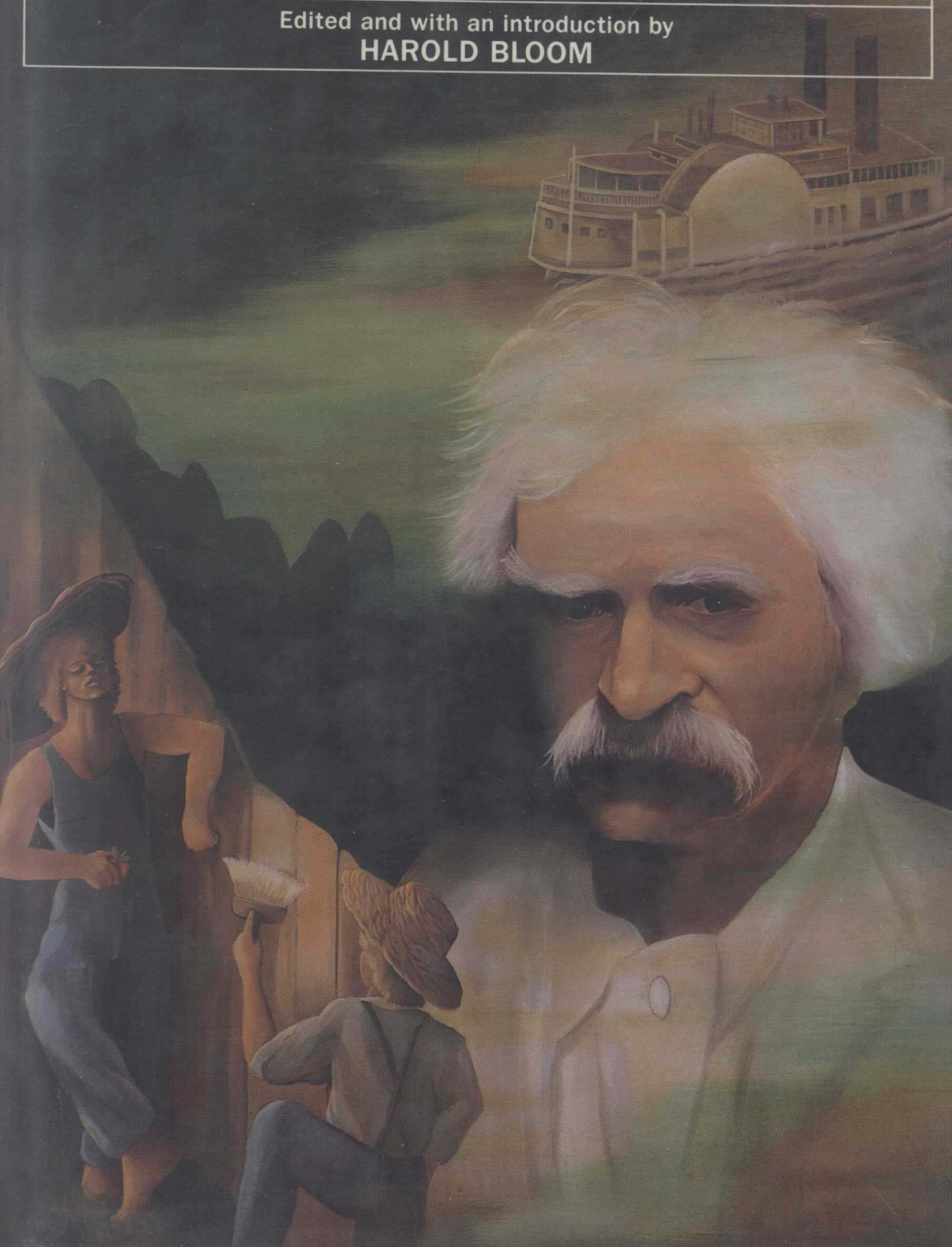


*Modern Critical Views*

# MARK TWAIN

Edited and with an introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



---

*Modern Critical Views*

---

MARK TWAIN

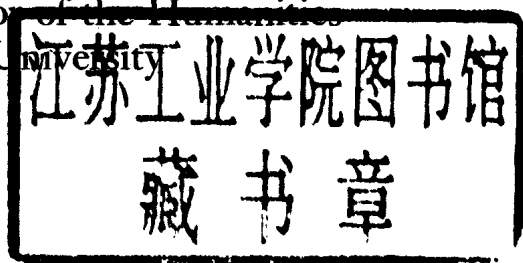
---

*Edited and with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities

Yale University



CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS ♦ 1986

New York ♦ New Haven ♦ Philadelphia

© 1986 by Chelsea House Publishers,  
a division of Chelsea House Educational Communications, Inc.  
95 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016  
345 Whitney Avenue, New Haven, CT 06511  
5068B West Chester Pike, Edgemont, PA 19028

Introduction © 1986 by Harold Bloom

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may  
be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any  
means without the written permission of the  
publisher.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

∞The paper used in this publication meets the  
minimum requirements of the American National  
Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library  
Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Mark Twain.

(Modern critical views)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Twain, Mark, 1835-1910—Criticism and  
interpretation—Addresses, essays, lectures.

I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.

PS1338.M27 1986 818'.409 86-2577

ISBN 0-87754-698-3 (alk. paper)

## Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism devoted to the writings of Mark Twain that has been published during the last forty years. I am grateful to Eden Quainton for his erudition and insight in helping me to choose the essays that constitute this volume.

The introduction centers upon Twain's undoubted masterpiece, *Huckleberry Finn*, emphasizing the secular intensities of Twain's loving study of his own nostalgia for the freedom of storytelling. Bernard De Voto's overview of Twain's career commences the chronological sequence, and usefully integrates life, work, and socio-historical context. It is followed here by the classic study of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* by F. R. Leavis, with its characteristic emphasis upon the book's "moral astringency." J. Hillis Miller, in his own earlier critical phase as a "critic of consciousness," contrasts first-person expressions of a consciousness in the narrators of *David Copperfield* and *Huckleberry Finn*.

A more formalist, New Critical reading of Twain is represented here by the distinguished poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren, whose essay analyzes *Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee* as structures that tell Twain's own self-divided story of personal and creative anguish. Related closely to Warren's essay, but even more biographically oriented, is Judith Fetterley's meditation upon what she calls Twain's "anxiety of entertainment," his sense of himself as public performer, the artist as showman.

Twain's anxious vision, as turned upon boyhood, is the subject of Cynthia Griffin Wolff's dark study of *Tom Sawyer*, which she reads as a nightmare vision of the self's defeat. That image of defeat certainly gets into the shaping of Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, analyzed by Bruce Michelson as a remarkable instance of the power of great fiction to affirm life even as it denies

all of the illusions that constitute life. Such a paradox is akin to what Alfred Kazin explores as Twain's power to make us accept how "life becomes farce without ceasing to be horror."

A more genial Twain is presented by James M. Cox as he revisits *Life on the Mississippi*, and ironically urges deconstructive critics to address themselves to what is most problematic in our greatest comic writer. Roy Harvey Pearce also confronts Twain where he is most baffling, in the image of Huck Finn as the self that tells lies in order to be free to get at the truth. The challenge to contemporary criticism is taken up by Douglas Robinson and by Cleo McNelly Kearns. Considering *A Connecticut Yankee* as an American apocalypse, Robinson maps Twain's revisionary relationship to the long tradition that extends from the Bible's Book of Revelation to nineteenth-century Romanticism. McNelly Kearns sets *Huckleberry Finn* against the current literary "science" of semiotics, and sees the book as a triumph that transcends the limits of semiotics, while carrying us to the antithetical borders of silence and of prophecy. Her strenuous reading fitly ends this book, reminding us again that *Huckleberry Finn* is one of the central American books, indispensable for our understanding of ourselves.

## Contents

Editor's Note      vii

Introduction      1  
*Harold Bloom*

Mark Twain and the Great Valley      7  
*Bernard De Voto*

Mark Twain's Neglected Classic      29  
*F. R. Leavis*

First-Person Narration in *David Copperfield*  
and *Huckleberry Finn*      45  
*J. Hillis Miller*

Mark Twain      55  
*Robert Penn Warren*

The Anxiety of Entertainment      83  
*Judith Fetterley*

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer: A Nightmare Vision*  
of American Boyhood      93  
*Cynthia Griffin Wolff*

Deus Ludens: The Shaping of Mark Twain's  
*Mysterious Stranger*      107  
*Bruce Michelson*

Creatures of Circumstance: Mark Twain	123
<i>Alfred Kazin</i>	
<i>Life on the Mississippi</i> Revisited	153
<i>James M. Cox</i>	
"Yours Truly, Huck Finn"	169
<i>Roy Harvey Pearce</i>	
Revising the American Dream:	
<i>A Connecticut Yankee</i>	183
<i>Douglas Robinson</i>	
The Limits of Semiotics in <i>Huckleberry Finn</i>	207
<i>Cleo McNelly Kearns</i>	
Chronology	223
Contributors	225
Bibliography	227
Acknowledgments	231
Index	233

## *Introduction*

### I

After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by-and-by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take stock in dead people.

**H**uck Finn's American vision has this in common with Captain Ahab's or Walt Whitman's, that Huck too would strike the sun if it insulted him. The three best American books—*Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby-Dick*, *Leaves of Grass*—have in common also that they are each the most American of books. Twain's masterpiece is essentially comic, Melville's is tragic, Whitman's is beyond characterization or categorization, except that despite its humor and its Emersonian hopes for America, we remember it best for its dark shadows. *Huckleberry Finn*, shrewd and grim as it is sometimes compelled to be, remains unique in our national literature for its affirmative force. Fecund in its progeny—as diverse as Kipling's *Kim*, Eliot's *The Dry Salvages*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, and Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?*—the book is likely to go on engendering our strongest writers, with only *Leaves of Grass* as a rival in that role.

What is the secret of an appeal that affected Eliot and Faulkner, Hemingway and Joyce, with almost equal intensity? Is it because the book tells the truth? That was the judgment of Lionel Trilling, and I am not moved to dismiss such a judgment lightly. The book tells a story which most Amer-



icans need to believe is a true representation of the way things were, are, and yet might be. Huck lives in a complex reality that nevertheless does not negate his freedom. Yet that freedom is also a solitude, and is purchased by a series of lies, noble in their intention, but lies nevertheless. Without a family, yet with a murderous father always apt to turn up again, Huck perpetually experiences a primal loneliness that he both welcomes and dreads:

Miss Watson she kept pecking at me, and it got tiresome and lonesome. By-and-by they fetched the niggers in and had prayers, and then everybody was off to bed. I went up to my room with a piece of candle and put it on the table. Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave and has to go about that way every night grieving. I got so down-hearted and scared, I did wish I had some company. Pretty soon a spider went crawling up my shoulder, and I flipped it off and it lit in the candle; and before I could budge it was all shriveled up. I didn't need anybody to tell me that that was an awful bad sign and would fetch me some bad luck, so I was scared and most shook the clothes off of me. I got up and turned around in my tracks three times and crossed my breast every time; and then I tied up a little lock of my hair with a thread to keep witches away. But I hadn't no confidence. You do that when you've lost a horse-shoe that you've found, instead of nailing it up over the door, but I hadn't ever heard anybody say it was any way to keep off bad luck when you'd killed a spider.

Huck, like any American, does not feel free unless he is alone, and yet solitude makes him fear that he is no part of the creation, however the world happened or came about. His extraordinary pathos results from his ambivalence towards a freedom he necessarily cannot evade for very long at a time.

## II

V. S. Pritchett found in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* evidence of an American limitation, when compared to the more civilized modes of European literature:

It is not a book which grows spiritually, if we compare it to *Quixote*, *Dead Souls* or even *Pickwick*; and it is lacking in that civilised quality which you are bound to lose when you throw over civilisation—the quality of pity. One is left with the cruelty of American humor.

Pritchett perhaps forgot that throwing over civilization and its discontents is not so easily accomplished. Huck's discomfort with culture is acute, but he is hardly "a natural anarchist and bum" to whom ideas and ideals are "repugnant," as Pritchett thought. Nor is he "the servant of the river-god," which was Lionel Trilling's trope, a mythologization that derived Huck's supposedly "very intense moral life" from his "perpetual adoration of the Mississippi's power and charm." That is to compound Huck with T. S. Eliot, for whom "the Boy is also the spirit of the River." Huck indeed is now part of the American mythology, but hardly because he is the spirit of the river, which is not a god for Twain, whatever it was to be for Trilling and for Eliot. Twain tells us that the Mississippi is well worth reading about, is remarkable, and manifests many eccentricities. Huck too is well worth reading about, is quite remarkable, and is a wonderfully eccentric boy. Critics are fond of finding a moral in him, or at least want to see him as a kind of Sancho Panza to Tom Sawyer's Don Quixote. Tom Sawyer, alas, is something of a bore and not very quixotic, and Huck has little in common with the shrewd and pragmatic Sancho. There is however a touch of the quixotic in Huck, who is a great storyteller, a boy who lies merely to keep in practice.

Huck's fictions are lies *against* time, against an impossible father, against society and history, but not against reason and nature. They are not lies *for* anything; Huck does not seek benefits from them. Like the strong poets, Huck always has the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere. Change and travel are necessary for Huck; without them he cannot be independent. But we would do him wrong if we judged him as seeking freedom above everything else. Except for Joyce's Poldy Bloom, Huck Finn must be the most good-natured and tolerant representation of a human being in the fiction of the English language. The freedom he must have, because he is that freedom, is a freedom that he wants for everyone else. It is the freedom of the storyteller, Twain's own freedom.

That freedom, by common consent, has something to do with postponing death, with deferring the fear of dying. Divination, the sidestepping of dangers to the magic, occult, ontological self, is a fundamental component of the urge to tell stories. Huck of course is never going to be an adult, and so never will have to die. Yet that sounds wrong, because Huck rejects a maturation that is merely the death drive. The superego haunts Huck, yet cannot dominate him, because Huck will not surrender his gift for lying. “You don’t know about me,” Huck begins by saying, and he ends with the insistence that he will be out there ahead of the rest of us:

But 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.

Huck’s discomfort with civilization stems from his wholehearted rejection of guilt, sin, and solipsism, all of them Eliotic attributes, or should one say virtues? We can call Huck’s attributes his virtues, because Huck, like his creator, is essentially an enlightened rationalist, though retaining considerable zest for the romance of superstitions. Unlike Eliot, Huck is not a Christian, and his prayer is not, “And let my cry come unto Thee,” but something more naturalistic and buoyant:

Sometimes we’d have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark—which was a candle in a cabin window—and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two—on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It’s lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky, up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made, or only just happened—Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to *make* so many. Jim said the moon could a *laid* them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn’t say nothing against it, because I’ve seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. We used to watch the stars that fell, too, and see them streak down. Jim allowed they’d got spoiled and was hove out of the nest.

This delightful compromise upon a myth of creation is “kind of reasonable,” and wholly characteristic of Huck’s cheerful skepticism. Even more

characteristic is the joy of being that opens chapter 19 with what must be the most beautiful prose paragraph yet written by any American:

Two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely. Here is the way we put in the time. It was a monstrous big river down there—sometimes a mile and a half wide; we run nights, and laid up and hid day-times; soon as night was most gone, we stopped navigating and tied up—nearly always in the dead water under a tow-head; and then cut young cottonwoods and willows and hid the raft with them. Then we set out the lines. Next we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off; then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee deep, and watched the daylight come. Not a sound, anywheres—perfectly still—just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bull-frogs a-cluttering, maybe. The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that was the woods on t’other side—you couldn’t make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness, spreading around; then the river softened up, away off, and warn’t black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along, ever so far away—trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks—rafts; sometimes you could hear a sweep screaming; or jumbled up voices, it was so still, and sounds come so far; and by-and-by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there’s a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the east reddens up, and the river, and you make out a log cabin in the edge of the woods, away on the bank on t’other side of the river, being a wood-yard, likely, and piled by them cheats so you can throw a dog through it anywheres; then the nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh, and sweet to smell, on account of the woods and the flowers; but sometimes not that way, because they’ve left dead fish laying around, gars, and such, and they do get pretty rank; and next you’ve got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the song-birds just going it!

This is a cosmos that was not made, but “only just happened.” It is no part of romance or legend, not myth, but a representation of a natural reality

seen in its best aspect, where the days and nights swim and slide by. We hesitate to call this a fiction, since it lacks any residual Platonism. Even Freud had his last touch of Platonism, the transcendentalism that he called the "reality principle." (Twain and Huck tell us a story about reality, but without reference to any principle.)

### III

Eminent critics have disagreed vigorously over the way in which Twain chose to end his masterpiece. That something is seriously wrong with the conclusion is palpable, but what is wrong may only be that in this book no conclusion is possible anyway. T. S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling both argued the formal adequacy of the long episode at the Phelps place, in which Tom Sawyer arrives again to organize the "rescue" of Jim, the runaway slave who in some clear sense has become Huck's true family. But the critical decision here certainly goes to Leo Marx, who sees the novel's end as its self-defeat:

Should Clemens have made Huck a tragic hero? Both Mr. Eliot and Mr. Trilling argue that that would have been a mistake, and they are very probably correct. But between the ending as we have it and tragedy in the fullest sense, there was vast room for invention. Clemens might have contrived an action which left Jim's fate as much in doubt as Huck's. Such an ending would have allowed us to assume that the principals were defeated but alive, and the quest unsuccessful but not abandoned. This, after all, would have been consonant with the symbols, the characters, and the theme as Clemens had created them—and with history.

Marx is aware that he asks for too much, but that is the lasting power of the book that Twain wrote until he reached the Phelps place episode. We are so transported by *Huckleberry Finn* that we cannot surrender our hopes, and of these the largest is a refusal to abandon the desire for a permanent image of freedom. Twain could not extend that image into a finality, but the image endures nevertheless, as a permanent token of something evermore about to be.

B E R N A R D   D E   V O T O

*Mark Twain and the Great Valley*

**T**he first truly American literature grew out of the tidewater culture of the early republic. It was the culture of a people who, whatever their diversity, were more homogeneous in feeling and belief than Americans as a people have ever been since them. We have come to think of the literature whose greatest names are Emerson and Poe, Thoreau and Melville, Hawthorne and Whitman, as our classic period, and in a very real sense the republic that shaped their mind was classical. It felt a strong affinity for the Roman Republic, it believed that Roman virtues and ideas had been expressed in the Constitution, it gave us a great architectural style because it identified its own emotions in the classic style. When Horatio Greenough let a toga fall from Washington's naked shoulders he was not out of tune with contemporary taste: Washington seemed a kind of consul, so did Jefferson, and in the portraits of them which our stamps and coins preserve they have a Roman look. This classical republican culture was at its most vigorous when our classic writers were growing up. But there is an element of anachronism in all literature, and while these men were themselves in full vigor American culture entered a new phase.

The culture of the early republic crossed the Alleghenies in two streams, one Southern, the other mainly New England; but they were more like each other than either was like the one which their mingling presently helped to produce. For beyond the mountains people found different landscapes, different river courses, different relationships of sky and wind and water, dif-

---

From *The Portable Mark Twain*. ©1946, renewed 1974 by The Viking Press, Inc. Originally entitled "Introduction."

ferent conceptions of space and distance, different soils and climates—different conditions of life. Beyond still farther mountains lay Oregon and California—and they were implicit in the expanding nation as soon as the treaty that gave us Louisiana was signed—but first the United States had to incorporate the vast expanse between the eastern and the western heights of land. That area is the American heartland. Its greatest son was to call it the Egypt of the West because nature had organized it round a central river and it touched no ocean, but it came into the American consciousness as the Great Valley. When the tidewater culture came to the Great Valley it necessarily broke down: new conditions demanded adaptations, innovations, new combinations and amplifications. The new way of life that began to develop there had a different organization of feeling, a different metabolism of thought. It was no more native, no more “American,” than that of the first republic, but it was different and it began to react on it.

The heartland was midcontinental and its energies were oriented toward the river at its center—and were therefore turned away from Europe, which had been a frontier of the early republic. And life in the heartland, with its mingling of stocks, its constant shifting of population, and its tremendous distances, led people in always increasing numbers to think continentally. Both facts were fundamental in the thought and feeling of the new culture.

The American littoral came only slowly, with greater slowness than the fact demanded, to realize that the nation's center of gravity was shifting westward. It tragically failed to understand one consequence of that shift, thirty years of contention between the Northeast and the South to dominate the Great Valley or at least achieve a preferential linkage with it. The failure to understand was in great part a failure to think continentally—as was made clear at last when the Civil War demonstrated that no peaceful way of resolving the contention had been found. Even now too many Americans fail to understand that the war, the resolution by force, only made explicit the organization of our national life that is implicit in the geography which the Great Valley binds together. Abraham Lincoln understood our continental unity; he argued it persistently down to the outbreak of the war and from then on. And Lincoln was a distillation of the heartland culture.

Lincoln's feeling for the continentalism of the American nation was so intense that it almost transcended the transcendent facts. It was a deposit in the very cells of his bones from the soil of the Great Valley. He was, Herndon rightly says, one of the limestone men, the tall, gaunt, powerful, sallow, saturnine men who appear in quantity enough to constitute a type when the wilderness on both sides of the Ohio comes under the plow. His radical democracy was wrought from the experience of the Great Valley. In his

ideas and beliefs as in the shadowed depths of his personality there is apparent a new articulation of American life. His very lineaments show it. When you turn from the Jefferson nickel to the Lincoln penny as when you turn from Jefferson's first inaugural address to any of Lincoln's state papers, in the flash of a total and immediate response you understand that you have turned from one era to a later one. You have turned from the tidewater republic to the continental empire.

Lincoln expressed a culture and brought a type to climax. Similarly, when that culture found major literary expression it did so from a rich and various, if humble, literary tradition. As always, the literary expression was the later one; the economic, social, and political impact was felt much earlier. The lag, however, was not so great as Walt Whitman thought. Whitman was sixty when in 1879 he traveled across the Great Valley to its western limit, where the Front Range walls it off. He traversed it with a steadily growing conviction that here in the flesh were the people whose society he had envisioned in so many rhapsodies, Americans who had been fused, annealed, compacted (those are his words) into a new identity. He felt that literature had not yet spoken to these prairie people, "this continental inland West," that it had not yet spoken for them, that it had not made images for their spirit.

The poet supposed that he was speaking of things still to come but he was already wrong by a full ten years. The thing had happened. And the first notification that it had happened can be dated with an exactness not often possible in the history of literature. That notification came in 1869 with the appearance of a book of humorous travel sketches by Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who, faithful to the established tradition, signed it with a pen name, Mark Twain.

*Innocents Abroad* was greeted with an enthusiasm that made Mark Twain a celebrity overnight, and with too much misunderstanding of a kind that was to persist throughout his career. It was a funny book and a cardinal part of its fun was its disdain of European culture. This disdain, the mere fact of making humor of such disdain, and its frequent exaggeration into burlesque all produced an effect of shock—in most ways a delightful shock but in some ways an uneasy one. Yet the point was not the provinciality of such humor, though it was frequently provincial, and not its uncouthness, though it was sometimes uncouth, but the kind of consciousness it implied. Again it is absurd to speak of this as the first American literature that was independent of European influences, for our literature had obediently divorced itself from Europe as soon as Emerson ordered it to. The humorous core of *Innocents Abroad* was not independence of Europe, but indifference to it. Thoreau and



Emerson and Poe were detached from Europe but completely aware of being heirs to it, but here was a literature which had grown up in disregard of Europe—which had looked inward toward the Mississippi and not outward beyond the Atlantic. Failure to appreciate the implications of this difference was one reason, no doubt the weightiest one, why for two full generations literary critics thought of Mark Twain as no more than a clown. But the same identity, the same organization of personality, that made Lincoln the artificer of our continental unity was what made Mark Twain a great writer.

There are striking affinities between Lincoln and Mark Twain. Both spent their boyhoods in a society that was still essentially frontier; both were rivermen. Both absorbed the midcontinental heritage: fiercely equalitarian democracy, hatred of injustice and oppression, the man-to-man individualism of an expanding society. Both were deeply acquainted with melancholy and despair; both were fatalists. On the other hand, both were instinct with the humor of the common life and from their earliest years made fables of it. As humorists, both felt the basic gravity of humor; with both it was an adaptation of the mind, a reflex of the struggle to be sane; both knew, and Mark Twain said, that there is no humor in heaven. It was of such resemblances that William Dean Howells was thinking when he called Mark Twain “the Lincoln of our literature.”

## II

Samuel Clemens was born at Florida, Monroe County, Missouri, on November 30, 1835, a few months after his parents reached the village from Tennessee. His father was a Virginian, his mother a Kentuckian, and as a family they had made three moves before this one. Florida was a handful of log cabins only two hundred miles east of the Indian Country and in the earliest stage of frontier economy. Though he could have only a generalized memory of it, Sam's earliest years were thus spent in the “Sweet Betsy from Pike” society which has contributed a color and a flavor of its own to American legendry. More: the town was located at the forks of that Salt Creek which figures in the folk proverbs. He could retain little conscious memory of the chinked-log, open-fireplace hamlet with its woods-runners and movers; mostly it would mean the immediacy of nature, the infinity of the forest, the ease of escape into solitude and an all-encompassing freedom. He was still short of four when the Clemenses made their last move, this time eastward. They seem to have been movers by force of circumstance, not instinct; it was always the pressure of poverty and the hope of betterment that impelled them on. But they bequeathed restlessness to their son.