structures it points to into a moral landscape. Because the two wings form an angle, the Veterans Memorial together

with the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial compose a large triangle, with the long reflecting pool as a segment of the base.

The memorial was dedicated on November 13, 1982—Veterans Day—when there were only the walls and the names, each wall composed of seventy granite panels, with about 58,000 names and room for several hundred more. Two years later a bronze statue of three servicemen, done in an exacting realism, was added to the site. Their backs are to the axis that connects the Monument and the Memorial, as though they are oblivious to the historical meanings to which the walls return us by pointing. Like innocents who look at the pointer rather than that to which it points, they see only rows and columns of names. They are dazed and stunned. The walls reflect their obsessed gaze, as they reflect the flag to which the servicemen's back is also turned, as they reflect the Monument and the Memorial. The gently flexed pair of walls, polished black, is like the back of Plato's cave, a reflecting surface, a dark mirror. The reflections in it of the servicemen, the flag, the Monument and the Memorial are appearances of appearances. It also reflects us, the visitors, as it does the trees. Still, the living are in it only as appearances. Only the names of the dead, on the surface, are real.

The reflecting walls constituted the Veterans Memorial at the time of its dedication, but before they were in place a concession was made to a faction that demanded figurative realism instead of what it perceived as an abstract monument to the liberal establishment. Thus the bronze servicemen. Those walls could have stood on their own, artistically, but the bronze group could not have. As a piece of free-standing sculpture it is intrinsically banal. Its three figures belong to obligatorily distinct racial types: a black and someone vaguely ethnic—a Jew, perhaps, or some Mediterranean type—stand on either side of a Nordic figure. The central figure has a holstered pistol, but the end figures carry more powerful weapons—though not held in a position for use—and there are no empty spaces in the cartridge belts: fighting is suspended. The garb and gear of this war are precisely documented: visitors will learn how many eyelets were in G.I. boots and that soldiers carried two canteens. More realistic than the military figures that guard the honor rolls in

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Civil War memorials, they look too much like specimens for a military museum, at least when considered alone. But they are greatly enhanced by their relationship to the great walls. In a way, the harmonization of their presence in the triangle generated by the walls is a monument to the triumph of political compromise rather than a memorial to artistic strife. The dead are remembered in their gaze, even when there are no living to look.

The walls are the design of Maya Ying Lin, who won a competition against 1,421 contestants when she was 21 and a student at Yale University. An Asian-American from Athens, Ohio, she was a child at the time of the memorialized conflict, too young to remember the tumult and the protest, which for her are simply history, like the War of Independence or the Civil War. The bronze group was done by Frederick Hart, a Washington sculptor, who was, ironically, a demonstrator against the Vietnam War. The irony is that artistic realism was associated with patriotism and endorsement of the war in the minds of those who insisted on figuration. They regarded the walls as a symbol for peaceniks. "A wailing wall for liberals"; "a tribute to Jane Fonda"; "a degrading ditch"; "the most insulting and demeaning memorial to our experience that was possible": these were among the nasty things said. The walls are nonfigurative, of course, but they are deeply representational, given the textual nature of memorial art (of all art, when it comes to that), and the question of the meaning of Lin's text was acknowledged by those who rejected what they took to be its supposed representation of reality. Its being black, for example, was loudly read as a sign of shame until a black general brought an abrupt end to that effort to pre-empt the language of color.

The winning design was the unanimous choice of a panel of eight experts, and it was accepted by the group that pushed the idea of a memorial as an expression of the feelings they wanted to have objectified. It gave a form to those feelings, as public art is supposed to do: the issues are never solely esthetic. It was accepted by 150,000 participants at the dedication. No one has defaced it, no one has tried to blow it up, though there was a threat of this once. It has been accepted by the nation at large, which did not even know it wanted such a memorial. It is now one of the sites

most visited in the capital. Still, it was wholly appropriate that the design should have been put in question when a schism opened up, that intense emotion and antagonism should have raged, that terrible and foolish things should have been said by everyone. Lin mounted the same high horse favored by artists whose work is publicly criticized and accused the critics of sexism. Even so, her design held. It was not replaced by a monument, as though the tacit rules that govern the distinction between monuments and memorials finally prevailed. Those who wanted realism finally got their mannequins, not exactly where they wanted them, with the walls to their back and a proud flag flying at the vee, but off to one side, up a gentle slope, and at a certain distance, with the flag still farther away. By a miracle of placement, Hart's shallow work has acquired a dignity and even a certain power. The complex of walls and figures reminded me of a memorial sculpture of Canova, in which a single figure sits in white silence outside a pyramidal sepulcher. A dimension is even added to the triangular walls, wonderful as they are. The entire complex is an emblem of the participation of the public in the framing of public art. It did not, to paraphrase Richard Serra, cost the government a dime. More than 275,000 Americans responded to the call for funds with contributions in small denominations—those bearing the faces of Washington and Lincoln.

Lin's instructor told her that the angle where the walls meet had to mean something, and I asked myself, when I pilgriaged down one hot Tuesday in July, what its meaning was. A writer in the "Talk of the Town" section of *The New Yorker* described it as "a long open hinge, its leaves cut vertically into the ground, which descends very gradually toward the vertex." The hinge is a powerful symbol—we speak of "the hinge of fate"—and it has the mysterious property of opening and closing at once. Still, that is something of a misdescription. A hinge 140 feet long sounds too much like Claes Oldenburg, who might, consistent with his *oeuvre*, have submitted the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Hinge had he entered the competition. The *New Yorker* writer does better on a nearer approach: "a little like facing a huge open book with black pages." The book lies open now that the episode is closed and all or

nearly all the dead are known. A book of the dead. And that would fit with their being listed in chronological order, from the first one killed in 1959 to the last one killed in 1975, when the remaining Americans were evacuated from Saigon as the Republic of Vietnam surrendered, on April 30.

This brings me to my chief criticism of Lin's work, which concerns an incongruity between narrative and form. An effort has been made to make the slight angle meaningful by having the narrative begin and end there: RICHARD VANDE GEER is at the bottom right of the west panel and DALE R. BUIS is at the top left of the east panel on either side of the joint. As though a circle were closed, and after the end is the beginning. But a circle has the wrong moral geometry for a linear conflict: the end of a war does not mean, one hopes, the beginning of a war. As it stands now, we read from the middle to the end, then return to the other end and read again our way to the middle. This means that the terminal panels, architecturally the most important, carry one name each, but the end points of the walls are not the end points of the list. If the first were first, we would read through to the last, from left to right. The panels grow larger, which is to say the space in which the walls are set grows deeper, as we approach the center. So there are more names on the central panels than on the rest. But that exactly reflects the shape of the war itself, our involvement being greatest in the late 1960s. So the angle could represent a high point and a turning point. And you would leave with the Monument before you, as you entered with the Memorial behind you, and the whole complex would acquire the direction of time and, perhaps, hope.

You can read a chronicle of the making of this singular work in *To Heal a Nation*, by Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow (Harper & Row). The memorial would not exist without Scruggs, a veteran of that terrible war and a man of great vision. I like to think that the voice of the book, optimistic, enthusiastic, conciliatory, is his, whoever did the writing. It also contains some photographs, but there is really no way to imagine the memorial from them, or from any pictures I have seen. For that you must make a visit. If you know someone who was killed, an attendant from the National Parks Service will help you locate his or her name. They

are all listed alphabetically in directories near the site.

Be prepared to weep. Tears are the universal experience even if you don't know any of the dead. I watched reverent little groups count down the rows of a panel and then across to the name they sought. Some place a poignant, hopeless offering underneath: a birthday card, a flag, a ribbon, a flower. Some leave little notes. Most photograph the name, but many take rubbings of it on pamphlets handed out by the Parks Service. You can borrow a ladder to reach the top names. The highest panels are about ten feet high—or, more accurately, their bottom edges are about ten feet below ground level. Someday, I suppose, visiting it will be like standing before a memorial from the Civil War, where the bearers of the names really have been forgotten and, since the theory is that the meaning of a name is its denotation, the names themselves will have lost their meaning. They will merely remain powerful as names, and there will only be the idea of death to be moved by. Now, however, we are all moved by the reality of death, or moved by the fact that many who stand beside us are moved by its reality. I copied down two of the names of which rubbings were made:

EDWARD H. FOX
WILBUR J. MILLER

DANCE.

MINDY ALOFF

Tango Argentino
Dance Theatre of Harlem

"I am a desperate song," goes one of the numbers in *Tango Argentino*, a smash revue devoted to the tango which played City Center for a week in June and should be brought back for a month. "Poor and alone, you are without illusion, without faith," goes another. "Life is an absurd wound," goes a third. The male singers deliver the lines in assertive baritones; the women in smoky contraltos. Yet despite the existential bravado, even bathos, of the lyrics, the tempos are limber and dry. Underneath the plangent complaints are taut musical figures, walking two- and four-beat phrases touched by little hesitations, like someone traveling a long, lightless alley in the dead of

night. The words tell you there's nothing to go on for, but the music records the adrenalin pumping away. This coupling makes popular theater that courts both the senses and the intelligence. One would like to know whether such complexity inheres in the tango or whether it stems from the particular vision of *Tango Argentino's* author-producer-designers, Claudio Segovia and Héctor Orezza. (The two collaborated on a similar revue devoted to flamenco and are putting together one on black American jazz.) Do the tango palaces of Buenos Aires routinely showcase such sprightly rhythm and technical virtuosity, or are we witnessing a masterful transformation of a folk art, like Diaghilev's Russian Fauves or Balanchine's waltzing Viennese?

Although just half of *Tango Argentino's* thirty-five songs were choreographed, the dancing was crucial to the sophistication and pace of the whole event. The tango's musical origins are obscure: one theory traces it to a Spanish-Indian ballad, another to a drum tattoo by African slaves. In the review we follow instead the dance's evolution from the nineteenth-century prototype, a challenge ritual for men ("thugs" says the program), to a contemporary bravura exhibition for mixed pairs. The idea of dance as the embodiment of local manners and sexual attitudes recalls Ettore Scola's film *Le Bal*, where the mores of twentieth-century Europe are traced through the activities of a single dance hall. But while *Le Bal* manipulates its dance anthology in support of literary or political agendas, *Tango Argentino* keeps its focus on shifting dance values: displacements of accent; introduction of pattering, ornamental steps executed at vertiginous speeds; the late use of acrobatic feats and balletic deportment.

The tango in the film is slowed down, camped up and otherwise deformed, and its sexual message is purely and simply embodied by the move that also serves as *Le Bal's* logo, a man ramming his stretched leg between the striding thighs of his female partner. The penetration of one dancer's walk by the advancing leg of another is a staple of the tango, but *Tango Argentino* places it in so many different circumstances that the step is divested of fixed meaning. To begin with, it isn't the aggressive beginning of a phrase, the way movies and TV normally show it, but the surprise ending of one, which usually comes



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