

Mark Twain

Edited by
Frederick Anderson

The Critical Heritage



MARK TWAIN: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES

General Editor: B. C. Southam

The Critical Heritage series collects together a large body of criticism on major figures in literature. Each volume presents the contemporary responses to a particular writer, enabling the student to follow the formation of critical attitudes to the writer's work and its place within a literary tradition.

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MARK TWAIN
THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by

FREDERICK ANDERSON



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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side, we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in *The Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly-productive and lengthily-reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

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Preface

In order to present a balanced sense of transatlantic response to Mark Twain's writings, reviews have been selected in approximately equal numbers from British and American journals with emphasis upon books most likely to elicit the strongest expression of national opinion.

The names of anonymous reviewers have been supplied, with explanation for attribution, whenever evidence supported conjecture. The widest possible choice has been made of critical points of view expressed throughout the span of Mark Twain's literary life. It is inevitable that the novels with an English setting aroused a special interest in English critics and these are therefore represented somewhat more fully. American reviewers rather surprisingly neglected to comment on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* at the time of its publication so that relatively little space has been allotted to that work in this volume, despite the massive concentration of critical attention in recent years.

Reviews are presented in chronological order to give some sense of the evolution of Mark Twain's literary reputation during his lifetime. In a very few instances this principle has been rejected to allow a retrospective consideration to appear in the context most apt to be useful to the reader.

The literary distinction of the criticism published here is uneven. Much of it was prepared for commercial and ephemeral journals and was motivated by moral, social or regional prejudice. Commentaries on the author's life and times pervade the reviews of his works. If in some sense this approach might appear to be an adulteration of the critical process, it must also be recognized as a valid approach to the unusual interinvolvement of the man and the writer. Mark Twain wrote most successfully when he remained within the matrix of Samuel Clemens' life. The relevance of 'the myth of Antaeus' was implicit in reviews throughout much of Clemens' life, explicit in a commentary in *Dial* (No. 80) at the time of his death and a truism of subsequent criticism.

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Acknowledgments

My chief debt for assistance in the preparation of this volume is to Kenneth M. Sanderson whose patient and thorough search for reviews is in part recognized by the appearance of his name on the title-page. Both Robert H. Hirst and Michael B. Frank made valuable suggestions for which I am properly grateful.

Note on the Text

The reviews collected in this volume are reprinted as they originally appeared with no attempt to correct their writers' errors. Only errors which were obviously typographical in origin have been silently emended. Long quotations from Mark Twain's writings have been dropped to conserve space, but in each instance sufficient information has been supplied to identify the passage.

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Chronological Table

- 1835 Born in Florida, Missouri.
1848-57 Worked as a printer.
1857-61 Apprentice and licensed pilot on the Mississippi.
1862-6 Reporter and writer for various Nevada and California newspapers and magazines.
1865 'Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog' published in *Saturday Press*, New York.
1866-9 Newspaper correspondent from the Sandwich Islands, New York, and the *Quaker City* excursion through the Mediterranean to the Holy Land (June-November 1867); lecture tours.
1867 *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, And other Sketches*.
1869 *The Innocents Abroad* (English title: *The New Pilgrim's Progress*; English publication, October 1870).
1870 Became editor of the Buffalo (New York) *Express*; married Olivia Langdon.
1871 Built house in Hartford, Connecticut; lecture tours.
1872 *Roughing It*; first English lecture tour.
1874 *The Gilded Age* (with Charles Dudley Warner); second English lecture tour.
1874 *The Gilded Age* ('Colonel Sellers') dramatized and first produced.
1875 *Sketches, New and Old*.
1876 *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.
1878-9 Travelled in Germany, Switzerland and Italy.
1880 *A Tramp Abroad*.
1882 *The Prince and the Pauper*.
1882 *The Stolen White Elephant Etc.*
1883 *Life on the Mississippi*.
1884-5 Extended lecture tour with George Washington Cable.
1885 *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (English publication, December 1884).
1889 *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (English title: *A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*).

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

- 1891-5 Lived in Germany, France and Italy.
 1892 *The American Claimant.*
 1893 *The £1,000,000 Bank-Note and Other New Stories.*
 1894 *Tom Sawyer Abroad.*
 1894 *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson.*
 1895-6 Lecture tour through New Zealand, Australia, India and South Africa.
 1896 *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc.*
 1897 *Following the Equator* (English title: *More Tramps Abroad*).
 1897-1900 Lived in Vienna and London.
 1899 'Collected Editions' published.
 1900 *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg.*
 1901 Litt.D. from Yale.
 1902 LL.D. from the University of Missouri.
 1903-4 Residence in Italy.
 1907 Litt.D. from Oxford.
 1909 *Is Shakespeare Dead?*
 1910 Died near Redding, Connecticut.

Introduction

Mark Twain's contemporary critics were uneasy in the presence of the Western humour, the high spirits and the vernacular language which characterized much of Mark Twain's most effective work. Even American critics were reluctant to accept as enduring literature humorous writing which broke away from the gentle irony of the New England writers to whom they were accustomed. In an age when piety and the reinforcement of conventional virtues were expected literary concerns, reviewers wanted the 'moral purpose' of humour to be clearly evident. The urbane wit and sentiment which prevailed at Oliver Wendell Holmes' breakfast-table and over his Bostonian tea-cups was far more comfortable than the horse-play and frontier yarns which amused men in smoky Western saloons. But most critics in the United States, England and throughout Europe did come to accept Mark Twain on his own terms even if almost always with reservations. Mark Twain was not uninterested in what reviewers might say, but his chosen subjects and style show no change as a result of criticism. He educated the critics in his purposes rather than accepting their instruction on the proper subjects for literature.

'It is a mark of the democratic independence of America that she has betrayed a singular indifference to the appraisal of her literature at the hands of foreign criticism', Archibald Henderson wrote in 1910 (No. 86). Henderson continued that 'the case of Mark Twain is a literary phenomenon which imposes upon criticism, peculiarly upon American criticism, the distinct obligation of tracing the steps in his unhalting climb to an eminence completely international in character'. The climb may have been unhalting, but it was certainly not without obstacles. On the other hand, unlike Henry James' and, far more dramatically, Herman Melville's, the author's reputation did not reach a peak from which it declined during his lifetime.

The reviews collected here show degrees of approval from the beginning of Mark Twain's career with critical reservations persisting to the end. Much of this ambivalence resulted from the uneven quality of Mark Twain's writing. Much of it resulted from critical irresolution

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when confronted by work which did not meet the assumed standards of the reading public.

I

THE CRITICS' PREMISES

Contemporary readers, the author and potential literary historians compose the audience to whom a book's reviewer may address himself. Our interest in the reviewer depends upon the extent to which he affected the sale of a book, influenced the author's literary development or preserved a record of the values of his period.

In the case of Mark Twain's critics, there was relatively little opportunity to influence the reader's decision to buy a book, since throughout most of Mark Twain's career the initial sales of his books were made in advance of publication by subscription purchase. Mark Twain was explicit in his view of the limited area of a critic's influence. The success with which reviewers recorded the intellectual climate of the literate public is demonstrated repeatedly in this volume. We have therefore a substantial view of the literary establishment whose good opinion Mark Twain alternately sought and rejected.

It was difficult for reviewers to award unqualified praise to Mark Twain's writings about the frontier in an age when 'refined', 'delicate', 'generous', 'kindly' and 'worthy' were the terms most often chosen to express critical approval. In at least one case when approval was registered—and this was as late as 1899—it was with a phrase gratifying to the Victorians but astonishing to the modern sense of Mark Twain's value. William Archer concluded his warm praise of *Huckleberry Finn* with the accolade that Mark Twain was the "sacred poet" of the Mississippi' (*America To-Day*, pp. 212-13). Before Mark Twain achieved acceptance on these terms he had been repeatedly attacked for scoffing at 'sacred' things and, in the *Melbourne Review* in 1885 among other places, because his humour failed to meet the obligation of 'enforcing morality and exposing vice and folly'. Without an overt statement of moral purpose, humour could not be accepted as literature. Commentary on Mark Twain's writing reveals that the critic enforced the social standards of his time far more frequently than he allowed himself the luxury of discovery or demanded of himself the courage of an independent and exclusively literary judgment.

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Despite their persistent anonymity only a rare reviewer chose or dared to commit himself to anything except the most conservative attitude towards a writer who mocked social conventions in language not always expected in the parlour.

II

SUBSCRIPTION BOOK PUBLICATION

Perhaps even more than by their conventional timidity Mark Twain's critics (and potential critics) were discouraged from reviewing his books by the method he chose for publication. Subscription book publication in the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States was regarded by critics and sophisticated readers with scorn. The English subscription publisher offered major novels by standard writers in weekly or monthly instalments at a cheap price. The American publisher of subscription books commonly provided gaudy volumes of little literary worth at high prices. Before publication, a corps of salesmen took 'prospectuses' containing specimen pages and sample bindings of the forthcoming volume from house to house. Aggressive sales techniques, the convenience of purchase at home and the promise of physically impressive volumes led to enormous sales. This large audience bought books for display without regard to their literary content or critical endorsement. Nearly 70,000 copies of *Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain's first book sold by this means, were distributed within a year of publication. Within the first three months of publication *Roughing It* and *The Gilded Age* each sold approximately 40,000 copies.

William Dean Howells, in 'The Man of Letters as a Man of Business', said in *Scribner's* (October 1893):

At one time there seemed a probability of the author's gains by subscription publication, and one very well-known American author prospered fabulously in that way. The percentage offered by the subscription houses was only about half as much as that paid by the trade, but the sales were so much greater that the author could very well afford to take it. . . . No book of literary quality was made to go by subscription except Mr. Clemens's books, and I think these went because the subscription public never knew what good literature they were.

Mark Twain's exploitation of an audience not much inclined to read is made evident by the inclusion in the salesman's prospectus for *A Tramp*

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Abroad of a Cleveland *Herald* comment: 'The illustrations are full of quaint humor, and without reading a line of the text these alone will secure the sale of the book.'

Howells described the reaction to subscription salesmen:

In the cities and large towns he is voted a bore and a nuisance; . . . he is a hissing and a by-word, a proverb of the undesirable. But in the smaller towns and in the country, where people have all the time there is . . . the book agent is not only tolerated, but welcomed; not only asked to sit down on a specially dusted chair, but bidden draw it up to the table when overtaken by dinner in the midst of his eloquence.

George Ade has given an immediate and persuasive account of the provincial community's response to the book agent and his wares (see Appendix B) in which he also makes clear the unique acceptance of Mark Twain's volumes. The books' weight, size, quantity of illustrations and generous embellishments of gilt, stamped design and leather bindings figured prominently in the salesman's appeal to an audience which preferred the appearance of quality over its sometimes uncomfortable if inconspicuous presence. The impressive if meretricious presentation established prices for Clemens' books which ranged, according to binding and gilt decoration, from \$3.50 to \$8.00. A 'Notice to the Public' on the last page of the first edition of *Tom Sawyer* attempted a rebuttal to charges that subscription books 'are higher in price than those of equal value sold at book stores'. Engravings, paper and printing costs were said to justify subscription prices 'and as through our Agents we sell ten times more of our books than do the trade publishers, we can afford a better book for a given sum'. The prices charged for Mark Twain's books certainly did not restrain their sales or the author's profits. Upon occasion Mark Twain defended his use of this medium as a means of reaching 'the masses', an aim which he undeniably achieved.

The flurry of reviews and retrospective examinations of his work which accompanied the appearance of the collected editions in 1899 in part resulted from his escaping the stigma of the shoddy subscription volume by achieving the reassuring prestige of a collected edition presented in attractive form.

III

THE AUTHOR'S VIEW OF CRITICS

The majority of Mark Twain's readers may not have been much concerned about the professional critics' opinions. Mark Twain may have been willing to risk critical disapproval or disinterest by exploiting a somewhat disreputable publishing medium for personal profit and to reach a mass audience. He may have made little compromise in choice of subject and style to win critical approval. But the author was certainly aware of the power critics possessed and expressed his views of it both ironically and with serious concern.

When Edwin Forrest, near the end of an honourable theatrical career, was scheduled to appear in San Francisco in 1866, Mark Twain, still a newspaperman himself, ironically admonished Forrest about the prejudices of newspaper reviewers. 'Our critics will make you sing a lively tune. They will soon let you know that your giant reputation cannot protect you on this coast.' Mark Twain mordantly anticipated a review the actor should expect:

Mr. Forrest has evidently mistaken the character of this people. We will charitably suppose that this is the case at any rate. We make no inquiry as to what kind of people he has been in the habit of playing before, but we simply inform him that he is now in the midst of a refined and cultivated community, and one which will not tolerate such indelicate allusions as were made use of in the play of *Othello* last night. If he would not play to empty benches, this must not be repeated.

The mock review was followed by advice which would be relevant when Mark Twain later met the same kind of attack. 'They always come the "refined and cultivated" dodge on a new actor—look out for it, Mr. Forrest, and do not let it floor you. The boys know enough that it is one of the most effective shots that can be fired at a stranger.'

The 'shots' fired by American critics in the East and by English critics at the Western stranger are amply recorded in the reviews that follow. The first Eastern critic to comment sympathetically about the serious purpose of the frontier humorist was William Dean Howells. His perceptive praise was published and affirmed in the literary establishment's chief journal, the *Atlantic Monthly* (for examples see Nos. 4, 11, 13, 15). Tempered approval was subsequently expressed by more conservative reviewers, but Mark Twain was impatient and expressed

his impatience to Howells: 'The longer I live, the clearer I perceive how unmatchable, how unapproachable a compliment one pays when he says of a man "he has the courage [to utter] his convictions". Haven't you had reviewers *talk* Alps to you, & then print potato hills?' Mark Twain's anxiety about the discrepancy between private acclaim and public statement persisted even as late as 1907 when he commented in response to a speech by William Lyon Phelps (see No. 75), 'when a man like Phelps speaks, the world gives attention. Some day I hope to meet him and thank him for his courage for saying those things out in public. Custom is, to think a handsome thing in private but tame it down in the utterance.'

Clemens did not always demonstrate such concern for critical opinions of his works. His apparent disinterest was expressed at least twice in reference to *The Gilded Age* (a book which did not receive critical approval): on 5 January 1874 he wrote to his friend, the Reverend Joseph Twichell, 'My interest in a book ceases with the printing of it', and on 4 September he wrote to another friend, Dr. John Brown, 'My interest in my works dies a sudden and violent death when the work is done.'

Although Mark Twain employed newspaper clipping services, he preserved primarily copies of his public interviews and speeches rather than reviews of his books. When he did collect literary reviews, he seems usually to have intended them for use in advertising. For example, he printed excerpts from thirty-nine reviews of *Innocents Abroad* in the *Buffalo Express* at the time he was a publisher and editor of that journal.

Two kinds of criticism did arouse Mark Twain's professional interest: personal attacks and criticism which disparaged a book for not being what its author had never intended. An extreme example of Clemens' sensitivity to 'personal attack' is illustrated by his response to reports that Whitelaw Reid had been criticizing him in the pages of the *New York Tribune*. He gleefully prepared to launch a counter-offensive intended to destroy Reid's personal and public reputation. This misguided effort fortunately proved abortive for, as Clemens reported to Howells on 28 January 1882, a search of the *Tribune* files produced only four items in two months which could be construed to be uncomplimentary. Among these were 'adverse criticism of P. & P. from an enraged idiot in the London *Athenaeum*' and 'a remark of the *Tribune*'s about refusal of Canadian copyright, not complimentary, but not necessarily malicious—& of course adverse criticism which is not malicious is a thing which none but fools irritate themselves about'.

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Clemens continued this explicit and sensible definition of his attitude towards criticism by noting that 'the whole offense boiled down, amounts to just this: *one* uncourteous remark of the *Tribune* about my *book*—not me—between Nov. 1 & Dec. 20; & a couple of foreign criticisms (of my *writings*, not me,) between Nov. 1 & Jan. 26! If I can't stand that amount of friction, I certainly need reconstruction.' The author of the *Athenaeum* review, who was in fact not very perceptive about American humour, is dismissed as 'an enraged idiot' and since Clemens could discover no malice on Reid's part, he sensibly dropped the whole matter.

When Clemens legitimately felt he was ill-used by critics he did defend himself. In October 1870, the London *Saturday Review* (No. 8) published an unfriendly account of *Innocents Abroad* which Clemens soon heard about. He promptly published a burlesque in the December *Galaxy* magazine which converted the English journal's criticism into ridiculous terms. The following month Clemens claimed in the *Galaxy* that his 'review', which had been accepted as genuine by Ambrose Bierce among other American writers, was written before he saw the original *Saturday Review* article. Now that he had seen the actual review, Clemens 'found it to be vulgar, awkwardly written, ill-natured, and entirely serious and in earnest'. When Clemens reprinted his burlesque in *Sketches, New and Old*, he added that 'the reader barely needs to be told that the above is not a conscientious reproduction of the *Saturday Review's* article. It is only a burlesque of it. The original review is very readable, and would be inserted here but for the fact that it is marred by grammatical lapses and inelegancies of speech, which cannot, with propriety, be placed before a refined audience.' The humorous content of both characterizations of the English criticism is conveyed in very similar terms: 'vulgar' and 'awkwardly written' become 'grammatical lapses and inelegancies of speech'. When Clemens accused the vastly respectable *Saturday Review* of altogether improbable faults, he phrased his rebuttal in the language of his critic whose reading of *Innocents Abroad*—'entirely serious and in earnest'—had led the reviewer to impugn Mark Twain's taste and skill by identifying the author with his fictional protagonist. In his dislike for the American bumpkin, the reviewer had failed to perceive that only an objective and skilful author could so effectively present the type. This failure to perceive the author's motive called forth Mark Twain's elaborate response.

One more examination of a skirmish between author and critic, this

time when attack took the form of censorship, further reveals Mark Twain's complicated reaction to criticism.

Despite generous advance publicity for *Huckleberry Finn*, in the form of the author's readings from the forthcoming book during an extensive lecture tour, the book's publication attracted little formal critical notice. The rejection of the book for the Concord, Massachusetts, Library did lead to a good deal of newspaper publicity, but did not stimulate serious literary consideration although it is reputed to have increased the sale of the volume.

On 17 March 1885, the Boston *Transcript* reported:

The Concord (Mass.) Public Library committee has decided to exclude Mark Twain's latest book from the library. One member of the committee says that, while he does not wish to call it immoral, he thinks it contains but little humor, and that of a very coarse type. He regards it as the veriest trash. The librarian and the other members of the committee entertain similar views, characterizing it as rough, coarse, and inelegant, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people.

Far from discouraged by this turn of events, Clemens wrote the next day to Charles L. Webster, his publisher:

The Committee of the Public Library of Concord, Mass., have given us a rattling tip-top puff which will go into every paper in the country. They have expelled Huck from their library as 'trash & suitable only for the slums.' That will sell 25,000 copies for us, sure.

The Springfield *Republican*, whose editor had long been antagonistic to Clemens, joined the attack with vigour, observing that Clemens' satire 'in certain of his works degenerates into a gross trifling with every fine feeling. The trouble with Mr. Clemens is that he has no reliable sense of propriety.' The attack concluded by commenting of 'these Huckleberry Finn stories' that 'their moral level is low, and their perusal cannot be anything less than harmful'.

After a week of criticism in the *Republican* and other newspapers, Clemens gained an unexpected but welcome position from which to reply when the Concord Free Trade Club offered him an honorary membership. In his letter of acceptance, which was immediately published in the newspapers, Clemens claimed that the ban had 'doubled' the sales of *Huckleberry Finn* and that 'it will cause the purchasers of the book to read it, out of curiosity, instead of merely intending to do so after the usual way of the world & library committees; & then they

will discover, to my great advantage & their own indignant disappointment, that there is nothing objectionable in the book, after all.'

When the *Transcript* printed excerpts from Clemens' Free Trade Club letter (4 April 1885), it omitted the defence against the charge of impropriety, and it also printed a paragraph from the Boston *Advertiser* accusing Mark Twain of 'that spirit of irreverence which, as we are often and truly told, is the great fault in American character'. The *Advertiser* expanded its attack, 'for we are unwilling to believe that his impudent intimation that a larger sale and larger profits are a satisfactory recompense to him for the unfavorable judgment of honest critics is a true indication of the standard by which he measures success in literature'.

Clemens decided to exploit these criticisms commercially, and the same day he wrote to Webster, 'The *Advertiser* and the *Republican* still go for me daily. All right, we may as well get the benefit of such advertising as can be drawn from it.' Clemens composed a 'Prefatory Remark' to be inserted in future printings of *Huckleberry Finn* with instructions for its immediate release: 'Huckleberry Finn is not an imaginary person. He still lives; or rather, *they* still live; for Huckleberry Finn is two persons in one—namely, the author's two uncles, the present editors of the Boston *Advertiser* and the Springfield *Republican*.' Mark Twain claimed the only difference between Huck and his 'originals' was that 'this boy's language has been toned down and softened, here and there, in deference to the taste of a more modern and fastidious day'. The 'Prefatory Remark' is perfunctory, humorous grumbling and lacks the sense of real grievance found in the letter to the Free Trade Club. Shortly thereafter Clemens wrote Webster, 'Livy forbids the "Prefatory Remark"—therefore, put it in the fire.'

However, the initial ban on *Huckleberry Finn* rankled, and Clemens made one more effort to strike back. He had been invited to address a Cornell alumni meeting and apparently intended to use the opportunity to enlarge on his grievances against the Concord Library Committee. Howells wrote to him on 20 April, 'On second thoughts I am against that Cornell speech of yours. That Concord Library Committee is game too small for you, and you can't stir it up without seeming to care more than you ought for it. You have done enough.' Apparently Clemens agreed, for we hear no more about the matter. In addition to his confidence that attack would lead to careful reading of his work, the one constant element of Clemens' response was an attempt to turn it to commercial advantage.

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Mark Twain's responses to criticism are thus seen to be complex: recognition that a public figure must expect adverse public comment, assumed indifference to critical evaluation, counter-attack, and frustration when public praise did not match private enthusiasm. In his zealous, if erratic, search for the approval which he thought was eluding him, Mark Twain largely ignored the reassurance he sought. For the reviewers were neither as consistently obtuse nor unkind as the author seemed to think.

Imocents Abroad was unsparing in its attack on both the American barbarian's pious hypocrisies and the pompous and stately institutions of Europe. Many American and English reviewers recognized this serious purpose although they often deplored the 'frivolity' of its presentation. For this, as for the succeeding books, critics offered Mark Twain the serious honour which he sought but in terms too tempered to provide him the gratification he craved.

IV

THE COURSE OF CRITICAL OPINION

One posthumous critic of Mark Twain's works, H. L. Mencken in 1913 (No. 88), saw the course of critical opinion of Mark Twain's books as a consistent progress through the various stages of grace from scorn, indifference, toleration, apologetic praise to 'heartly praise' by the time of the author's death. Mencken foresaw 'unqualified enthusiasm' as the impending critical response to Mark Twain's works.

From a perspective well over half a century longer than Mencken's, we can see that although critical interest in his writings has been sustained, neither Mark Twain's critical nor popular readers regard his works with unqualified enthusiasm. Several of the books the author and his contemporaries accepted with the greatest confidence of enduring worth are little read. Other, 'lesser' works are the foundation for the remarkable and persistent affection accorded the writer. But unqualified enthusiasm cannot be applied to any of the books. *Huckleberry Finn* is as widely read and discussed as any American novel but few major works by any writer are regarded with more reservations about their author's final success.

Nor does the evidence sustain in detail Mencken's summary of the even progress of critical acceptance. Mark Twain as a public personage

did rapidly attain public favour and finally adulation but reservation and even hostility towards his writing persisted.

Henry Harland (No. 68) as late as 1899 comprehensively condemned the contents of *Innocents Abroad* for 'vulgarity', 'ignorance', 'narrowness', 'provincialism', but above all for its 'colossal irreverence'. His own provincialism is ironically revealed by his concluding attack on Mark Twain's use of American rather than English spellings.

By reference to the 'suave literary graces' and 'honeyed verse' of 'other national humorists like Aristophanes, Cervantes, Molière or Swift', an unsigned review in the *Critic* (No. 55) in 1895 attacks Mark Twain's style. The American writer, it is claimed, cannot achieve the 'exquisite literary form' of Aristophanes whose choral interludes are composed of 'wonderful bird-rhythms and wasp melodies and cloud-architecture, so to speak'.

The *Academy* critic (No. 58) records in 1897 that 'a generation bred up on Mr. Ruskin was left gasping by the impudence of this American, who declined to put on fine phrases and tread delicately just because he had exchanged his own country for an older'. The reviewer anxiously and clumsily involves himself in associative guilt in order to emphasize Mark Twain's creative freedom: 'He is so unburdened by sentiment or reverence—and most of us have too much of both.'

The next year Theodore de Laguna (No. 66) defended Mark Twain from charges of having 'done more for the debasing of the English language than any other recent influence' by commenting that his style 'is a return to the living source of all inspiration and power,— the genius of the spoken language'.

A less generous defender, David Masters in the *Chautauquan* for September 1897 (No. 59), saw the structure of Mark Twain's career as an effort 'to obliterate the memories' of *Innocents Abroad* by 'the purpose and seriousness of his work in his later publications'. Masters supports this attributed purpose by citing Mark Twain's 'steady improvement in his style and facility of expression'.

The distrust with which Victorians regarded any assault on the worthy traditions is summarized by Hiram Stanley in 1898 (No. 65) when he advances and counters the recurrent charge against Mark Twain that 'to many refined people he may seem the vulgar buffoon, entirely unrespectful, unconventional, irreverent; but this aspect is but his surface aspect. He reverences what is essentially worthy of reverence.'

Critics found it difficult to reconcile humour and the quality of reverence which they found so essential. In fact, American humour

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could scarcely be considered even respectable. On 27 September 1883 *The Nation* published an article on the subject by Arthur G. Sedgwick which was written in response to an announcement that Mark Twain and William Dean Howells 'were going to bring out a book on "American humour"' (published in 1888 as *Mark Twain's Library of Humor*). Sedgwick quoted a rather lofty judgment from the *New York Tribune*:

We are inclined to think that the queer article which is popularly supposed to be 'American humor' has been exalted overmuch. It is often anything but humor; sometimes it is broad farce—the caper of a clown; and not seldom it is a coarse trifling with things which ought to be sacred—a trifling which implies laughter only by its unexpectedness rather than by any amusing quality. Of this kind of wit Mark Twain has proved himself a master.

This curious conglomeration of assumptions about wit and humour and the proprieties was endorsed and extended by Sedgwick, 'the "American humor" which now goes by the name, and has attracted such world-wide notoriety, is not, properly speaking, literary humor at all It was begun by Artemus Ward, and has been perpetuated by a long line of jesters, funny men, clowns, or whatever they may be called. . . .'

Reviewers were moved frequently to comment that American humour was a unique phenomenon of varying merit. But it was generally agreed that Mark Twain's position, although integral, was pre-eminent within the 'movement', as Grant Allen (*Fortnightly Review*, 1 August 1888) described it:

. . . Artemus Ward, Josh Billings, and Orpheus C. Kerr being practically his only considerable rivals in the European market. But whoever knows the daily talk and the daily newspapers of Western America knows that embryo Mark Twains grow in Illinois on every bush, and that the raw material of the *Imbeciles Abroad* resounds nightly, like the voice of the derringier, through every saloon in Iowa and Montana. A large style of cheap and effective homicidal humour, based mainly on exaggeration and grotesque incongruities, flourishes everywhere on the borderlands of American civilization.

V

MARK TWAIN'S VIEW OF THE HUMORIST

Mark Twain's own efforts at definition and distinction of his role as a humorist betray the accuracy of a comment he made for his autobio-

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graphical dictation on 28 March 1907: 'Humor is a subject which has never had much interest for me. This is why I have never examined it, nor written about it nor used it as a topic for a speech. A hundred times it has been offered me as a topic of these past forty years, but in no case has it attracted me.' Less than a year before, on 31 July 1906, also for his 'autobiography', in discussing a recently issued anthology of American humorists Mark Twain noted that the volume

reveals the surprising fact that within the compass of these forty years wherein I have been playing professional humorist before the public, I have had for company seventy-eight other American humorists. Each and every one of the seventy-eight rose in my time, became conspicuous and popular, and by and by vanished. . . . Why have they perished? Because they were merely humorists. Humorists of the 'mere' sort cannot survive. Humor is only a fragrance, a decoration. . . . Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever.

By forever, I mean thirty years. . . . I have always preached. That is why I have lasted thirty years. If the humor came of its own accord and uninvited, I have allowed it a place in my sermon, but I was not writing the sermon for the sake of the humor.

In 'How to Tell a Story', first published in 1895, Mark Twain made an extended attempt at description of the disciplines of humour which serves in many ways as an answer to questions raised by his critics:

There are several kinds of stories, but only one difficult kind—the humorous. I will talk mainly about that one. The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, the witty story is French. The humorous story depends for its effect upon the *manner* of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the *matter*.

The humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular; but the comic and witty stories must be brief and end with a point. The humorous story bubbles gently along, the others burst.

The humorous story is strictly a work of art—high and delicate art—and only an artist can tell it; but no art is necessary in telling the comic and the witty story; anybody can do it. The art of telling a humorous story—understand, I mean by word of mouth, not print—was created in America and has remained at home.

Despite his emphasis on the oral presentation of what Mark Twain considers the uniquely American quality of the humorous story, the substance of his remarks does apply to the written version and was central to his recording of the material.

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Mark Twain had not always considered the humorous story to be 'high and delicate art' and his conception of his role as a writer had not been easily established.

VI

THE AUTHOR IDENTIFIES HIS AUDIENCE

The favourable comment which followed Mark Twain's introduction to a national audience with the publication of 'Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog' brought this scornful response in 1866: 'To think that, after writing many an article a man might be excused for thinking tolerably good', he wrote to his mother and sister from San Francisco, 'those New York people should single out a villainous backwoods sketch to compliment me on!' His mock-modesty continues in this letter as he states, 'though I am generally placed at the head of my breed of scribblers in this part of the country, the place properly belongs to Bret Harte, I think, although he denies it along with the rest!' At the age of thirty, Mark Twain, behind a very thin veil of disdain, made sure his family became aware of the promise of his success if only at this time in the role of a newspaperman.

Four years later the author of the immensely popular *Innocents Abroad*, an international traveller, syndicated newspaper correspondent and co-proprietor of an Eastern newspaper, again wrote modestly of his respect for Bret Harte. Mark Twain declared that Harte had 'trimmed and trained and schooled me patiently until he changed me from an awkward utterer of coarse grotesquenesses to a writer of paragraphs and chapters that have found a certain favor in the eyes of even some of the very decentest people of the land'. His correspondent was Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who was already a member of the polite society of Boston writers. Mark Twain's acknowledgment of debt to Harte's training is generous (even if the choice of vocabulary brings the success of that training into question) but the modesty of 'a certain favor' from the author of a book which sold 70,000 copies within a year of its publication is not entirely convincing.

As the years moved on, Mark Twain realized that his readers were from a 'popular' rather than a 'literary' audience. 'My books are water; those of the great geniuses are wine. Everybody drinks water', Mark Twain wrote in his notebook in May 1886.

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The metaphor appealed to him so much that he repeated it to Howells on 15 February 1887. By that time Mark Twain's acceptance of the nature of his audience appears reasoned and secure:

I haven't as good an opinion of my work as you hold of it, but I've always done what I could to secure & enlarge my good opinion of it. I've always said to myself, 'Everybody reads it, & that's something—it surely isn't pernicious, or the most respectable people would get pretty tired of it.' And when a critic said by implication that it wasn't high & fine, through the remark 'High & fine literature is wine,' I retorted (confidentially to myself), 'Yes, high & fine literature is wine, & mine is only water; but everybody likes water.'

Mark Twain's conception of his democratic appeal persisted and was expressed even more decidedly to Andrew Lang (see Appendix A) in defence of *A Connecticut Yankee*:

Indeed I have been misjudged, from the very first. I have never tried in even one single little instance, to help cultivate the cultivated classes. I was not equipped for it, either by native gifts or training. And I never had any ambition in that direction, but always hunted for bigger game—the masses. I have seldom deliberately tried to instruct them, but have done my best to entertain them.

In addition to this revelation of his conception of his limited role as a writer, what is perhaps of most remarkable interest is his conclusion that 'My audience is dumb, it has no voice in print, and so I cannot know whether I have won its approbation or only got its censure.'

The pathos of this statement is considerably diminished by reference to fact. The approbation of Mark Twain's supposedly 'dumb audience' had by 1890 been made repeatedly evident to him in the most tangible possible form: the sustained and very profitable sales of his books. Their verbal approval of his writing was evident in the thousands of letters he received, and often saved. It was expressed only slightly less directly by the enormously enthusiastic crowds who attended his public readings.

VII

USES OF CRITICISM

The letter to Lang was not the only instance of Mark Twain's appeal for critical sympathy. In order to confound his critics Mark Twain was

frank in seeking early reviews which would be favourable in the hope that successive reviewers would adopt the attitude first established. With no apparent conflict of conscience, William Dean Howells willingly and more than once entered into collusion with the author. Well in advance of the publication of *Tom Sawyer*, Howells proposed that Mark Twain give him 'a hint when it is to be out, and I'll start the sheep to jumping in the right places'. The offer was eagerly accepted, 'I mean to see to it that your review of it shall have plenty of time to appear before the other notices.' In this case it certainly did, for Howells' review, based on an advance reading of the manuscript, was printed in the May 1876 issue of the *Atlantic* although the American edition of the book was not issued until mid-December of that year. Howells cheerfully dismissed the incongruity caused by the book publisher's delay with a casual 'I rather like the fun of the thing'.

But there were serious implications to this procedure, for as Mark Twain had said in commenting on Howells' review of *Sketches, New and Old* in 1875, 'Yours is the recognized critical Court of Last Resort in this country; from its decision there is no appeal.'

In the same letter of 19 October 1875 Clemens expanded upon his attitude towards most critics:

The newspaper praises bestowed upon the *Innocents Abroad* were large & generous, but I hadn't *confidence* in the critical judgment of the parties who furnished them. You know how that is, yourself, from reading the newspaper notices of your own books. They gratify a body, but they always leave a small pang behind in the shape of a fear that the critic's good words could not safely be depended upon as *authority*.

Disillusionment about their critical perception and authority did not prevent Clemens from attempting to use even the newspaper reviewers to his own advantage. Before publication of *The Gilded Age* he wrote to Whitelaw Reid (22 April 1873) concerning a proposed review in the New York *Tribune*:

I want the *Tribune* to say it *right* & say it powerful—& then I will answer for the consequences. The consequences will be that all other papers will *follow suit*—which you know, as well as I do. And then our game is made & our venture launched with a fair wind instead of a baffling one.

Few reviews of *The Gilded Age* appeared, however, despite the *Tribune's* satisfactory comments and fewer still were complimentary. It is not the success of these or the many other stratagems employed by Clemens to attract favourable reviews that is at issue. His assumption of critical

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corruption, irresponsibility or incompetence must inevitably have determined the degree to which Clemens could dismiss the unfavourable responses of his contemporaries.

His real lack of respect for the literary critic's function is evident in a comment he wrote to Howells on 22 September 1889:

As a rule a critic's dissent merely enrages, & so does no good; but by the new art which you use, your dissent must be as welcome as your approval, & as valuable. I do not know what the secret of it is, unless it is your attitude—man courteously reasoning with man & brother, in place of the worn & wearisome critical attitude of all this long time—superior being lecturing a boy.

Since by 1889 Mark Twain had written and published virtually all of his important work, it is clear that he thought critical commentary had had little influence on him and objective evidence does not dispute this. Certainly the development of his work was little changed by what his contemporaries had to say of it in print.

Mark Twain is quoted as having said, about January 1906, 'A critic never made or killed a book or a play. It has always been the people who have been the final judges—it is their opinion which does the job—they are the final arbiters' (S. J. Woolf, *Drawn from Life*, New York, 1932, p. 13). The statement is ambiguous (and conceivably apocryphal) since we cannot tell whether Mark Twain is concerned here with successful sales or the literary survival of worthy books. But his contempt for the critic is clear in either case. While his own creative impulses or the successful sales of a book would lead him to return to characters and themes in subsequent volumes, it is very difficult to identify any review's influence on the style or content of Mark Twain's work.

One reason for the critics' failure to have any effective influence on Mark Twain's writing may have been their general inability to recognize his unique quality. Archibald Henderson's summary statement published in the December 1910 issue of the *North American Review* (No. 86) documents critical imperception: 'Upon her writers who have exhibited derivative genius—Irrving, Hawthorne, Emerson, Longfellow—American criticism has lavished the most extravagant eulogiums.' In contrast, the three writers Henderson identified as the product of an American cultural tradition—Poe, Whitman, Mark Twain—'still await their final and just deserts at the hands of critical opinion in their own land'.

VIII

POSTHUMOUS CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Immediately after Mark Twain's death in 1910 several retrospective accounts of his work appeared. William Dean Howells published *My Mark Twain*, a moving account of an enduring professional friendship, whose value cannot be overstated. The revolutionary decade which followed produced two major reviews in 1913 by John Macy and H. L. Mencken which are included in this volume (Nos. 87 and 88). Albert Bigelow Paine's massive but over-protective biography appeared in 1912, his controversial edition of *The Mysterious Stranger* in 1916 and a carefully bowdlerized edition of Mark Twain's letters in 1917. It was not until 1920 that a major attack on this sentimental myth-making appeared.

Van Wyck Brooks' *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* attempted to prove that the limitations of crude frontier origins compounded by frustrating social and emotional pressures exerted by his wife and friends had restrained Mark Twain from realizing his inherent genius. In tone and purpose Brooks represented the genteel view that underlay critical distaste for Mark Twain's 'vulgarity' in his lifetime. Brooks' facts were often wrong or incomplete, his assumptions frequently irrelevant, but he effectively demanded that Mark Twain's literary position be impartially assessed.

Bernard DeVoto took the challenge and in 1932 published *Mark Twain's America*. He saw the strengths of Mark Twain's works as a product of the frontier influences which Brooks had deplored. This engrossing if chauvinistic study of cultural history did not adequately define the degrees of the writer's success and failure and, with some irony, each critic drifted towards the other's views. Brooks in 1933 published an important revision of the *Ordeal* and DeVoto presented a far less sanguine view in the essays, especially 'The Symbols of Despair', collected in 1942 in *Mark Twain at Work*.

As he had eluded Brooks and DeVoto, Mark Twain continues to elude exact critical appraisal. Academic critics and literary historians have interpreted the symbols and pursued the sources, they have discussed Mark Twain's influence and analysed his role among his contemporaries, but they end more often with biography than literary criticism. Despite critical confusion, Mark Twain's works retain

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an audience on very nearly every level of literary sophistication and political persuasion. In his diversity Mark Twain evidently continues to express the diverse views of opposing regional and national cultures.

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