



Mark
Twain

Life on the Mississippi

*With an introduction
by Jonathan Raban*



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Life on the Mississippi

BY

MARK TWAIN



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Life on the Mississippi

JONATHAN RABAN
WROTE THE INTRODUCTION
FOR THIS VOLUME

GUY CARDWELL
WROTE THE NOTES AND SELECTED THE
TEXT FOR THIS VOLUME

INTRODUCTION

by Jonathan Raban

Later in life, Twain would claim *Life on the Mississippi* as his own favorite among his books, but in the winter of 1882, when he was struggling to finish it against a deadline, it was his millstone and his albatross. From his desk in Hartford he plagued his friends with weary bulletins: "The spur and burden of the contract are intolerable to me. I can endure the irritation of it no longer . . ."; "I never had such a fight over a book in my life before . . ."; ". . . this wretched God-damned book."

Yet, when he put his signature to that accursed contract, the job of writing a book on the Mississippi must have seemed a breeze. The guts of the project were already to hand, in the seven articles, totalling 35,000 words, which he had published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1875, under the title of "Old Times on the Mississippi." The articles had come to Twain in a single fluent burst of work, while he paused in the writing of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and their portrait of the artist as a young river pilot had already earned him a round of invigorating critical applause. All he had to do now was to capitalize on their success and expand the series to book length.

The *Atlantic Monthly* pieces were suffused with the roseate style of *Tom Sawyer*. The "white town drowsing in the sunshine of a summer's morning" in "Old Times" is set in the same key and the same tempo as "The sun rose upon a tranquil world, and beamed down upon the peaceful village like a benediction" in *Tom Sawyer*. Both the magazine series and the boys' book represent the river as an idyllic playground. In both, Twain re-created his own youth and wrote of a lost age when America itself was still young.

In fact, only thirteen years intervened between May 1861, when Twain, aged 25, made his last trip on the river as a pilot, and October 1874, when he sat down to write "Old Times"; it might as well have been a century. War had changed the world beyond recognition or repair. Before the war, the Mis-

Mississippi had been the arterial mainstream of mid-century American life; after the blockade of Memphis in 1861, the river was broken in two, its trade killed for the duration. It was the end of the culture of the steamboat and the river town. When peace eventually came, the railroads took most of the traffic that had once gone by water. Twain at 38 was able to look back at his own young manhood as if it were ancient history; his memories—both in *Tom Sawyer* and in “Old Times”—have the hauntedness, the glowing remoteness, of those of a man in his nonage.

Between the New England *now* of his writing and the Missouri *then* of his fiction and reminiscence lay a personal as well as a national cataclysm. When the war put an end to his career as a river pilot (a career in which he was by all accounts extremely happy), he enlisted in the Marion Rangers, a band of Confederate guerrillas based in Missouri—a state that remained loyal to the Union despite the secessionist stand made by its governor. The next few weeks were spent in hiding or on the run. Then Twain, in the company of his brother Orion, who had been appointed Secretary to the Nevada Territory, fled West—first to the gold-diggings, then to the San Francisco newspapers, where he quickly established himself as a famously droll columnist. In *Life on the Mississippi* he vilifies the Confederate South in a tone of wise, and seemingly age-old, contempt; it's worth remembering that he began the Civil War as a Rebel volunteer, and spent the rest of it in a state of what amounted to internal exile.

He emerged in 1865 with a new name, a new profession, and a new political view of the world. The young humorist Mark Twain was an entirely different kind of animal from the young pilot Samuel Clemens; and Mark Train would commit himself to so befogging and mythologizing the past of Samuel Clemens that it would turn into the best and most glorious of the mature writer's inventions. The “Old Times” pieces were fiction—a fiction made credible, in every sentence, with autobiographical fact. From the makeshift and muddy raw material of western life in the 1840's they created a golden age of innocence and harmony as pure, and as unreachable, as that pastoral world of nymphs and swains on which the poets of the Jacobean court used to dote.

It was a fiction that could not be indefinitely sustained. Even before he finished the *Atlantic Monthly* series, there were signs that Twain was beginning to scrape the bottom of that particular barrel. Article 7 (Chapters XVI–XVII of *Life on the Mississippi*), with its steamboat-race statistics and its limp anecdotal ending, is not a patch on Twain's portrait of his boyhood and his apprenticeship as a cub pilot under Horace Bixby. To make a whole book out of the river, he needed to construct a bang-up-to-date modern (even modernist) frame in which to hang his idealized picture of the past. He would pit the antebellum Golden Age against the postbellum Gilded Age.

In April 1882, he went back to the river. It was a triumphal, grandee's return. Twain took with him Charles Osgood (his literary agent and the manager of his publishing house) and Roswell Phelps, who was signed on as a stenographer to take down the great writer's small talk. He at least toyed with the idea of taking on an assumed name; as C. L. Samuel of New York—a rich Jewish East Coaster—he might eavesdrop, like Huck Finn, on people speaking of his younger self as if he were dead.

The Twain party arrived at St. Louis, rode down the river to New Orleans, then up the river again to Minneapolis. A month after setting out, Twain was back in Hartford, where he quickly found that the book, far from being an easy assignment, was the most mulish and immoveable project that he had faced in his entire writing life.

Reading *Life on the Mississippi*, it is not the river one sees first but the writer's desk—a desk littered with magazines, books, brochures, writing pads. There is the stack of seven-year-old issues of the *Atlantic Monthly*; a pile of recently acquired guidebooks, bland and boosterish then as now; several American travelogues by British authors—Frances Trollope, Captain Marryat, Captain Basil Hall; a copy of *A Tramp Abroad*, published two years before, from which some overspill material (like “A Dying Man's Confession”) might be filched for the Mississippi book. Most important of all, there is the half-finished manuscript of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Few books expose the halting progress of their own au-

thorship so plainly as this one does. You catch the rhythm of Twain's working days from it—the bad ones along with the good ones. A day of plodding journalism will be succeeded by a day of happy inspiration; sometimes Twain nods over the work, then, suddenly, he quickens and takes wing. When his energy flags, he goes back to the books and papers on the desk, searching for a quotation that will fit, or for an idea that will move the manuscript along for another thousand words.

Chapter XXXVIII, "The House Beautiful," provides a nice example of Twain at work, doodling and improvising his way around the river. It begins with a steamboat run, quotes Dickens on steamboats, then, triggered by little more than the mention of Dickens's name, launches into a brilliant Dickensian pastiche. Twain, diverted into thoughts of Dickens's animated London interiors (or so I surmise), begins to apply Dickens's patent brand of telegraphic syntax to a childhood memory of his own—his childhood visits to the farmhouse owned by his uncle and aunt, John and Patsy Quarles, in Florida, Missouri. The result is a wonderful exercise in rapt memoriousness. A whole society is brought to life in an epic inventory of its household effects. It is at once the cleverest imitation of Dickens ever written and a magnificent original in its own right. Later, when he returned to *Huckleberry Finn* (and all the internal evidence suggests that the passage in *Life on the Mississippi* came first), Twain used this chapter as a quarry from which to extract material to furnish the Grangerford house. The second time around, Huck does the seeing, and gets it poignantly wrong.

The chapter loops its way back to steamboat architecture and, a page later, Twain—on what is evidently a dull morning—is down to one of his regular ploys-of-last-resort and quoting Mrs. Trollope. Both the rollercoaster motion and the essential literariness of the method are typical of *Life on the Mississippi*. Like the river itself, the book is labyrinthine, a succession of meanders, chutes, and cutoffs; it turns digression into a structural principle, as Twain wanders downstream, then up, branching off at will into recollections, swoops of fancy, lectures, fictions, facts, guided tours, meditations, and sly parodies.

It is a palimpsest, with one style of writing laid slantwise

on top of another, and it is a book obsessed with the meaning and consequence of writing. When Twain blames the Civil War on the South's fatal weakness for the romantic prose of Sir Walter Scott, he is joking, but only just. *Life on the Mississippi* is profoundly charged with the insight that, in Wittgenstein's happy formulation, the world we live in is the words we use, and that the United States in the late nineteenth century was living in a language that had become corrupt and stale. The book begins in newspaperese—a slather of routine statistical journalism, as if the great river might be netted in a mesh of facts and figures; it ends in a tongue-in-cheek pastiche of varnished guidebook prose, full of tired lyricism and spurious Indian legends. En route, Twain keeps up a continuous—and often very funny—attack on the language of romantic cliché.

Twain's real opponent is not Scott, or Poe (who is mocked and imitated in Chapter XXXI), or the New Orleans *Times-Democrat* journalist who is given a dressing-down in Chapter XLV, but himself. He suffered from what he labels “the artificial-flower complaint,” and his own prose (in *Innocents Abroad*, in *Tom Sawyer*, and in the “Old Times” pieces) had strong Confederate leanings. The passage he quotes from the New Orleans journalist (“On Saturday, early in the morning, the beauty of the place graced our cabin . . .”) sounds very like the kind of sentence in his early work to which Twain himself might, with hindsight, have posted a rejection slip.

He had already created, in manuscript, the clear and powerful voice of Huckleberry Finn: a voice without literary precedent. *Life on the Mississippi* counts the cost of that creation. It shows Twain in the act of wrestling with the demons of the language—battling, in parody and pastiche, toward a new way of rendering the world in writing. Style after style is tried out on the river, and found wanting. All Twain's literary ancestors, from his journalist-brother Orion to Dickens, are mimicked, some in homage, some in excoriation. This is a far more anarchic book than has generally been acknowledged.

Its emotional and stylistic heart resides in Chapters LIII to LVI, where Twain goes back to his old home in Hannibal. The tone throughout is conventionally fond (“this tranquil

refuge of my childhood . . ."). It is the required tone of a man revisiting his past and finding it at once sweetly evocative and changed almost beyond recognition. It is a cunning mask. For the memories that the town brings to mind are violently at war with the style in which they are recalled. Fondly, at leisure, Twain dwells on the story of his schoolmate who was taunted to his death by Twain and his playfellows, on the tramp who burned himself to death in the town jail, on the man who fancied himself a serial murderer, on the woman driven insane by another childish prank, and on the town's chief tourist attraction, the pickled body of a fourteen-year-old girl. He laments the passing of the slaughterhouse and discovers Tom Sawyer's sweetheart Becky Thatcher (for it is surely she) in the person of a raddled and promiscuous crone. Every page is littered with the town dead; the unmathematical reader will rapidly lose count of the corpses that form the main punctuation points in Twain's story of his homecoming.

It is an extraordinary performance. Manner and matter are played against each other, tenor and descant, in a brilliant and unsettling black comedy. Here, as almost everywhere else in the book, Twain is working on the edge of parody. The model in these chapters is Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," and the connection between Irving's story and Twain's reworking of it is precise and suggestive. Van Winkle slept through the American Revolution; Twain has, as it were, slept through the American Civil War. Wakened at last, he is a very old man indeed—far, far older than the 46-year-old who made the literal return to Hannibal.

He might have called the book *Death on the Mississippi*. When he came to pick up the threads of the "Old Times" series, in Chapter XVIII, he built the book up to its first climax—the story of his brother Henry's death in an explosion aboard the steamboat *Pennsylvania*. The scene of the "death house" in Memphis ("Two long rows of prostrate forms—more than forty, in all—and every face and head a shapeless wad of loose raw cotton.") is the last we see of the antebellum Mississippi, and the bodies of the people killed in the explosion, viewed as in an improvised field hospital, foreshadow the bodies of those about to be killed in the Civil War.

Thereafter, Twain can't keep his pen away from the subject.

He jokes about it. He spins out morbid gothic tales. He records it as a matter of important fact, and, when he reaches the last page of the book, he drags death in by its heels, in a facetious metaphor:

A dead man could get up a better legend than this one. I don't mean a fresh man either; I mean a man that's been dead weeks and weeks.

As he wrote to his wife, Livy, when he was on the river in May 1882:

That world which I knew in its blossoming youth is old and bowed and melancholy, now; its soft cheeks are leathery and wrinkled, the fire is gone out in its eyes, and the spring from its step. It will be dust and ashes when I come again. I have been clasping hands with the moribund . . .

In the same letter, he called his return to the past "this hideous trip," and when he settled down to write his book, he wrote compulsively of dead people, dead cities (like the town of Napoleon, Arkansas, washed away by the river), a dead civilization. The brightest, funniest moments in the book are shot through with a kind of jaunty necrophilia.

It is the conceit, and necessary premise, of the "modernist" writer to believe that he or she has somehow survived into an era without precedent, beyond history—that the world in effect died sometime between the time he or she was born and the time in which he or she is writing. No one in the late twentieth century has subscribed more fervently to this belief than Twain did in the late nineteenth. The Civil War was his Holocaust and his nuclear bomb. *Life on the Mississippi* shows him dealing with that predicament in a typically modernist way—in pastiche, in parody, in writing (as John Barth described Borges) "postscripts to the corpus of literature." It is a strange, untidy, uncomfortable, and secretive book, and it is no wonder that Twain, having sweated blood to make it work, should have been so proud of it long after its publication.

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Life on the Mississippi

The "Body of the Nation"

But the basin of the Mississippi is the BODY OF THE NATION. All the other parts are but members, important in themselves, yet more important in their relations to this. Exclusive of the Lake basin and of 300,000 square miles in Texas and New Mexico, which in many aspects form a part of it, this basin contains about 1,250,000 square miles. In extent it is the second great valley of the world, being exceeded only by that of the Amazon. The valley of the frozen Obi approaches it in extent; that of the La Plata comes next in space, and probably in habitable capacity, having about $\frac{8}{9}$ of its area; then comes that of the Yenisei, with about $\frac{7}{9}$; the Lena, Amoor, Hoang-ho, Yang-tse-kiang, and Nile, $\frac{5}{9}$; the Ganges, less than $\frac{1}{2}$; the Indus, less than $\frac{1}{3}$; the Euphrates, $\frac{1}{5}$; the Rhine, $\frac{1}{15}$. It exceeds in extent the whole of Europe, exclusive of Russia, Norway, and Sweden. It would contain Austria four times, Germany or Spain five times, France six times, the British Islands or Italy ten times. Conceptions formed from the river-basins of Western Europe are rudely shocked when we consider the extent of the valley of the Mississippi; nor are those formed from the sterile basins of the great rivers of Siberia, the lofty plateaus of Central Asia, or the mighty sweep of the swampy Amazon more adequate. Latitude, elevation, and rainfall all combine to render every part of the Mississippi Valley capable of supporting a dense population. As a dwelling-place for civilized man it is by far the first upon our globe. —EDITOR'S TABLE, Harper's Magazine, February, 1863.

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