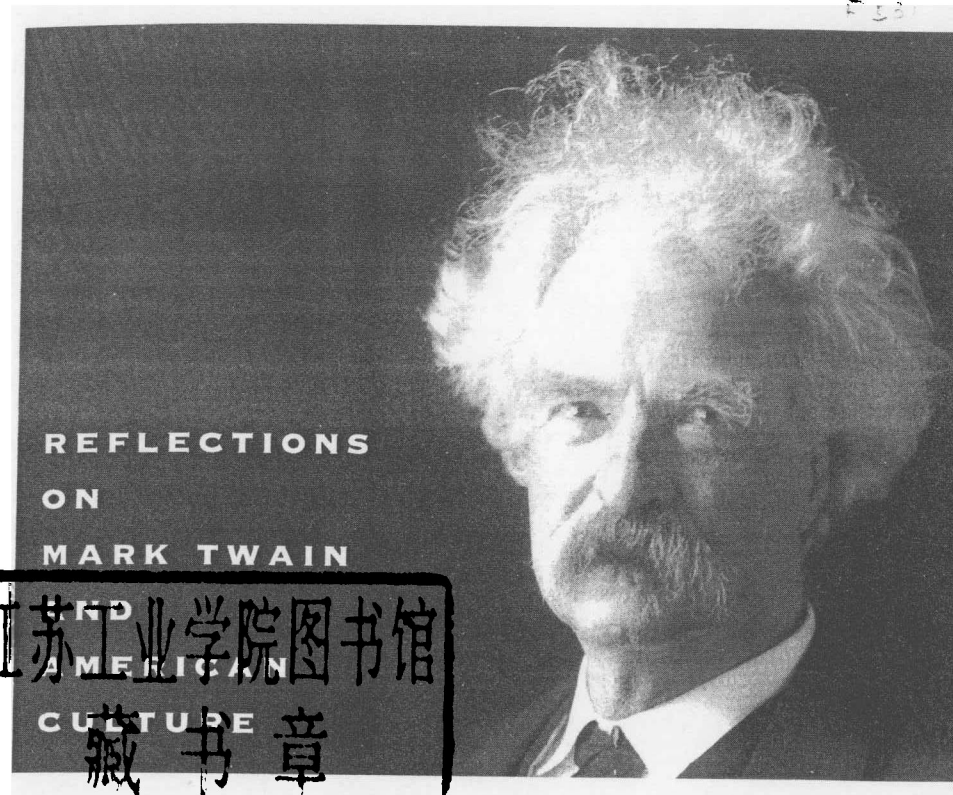




Lighting Out the Territory

SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN



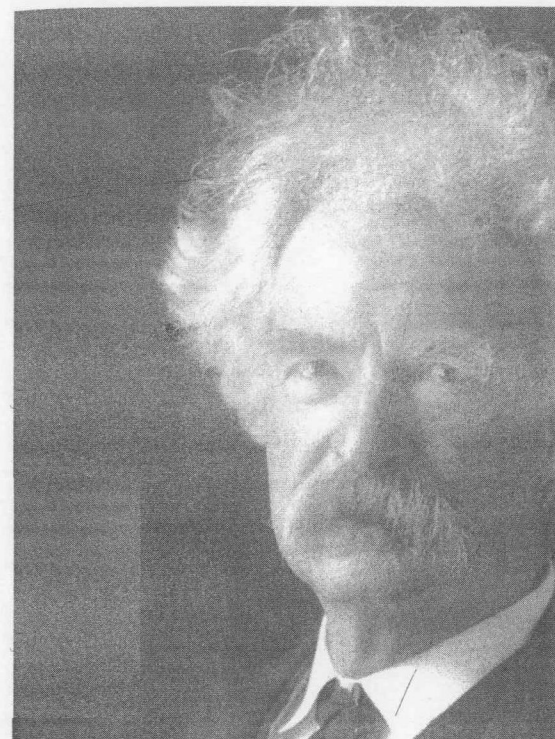
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SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN

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TERRITORY**

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For my father,

MILTON FISHER,

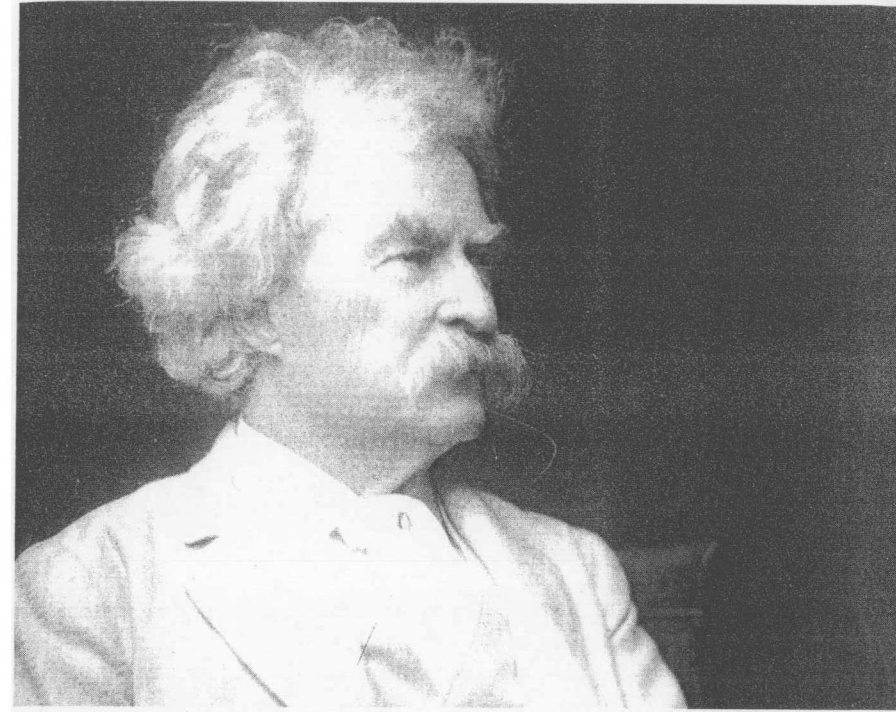
whose sense of humor

and passion for justice

prepared me to appreciate

Mark Twain

**LIGHTING
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TERRITORY**



PROLOGUE

My mother startled me out of a cocoon of cartoons and cocoa one blustery Saturday morning when I was eleven.

"Get dressed. We're going on a mystery trip."

"But it's cold," I protested. "It's supposed to snow."

"Then dress warmly. Hurry. We've got a two-hour drive."

The snow that was beginning to transform the Connecticut landscape into a dreamscape of silver and white only increased my mother's determination to get us where we were going and back before the storm really hit. Once in the car, I badgered her until she revealed our destination: a house in Hartford, Connecticut, that had once belonged to a writer named Mark Twain and had recently been restored and opened as a museum. Why anyone would want to drive four hours in the snow just to look at a house was beyond me, but I kept that thought to myself. My mother always had her reasons, and they usually turned out to be good ones.

"We're here."

I must have dozed off because it seemed like we'd just started. I opened

my eyes and looked around for a house. I wasn't prepared for the vast, ornate, orange and brown structure that stared down at us from a hilltop. And I had never imagined a home with a Tiffany-designed interior, mosaic tiles, oriental carpets, stenciled wall coverings, a banister of deep, rich, polished walnut, and a phone booth. A phone booth? Had I heard the guide right? Indeed I had. And it was complete with a report card Mark Twain used to grade the phone company. (One plus sign signified "artillery can be heard" in the phone lines, two "thunder can be heard.")

As the tour proceeded, I saw the speaking tubes in the nursery (which Twain used to convey important instructions from "Santa" every Christmas), the first flush toilet in Connecticut (at least they didn't know of any earlier ones), a fireplace with a divided flue that let you bask in the warmth of a crackling fire while watching the snowflakes fall right above it, and in the basement a strange, complicated machine that was designed to set type automatically but never quite did what it was supposed to and somehow ate all of Twain's money instead.

That whole magical afternoon my mother beamed. She knew what she was doing all right. She was planting the seeds of a lifelong fascination with the man who had lived in that house.

Soon after we returned from Hartford, she began reading *Tom Sawyer* to me as a bedtime story. I thought Huck and Tom could be a lot of fun, but I dismissed Becky Thatcher as a bore. When I was twelve I invested a nickel at a local garage sale in a book that contained short pieces by Twain. That was where I met Twain's Eve. Now *that's* more like it, I decided, pleased to encounter a female character I could identify *with* instead of against. Eve had spunk. Even if she got a lot wrong, you had to give her credit for trying. "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" left me giddy with satisfaction: none of my adolescent reveries of getting even with my enemies were half as neat as the plot of the man who got back at that town. "How I Edited an Agricultural Paper Once" set me off in spasms of giggles.

People sometimes told me that I looked like Huck Finn. "It's the freckles," they'd explain—not explaining anything at all. I didn't read *Huckleberry Finn* until my junior year in high school, when it was assigned in my English class. It was the fall of 1965. I was living in a small town in Connecticut. I expected a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*. So when the teacher handed out the books and announced our assignment, my jaw dropped: "Write a paper on how Mark Twain used irony to attack racism in *Huckleberry Finn*."

A year before, the bodies of three young men who had gone to Mis-

issippi to help blacks register to vote—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—had been found in a shallow grave; a group of white segregationists (the county sheriff among them) had been arrested in connection with the murders. America's inner cities were simmering with pent-up rage that had started exploding in the summer of 1965, when riots in the Watts section of Los Angeles left thirty-four people dead. None of this made any sense to me. I was confused, angry, certain that there was something missing from the news stories I read each day: the why. Then I met Pap Finn. And the Phelps.

Pap Finn, Huck tells us, "had been drunk over in town" and "was just all mud." He erupts into a drunken tirade about "a free nigger . . . from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man," with "the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and there ain't a man in town that's got as fine clothes as what he had."

. . . they said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could *vote*, when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote, myself, if I warn't too drunk to get there, but when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drewed out. I says I'll never vote agin. Them's the very words I said. . . . And to see the cool way of that nigger—why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way.

Later on in the novel, when the runaway slave Jim gives up his freedom to nurse a wounded Tom Sawyer, a white doctor testifies to the stunning altruism of his actions. The Phelps and their neighbors—all fine, up-standing, well-meaning, churchgoing folk—agreed that

Jim had acted very well, and was deserving to have some notice took of it, and reward. So every one of them promised, right out and hearty, that they wouldn't curse him no more.

Then they come out and locked him up. I hoped they was going to say he could have one or two of the chains took off, because they was rotten heavy, or could have meat and greens with his bread and water, but they didn't think of it.

Why did the behavior of these people tell me more about why Watts burned than anything I had read in the daily paper? And why did a drunk Pap Finn railing against a black college professor from Ohio whose

vote was as good as his own tell me more about white anxiety over black political power than anything I had seen on the evening news?

Mark Twain knew that there was nothing, absolutely *nothing*, a black man could do—including selflessly sacrificing his freedom, the only thing of value he had—that would make white society see beyond the color of his skin. And Twain knew that depicting racists with chilling accuracy could expose the viciousness of their worldview like nothing else could. It was an insight echoed some eighty years after Twain penned Pap Finn's rantings about the black professor, when Malcolm X famously asked, "Do you know what white racists call black Ph.D.'s?" and answered, "*Nigger!*"

Mark Twain taught me things I needed to know. He taught me to understand the raw racism that lay behind what I saw on the evening news. He taught me that the most well-meaning people can be hurtful and myopic. He taught me to recognize the supreme irony of a country founded on freedom that continued to deny freedom to so many of its citizens. He also taught me how powerful irony and satire could be in the service of truth. I found it exhilarating to analyze why it was so important that Twain never let Huck figure out he was doing the right thing all along—why a naive narrator could be such an effective vehicle for conveying to readers the moral bankruptcy of the world in which he lived. It was exciting to read between the lines—as well as under, around, and behind them—to try to figure out what the author, as opposed to his characters, was really trying to do and how he did it.

* * *

In the years since I first entered his house in Hartford that winter afternoon, Mark Twain has certainly led me places neither my mother nor I could have predicted. My mother passed away twenty years ago, and one of the great sadnesses I carry with me is that she isn't here to share the adventures that she so subtly set in motion. Mark Twain has led me into the past, prompting me to examine the history of American journalism, literature, literary criticism, education, race relations, folklore, dialect, rhetorical traditions, historiography, and law; to study nineteenth-century newspapers; to interview descendants of slaves; and to ask troubling questions about why some aspects of the past are commemorated while others are ignored. Twain has led me into the future, compelling me to become conversant with new technologies, to use them to answer questions I never dreamed of asking until last week. He has led me into the present, introducing me to writers, scholars, archivists, activists, in-

ventors, and artists. He has led me to Hannibal and Elmira and (many, many times) back to Hartford.

* * *

He has been called the American Cervantes, our Homer, our Tolstoy, our Shakespeare, our Rabelais. Ernest Hemingway maintained that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." President Franklin Delano Roosevelt got the phrase "New Deal" from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. *The Gilded Age* gave an entire era its name. "The future historian of America," wrote George Bernard Shaw to Samuel Clemens, "will find your works as indispensable to him as a French historian finds the political tracts of Voltaire."

Mark Twain has indelibly shaped our view of who and what the United States is as a nation and who and what we might become. He helped define the rhythms of our prose and the contours of our moral map. He saw our best and our worst, our extravagant promise and our stunning failures, our comic foibles and our tragic flaws. He understood better than we did ourselves our dreams and aspirations, our potential for greatness and our potential for disaster. His fictions brilliantly illuminated the world in which he lived and the world we inherited, changing it—and us—in the process. He knew that our feet often danced to tunes that had somehow remained beyond our hearing; with perfect pitch he played them back to us.

"In a century we have produced two hundred and twenty thousand books," Mark Twain wrote in 1906. "Not a bathtub-full of them are still alive and marketable." Yet in 1906, as well as every year since, "alive and marketable" works by Twain alone would have filled the average bathtub to overflowing. By 1906 some 90 different editions of his books had appeared in print in the United States, and hundreds had appeared abroad. By 1976 his writings in book form had been published in at least 5,344 editions in fifty-five countries and translated into seventy-two foreign languages. The trend shows no signs of abating; indeed, a recent Japanese translation by Professor Hiroshi Okubo of "Eve's Diary" and "Extracts from Adam's Diary" sold 230,000 copies—enough to fill every bathtub on Twain's block in Hartford.

Twain neither held nor sought an elective or appointed office, yet he was seen as representing his nation when he traveled abroad. Throughout the world he is viewed as the most distinctively American of American

authors—and also as one of the most universal. He has been a major influence on writers in the twentieth century, from Argentina to Nigeria to the Czech Republic. Children ride horses daily at the Tom Sawyer *Bokuju* (farm or meadow), an amusement park in Japan. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is taught every year in classrooms in Belfast, Buenos Aires, Lublin, Beijing, Jerusalem, Thessaloniki, Rio de Janeiro, Delhi, Tokyo, and Riyadh. “Are you an American?” Twain once jotted in his notebook: “No, I am not *an* American. I am *the* American.”

A century after the American Revolution sent shock waves throughout Europe, it took Mark Twain to explain to Europeans and to his countrymen alike what that revolution had wrought. He probed the significance of this new land and its citizens and identified what it was about the Old World that America abolished and rejected. The founding fathers had thought through the political dimensions of making a new society; Twain took on the challenge of interpreting the social and cultural life of the United States for those outside its borders as well as for those who were living the changes he discerned.

Americans may have constructed a new society in the eighteenth century, but they articulated what they had done in voices that were largely interchangeable with those of Englishmen until well into the nineteenth century. Mark Twain became the voice of the new land, the leading translator of who and what the “American” was and, to a large extent, still is. Frances Trollope’s *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, a best-seller in England, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, and Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* all tried to explain America to Europeans. But Twain did more than that: he allowed European readers to *experience* this strange “new world.” And he gave his countrymen the tools to do two things they had not quite had the confidence to do before. He helped them stand before the cultural icons of the Old World unembarrassed, unashamed of America’s lack of palaces and shrines, proud of its brash practicality and bold inventiveness, unfraid to reject European models of “civilization” as tainted or corrupt. And he also helped them recognize their own insularity, boorishness, arrogance or ignorance and laugh at it—the first step toward transcending it and becoming more “civilized” in the best European sense of the word.

Twain understood the potential of art in the service of truth, and he grasped the potential of humor in the service of morality. (“Against the assault of Laughter,” he wrote, “nothing can stand.”) His unerring sense of the right word and not its second cousin taught people to pay attention when he spoke, whether in person or in print. He said things that were

smart and things that were wise, and he said them incomparably well. Twain often strikes us as more a creature of our time than of his. He appreciated the importance and complexity of mass tourism and public relations, fields that would come into their own in the twentieth century but were only fledgling enterprises in the nineteenth. He explored the liberating potential of humor and the dynamics of friendship, parenting, and marriage. He narrowed the gap between “popular” and “high” culture, and he meditated on the enigmas of personal and national identity. Indeed, it would be difficult to find an issue on the horizon today that Twain did not touch on somewhere in his work. Heredity versus environment? Animal rights? The boundaries of gender? The place of black voices in the cultural heritage of the United States? Twain was there.

With startling prescience and characteristic grace and wit, Twain zeroed in on many of the key challenges—political, social, and technological—that would face his country and the world for the next hundred years: the challenge of race relations in a society founded on *both* chattel slavery and ideals of equality, and the intractable problem of racism in American life; the possibilities of new technologies to transform our lives in ways that could be both exhilarating and terrifying—as well as unpredictable; the problem of imperialism and the difficulties entailed in getting rid of it. But he never lost sight of the most basic challenge of all: each man or woman’s struggle for integrity in the face of the seductions of power, status, and material things.

Samuel Clemens entered the world and left it with Halley’s Comet, little dreaming that generations hence Halley’s Comet would be less famous than Mark Twain. There is a Mark Twain Bank in St. Louis; a Mark Twain Diner in Jackson Heights, New York; a Mark Twain Smoke Shop in Lakeland, Florida; and an Asteroid Mark Twain in outer space. Neatly reflecting, perhaps, the spectrum of interpretations of Twain’s legacy, there is a Mark Twain Junior High for emotionally disturbed youngsters in Rockville, Maryland, and a Mark Twain High School for the Gifted and Talented in Brooklyn, New York. Mark Twain’s image peers out at us from advertisements for Bass Ale and Old Crow Bourbon (his drink of choice was scotch), as well as for a gas company in Tennessee, a hotel in the nation’s capital, and a cemetery in California.

Ubiquitous though his name and image may be, Mark Twain is in no danger of becoming a petrified icon. On the contrary, Mark Twain lives. *Huckleberry Finn* is “the most taught novel, most taught long work, and most taught piece of American literature” in American schools from junior high to graduate school. Hundreds of Twain impersonators appear in

theaters, trade shows, and shopping centers in every region of the country. Scholars publish hundreds of articles as well as books about Twain every year, and he is the subject of daily exchanges on the Internet. A journalist somewhere in the world finds a reason to quote Twain just about every day. Television series such as *Bonanza*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *Cheers* broadcast episodes that feature Mark Twain as a character. Hollywood screenwriters regularly produce movies inspired by his works, and writers of mysteries and science fiction continue to weave him into their plots.

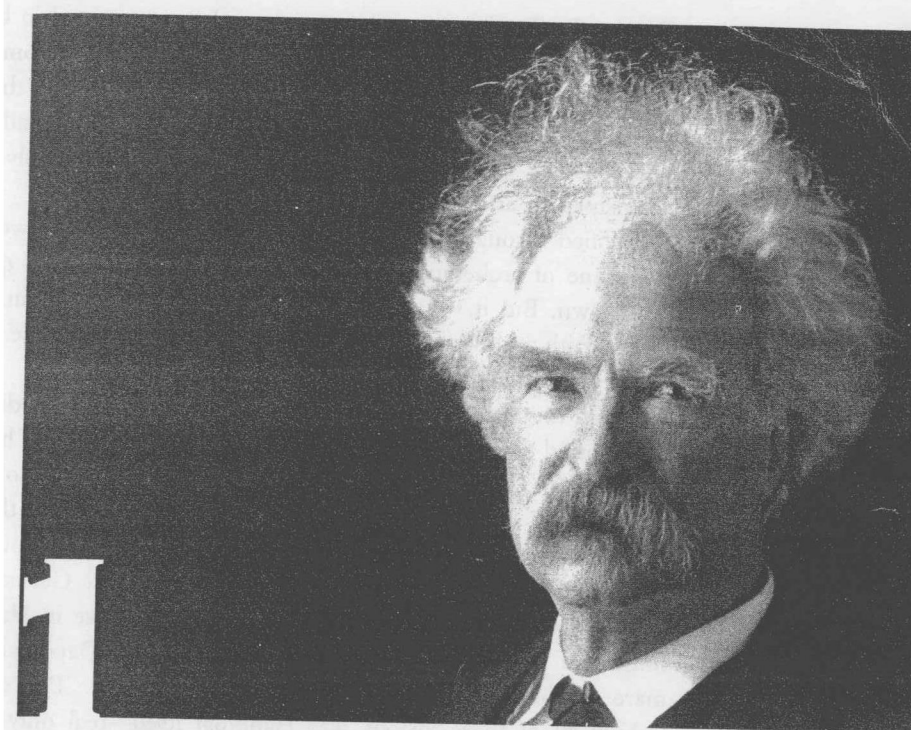
Mark Twain entered the public eye at a time when many of his countrymen considered “American culture” an oxymoron; he died four years before a world conflagration that would lead many to question whether the contradiction in terms was not “European civilization” instead. In between he worked in journalism, printing, steamboating, mining, lecturing, publishing, and editing, in virtually every region of the country. He tried his hand at humorous sketches, social satire, historical novels, children’s books, poetry, drama, science fiction, mysteries, romances, philosophy, travelogues, memoirs, polemics, and several genres no one had ever seen before or has ever seen since. He invented a self-pasting scrapbook, a history game, a vest strap, and a gizmo for keeping bedsheets tucked in; he put money into machines and processes designed to revolutionize typesetting and engraving; and he invested in a food supplement called “Plasmon.” Along the way he cheerfully impersonated himself and prior versions of himself for dotting publics on five continents, while playing out a charming rags-to-riches story followed by a devastating riches-to-rags story followed by yet another great American comeback. He had a long-running real-life engagement first in a sumptuous comedy of manners and then in a tragedy not of his own design: during the last fourteen years of his life almost everyone he ever loved was taken from him by disease and death. How can we come to know this larger-than-life figure who managed to leave his mark on so many aspects of his world and our own?

In books and articles published over the last ten years, I have taken a range of approaches to this question, probing some of the sources of Twain’s fiction, the processes by which he transmuted those sources into art, and the responses his work elicited. As editor of *The Oxford Mark Twain*, I invited some of the leading writers of our time to respond to Twain as one artist to another, continuing the cultural conversation, and I asked key Twain scholars to set each work in its biographical, social,

and cultural context. Although I will refer to and build on what I learned in these earlier investigations, I take a rather different tack in this book.

The interconnected meditations that make up *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture* explore some of the challenges that confront us as we follow Twain into the territory that he made his own—and ours. In Chapter One, “The Matter of Hannibal,” I invite the reader to accompany me on a visit to Hannibal, Missouri, where I explore how that community shaped Mark Twain’s work and how it honors his memory today. Chapter Two, “Excavations,” describes my efforts to recover and vivify some “missing” chapters of the past. Chapter Three, “Ripples and Reverberations,” charts how Twain continues to shape the very texture of our lives in the United States and around the world, tapping into the zeitgeist of his time and ours in ways we are still uncovering. In the epilogue I consider some of Twain’s legacies for the twenty-first century.

What does the “use” we make of Mark Twain tell us about ourselves? Twain is there for us, speaking to our condition, as the Quakers say, no matter what that condition may be at any point, no matter how drastically it may change over time. The diverse and frequently competing images conjured up by the name “Mark Twain” were often carefully crafted and exploited by Sam Clemens himself. Twain spent a lifetime first projecting and then undercutting one image after another: a funny man with a talent for literature of the “low” sort; a serious author who despaired of being forever tarred with the “humorist” label; a satirist so subtle his meanings were often missed; a polemicist so direct his messages were often pointedly ignored. There is something for everyone in Mark Twain’s opus: moral outrage, scintillating silliness, materialism, antimaterialism, nostalgia, antinostalgia, conformity, iconoclasm, technophilia, technophobia, exuberance, and bleak despair. The Twain we claim as our own reveals much about who we think we are—and who we want to be. In virtually any part of the world where there is literacy and printing, his works have been translated, read, and taught, yielding up to readers of vastly disparate geographies, economies, and educational levels a menu of stunningly varied tastes and textures. “Aren’t you ready to move on to something else?” a friend asks, certain I should be bored by now with Mark Twain. The question makes no sense to me.



THE MATTER OF HANNIBAL

June 20, 1995. The summer sun shot through the window in blinding flashes as my plane approached the runway for a landing. I shielded my eyes. As the Fokker 100 touched the ground, I recalled the conversation I'd had eight months earlier with Masako Notoji, an ebullient professor of American Studies from the University of Tokyo, who was studying American theme parks and historic sites. She had been regaling me with stories of the half-dozen historic sites in the United States she'd just visited, one of which was Hannibal, Missouri. I confessed I had never been there. She was incredulous. "You haven't been to Hannibal? And you work on Mark Twain?" "But you must go," she scolded. "It's that simple: you *must* go."

The "Matter of Hannibal," as Henry Nash Smith called the world of Twain's youth and the world of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, would preoccupy Twain throughout his career as a writer. Sometimes the slavery that helped make that world what it was hovered at the periphery of Twain's awareness, while at other times it was at the center.

Repeatedly Twain returned to events and scenes rooted in his Hannibal past, held them up to the light, turned them to see them from new angles, allowing them to cast fresh shadows. People and scenes that impinged on his consciousness in the present influenced what he recalled from that past, how he viewed it, and how he shaped it (consciously and unconsciously) into art.

Vivified through Mark Twain's imagination, Hannibal would become the scene of archetypal innocent idylls of childhood, the quintessential hometown. But it would also become a flash point of guilt, an emblem of bad faith and corruption, of moral rot, of barbarism—the underside of an arcadia that was innocent *only* in imagination.

When the well of his inspiration ran dry, as it did periodically, Twain often found that a quick detour back through the scenes of his childhood allowed it to fill again. But he could rarely predict the train of associations these returns would set in motion. Fragments of the past that had been muted or forgotten or buried would unexpectedly jump out at him. In Bombay in the 1890s, for example, the sight of a German abusing a servant vividly called up the chilling image of a slave in Hannibal being murdered by his master for some trifling offense. Daydream and nightmare would jostle one another, vying for primacy. The only constant linking all of these visions was Hannibal itself—real only as his mind chose to recall it, yet there, in some sense, in actuality, to return to in body as well as in spirit.

Twain did return physically—seven times, in fact—the last time being in 1902, when he was celebrated as a conquering hero. As a writer, however, he returned to Hannibal many more times. Hannibal would be the St. Petersburg of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and the sequels, and of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (where parts of it may have made their way into Bricksville and Pikesville as well). It would appear in the shape of Dawson's Landing in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Eseldorf (literally "Assville") in *The Mysterious Stranger*. It would peek out in various guises from the pages of *Life on the Mississippi*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed," and *Following the Equator*, as well as the autobiographical dictations and the posthumously published "Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy" and "A Scrap of Curious History." Dimensions of Hannibal's complacency, pretentiousness, and bad faith would surface in "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" and "My First Lie and How I Got Out of It"—a suggestive but incomplete list.

Mark Twain's Hannibal is a palimpsest that yields diverse and often

contradictory meanings. It is also a microcosm of America itself—its promise and its potential, its guilt and its shame. In *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Vann Woodward observed that "the tragic aspects and the ironic implications" of American history have been obscured by "the national legend of success and victory and the perpetuation of infant illusions of innocence and virtue." Hannibal eventually came to evoke, as no other single locale in the nation would or could evoke, both the innocence and the irony of American history.

* * *

As I pulled my rental car out of the St. Louis airport, heading northwest on Interstate 70, I recalled the view of Twain's snaking river from the plane. Meachum's river, too, I thought. Hannibal was my destination, but for the moment I was still in John Berry Meachum's town and I let my thoughts wander to this remarkable figure as St. Louis receded behind me. Born a slave in Virginia in 1789, Meachum became a skilled carpenter, cabinetmaker and barrel maker, purchasing his own freedom and that of his father before marrying and starting a family with a woman who was still a slave. When her master moved to Missouri, Meachum followed, soon purchasing his wife's and children's freedom as well and settling them in St. Louis. After establishing himself as a successful steamboat entrepreneur, Meachum bought twenty slaves, taught them a trade, employed them in his barrel-making business, and allowed them to purchase their freedom from him with the wages he paid them. He also became an important religious leader: ordained as a Baptist minister in 1825, he founded (in collaboration with New England evangelist John Mason Peck) the first black Protestant congregation west of the Mississippi. But it was his commitment to education that indelibly etched him in my memory.

In the late 1820s, in violation of a city ordinance, Meachum founded a clandestine school in the basement of his church on Third and Almond Streets, the first school for blacks in St. Louis. Under the cover of receiving religious instruction, his pupils, both slave and free, were taught to read and write and were encouraged to view education as the key to their future success. In 1847, however, unnerved by escalating fears of slave uprisings, the Missouri state legislature did away with Meachum's school (or so they thought), passing a law stipulating that no one could "keep or teach any school for the instruction of negroes or mulattoes in reading or writing in this STATE." The punishment for those who broke the law and couldn't pay the fine was public whipping. John Berry Meachum was undeterred. In a move that deserves to be remembered in the

flipped through the rack of glass-covered boards displaying clippings and memorabilia associated with Twain and his world. Two items caught my interest. One was a 1935 poem by Edgar Guest composed for the Twain centennial.

Down in Hannibal, Missouri, they're living once again
All the countless happy memories of a boy they called Mark
Twain. . . .

Down in Hannibal, Missouri, young and old with eyes aglow
Are remembering a baby born one hundred years ago.
They are pointing out the places where that little fellow played,
And the haunts he made immortal by some boyish escapade. . . .

The other was a page from the *St. Louis Republican* of 1849, displayed with a legend stating that this issue of the newspaper "reached Hannibal when Samuel Clemens was 14 years old." Among the ads for Perry Davis's painkiller medicine, the circus, and various theatrical productions were these:

NEGROES for SALE A strong, healthy woman 35-40 years of age, a first-rate cook, ironer and washer. Speaks French and English, and her two children, a boy seven years, and a girl three years old. Also, a sprightly 11 year old girl, all from the country. A first-rate woman cook, washer and ironer, for sale, not to leave the city. Apply at 104 Locust St.

NEGRO GIRL FOR SALE A likely young negro girl, about 14 years old—sold for no fault. The owner having no use for her, would prefer to sell to a resident of the state. Apply on Broadway, first brick house south of Howard St.

The museum was closing. I'd have to save the rest of the exhibits for the next day. As I made my way out into the street, I wondered how Hannibal was going to reconcile the world of "countless happy memories" of care-free boyhood with the world embodied in those chilling ads.

* * *

Exiting onto Hill Street, I walked past the Mark Twain Boyhood Home, John Marshall Clemens' Law Office, the Haunted House, the Becky Thatcher House, and the Twainland Express Depot. I turned left on Third Street and found myself in what looked like the commercial



1. The Mark Twain Family Restaurant and the Twainland Express depot at the corner of Third and Hill Streets in Hannibal, Missouri (Photo courtesy of R. Kent Rasmussen)

district of any town of comparable size: a real estate office, a business supply store, a photography studio, a car stereo and cellular phone store, an electric heating equipment company, a radio station, a luncheonette, and a newspaper office. This had been a commercial area in Twain's day as well, I recalled. I stopped when I reached the corner of Third and Center Streets. When Sam Clemens was twelve, a businessman named John Armstrong traded hay, grain, and slaves at Melpontian Hall on this corner.

Slavery in Hannibal may not have been "the brutal plantation article," but it was slavery nonetheless, with the all too familiar mix of pain and powerlessness. Emma Knight of Hannibal was born a slave near Florida, Missouri, Mark Twain's birthplace. When she and her sisters outgrew the shoes their master gave them only once a year, they had to go barefoot. "Our feet would crack open from de cold and bleed. We would sit down and bawl and cry because it hurt so," she told an interviewer years after freedom had come. Her family had been separated, her father sold at auction—and not simply to settle an estate. "My father was took away. My mother said he was put upon a block and sold 'cause de master wanted money to buy something for de house." Clay Smith, another slave

history of American education as a masterpiece of ingenuity, Meachum outfitted a steamboat with books and anchored it in the middle of the Mississippi River, where it was subject to federal but not state laws. Students were ferried to the boat by skiff, taught reading, writing, and arithmetic all day, and ferried back to shore in the evening. Meachum's floating "Freedom School" continued until his death in the late 1850s.

As I turned off the interstate onto famous Highway 61, I thought about Meachum's creativity and courage—and about his obscurity. I had come across him by accident in my research. No monument or statue is erected to his memory, and he never makes it into American history books, Missouri histories, or histories of education. Why?

I recalled my graduate seminar on the African-American press last semester at the University of Texas at Austin. One of my students, Bruce Wilson, a black veteran whose knowledge of Texas black history is longstanding and rich, had chosen to investigate an incident that had received widespread attention in the local paper and the national black press when it first happened but somehow had not made it into standard histories of the state. John R. Shillady, the white secretary of the NAACP, had been brutally beaten in broad daylight during his visit to Austin in 1919 in an attempt to discourage his efforts on behalf of the NAACP in Texas. One of Shillady's attackers, a well-known county judge, bragged, "I told him our Negroes would cause no trouble if left alone. Then I whipped him and ordered him to leave because I thought it was for the best interests of Austin and the state." When the NAACP national office asked the governor of Texas what was being done to punish the offenders, he replied by telegram, "Shillady was the only offender in connection with the matter." But it was the names of these powerful and visible leaders in Texas politics that sent shock waves around the classroom when Bruce Wilson spoke them: Pickle and Hobby. The county judge and the governor involved in this 1919 incident had the same last names as two highly respected contemporary elder statesmen of Texas who had firmly held the reins of power in the state until their retirement in the early 1990s, one as a U.S. congressman, the other as lieutenant governor. It was not, alas, some strange coincidence: they were, respectively, the grandfather of one and the father of the other.

I began to see why there was no monument to John Berry Meachum. One cannot honor the achievement of blacks who fought against their oppression without shining a glaring light on that oppression and on those who perpetrated it. One has to be willing to finger the first families of the state. longtime political dynasties, and good churchgoing folks like

Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas in *Huckleberry Finn* as complicitous in an obscene and barbaric system. Celebrating the bravery and heroism of a Meachum required acknowledging the baseness of the good citizens of Missouri who threw those legal obstacles in his path. Small wonder that for many whites it seems simpler—and infinitely safer—just to forget the whole thing.

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I checked into the Best Western Hotel Clemens in the late afternoon. When I realized I was a block from the Mark Twain Historic District, I decided to go for a walk. Shortly after I turned left onto Hill Street, I spotted a historic marker that read:

HERE STOOD THE BOARD
FENCE WHICH TOM SAWYER
PERSUADED HIS GANG TO
PAY HIM FOR THE PRIVILEGE
OF WHITEWASHING. TOM
SAT BY AND SAW THAT IT
WAS WELL DONE.

Wait a minute, I thought. Tom Sawyer was a fictional character and was thus incapable of doing anything to an actual board fence that may or may not have existed at one time on Hill Street. And I knew that if Tom's fence allegedly "stood" on this spot some time in the past, at least ten more "Tom Sawyer's Fences" would miraculously materialize when Tom Sawyer Days took place some two weeks from today. I responded to the historical markers in Twain's hometown with the same healthy skepticism Twain himself had trained on the "facts" related by tour guides in *The Innocents Abroad*:

We find a piece of the true cross in every old church we go into, and some of the nails that held it together. . . . I think we have seen as much as a keg of these nails. Then there is the crown of thorns; they have part of one in Sainte Chapelle, in Paris, and part of one, also, in Notre Dame. And as for bones of St. Denis, I feel certain we have seen enough of them to duplicate him if necessary.

I smiled to myself when I realized the kind of tourist I'd become: the kind Mark Twain had trained me to be.

I had only a few minutes in the Mark Twain Museum Annex before it closed, so I watched the biographical slide show and then hurriedly



2. Sign directing tourists to the "Haunted House on Hill Street" Wax Museum in Hannibal, Missouri (Photo courtesy of R. Kent Rasmussen)

from Hannibal, recalled that her aunt Harriet "was sold on de block down on Fourth Street right here in Hannibal."

The slave trading at Melpontian Hall—about four blocks from the house where the Clemens family lived—was so repugnant to the Moores, a newly arrived family in town, that they packed up and moved back to Wisconsin after a very brief stay. Yet the disdain in which the citizens of Hannibal allegedly held the slave trader was not so strong as to dissuade them from using Melpontian Hall as their voting place on election day.

All slaves were vulnerable to being sold away from friends and family. Indeed, as Twain tells us, his own father was responsible for one such sale, having exiled a slave named Charley "from his home, his mother, and his friends, and all things and creatures that make life dear." In 1842 John Marshall Clemens, who had received the slave in settlement of a long-standing debt, took Charley with him on a trip to collect \$470 he was owed by a man in Mississippi. John Clemens found the financial trials of the Mississippi man so moving that he "could not have the conscience" to collect the debt (as he wrote home). But he had no qualms about selling Charley down the river for about forty dollars' worth of tar—the same amount that the king and the duke got for Jim when they sold him in the novel Twain would write some forty years later.

That the Deep South held no monopoly on cruelty as far as slaves are concerned is clear from Twain's own recollections. At age ten, in 1845, on one of Hannibal's main streets, he had watched a white master strike and kill a slave with a piece of iron, a memory that came back to him in Bombay. "I knew the man had a right to kill his slave if he wanted to, and yet it seemed a pitiful thing and somehow wrong, though why wrong I was not deep enough to explain. . . . Nobody in the village approved of that murder, but of course no one said much about it." On another occasion he recalled the community's response to the death of a slave at the hands of a white overseer: "Everybody seemed indifferent about it as regarded the slave—though considerable sympathy was felt for the slave's owner, who had been bereft of valuable property by a worthless person who was not able to pay for it." (The jarring intrusion of the fact that the murder of the slave left the owner "bereft of valuable property" resonates with the dry denouement of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*: "Everybody granted that if 'Tom' were white and free it would be unquestionably right to punish him—it would be no loss to anybody; but to shut up a valuable slave for life—that was quite another matter. As soon as the Governor understood the case, he pardoned Tom at once, and the creditors sold him down the river.")

Although the white citizens of Hannibal may have persuaded themselves that their "mild domestic slavery" was more humane than "the brutal plantation article," the efforts of slaves to escape at great personal risk and the fears of their owners that they would succeed belie the view that "as a rule our slaves were convinced and content." Emma Knight recalled her mistress's efforts to intimidate the slaves: "Mistress always told us dat if we run away somebody would catch and kill us. We was always scared when somebody strange come." Clay Smith recalled that "Father run away to Illinois during the war and we ain't never saw him again." Twain recalled from his early childhood in Florida, Missouri, hearing the "loud and frequent groans" of a runaway slave brought into the town "by six men who took him to an empty cabin, where they threw him on the floor and bound him with ropes." In 1847, when Twain was eleven, a runaway slave who belonged to a man named Neriam Todd swam across the river and hid in the swampy thickets of Sny Island, on the Illinois side of the Mississippi. A boy of Twain's acquaintance, Benson Blankenship, found him and brought him scraps of food instead of giving him up for a reward. (His behavior would become a model for aspects of Huck's behavior in *Huckleberry Finn*.) Some woodchoppers chased the slave into a part of the swamp called Bird Slough, where he disap-

peared; several days later, Sam Clemens and a few of his friends who had crossed the river to fish and hunt for berries found the slave's mutilated body. Yet courage persisted in the face of cruelty and danger. Indeed, slaves escaped with just enough frequency that insurance companies advertised policies to help protect slave owners from the financial loss involved.

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There was something else the slaves had that pain and powerlessness and poverty didn't manage to extinguish: a rich and creative oral tradition. A young Sam Clemens who as yet knew nothing of his future calling listened to it every chance he got. The slaves didn't tell this attentive little white boy how much they suffered: stories like those Emma Knight and Clay Smith shared with interviewers years after slavery ended were not for his ears. What they did let him hear were ghost stories and satirical orations so masterfully constructed and delivered that he would remember them all his life. He was tremendously struck by the storytelling talents of Uncle Dan'l, a slave at his uncle's farm in Florida, Missouri, whose tales he was privileged to listen to every night in the summer. In a letter Twain wrote about him in 1881, he recalled the "impressive pauses and eloquent silences" of Uncle Dan'l's "impressive delivery." Twain would also recall the rhetorical performances of Jerry, "a gay and impudent and satirical and delightful young black man—a slave, who daily preached sermons from the top of his master's woodpile, with me for sole audience. . . . To me he was a wonder. I believed he was the greatest orator in the United States." All his life Twain would emulate the lessons in storytelling and satire he learned from Uncle Dan'l and Jerry during his Hannibal childhood. These master talents, however, despite their consummate skill as artists, were still slaves, and as such they were just as vulnerable as Charley was to being sold and separated from the people they loved. Later in life—much later—Twain would comprehend what that meant.

As an adult Twain would remember the sight of "a dozen black men and women chained to each other . . . and lying in a group on the pavement, awaiting shipment to the southern slave market. Those were the saddest faces I ever saw." In *A Connecticut Yankee* he would describe another chained group of slaves: "Even the children were smileless; there was not a face among all these half a hundred people but was cast down, and bore that set expression of hopelessness which is bred of long and hard trials and old acquaintance with despair."

During his Hannibal boyhood, Sam Clemens did not challenge the

social and legal norms that produced that despair. "In those old slave-holding days," he recalled,

the whole community was agreed as to one thing—the awful sacredness of slave property. . . . To help steal a horse or a cow was a low crime, but to help a hunted slave . . . or hesitate to promptly betray him to a slave-catcher when opportunity offered was a much baser crime, and carried with it a stain, a moral smirch which nothing could wipe away. . . . It seemed natural enough to me then.

But the boy who found this state of affairs "natural enough" would ultimately come to hold a very different attitude.

What is a "real" civilization? Nobody can answer that conundrum. They have all tried. Then suppose we try to get at what it is not; and then subtract the what it is not from the general sum, and call the remainder "real" civilization. . . . Let us say, then, in broad terms, that any system which has in it any one of these things, to wit, human slavery, despotic government, inequality, numerous and brutal punishments for crimes, superstition almost universal, ignorance almost universal, and dirt and poverty almost universal—is not a real civilization, and any system which has none of them is.

If you grant these terms, one may then consider this conundrum: How old is real civilization? The answer is easy and unassailable. A century ago it had not appeared anywhere in the world during a single instant since the world was made. If you grant these terms—and I don't see why it shouldn't be fair, since civilization must surely mean the humanizing of a people, not a class—there is today but one real civilization in the world, and it is not yet thirty years old. We made the trip and hoisted its flag when we disposed of our slavery!

This child of slaveholders, this member of a ragtag band of Confederate irregulars, would write what is arguably the greatest antiracist novel by an American: a book about a young boy who is oblivious to anything amiss in the moral universe of the grown-ups around him (as Clemens himself was) but who, despite his best intentions to the contrary, allows his "sound heart" to defeat his "deformed conscience," forging, in the process, one of the most memorable interracial friendships in literature.

What an incredible story Clemens' own story was: a young boy who accepts slavery as natural and right grows up to become a man who asserts that civilization began when slavery was abolished. Along the way he