



A COMPANION TO
MARK TWAIN

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Mark Twain and Nation

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The national consciousness so typical of the nineteenth century pervaded Mark Twain's work, from the early years, when his humor merged with the nationalist effort to define an American literature, to the later years, when his status as representative American and his anti-imperialism gave him a complicated relationship to the United States as a world power. He identified himself with American humor, and was quickly identified with it in the press, the publication of *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) conferring an international reputation for expressing an American point of view. Self-conscious Americanism, as often as not laced with irony or satire, tinged his ideas about society and culture. Intertwined as the concept of nation is with notions of race, ancestry, territory, language, modernization, politics, international relations, literature, values, and gender (among other things), it necessarily became one of Twain's topics – sometimes quite explicitly, sometimes indirectly. But Twain's own remarks about the idea of a nation, and about America, were notoriously various, changing from one occasion and audience to another. This variety has helped generate a rich range of interpretive comment about Mark Twain and the American nation. For well over a hundred years, through various moments and varieties of twentieth-century national self-definition, Twain has been used to epitomize American values and contradictions. Various critics and scholars have tracked and measured the staggering ubiquity of Mark Twain in America – from Twain T-shirts to white-suited Disney

simulations – including his widely disseminated nationalist meanings.¹

My aim here is more modest. I lay out a few of Twain's explicit comments about nation as a way of focusing some of the ideas it evoked for him and the contradictions it entailed. I also adduce examples from his fiction to show how he explored and complicated the matter – to the point, I believe, of intuiting features of national feeling and the modern nation-state as we now understand them, and of wondering how these things come into being. Then I select influential academic interpretations of Mark Twain and America that span the twentieth century and that mark the ways, both celebratory and critical, in which he has been treated as an icon of American culture and used to imagine America – in his roles as a figure of the frontier, a writer of American humor and vernacular, and a recorder of American race relations. Twain still has this function in our time, when nationalism rightly arouses suspicion in the academy and yet is experiencing an intense popular renaissance. The continued pairing of Twain and nation will undoubtedly foment more disagreement and controversy; one can hope it will also bring more insight into both.

Nation, Genealogy, and Race

A standard practice of nation-constructing is the linking of the new entity to a past, fashioning stories and elaborating genealogies that explain the nation in terms of fathers who can be celebrated, or in terms of immemorial origins, sometimes of a primordial racial sort. History is rewritten as national history; the nation is narrated in this process of self-imagining. Twain repeatedly participated in and mocked this process. For the most part, he jokes with the legends of American founding fathers and national heroes. "A New Biography of Washington" (1866), for example,

berates this national patriarch for not knowing enough to tell a lie – a skill the writer claims to have learned early on – and says the chances are slim that American youth would emulate Washington's example (Twain 1992a: 205–7). "The Late Benjamin Franklin" (1870), while granting that Franklin "did a great many notable things for his country, and made her young name to be honored in many lands as the mother of such a son," aims mainly to debunk his "pretentious maxims" as ancient and "wearisome platitudes" deceptively tricked up for modern consumption (Twain 1992a: 425–7). It may be too much to credit this burlesquing Twain with sophisticated doubts about the storytelling that constitutes national identity, but his themes – casting aspersions on supposed truth-telling, humorously embracing wholesale lying, cynically discrediting the words of these fathers, doubting the likelihood that latter-day Americans could reproduce the legendary paragons – all this suggests that he has turned onto the fabrication of national myth his characteristic raillery and doubts about the possibility of truth in representation. In any case, in Twain's writing a national pantheon does *not* descend to us unbesmirched. A Fourth of July speech delivered in London in 1873 declares the United States

A great and glorious land ... a land which has developed a Washington, a Franklin, a William M. Tweed, a Longfellow, a Motley, a Jay Gould, a Samuel C. Pomeroy, a recent Congress which has never had its equal – (in some respects) and a United States Army which conquered sixty Indians in eight months by tiring them out – which is much better than uncivilized slaughter, God knows. (Twain 1910: 414)

If Washington and Franklin are not explicitly discredited in this passage, they are in the shady company of the corrupt

boss Tweed, the rapacious capitalist Gould, the bribe-taking congressman Pomeroy, and a US Army that has “improved” upon its propensity for slaughtering Indians only through its inefficiency. Here is a mixed genealogy at best, a nation at least partly fathered by real bastards, figuratively speaking.

In this vein, Twain’s most striking patricide of national fathers is “Plymouth Rock and the Pilgrims,” a speech given in 1881 to the New England Society of Philadelphia (Twain 1910: 17-24). “What do you want to celebrate those people for? – those ancestors of yours, of 1620 – the *Mayflower* tribe, I mean,” he asks. Those Pilgrims

took good care of themselves, but they abolished everybody else’s ancestors ... My first American ancestor, gentlemen, was an indian – an early Indian. Your ancestors skinned him alive, and I am an orphan ... Later ancestors of mine were the Quakers ... Your tribe chased them out of the country for their religion’s sake. (pp. 19-21)

He goes on: “All those Salem witches were ancestors of mine ... The first slave brought into New England out of Africa by your progenitors was an ancestor of mine – for I am of a mixed breed, an infinitely shaded and exquisite Mongrel” (p. 22). In this way Twain contrasts the Pilgrim forefathers to a multiethnic and multicultural nation, embodied in a mongrelized Twain, whose ancestors – grandfathers *and* grand-mothers – have been murdered, exiled, and enslaved. He beseeches his audience to disband the New England Societies and sell Plymouth Rock! And if he relents at the end – “chaff and nonsense aside, I think I honor and appreciate your Pilgrim stock as much as you do yourselves, perhaps” – this sop to his audience’s dignity only briefly blunts the pointed, though humorous, denunciation that preceded it (p. 24). The English settlers

themselves are given a mixed moral heritage, at the same time that a multifarious mulatto nation arises around the supposed Pilgrim origins of the American self.

True to his own sense of doubleness, and drawing perhaps inevitably on the intrinsic contradictions that lie within any conception of nation, Twain does trace national chronologies that have positive value – but these show their darker sides as we comb through them. One such narrative looks for national origins in England and the Anglo-Saxon race. In two Fourth-of-July speeches, one in 1873, the other in 1907, and both made in London, where the audience obviously affected the sentiment, Twain anchors American nationality in English soil and history. In the earlier speech he acknowledges the English “mother soil” and half-seriously asks: “With a common origin, a common literature, a common religion and common drinks, what is longer needful to the cementing of the two nations together in a permanent bond of brotherhood?” (Twain 1910: 414). His later speech, reflecting his sanguine version of American nationalism as a force for freedom, declares that the United States had five Fourths of July, in the sense of memorable moments for liberty, all of them actually bequeathed by England: the first was Magna Charta, the second the Petition of Right, the third the American colonists’ principle of no taxation without representation, the fourth the Declaration of Independence, the fifth the Emancipation Proclamation. Since the first four were all made by British subjects, the only truly American one was the last, though it too followed England’s abolition of slavery. Twain concludes:

Let us be able to say to Old England, this great-hearted, venerable old mother of the race, you gave us our Fourths of July that we love and that we honor and revere, you gave us the Declaration of Independence, which is the Charter of our rights, you, the venerable Mother of Liberties, the Protector of Anglo-Saxon Freedom – you gave us these things, and we do most honestly thank you for them. (p. 412)

Twain significantly invokes here a racial matrix for national origins – typical of turn-of-the-century national self-imagining – at the same time that he exalts the freeing of the slaves, making the love of liberty flow in Anglo-Saxon blood, to the benefit of African Americans. The potential miscegenation that comes with declaring emancipation a moment of national conception comes with a reassertion of white national genealogy and hierarchizing of racial difference.

Twain's most notorious treatment of this difficult muddle of nation, ancestry, and race comes in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). In that novel we learn early on that York Leicester Driscoll was "proud of his old Virginia ancestry" and that Pembroke Howard was of "proved descent from the First Families" (Twain 1894: 20-1). This went for Cecil Burleigh Essex too, "another F. F. V.," or member of a First Family of Virginia, with whom we supposedly "have no concern," though he is the father of a central character, the black slave Roxy's son (p. 22). This semi-mythical lineage and place refer to national origins, of course: the first British colony of the New World. The genealogy of these sons of the "F. F. V." is joined with the explicit declaration that they are gentlemen. In their labeling, several crucial meanings are intertwined: that these men can trace their heritage back to fathers of the nation, but also that they are slaveholders, are white, belong to a fraternity of men who stand above others, and have authority over others. That is,

the crucial questions of genealogy and inheritance in this novel have implications most obviously for whiteness (does your ancestry mean you are a free white or a black slave?), but a whiteness, nonetheless, joined to pride in nation.

This genealogy of American white manhood is pointedly deranged when Roxy, perversely ratifying its importance, tells her son that, because his father was descended from the First Families of Virginia, no other “nigger [is] ... as high-bawn as you is” (Twain 1894: 120). This is more than a moment of burlesque, more than an instance of mock-pretentious minstrelsy, more than Roxy’s simply putting on airs and aping white status hierarchies. It blurts out an officially hidden, racially mixed line of descent. Roxy further disrupts the official national genealogy of the city fathers when she denounces her son Tom’s manhood – because he smirched his honor by refusing to duel with Luigi after the meeting of the Sons of Liberty – and then tells him that “the nigger in him” has disgraced his birth, his Essex blood, and also the blood of John Smith, and that of Smith’s “great-great-gran’mother” Pocahontas and her husband, “a nigger king outen Africa.” The invocation of John Smith, of course, places this charge in the territory of national legend, and so does the invocation of Pocahontas. If Roxy avoids the Indian-white miscegenation of the marriage between Pocahontas and her actual husband John Rolfe, and instead has Pocahontas marry a black African king, their progeny nonetheless is John Smith. Roxy’s national genealogy has black roots, is miscegenated and complicated “somers along back dah” (p. 189). While her imagined heritage might be adduced for the argument that Twain treats racial genealogies, like race itself, as a “fiction of law and custom,” the lineage she declares does more than show itself to be a fiction. It also pointedly names an alternative national genealogy to the myth of origins that the white town fathers embrace, remingling multiracial

family-descent lines into the national narrative. In having Roxy mime the family (and national) pride of the white males, but mime it impurely, Twain seems quite consciously to be assaulting the constellation of whiteness, manliness, and nation. But even if he is irreverent about this configuration of authority, his novel re-enacts Roxy's treatment of the matter, challenging the injustice but preserving a belief in character based on race and blood that underpins the problem. He follows a pattern, as we shall see in a moment, that critics of his apotheosis as national author have traced in his treatment of race in America.

Nation and Modernization

While acknowledging the risk of seeming to retrofit Twain to our twenty-first-century conceptions, we might nonetheless say that *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), in its depiction of the (failed) transition from feudal aristocracy to Hank Morgan's "republic," grapples with questions we still have about the emergence of a nation and the conditions necessary for the modern nation-state. One group of historians, that is, sees nation and nationalism as products of modernization, specifically of capitalism and industrialization, which forged the homogeneous (or standardized), literate national populations necessary for their own development.² Seemingly disagreeing with this idea, Hank repeatedly refers to an English "nation" (a term he uses over 50 times – one of his favorite words), by which he means an Anglo-Saxon people whose sense of themselves and their rights as "men" pre-existed the sixth century and has been nearly obliterated by the church and the nobility. Nonetheless, he is quite attuned to the importance of mass education and industry for fashioning the nation-state he proposes (his

Man-Factory combines the two), and capitalist marketing is one of the ways he extends its influence. Notably, he says that “The first thing you want in a new country is a patent office; then work up your school system; and after that, out with your paper ... You can’t resurrect a dead nation without it” (Twain 1889: 109). Whether this is a new country or a resurrected nation, the connection of nation-fashioning to newspapers suits Benedict Anderson’s now ubiquitous conception of the nation as an “imagined community” grounded in the emergence of what he calls “print capitalism” (Anderson 1991: 37–46). This refers in part to the capitalist development of print materials, the newspaper in particular, which enabled people to imagine themselves part of a community of individuals that included others they would never meet – readers of the same newspaper, consumers of the same news, all privately engaging in this same activity on the same day. The distribution of printed material and the vernacular language of the newspaper bound people together in this new conception of a nation – and it happened first in the Americas in the late eighteenth century. Twain did in fact associate the birth of “the press” with the American Revolution and the birth of the republic (Twain 1992a: 942–3). He also saw the press as a kind of glue for the common folk. The journalistic style of Hank’s able assistant Clarence is immediately “up to the back settlement Alabama mark” – “he talked sixth century and wrote nineteenth” (Twain 1889: 121), including disgraceful familiarities – meaning for one thing that his backwoods language is vernacular in a very old sense: a language that elbows out the Latin of clergy and scribes, replaces the courtly language that excludes the masses, and therefore potentially becomes a national idiom. While it is true that, like the back-settlement Alabama paper, the *Camelot Weekly Hosannah and Literary Volcano* is a local paper, not a national one, bits of national news appear to foster the larger imagined

community. And of course in Hank's case other communications technologies bolster the conditions of national interconnections. His telegraph and his "atmosphere of telephones and lightning communication with distant regions" (p. 305) ensure this. When Morgan trounces a soothsayer's supposed clairvoyance about the king's activities by using telegraphic information to announce that the king is traveling and will arrive in two days – and of course is right about this bit of national news – he exemplifies the consciousness of newspaper and nation, of other people and events simultaneously proceeding, out of sight, within the imagined community (pp. 309–10).

Hank arguably also introduces another, related condition of the nation according to Anderson: the dispersed "homogeneous, empty time" (Anderson 1991: 24–6), a time measured by clock and calendar rather than by the sacred and centered time-lessness of prefiguration and fulfillment. Hank's "miracle" of predicting the solar eclipse puts his calendrical calculations into the place of the divine order, replacing miracles as prefigured divine signs with the measured march of godless nature. With this desacralized, abstractly homogeneous sense of time comes another condition for the nation, the displacement of the king as a type of the divine by the secular administrator (or "Boss"), and the displacement of the dynasty as the principle of social organization by the state. Hank plays along with the pre-national, monarchic idea of a chain from God to king to people: he keeps up the performance of Arthur's supposed healing of scrofula by touch – the "king's-evil business" (p. 334) – and his other spectacles seem to invoke supernatural power. But in fact all of these ostensibly sacred symbolic moments, from going a-grailing to his staged miracle in the Valley of Holiness, are technologically produced or at least efficiently administered. Hank's

administrative entity grows into the substratum for his nation-state, inaugurating a system of schools, taxes, communications, American-based national currency, national advertising and marketing, industry, and “missionary” expansion, extending his profane influence all the way to “obscure country retreats” and the “quiet nooks and corners” (pp. 117–18) of the nation – culminating in a network of wires and explosives connecting all his innovations, ready to blow them all up. Here, with a ruthless single-mindedness, is the nation in the sense of a geographically bounded entity, replacing a dynastically or divinely centered monarchy. Here, with wires, Hank literalizes the connections needed for national unity. Here he unashamedly establishes national unity as the grounds for capitalist investment and expansion.

Twain wrestles throughout his novel with the question of whether nation serves as a liberatory, revolutionary thing or as an excuse for exploitation and oppression. Hank senses that the creation of his nation-state has skipped the paradigmatic step of republican revolution, the event that historically provides the national political alternative to monarchy, and he declares, “The thing that would have best suited the circus-side of my nature would have been to resign the Boss-ship and get up an insurrection and turn it into a revolution.” But first, as he recognizes, you have to educate your “materials up to revolution-grade” or get left (Twain 1889: 160). This of course ends up being his big problem: the Arthurians are simply not ready for a self-determined national republic. Hank’s dream is a revolution without bloodshed, and then a republic with universal suffrage (p. 391). In his delusional fantasies, then, his nationalism is put in the service of freedom and liberation. But in a typical Twainian return of pessimism about the dehumanized masses, the church easily retrieves the English from the republicanism Hank tries to rouse them to

(or impose on them). His republic finally unites its people only as a mass of protoplasm. With the electrified fence, gatling guns, and dynamite torpedoes in place, Clarence asks “When does the performance begin?” and Hank answers, now, by declaring a republic (p. 544). But his republic has no nation. What ensues, in a mockery of the true republican nation-state, is national solidarity through death (though Hank justifies it by saying that only the knights are dying, not the nation). Literalizing with a malapropian flourish, Hank turns *res publica*, or “public matter,” into undifferentiated ooze: cohesive, perhaps, and standardized; homogeneous and interconnected. But a national subjectivity eludes his efforts to launch his new deal. Sixth-century England is not historically ready for “the nation” and “the people.” And the questions arise not only whether the English nation existed before Hank’s arrival, but also whether his modernization is sufficient to lure it into existence.

Nationality, Femininity, and Imperialism

In 1896, in *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, Twain wrote: “With Joan of Arc love of country was more than a sentiment – it was a passion. She was the Genius of Patriotism – she was Patriotism embodied, concreted, made flesh, and palpable to the touch and visible to the eye” (Twain 1896: 461). In contrast to Hank’s national republic, Joan’s elicits profound emotion and loyalty. And in this case love of country undergoes no burlesque. This is patriotism revered as a holy spirit, and love of nation becomes, indeed, equivalent to a religion. Joan is the materialization of love of *patrie*, the fatherland, and the perfect such embodiment because of her pure and selfless daughter-love. In this she represents, as Twain writes, “purity from

all alloy of self-seeking, self-interest, personal ambition" (p. 287); she is ready to sacrifice herself, and inspires others to make the same pure, familial self-sacrifice for the nation. While the actual Joan of Arc, and her martyrdom, may have indeed helped give form to a French nationhood that was to supersede loyalty to the monarch, Twain's Joan had benefited from nineteenth-century efforts to refabricate her as a symbol of French identity. His Joan embodies a full-fledged popular nationality. Early in the novel, after the stranger to whom she has given her food regales the folk at the local inn with a history of France and the Song of Roland, she leads the crowd as "they all flung themselves in a body at the singer, stark mad with love of him and love of France and pride in her great deeds and old renown, and smothered him with their embracings" (pp. 34-5). Here is nation-love based on the idea of a country, its history and beliefs, its anthem, its popular identity. Even if Charles VII, who finally owes his crown to Joan, fails her, the common people in Twain's novel know and love Joan as the savior of France. They live in a fifteenth-century principality and think as nineteenth-century national subjects, joined horizontally by national identity rather than vertically by authority of the crown.

Joan's Frenchness, and her France, gain such patriotic support in a way that Hank's republic could not. But even if Hank's abstract, manufactured republic could stir no patriotic emotion, could such passion for the idea of the nation as Twain's Joan inspires actually be possible before Hank's sort of mass education and print capitalism constituted the necessary imagined community? Twain's contrast between Hank and Joan resonates with a split among our current theorists of nation between those who see nationality as a modern phenomenon and those who trace it further back in history. While the former argue that nationalism as a political program is only a couple of

hundred years old, and any national feeling discovered earlier than that is its own projection backward, the latter argue that the stirrings of national sentiment occurred well before the late eighteenth century, in ethnic and cultural groupings.³ Having seen Hank's republic to its grim end, Twain seems to discount nation as it is fashioned by modernization, and instead, through Joan, to reach for older roots, for collective national feeling somehow arising from the soil, or as the realization of a national spirit. We may see in his Joan of Arc a questionable invention of full-blown nationality, but for Twain Joan represents indigenous national passion, autochthonous patriotic emotion, a mad love of nation as natural homeland. For him, she legitimately offers a national alternative to the older dynastic order, a counter-force to both nobility and clergy. The organization of principalities, indeed, is one of the villains of her story, as it arranges the marriage of Henry VI of England and Catherine of France and confers on their baby boy the throne of both countries – an unbearable outrage to Joan's Frenchness. Joan also fights the international organization of the church, the archaic institutional power that would obliterate her nationalism and her individuality. Her foes seek falsely to stifle an essential, pure, organic patriotic passion.

Joan's embodiment of nation and patriotism brings with it the equally important equation of patriotism and youthful femininity. Twain ends his novel by saying:

Love, Mercy, Charity, Fortitude, War, Peace, Poetry,
Music, – these may be symbolized as any shall prefer: by
figures of either sex and of any age; but a slender girl in
her first young bloom, with the martyr's crown upon her
head, and in her hand the sword that severed her
country's bonds – shall not this, and no other, stand for
PATRIOTISM through all the ages until time shall end?
(Twain 1896: 461)

This comes at the end of a novel that has gloried in Joan's
girlhood, feminine purity, virginity, modesty, and chastity.
The intersection of images of women and figurations of
national identity is of course immensely complex; the ways,
for example, that Joan of Arc may interweave with such
American images as that of the female Columbia, Lady
Liberty, and the Republican Mother, is beyond my scope
here. What becomes obvious, however, is Twain's equation
of this girlhood purity with a kind of primordial nationhood,
a righteous version of nation not unlike that of American
virgin land – a nationality emergent from the soil,
belonging by natural right to its true owners and
defenders. The equation enables a parallel between the
melodramatically persecuted heroine, whose virtue is
obscured in her sham trial and whose virginity and
feminine modesty are assaulted, and a nation violated and
colonized by the predatory English and Burgundian armies.
This melodrama of purity defiled and innocence persecuted
metamorphoses into Twain's figurative schema for
understanding nationalism in the late-nineteenth-century
context of American imperialism. Never an admirer of the
French nation, Twain makes Joan an allegory of national
principle that he could apply to his own landscape of
international relations. In 1901, most notably, Twain
compares General Emilio Aguinaldo to Joan of Arc, the
grounds being specifically those of patriotism. Aguinaldo
had been declared the first president of the Philippine

Republic in 1898, on the assumption that the Philippines would have independence after they had joined the United States in defeating the Spanish in Manila. The United States dashed that aspiration, instead taking possession of the Philippines and beginning a war to maintain and extend its control over the islands. For Twain, Aguinaldo became a Joan-like figure, a nation-lover, arising from obscure peasant origins to earn the trust of his people, fighting against tyranny and for freedom and independence – first against Spain and its Catholic friars, then against the United States – and finally beaten by dishonorable subterfuge and deceitful betrayal, crushed by a more powerful force (Zwick 1992: 99–100, 88). In these years Twain writes and speaks repeatedly about two different kinds of patriotism: the just, nationalist, anti-colonial kind of Joan, Aguinaldo, and George Washington, which he extols, and the newspaper-fed patriotism of conformity which he sees propelling US imperialist ventures that rob weak nations of their freedom, which he despises (Twain 1992b: 476–8, 645; Zwick 1992, *passim*). Partly gendered, the apparent weakness and natural purity of purpose of Joan and Aguinaldo is compounded with their righteous, martial, nationalist fervor (signified in Joan, the martyr with the sword, the virgin in male armor). That contradiction is set against a domestic United States that has a weak population manipulated into a false patriotism and an aggressively devious imperial military. Twain's contrast may clarify meanings of nation and patriotism, but the doubled contradictions also promise intricate confusions, the kinds of inconsistencies, again, that the concept of nation seems to generate.

National Author

Twain made spirited defenses of American civilization in response to the derogatory evaluations from England by Matthew Arnold and from France by Paul Bourget. Part of his argument was that a “foreigner” can only “photograph the exteriors of a nation.” To get at “its interior – its soul, its life, its speech, its thought” requires years of unconscious absorption of “its shames and prides, its joys and griefs, its loves and hates, its prosperities and reverses, its shows and shabbinesses, its deep patriotisms, its whirlwinds of political passion, its adorations – of flag, and heroic dead, and the glory of the national name.” He crucially adds: “There is only one expert who is qualified to examine the souls and the life of a people and make a valuable report – the native novelist.” However, Twain goes on to note, a novelist cannot “generalize the nation,” but must simply capture on paper the people of “his own place.” And “when a thousand able novels have been written, *there* you have the soul of the people, the life of the people, the speech of the people; and not anywhere else can these be had.” Much of the rest of the piece I quote from – “What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us” (1895) – is devoted to ridiculing the very project of generalizing about national traits, characteristics, psychologies. There are basic human traits that exist across nations, Twain writes, and there is staggering variety within every nation. The only thing that seems to be peculiarly American, he facetiously adds, is the taste for ice-water – something which has “not been psychologized yet. I drop the hint and say no more” (Twain 1992b: 164–79).

Criticism of the work of Mark Twain done in a national-cultural vein has often taken up his conviction that the native novelist can capture the “soul” of a nation, but has just as often forgotten his admonition against making large cultural generalizations as it has re-imagined the nation through its accounts of Twain. This is not to say, though,

that such generalizing has not been illuminating and provocative. Ten years after Twain's death, Van Wyck Brooks made the first enduringly influential and controversial sally in *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920). Sometimes remembered only as a misogynistic and psycho-biographical attack on Twain's wife Livy for censoring and stunting her husband's talent, Brooks's book more largely aimed to make Twain a national type – of the artist crushed by the American environment – and to skirmish over the definition of a national literary tradition during the period of intense nationalism (and nativism) following World War I. Concerned to foster an American literature that would express the nation to itself – a notion inherited from nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism, and which for him required high literary accomplishment – Brooks offered Twain as a model to avoid, an “arch-type of the national character” only in his arrested development, his failure to know himself (Brooks 1955: 26). Tragically, Twain's genius had been starved by the cultural “desert” of the frontier (p. 40), stifled by American business-mindedness, and seduced by Victorian conventionality – much of which Brooks traced ultimately to repressive Calvinism. That last crucial point was a salvo by this aesthete-radical against the more conservative critics who had been defining an American cultural and literary tradition as rooted in New England and Puritanism; for Brooks, Puritanism was a great impediment to the national literature he sought.

Ten years later, in his *Main Currents in American Thought*, Vernon Louis Parrington similarly formulated an abidingly influential version of Twain as an embodiment of the conflict that, he argued, defined American thought – between optimistic American democratic individualism and later industrialism, with its pressure to conform and its pessimistically mechanistic science, class injustice, and capitalist exploitation. Twain was “an authentic American –

a native writer" without European influences, "local and western yet continental" and "the very embodiment of the turbulent frontier that had long been shaping a native psychology." Tragically, however, Twain's "Americanism," his "embodiment of three centuries of American experience – frontier centuries, decentralized, leveling, individualistic," was too crude "to deal with the complexities of a world passing through the twin revolutions of industrialism and science"; hence, he is only "a mirror reflecting the muddy crosscurrents of American life" (Parrington 1930: 86–8). With a twist on Brooks, Parrington lays out the now-familiar picture of Twain as an intensely divided person whose tragic personal conflicts mirror national contradictions.

In a fierce defense of Twain, directed mainly against Brooks, Bernard DeVoto's *Mark Twain's America* (1932) exalted Twain as an artist of the frontier, and his work as an expression of America, by representing the frontier not as a crude, stunting desert but as the rich core of American experience. Much of DeVoto's book is a tapestry of frontier cultures, importantly including African American storytelling and music and stressing the oral tall tale as Twain's principal resource and as "sharply and autochthonously American – unique" (DeVoto 1932: 91). DeVoto attacks "literary theory," and Brooks, for making generalizations – about "The Frontier, the American, the Puritan, the Pioneer ... [and] Industrial Philistinism" – which have little "correspondence in reality." And in his crusade against such abstractions, he criticizes the very undertaking of trying to order the chaos of "American heritage" into simplistic "categories, personifications, unities." This includes the study of "an eidolon, 'Mark Twain,' in its relation to another phantom, 'America' " (pp. 223–4). DeVoto adds, "It is unsafe to regard any artist as an embodiment of his time or its thought. An individual is not a symbol of his era" (p. 295). Nonetheless, DeVoto argues,

with what he suggests is the proper and unprecedented complexity and contextual knowledge, that the frontier shaped Twain, his works express it, and, because all of America passed through the frontier stage, in Twain's works "American civilization sums up its experience; they are the climax of a literary tradition" (p. 241). For DeVoto, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in its account of frontier variety, "comes nearer than any other [book] to identify itself with the national life. The gigantic amorphousness of our past makes impossible, or merely idle, any attempt to fix in the form of idea the meaning of nationality. But more truly with 'Huckleberry Finn' than with any other book, inquiry may satisfy itself: here is America" (p. 314). DeVoto ends his book by declaring that Twain himself, through his multiple occupations and by living through multiple eras, "more completely than any other writer, took part in the American experience. There is, remember, such an entity." Twain "wrote books that have in them something eternally true to the core of his nation's life. They are at the center; all other books whatsoever are farther away" (DeVoto 1932: 320). Loath to schematize Twain as the embodiment of a national contradiction, DeVoto is nonetheless ready to extol Twain as the distillation of a peculiarly American cultural variety.

DeVoto had drawn on the work of Constance Rourke and showed deep affinities with her in his high valuation of folklore as the source of Twain's art. But Rourke, drawing on Herderian ideas of national identity as emerging from folk culture, more explicitly tried to identify a populist and democratic "American character." In *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931), Rourke described an American character expressed in lore, and she limned three complex figures who rose from regional folk origins to the level of national myth: the rural deadpan Yankee, the tall-tale-telling backwoodsman, and the black-faced

minstrel. Mark Twain became an important national figure himself “because of the regional elements which he freely mixed, the Yankee with the Californian, the backwoodsman with both of these” (Rourke 1931: 219–20). Notably, she did not include in Twain’s personal mix her third important component of American humor – the minstrel tradition and the authentic African American culture from which she thought it grew. Also drawing on Rourke, Walter Blair’s *Native American Humor (1800–1900)* (1937) defined a national tradition that began to emerge around 1830, when American humorists finally recognized funny things in American characters and scenes and developed techniques to exploit this humor, thereby fashioning a comic tradition imbued, he declared, with the customs and convictions of the nation. Twain, in Blair’s estimation, was the climax in the development of this tradition, because he brought together the strands Blair’s research tracked – Down East Yankee humor, Southwest frontier oral storytelling, literary comedy, and local color writing (Blair 1966: 147). Significantly, Blair dropped Rourke’s tradition of minstrelsy altogether, and he more fully exalted Twain’s contribution to the creation of a national humor, with *Huckleberry Finn* as the culmination.

Jonathan Arac has recently argued, nonetheless, that it was not really until the years from 1948 to 1964 that *Huckleberry Finn* was plucked from Twain’s œuvre and idolized as the ultimate expression of American national culture. This arguably was accomplished especially in essays on the novel in the 1940s by Lionel Trilling, and in the work of Leo Marx and Henry Nash Smith in the 1950s and 1960s. Trilling called the novel “one of the central documents of American culture” (Trilling 1950: 101). By this he meant that the book expressed a post-Civil War change in what was “accepted and made respectable in the national ideal”; Twain’s novel was a “hymn to an older

America" that, despite its faults and violence and cruelty (slavery was not specified), "still maintained its sense of reality, for it was not yet enthralled by money, the father of ultimate illusion and lies" (p. 110). Its rural, frontier "river-god" stood against the newer, urban, machine-culture, capitalist "money-god." The book, like Mark Twain himself, embodied this conflict. Though Trilling criticized Parrington for characterizing American culture as a stream rather than a conflict – that is, for not being dialectical enough in his conception of American culture – he plainly borrowed from Parrington in making Twain's book epitomize this national contradiction.

The writing of Smith and Marx on Twain was intertwined with their postwar effort to establish American Studies as a project devoted to defining the broader contours of national culture and identity. Smith's 1957 essay on method in American Studies broached the topic of Twain and nation by arguing that Twain's style and characters had to be explained in relation to American culture (that is, they were not amenable to New Critical literary analysis), and that Twain's complex art explains much more about American culture than pop-art stereotypes do. This suggestion got fuller treatment in *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer* (1962), where Smith argued that Twain's difficult task was "to deal with the conflict of values in American culture" (Smith 1962: 21), namely a conflict between the dominant culture's conventional ideality, quite divorced from reality, and the vernacular mentality's rejection of this. Twain's "development" was toward seeing ideal values in the commonplace, bringing the serious into the vernacular style, giving the everyday the dignity of art, and criticizing genteel ideality from this standpoint. This was the revolutionary accomplishment of *Huckleberry Finn*, which "approaches perfection as an embodiment of American experience in a radically new and appropriate

literary mode" (p. 137). Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) built on Smith's work, seeing, too, "a conflict at the center of American experience" (Marx 1964: 320) – this time a conflict precipitated by the rapid industrialization of the nineteenth century, a conflict perceived and symbolized by America's most perceptive artists as a pastoral ideal shattered by the machine. *Huckleberry Finn*, Marx argued, brilliantly turns Huck and Jim's raft into an Arcadia of fraternity and freedom, the very image of American promise, and then has the raft smashed by the steamboat, and the American ideal figuratively smashed by history. "No book," Marx writes, "confirms the relevance of the pastoral design to American experience as vividly as the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" (p. 319). Twain's literary crystallization of the tragic version of Arcadia fixes the conflict at the heart of America and makes him an exemplary national artist.

From the 1960s on, as notions of national character or American collective consciousness were increasingly criticized for supposing a holistic consensus that disguised dominant culture and ideology, academic criticism about Mark Twain that made claims about his exceptional "Americanness" grew rarer. But gradually through the 1970s and 1980s national-cultural studies of Twain returned, partly as pointed critiques of his writings that saw them as embodiments of dominant ideologies. As an example, I would suggest Forrest G. Robinson's *In Bad Faith: The Dynamics of Deception in Mark Twain's America* (1986), which takes Twain's popularity in America, rather than any peculiarly perceptive artistry, as grounds for learning about national culture through his texts ("enduringly popular works are full and clear windows" [Robinson 1986: 10]). Drawing on a model oriented by Marxist and New Historicist theory, Robinson sees Twain's

work as representing, but then also repeating, both the tissue of lies that holds national culture together and the general denial of this social deceit. Although much of Robinson's analysis is devoted to Twain's representation in *Tom Sawyer* of the mechanisms of this denial – a national addiction to entertaining distraction, to evasion from acknowledging the deceptions that socially construct US culture – the paradigmatic example is still *Huckleberry Finn*. The explicit tissue of lies there, of course, enables race slavery. And the performances in the novel are distractions from it, including, especially, Tom's showmanlike "evasion" at the end, which is also an evasion on the part of Twain, enacted for an American audience inclined to disavow its racism and history of slavery and to embrace principles of liberty and equality while shirking the recognition of their betrayal. "Mark Twain's enormous American audience has assented to his authority with them as the interpreter and guardian of their deepest cultural selves," Robinson writes (p. 108). By this he means that Twain does crystallize the lies and self-deceptions of American cultural selves, but then repeats the act of bad faith, skirts the matter, wishes them away, contains his threat to them. *Huckleberry Finn* remains a favorite, despite raising the issue of race slavery, "because it seems to invite the dismissal or disavowal of as much of its darkness as we cannot bear to own" (p. 215). For Robinson, Twain's relation to America is that of a pre-eminent national myth-sustainer, in the sense of myth as something that shapes, invokes, and sustains the historical experience, memory, and collective psychology of a "people" – and operates, too, to forget and deny anything that rends the precarious stability of the intersubjective national-cultural fabric.

National literary tradition, and Twain's place in it, was similarly revisited for criticism by Toni Morrison in *Playing*

in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992). For Morrison there is indeed a “national literature,” but it is “the preserve of white male views, genius, and power.” And its very “sense of Americanness,” as well as its defining values – including freedom, individualism, masculinity, and innocence – is actually a response to “a real or fabricated Africanist presence” (Morrison 1992: 4–6). To a great extent, this response involves projecting a black presence constructed of white fears and desires, which is then often silenced or evaded but persistently erupts into or infuses the psychology and literature of white America. Black slaves became “a playground for the imagination” of white authors, who cooked up “a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American” (p. 38). No exception to this, Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* fashions Jim into a figure whose enslavement is necessary both for Huck’s freedom and for his moral maturation. Twain once again is an exemplary national author, this time in the way his book embodies “the parasitical nature of white freedom.” And if the novel does criticize antebellum America and its formations of race and class, it also participates in the national evasion of injustice by doing so through humor that allows its contestatory sallies to be dismissed (pp. 54–7). Like Robinson’s Mark Twain, Morrison’s enacts a national subterfuge on behalf of a white “we the people.”

The frank celebration of Twain as a national author was resurrected by Shelley Fisher Fishkin in *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (1993). But, for Fishkin, the nation Mark Twain expresses and interprets is a nation of differences. We might say that Fishkin retrieves DeVoto’s stress on the influence of African American storytelling in Twain’s work and combines it with the insistence of Morrison and Ralph Ellison that there is a complicated black presence throughout American

literature. The result is an argument that “the mainstream American literary tradition” so profoundly shaped by Twain’s vernacular style is actually constituted by a “multicultural polyphony” that includes black voices (Fishkin 1993: 4–5) and which therefore requires us to rethink “how African-American voices have shaped our sense of what is distinctively ‘American’ about American literature” (p. 9). Fishkin concretizes the idea by declaring that she has discovered the source of Huck’s voice in the language of a black character in an earlier Twain sketch, and therefore “the voice of Huck Finn, the beloved national symbol and cultural icon, was part black” (p. 144) – hence her sensational book title and the flurry of national media attention surrounding the publication of her study. Whatever one may think about this “discovery,” Fishkin’s work influentially reframed our understanding of what she characterizes as “the novel that we have embraced as most expressive of who we really are” (p. 144). It also rehabilitated Twain as a national author, and rescued and reconceived the nationalist literary tradition he heads, this time for the era and purposes of multiculturalism.

Fishkin’s kind of nationalist “idolization” of *Huckleberry Finn* comes in for sharp criticism in Jonathan Arac’s *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in our Time* (1997). But Fishkin is simply the latest example of the “hypercanonization” of the novel that began during the Civil Rights era, Arac argues, when the novel did something for its white readers similar to what it had done for their forerunners in the 1880s. When it was first published, that is, white readers in a culture that had repudiated slavery could self-approvingly identify with Huck’s decision to help Jim to freedom – and therefore watch him become as good as them. In the 1960s (and ever since), liberal white readers in a culture in which white supremacy was being challenged could similarly, and again

self-approvingly, identify with Huck, feeling that their hearts were right even if their society was still racist. Indeed, "Northern liberal smugness" embraced the book as enlightened while assuming that the bigots of Little Rock were too racist to appreciate it (Arac 1997: 65). Liberal intellectuals, similarly, could get "moral self-satisfaction in articulating the values Huck couldn't," and therefore the book was hypercanonized as "a talisman of self-flattering American virtue" (p. 62). African Americans who attacked the book, and Huck's use of "nigger," therefore managed to "challenge 'us' just where 'we' feel ourselves most intimately virtuous" (p. 13), and liberal literary experts accordingly lined up to defend the book's anti-racism. In a manner similar to Forrest Robinson's, Arac sees the novel as helping its readers evade problems of race relations by making them feel warm about their own anti-racist feelings; and he further sees the alignment of Twain and his book with the nation as intimately wedded to this complacency-breeding process. Even if Fishkin's nationalism is put in the service of "interracially progressive purposes," turning this national icon into a positive version of "hybridized antiracism," Arac suggests, is complicit with a process which, by hypercanonizing the novel as an American document, wrongly validates the nation's claim to moral goodness (pp. 184-5). He contrasts Fishkin's nationalist framework with Edward Said's critique of such celebratory nationalism and his effort to bring colonialism, imperialism, and international relations into our critical picture. We ought to put "less weight on the exceptionalist, nationalist project" (p. 209), Arac finally asserts, and think more of the United States as a nation among others - and also think of Mark Twain in an international frame. This might begin a cure, Arac suggests, to a self-congratulatory nationalist myopia in the American literary and cultural criticism represented by the idolization of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Indeed, in our period of globalization and nationalist ethnic cleansing, when “postnationalism” runs up against post-9/11 patriotism, critical attention to Mark Twain directly engages the question of nation and Twain’s place in the international arena. Amy Kaplan’s *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture* (2002) is perhaps the foremost example of such engagement. Paradigms for the study of US culture have had a national focus, Kaplan notes, which she aims to question and disrupt by opening the international context. She undertakes to show that Mark Twain in particular, whose name “has long been synonymous with American culture,” looks different when recontextualized: “his international travels in the routes of empire profoundly shaped both the iconic stature of Twain as an American writer and his complex representation of race” (Kaplan 2002: 19). Observing that Twain has often been characterized as embodying divisions that symbolize contradictions in national culture, Kaplan aims to correct this through triangulation, by opening up the imperial sphere: “Twain’s career, writing, and reception as a national author were shaped by a third realm beyond national boundaries: the routes of transnational travel, enabling and enabled by the changing borders of imperial expansion.” In short, “the national identity of Mark Twain, his ‘Americanness’,” was created in this international context (p. 52). Kaplan’s readings of Twain’s early writings about Hawaii, especially, and her analysis of the complex relations between his exoticization of Hawaiians and his memories of slavery, work to situate Twain in her larger argument that the intricacies and contradictions of American imperial relations, and depictions of the foreign and the alien, helped shape “representations of American identity at home” (p. 1). Twain’s ambiguous treatments of Hawaiians call up and mingle with his contradictory boyhood memories of slaves, generating the writing most embraced as “American.” Twain’s writing career, as well as

the icon of Mark Twain as American, is shown to be suffused with the same sort of anarchy and ambiguity that characterized images of the world abroad. They deeply involved “both remembering and forgetting the inextricable connections between national identity and imperial expansion” (p. 22).

Despite the current surge of popular US patriotism, the literary-critical landscape for the study of Twain and nation seems to have been decisively reoriented by work that has put into question the construction of nation and national literature and urged new models of understanding that connect these constructions to global contexts. If today’s intense nationalisms remind us that we hardly live in a “post-national” world, we nonetheless have rightly lost the unexamined platform from which commentators talked about “American literature” as a self-evident or transcendent national entity, an a priori source of coherence, or a teleological goal. Projects pursuing Twain as exemplary American, or otherwise connecting Twain and nation, will have to scrutinize their scaffolding before going further, or make the scaffolding, and its foundations, their object of study. But this is inspiring, as new horizons for understanding open up, as seemingly self-evident assumptions about the importance of *American* literature are questioned, and as the implications and effects of joining Mark Twain and nation are thoughtfully exposed. At the same time, our new questions about nation and nationalism enable us to ask different things of Twain’s writing and to subtilize our sense of the relation between his work and the phenomenon of nationality.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Anderson, Benedict (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev.