On Western Waters: Anglo-American Nonfictional Narrative in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract: Anglo-American westward expansion provided a major impulse to the development of the young United States’ narrative tradition. Early U.S. writers also looked to the South, that is, to the Spanish New World and, in some cases, to Spain itself. Washington Irving’s “A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus” (1828), the first full-length biography of the admiral in English, inaugurated the trend, and Mark Twain’s “Life on the Mississippi” (1883) transformed it by focusing on the life and lives of the Mississippi River Valley and using an approach informed by Miguel de Cervantes’s “Don Quijote de la Mancha.” From Irving’s “discovery of America” to Twain’s tribute to the disappearing era of steamboat travel and commerce on the Mississippi, the tales about “western waters,” told via their authors’ varied engagements with Spanish history and literature, constitute a seldom acknowledged dimension in Anglo-America’s nonfictional narrative literary history.

Anglo-American expansion into the West and far West of North America provided a major impulse to the development of the young United States’ narrative tradition. Travel accounts figured prominently, and most, from Washington Irving’s A Tour on the Prairies (1835), to Francis Parkman’s The Oregon Trail (1847–1849), to Mark Twain’s Roughing It (1872), looked westward. In fact, U.S. nonfictional literature was born on the lands and waters of western exploration. This phenomenon inspired the internationally renowned Argentine writer and bibliophile Jorge Luis Borges to remark in 1967, while holding the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetry at Harvard, that in the United States, even the American West seemed to have been invented in New England.1

America’s early writers looked not only to the West but also to the South, that is, to the Spanish New World and, in notable cases, to Spain. Washington Irving’s A History of the Life and Voyages of
Christopher Columbus (1828), the first full-length biography of the admiral in English, inaugurated the trend, and Mark Twain’s Life on the Mississippi (1883) transformed it with a critical but tolerant reflection on the life and lives of the Mississippi River Valley and an approach informed by Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quijote de la Mancha. While Washington Irving (1783–1859) focused on the earliest Spanish exploration and settlement of American lands, Mark Twain (1835–1910) strove to give the United States its own experience, honed in the heyday of steamboat travel and riverboat commerce on the Mississippi.

For Irving, Columbus provided the opportunity to pursue serious history-writing on a subject of national interest. Irving’s benefactor, diplomat and editor of the North American Review Alexander H. Everett, lauded Irving’s patriotic fervor and his “pretension to be viewed as the valorous knight, who was called, in the order of destiny . . . to achieve the great and hitherto unaccomplished adventure of establishing a purely American literary reputation of the first order.” Twain’s close friend and editor of The Atlantic Monthly, William Dean Howells, was of the opinion that Twain considered Life on the Mississippi his greatest work. Howells remarked that as a reader Twain had always been drawn to books that “had the root of the human matter in it” and “gave him life at first-hand”: namely, history, autobiography, and firsthand accounts of travel or captivity. Although it is hardly remembered and seldom read today, Irving’s romantic Columbus enjoyed immense popularity throughout most of the nineteenth century and beyond. Twain, meanwhile, was giving the lie to the idea that any account of exploration or travel by foreigners could be considered “innocent.” The bridge (to use a river metaphor) that connects Washington Irving and Mark Twain is the romantic historian Francis Parkman (1823–1893). Parkman did not participate in the contemporary vogue for studying things Spanish; however, like Irving and Hispanist historian William Hickling Prescott (1796–1859), he made enthusiastic references to knight errantry and “ocean chivalry.” Twain admired Parkman for his astute firsthand accounts of the Oglala Sioux in The Oregon Trail, and he was a faithful reader of Parkman’s La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West (1869, 1879), which was of signal importance in chronicling “western waters.”

Twain no doubt chose Parkman because the Bostonian evoked the unfathomable, dynamic Mississippi River with great respect, while British travelers to America often expressed contempt for it. One of them called this most formidable of waterways the “great common sewer of the Western America.”

Accounts of Spanish exploration and conquest, compiled during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries and translated into other European languages, were immensely popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Irving fondly recalled reading them in his youth, citing late in life one of his early favorites, a multivolume compendium prologued by Samuel Johnson and entitled The World Displayed; or A Curious Collection of Voyages and Travels, Selected from the Writers of All Nations, in Which the Conjectures and Interpretations of Several Vain Editors and Translators are Expunged. Inspired by this tradition and by Spanish naval historian and director of Spain’s Royal Academy of History Martín Fernández de Navarrete’s path-breaking publication of the corpus of Columbus documents (1825–1837), Irving inaugurated the American trend of writing on Spanish New World exploration and settlement with his Columbus. Prescott became the most notable of the nineteenth-century Hispanics writing narrative history, and his works from the 1830s...
through the 1850s built America’s basic Spanish bookshelf: *The Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella* (1837), *The Conquest of Mexico* (1843), *The Conquest of Peru* (1847), and *The Reign of Philip II* (1855, 1858) would guide Americans’ thinking about Spain and its New World conquests for more than a century. Other U.S. historians, principally Parkman, John Lothrop Motley, and George Bancroft, created monumental histories of the French, the Dutch, and the English in the Americas.

Colonial times in British North America witnessed a widening interest in Spanish history and culture through the study of the Spanish language, the collection of Spanish materials for libraries, and the presentation of Spanish themes in the literary and historical arts. After U.S. independence, Thomas Jefferson promoted the study of the Spanish language, anticipating the development of trade with Latin America and encouraging linguistic mastery because “the ancient part of American history is written chiefly in Spanish.” America’s early writers took up the challenge. The period from the 1820s to the 1860s was particularly productive for the growth of Anglo-American Hispanism; in addition to Irving’s and Prescott’s histories, the scholarship of George Ticknor, the poetry of William Cullen Bryant, and the fiction of Herman Melville stand out. Miguel de Cervantes’s *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615) had been read since the eighteenth century, and references to the novel and its protagonists can be found among Anglo-American writers from Irving onward.

Often hailed as America’s “first man of letters,” Washington Irving wrote in the era of Jacksonian democracy, westward expansion, European immigration, and Indian removal. The demise of the Spanish empire and the recent independence of Latin American republics provided the United States ample room for maneuver as it pursued its own “manifest” national destiny. In that context, the figure of a solitary genius and entrepreneur carrying European civilization over new frontiers to uncharted lands resonated well with the aspirations of a young America. Irving’s Columbus dramatized, in short, the model of the North American “self-made man” who could do good for others by doing well for himself.

As Irving portrayed him, Columbus “singly combined the practical and the poetical”: like a nautical knight-errant, his discoveries “enlightened the ignorance of the age, guided conjecture to certainty, and dispelled the very darkness with which he had been obliged to struggle.” This new Columbus possessed an “ardent and enthusiastic imagination which threw a magnificence over his whole course of thought.” Quixotic but not mad, his imagination “instead of exhausting itself in idle flights, lent aid to his judgment, and enabled him to form conclusions at which common minds could never have arrived, nay, which they could not perceive when pointed out.” Irving endowed the larger Columbus story with a satisfying teleology: the immediate triumph of Columbus, his subsequent defeat, and, posthumously, his (almost) imperishable renown. Irving highlighted Columbus’s illusions about having arrived at the threshold of Asia and locating the terrestrial paradise, and he endowed his hero with a blithe unawareness of the potential historical and human consequences of his epoch-making actions.

Irving, as Prescott and others would do after him, thus turned the Spanish adventure in the New World into a remarkable Anglo-American story. Irving created a nineteenth-century Columbus on the verge of discovery and opportunity. He smoothly grafted the accounts by Hernando Colón (Columbus’s son) and Spanish
missionary activist and historian Bartolomé de las Casas—his principal sources on Columbus—onto a North American conceptualization of New World Columbian history based on personal entrepreneurship, private enterprise, and the “spirit of commerce.” Irving referred to Columbus’s goal—“the design of seeking a western route to India”—as his “grand project of discovery.” Irving made frequent reference to the admiral’s “enterprise,” thus underscoring, in typical nineteenth-century language, the progressive economic goals he attributed to Columbus.18

Parkman’s depiction of French explorer René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, was cut from the same cloth:

[W]ith feet firm planted on the hard earth, [La Salle] breathes the self-relying energies of modern practical enterprise. Nevertheless, La Salle’s enemies called him a visionary. . . . La Salle at La Chine dreamed of a western passage to China, and nursed vague schemes of western discovery. Then, when his earlier journeying revealed to him the valley of the Ohio and the fertile plains of Illinois, his imagination took wing over the boundless prairies and forests drained by the great river of the West. His ambition had found its field. . . . It was for him to call into light the latent riches of the great West.19

Twain takes a different tack. While professing in Life on the Mississippi the progressive economic values that link him to Irving and Parkman, he achieves a narrative transformation that turns the foregoing travel-and-exploration models inside out.

As in the works of Irving and Parkman, in Twain’s Life on the Mississippi competence and mastery are navigational. Columbus and La Salle have been replaced by Mr. Horace Bixby, the master pilot under whom the young Sam Clemens apprenticed and whose extraordinary navigational art as a Mississippi River pilot Mark Twain lauds. Replacing the long-gone European explorers, Bixby is the modern-day exemplar of nautical prowess in Twain’s America. Whereas grandiose imaginings inspired the navigational achievements of Irving’s Columbus and Parkman’s La Salle, Twain attributes Bixby’s mastery of skills to clearheaded observation and experience. A harbinger of neither great empires nor nineteenth-century adventurous enterprises, Bixby is instead a great teacher, whose prideful modesty is underpinned by his sober realization that each day on the treacherous Mississippi brings new challenges.

Rather than any personage, the Mississippi River itself emerges as the book’s central figure: larger than life, it is at once terrible, inscrutable, and sublime. As pilot/author Clemens/Twain metaphors it:

The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book. . . . The passenger who could not read it was charmed with a peculiar sort of dimple on its surface (on the rare occasions when he did not overlook it altogether); but to the pilot that was an italicized passage . . . for it meant that a wreck or a rock was buried there that could tear the life out of the strongest vessel that ever floated.20

Reading the river correctly was the apprentice (“cub”) pilot’s greatest high-stakes challenge.

The country Twain portrays in Life is no longer that of Washington Irving. Twain’s/Clemens’s homeland is a broken one, not yet recovered from the incurable wounds wrought by the Civil War, all too painfully in evidence two decades after the war’s conclusion, especially in the Lower Mississippi River Valley. Citing the particulars of all he finds noteworthy on the river during his five-week sojourn in 1882, Twain becomes the historian and chronicler of change. The temporal depth he
achieves owes to the fact that nearly the first quarter of the book was published serially in The Atlantic Monthly. Titled "Old Times on the Mississippi," the serialized narration re-created Clemens’s river-boat days of 1857 to 1861. There and in his Autobiography, Twain confesses that his earliest impulse for going down the Mississippi had been to get to South America and the Amazon River Basin, where he planned to make a fortune collecting and selling coca. With regard to this ill-considered youthful folly, Twain remarks: “I never was great in matters of detail” (Life, 68; see Figure 1).

When soon afterward he became a cub pilot, the young Clemens learned from the Mississippi and Mr. Bixby the importance of “matters of detail.”

Twain’s citations of Parkman’s La Salle and recent nineteenth-century European tourists’ accounts of their visits to America underscore Twain’s deep love of the Mississippi River Valley, to which he assigns the Abraham Lincoln-inspired epigraph, “Body of the Nation.” How Twain handles Parkman’s historical works and foreign visitors’ travel narratives reveals the steps he takes to move beyond those earlier accounts. Twain exchanges Parkman’s early modern European explorers for a long series of nineteenth-century, mostly English, tourists who visited the Mississippi, Charles Dickens included.

Twain treats in detail the three-volume A Diary in America, with Remarks on its Institutions (1839) by the English naval officer and novelist Frederick Marryat, whose “great sewer” remark enlivens Life’s first chapter. Twain cites at length Marryat’s catalog of the monsters dwelling in and around the Mississippi: within its waters, “the coarsest and most uneatable of fish, such as the cat-fish”; on its banks, “the fetid alligator”; and in the cane-brakes at the river’s edge, the panther, “almost impervious to man.” Twain concedes that “as a panorama of the emotions sent weltering through this noted visitor’s breast by the aspect and traditions of the ‘great common sewer,’” Marryat’s account has “a value, though marred in the matter of statistics by inaccuracies; for the catfish is a plenty good enough fish for anybody, and there are no panthers that are ‘impervious to man’” (Life, 200–201).

With certain delight, Twain cites a passage from Mrs. (Frances Milton) Trollope’s Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832) in which the author, the mother of English novelist Anthony Trollope, recounts her view of the entrance to the Mississippi, with “the mighty river pouring forth its muddy mass of waters, and mingling with the deep blue of the Mexican Gulf.” Having “never beheld a scene so utterly desolate,” she assures her readers that if Dante had seen it, he might have envisioned another Bolgia: that is, one of the stone trenches where sinners are punished in the eighth circle of hell. To trump Mrs. Trollope’s Dantesque vision, Twain calls on Parkman’s La Salle, whom he describes as a tourist, but the “old original first and gallantest” of all of them, and a “pioneer, head of the procession,” whose “name will last as long as the river itself shall last” (Life, 199, 201).

(Twain has a way of making double-edged his most trenchant assessments.) A far cry from Parkman’s paean to La Salle, Twain’s homage, quoted directly from Parkman, is paid not to the explorer but to the river, as it merges magnificently, not hellishly, into the waters of the Gulf:

And now they neared their journey’s end…. As [La Salle] drifted down the turbid current, between the low and marshy shores, the brackish water changed to brine, and the breeze grew fresh with the salt breath of the sea. Then the broad bosom of the great Gulf opened on his sight, tossing its restless billows, limitless, voiceless, lonely as when born of chaos, without a sail, without a sign of life. (Life, 202)
It is for such solemn, lyrical renderings that Twain is Parkman’s fond reader, and for the narration of the journeys of Marquette and Joliet as well as La Salle, Twain follows Parkman.\textsuperscript{25}

Twain also admires Parkman for his occasional ironies. Of a pro-English and Protestant outlook, Parkman targets French absolutism (calling Louis XIV the “Sultan of Versailles,” for example) and mocks Roman Catholic and Jesuit authority.\textsuperscript{26}

Twain trades Parkman’s gentle jibes for his own much sharper ones. When La Salle takes formal possession of the vast lands at the confluence of the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers, Parkman imagines the scene in which the local Indians “entertained the strangers who, on their part, responded with a solemnity which their hosts would have liked less if they had understood it better.” He quietly skewers the priest’s and the commandant’s attempts to establish French order: “La Salle, in the King’s name, took formal possession of the country. The friar, not, he flatters himself, without success, labored to expound by signs the mysteries of the Faith; while La Salle, by methods equally satisfactory, drew from the chief an acknowledgment of fealty to Louis XIV.”\textsuperscript{27}

Twain gleefully offers his own more pointed version of the scene:
Then, to the admiration of the savages, La Salle set up a cross with the arms of France on it, and took possession of the whole country for the king — the cool fashion of the time — while the priest piously consecrated the robbery with a hymn. The priest explained the mysteries of the faith “by signs,” for the saving of the savages; thus compensating them with possible possessions in Heaven for the certain ones on earth which they had just been robbed of. And also, by signs, La Salle drew from these simple children of the forest acknowledgments of fealty to Louis the Putrid, over the water. Nobody smiled at these colossal ironies. (Life, 48, emphasis added) 

Fond of evoking the ceremony of taking formal possession of foreign territories, with its requisite raising of the Christian cross, Twain calls it La Salle’s “consecrating cross” — “the first consecration-cross [that] was raised on the banks of the great river” (Life, 45, 48–49).

But what of the Spanish, whose echoes of formal possession-taking are so clearly audible in Twain’s wickedly humorous rendering of the French ceremony? In La Salle, Parkman dispenses with the first European sighting of the Mississippi by the Spanish expedition of Hernando de Soto (1539–1543) in a single paragraph. 

Twain makes only a brief reference to De Soto, but he turns it into an opportunity to sum up the high (and low) points of early modern European political and cultural history. He catalogs sixteenth-century events, from the oppressive actions of absolutist monarchs (Charles V’s “manufacturing history after his own peculiar fashion,” for example) to the appearance — in some cases, anticipation — of great artistic and literary masterpieces by Michelangelo, Rabelais, Shakespeare, and Cervantes. Twain characterizes the era as one in which “lax court morals and the absurd chivalry business were in full feather” and when “religion was in a peculiarly blooming condition: the Council of Trent was being called; the Spanish Inquisition was roasting, and racking, and burning, with a free hand,” while “elsewhere on the continent the nations were being persuaded to holy living by the sword and fire” (Life, 41–42). Twain expands the Black Legend of Spanish history, that is, the disparagement of Spain’s Inquisition and overseas conquests by other European powers, by painting those other nations in the same dark colors. Twain thus makes De Soto’s unheralded discovery of the Mississippi the focal point from which to consider the events that made the early modern West what it was, the legacy of which lived on in the 1880s in the American West and South. In doing so, Twain reveals the seriousness of his concern for history and change. “Mere figures,” he contends, “convey to our minds no just idea, no distinct realization, of the stretch of time which they represent.” To offer perspective on the time elapsed between De Soto’s discovery of the Mississippi in 1542 and the arrival of Marquette and Joliet in 1673, Twain compares it to the life span of Shakespeare (1564–1616): that is, while De Soto’s sighting occurred nearly a quarter-century before the Bard’s birth, French explorers did not arrive until well beyond fifty years after his death. “In our day,” Twain adds, reflecting on his own times, “we don’t allow a hundred and thirty years to elapse between glimpses of a marvel” (Life, 41, 43). The marvel, of course, is the Mississippi. In recalling Parkman’s account of the recognition of the Mississippi by De Soto, Marquette and Joliet, and La Salle at the mouth of the Arkansas River, Twain goes a step further and identifies these early explorers with the site of the nineteenth-century town of Napoleon, Arkansas. Napoleon registers the layers of time that
Twain seeks to make real for the reader. He also makes the Mississippi his own, weaving together narrative events germane to his personal history. He describes "one of the Mississippi’s oddest peculiarities – that of shortening its length from time to time": that is, the river creates "cut-offs," where the water cuts through the alluvial banks of the "deep horseshoe curves" of the winding river and straightens its course. Since his piloting years, Twain remarks, the river produced several new cut-offs. One such dramatic and disorienting event occurred at Napoleon, Arkansas (Life, 145–146).

If there is a modest, latent teleology in Life on the Mississippi, it is to be found in the events that unfold at Napoleon, ending with the town’s apocalyptic disappearance into the waters of the Mississippi. Twain forewarns the reader about this possibility in Chapter 2, when, referring to De Soto, Marquette and Joliet, and La Salle, he remarks:

Three out of the four memorable events connected with the discovery and exploration of the mighty river occurred, by accident, in one and the same place. . . . France stole that vast country on that spot, the future Napoleon; and by and by Napoleon himself was to give the country back again! – make restitution, not to the owners, but to their white American heirs. (Life, 48)

Beyond alluding to the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, Twain confides that Napoleon is the site where, in 1858, he learned of the recent explosion of the steamboat Pennsylvania that shortly afterward would take the life of his younger brother, Henry Clemens (Life, 48, 161–165).31

In the narrative time of Twain’s 1882 trip, Napoleon also becomes the anticipated site of a buried fortune that he will endeavor to retrieve and forward to the rightful party, in fulfillment of the death wish of an acquaintance made, he says, in Munich, Bavaria, the previous November (Life, 233–243). But Twain (and his readers) then discover that Napoleon, Arkansas, heavy with history – both epoch-making and personal – has been wiped off the face of the earth:

The Arkansas River burst through it, tore it all to rags, and emptied it into the Mississippi! . . . Yes, it was an astonishing thing to see the Mississippi rolling between unpeopled shores and straight over the spot where I used to see a good big self-complacent town twenty years ago. Town that was county-seat of a great and important county; town with a big United States marine hospital . . . town where we were handed the first printed news of the Pennsylvania’s mournful disaster a quarter of a century ago; a town no more – swallowed up, vanished, gone to feed the fishes; nothing left but a fragment of a shanty and a crumbling brick chimney! (Life, 247)

Stating plainly that the town has “gone to feed the fishes,” Twain registers loss without sentimentality. Further, as Twain writes in the successive chapter, three months after this revelation he learned from the New York newspapers that the steamer Gold Dust, which had recently carried him and his party past the site of the former Napoleon to Vicksburg, Mississippi (also later diverted from the riverbank by a cut-off), had blown up: “Forty-seven persons were scalded and seventeen are missing” (Life, 274). The accident signifies, in Twain’s account, the virtual end of the steamboat era, which, in its own right, is chronicled in Twain’s references to the U.S. Civil War, the development of railroad commerce, and the related factors that at the time spelled doom to commercial and passenger riverboat travel.

Where does Twain’s well-known critique of the “sham civilization” of the South fit into the “Spanish” picture? He characterizes the South as the place where
“the genuine wholesome civilization of the nineteenth century is curiously confused and commingled with the Walter Scott Middle-Age sham civilization” (Life, 327). Attributing to the North American South a predilection for Scott’s imagined age of chivalry, Twain looks back in time to the Spanish South. He makes note of De Soto’s impractical underestimation of the value and usefulness of the Mississippi. “One would expect,” Twain remarks, that after De Soto’s death and burial in the Mississippi, his priests and soldiers would have conjured up extravagant reports about it, “multiplying the river’s dimensions by ten – the Spanish custom of the day – and thus move other adventurers to go at once and explore it” (Life, 42 – 43, emphasis added). But it did not happen.

“Further south,” Twain continues, the Spanish pursued their chimerical searches for other Mexicos and Cuzcos and never-found El Dorados, all the while “robbing, slaughtering, enslaving, and converting” the native inhabitants. All this occurred, Twain points out, when the “absurd chivalry business” was in full swing (Life, 42 – 43). Here, Twain echoes Prescott’s characterization of the sixteenth century: “The period which we are reviewing was still the age of chivalry. . . . The Spaniard, with his nice point of honor, high romance, and proud, vainglorious vaunt, was the true representative of that age.” For his part, Twain expands the arena of the Prescottian “age of chivalry” to include the early modern monarchs Francis I and Henry VIII as well as Charles V.

Twain does not categorically condemn the North American South. After all, Clemens was by birth, inclination, and acknowledgment a Southerner, or a Southwesterner, whose father had owned slaves and who himself had “served” for two weeks in 1861 in the Hannibal Home Guard of Confederate leanings. Howells calls him “the most desouthernized Southerner I ever knew,” and he does so by equating the South with the support of slavery, which Twain abhorred. In fact, Twain’s “sham civilization” target is not the South as such, but rather the pernicious effects of a certain kind of literature, historical as well as fictional. He attacks the romantic novels that at the time, he argues, were reinforcing the South’s illusions: “But for the Sir Walter disease, the character of the Southerner – or Southron, according to Sir Walter’s stanchier way of phrasing it – would be wholly modern, in place of modern and medieval mixed, and the South would be fully a generation further advanced than it is” (Life, 327 – 328, emphasis added; see Figure 2).

Twain’s Life on the Mississippi complements and transforms, terminating – in theory if not in practice – the era of Anglo-American nonfictional narrative inaugurated by Washington Irving. Irving had found in historical novelist Sir Walter Scott the confirmation of his ideals in writing; like Scott, Irving loved “that extraordinary society of the middle ages . . . fashioned into a chivalric world that never had an actual being.” Irving was not alone; Prescott and Parkman were among those writers who admired Scott and his penchant for the grandiloquent portraiture of historical figures. While eternally professing ideals of Anglo-American “progress,” these authors paradoxically thrilled to the sound of heralding trumpets and “inflated speech” (Twain’s expression) in their prose.

This was the American literary heritage that Twain rejected. In the 1880s, Irving’s Columbus being anthologized and sold across the nation, and Prescott’s conquest histories of Mexico and Peru were enjoying the warmth of new readers’ ardor. Twain’s complaint was more than regional; the flaws of narrative prose produced in, by, and for the United States were not confined to the South:
If one take[s] up a Northern or Southern literary periodical of forty or fifty years ago, he will find it filled with wordy, windy, flowery "eloquence," romanticism, sentimentality – all imitated from Sir Walter, and sufficiently badly done, too – innocent travesties of his style and methods in fact. (Life, 328)

(A good example is provided by the overwrought language that Alexander Everett Used to describe Irving’s literary “pretension to be viewed as the valorous knight” in establishing an American literary reputation with his Columbus.) As Twain sweeps Northern writers of a half-century earlier into his critique, he has in mind Irving and Prescott and to some extent, Parkman, too. Even if, as Twain contends, “the North has thrown out that old inflated style,” these authors were still being read and admired.
So great was Scott’s literary influence, Twain argues, that Sir Walter did “measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote” (Life, 327–328). Twain excoriates the “sham chivalry” at work in Scott’s Ivanhoe by contrasting it with the salutary effects of Cervantes’s Don Quijote:

A curious exemplification of the power of a single book for good or harm is shown in the effects wrought by Don Quijote and those wrought by Ivanhoe. The first swept the world’s admiration for the medieval chivalry-silliness out of existence; and the other restored it. As far as our South is concerned, the good work done by Cervantes is pretty nearly a dead letter, so effectually has Scott’s pernicious work undermined it. (Life, 329)

In acknowledging the power of Cervantes’s Don Quijote to sweep “the medieval chivalry-silliness out of existence,” Twain offers one of the ultimate nineteenth-century Anglo-American expressions of homage to Spanish literature. More broadly, he recognizes the power of Cervantes’s thesis about the influence of books on readers. Following Prescott, Twain invokes the era of sixteenth-century overseas conquests as the “age of chivalry.” But he makes the deliberate literary- and cultural-historical point that the world would have to wait for Cervantes’s Don Quijote to terminate the “absurd chivalry business”: “Don Quixote was not yet written” (Life, 41–42).

Literary critics have remarked on the parallels that Twain drew with Cervantes, taking into account, for example, similarities between the plots of Don Quijote and The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), the Cervantine echoes in Tom and Huck’s dialogues on books and reading, Twain’s occasional imitation of an episode from Don Quijote, and, in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (1889), his rollicking satire of chivalry and chivalric romance that was “clearly borrowed from Cervantes.”36 Regrettably, readers have not always recognized, as Twain did, Cervantes’s deeply serious intentions and significance.

Often mistakenly identified as a Spanish picaresque novel, Don Quijote’s episodic adventures lead—as Twain understood—beyond the lighthearted spoofing of a gentleman reader’s obsessions and society’s foibles to explore the inherently dialogic nature of human experience. Indeed, the larger-than-life figures of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza have walked off the pages of Cervantes’s novel and perennially continue their wanderings along the highways and byways of Western culture. No Spanish pícaro in the literature of the time was endowed with the vitality and depth that Cervantes achieved through the creation of Don Quijote and Sancho and the remarkable conversations that have given them life and longevity.37

For Twain, Cervantes was Western Europe’s (and Spain’s) unique literary cultural achievement, and by mentioning Cervantes in his Walter Scott critique in Chapter 46 of Life on the Mississippi, Twain takes the reader back to Chapter 1. There, Cervantes’s masterpiece Don Quijote appears in the series of long-ago landmarks that “considerably mellows and modifies the shiny newness of our country, and gives her a most respectable outside-aspect of rustiness and antiquity” (Life, 42). The patina of antiquity and the shabbiness of rust usher out complacency and self-satisfaction as quickly as they were welcomed in. Unlike Irving, Prescott, and Parkman, Twain recoils from the habit of national self-congratulation.

Cervantes had done the same before him. Twain admired not only the Span-
ard’s brilliantly wrought duo of literary protagonists but also their creator, whose clarity of vision about human failings did not prevent him from taking a critical but deeply expansive approach to Spanish society and history. Twain, like Cervantes, took the long view of his times and the world, seeing the greed, brutality, and intolerance of his age in light of all others. Twain discovered in Cervantes a kindred spirit, a guide for the expression of a sensibility that Twain, in his own time and under different circumstances, shared: a clear-eyed criticism of human weaknesses that, if not pardonable, could be understood.

Twain expressed his vision through the kind of humor that, lacking sentimentality, produces irony. Howells understood this well, observing that Twain’s humor “trusts and hopes and laughs; beyond that it doubts and fears, but it does not cry.” Howells identified this brand of humor as Western, that is, as pertaining to the Western United States, but I attribute it to Twain’s serious reading of Cervantes and his understanding of Cervantes’s quest—and Don Quijote’s role—in literary and cultural history. He makes his respect for Cervantes explicit when, calling out Walter Scott for the “exemplification of the power of a single book for good or harm,” he lauds, as its opposite, the “good work done by Cervantes.”

Full of humor and irony—the palliative humor that staves off despair and the reflection-provoking irony that cushions all falls—Life on the Mississippi displays a way of life and its aftermath that are singularly Anglo-American. Tied by time to U.S. history and bound by geography to North American soil (including the Mississippi’s mud that, if solidified annually, Twain tells us, “would make a mass a mile square and two hundred and forty-one feet high” [Life, 40]), Twain’s Life is an American book, and in it, his much-heralded contribution to the development of Anglo-American narrative is substantial. Nevertheless, the Ivings, Prescotts, and Parkman are his essential predecessors, even contemporaries and springboards, thanks to their appropriation of Spanish historical and literary themes. Still, the penetrating appreciation and assimilation of Cervantes’s remarkable sensibility belong to Twain alone.

As U.S. authors retold the early modern stories of European, especially Spanish, exploration and conquest in the New World, they summoned and rejected the values (chivalric chimeras) they attributed to the Old World, besting them with America’s progressive liberal solutions: Irving’s Christopher Columbus became the North American self-made man, and Prescott’s Pedro de la Gasca—the royally appointed peacemaker in a conquistador-torn Peru—was likened to George Washington. Parkman imagined La Salle as a model of entrepreneurial initiative who would “call into light the latent riches of the great West.” Enter Mark Twain. He tells, for the most part, the nation’s own story. If the American West had been, in Borges’s view, an invention of New England, the Mississippi River Valley, in Twain’s hands, was not. The river’s role in the destruction of the town of Napoleon, the river boat called Gold Dust, and the life of Clemens’s young brother Henry, cut short before his twentieth birthday, was painfully real. Samuel Clemens was quintessentially American, but Mark Twain—because of his irony—was never an American essentialist. He gave a transformative twist to the U.S. narrative tradition of exploration and travel writing. Its most notable nineteenth-century “Spanish accents” are Irving’s inaugural Columbus and Twain’s clear-eyed appreciation of Cervantes’s outlook and genius, inte-
grated into a critical but tolerant reflection on the life and lives of the Mississippi River Valley—the “Body of the Nation.” From Irving’s “discovery of America” to Twain’s tribute to the disappearing era of steamboat travel and commerce on the Mississippi, the tales about “western waters,” told via their authors’ varied engagements with Spanish literature and history, constitute a major dimension in Anglo-America’s nonfictional narrative literary history.

ENDNOTES


7 “Western waters” is Theodore Roosevelt’s phrase; see Theodore Roosevelt, “The Men of the Western Waters, 1798–1802,” in The Winning of the West, 4 vols. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1889). Roosevelt dedicated the work to Parkman, “to whom Americans who feel a pride in the pioneer history of their country are so greatly indebted.”


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16 Irving, Columbus, vol. 2, 484–485, 491–492.

17 Since the 1970s the figure of Columbus has undergone the most dramatic reworking of any major historical figure portrayed in U.S. textbooks; see Sam Dillon, “Schools Growing Harsher in Scrutiny of Columbus,” The New York Times, October 12, 1992.


19 Francis Parkman, La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West (1869, 1879; Boston: Little, Brown, 1922), 83–84; La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West is Part 3 of Parkman’s multi-volume France and England in North America (1865–1892).

20 Mark Twain, Life on the Mississippi, ed. James M. Cox (1883; New York: Viking Penguin, 1984), 94. Subsequent citations are noted parenthetically within the text.

21 Mark Twain, Autobiography of Mark Twain, vol. 1, ed. Harriet Elinor Smith et al. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), vol. 1, 461. Clemens met the pilot Horace Bixby on his first trip down the Mississippi in 1857, and Bixby captured the Baton Rouge on Twain’s final sojourn on the river in 1882.

22 Twain quotes from the Harper’s New Monthly Magazine (February 1863) Editor’s Table, which was based on Lincoln’s Annual Message to Congress in December 1862 and “its theme of national unity for which the Mississippi Valley had begun to serve as a central symbol”; Horst H. Kruse, Mark Twain and “Life on the Mississippi” (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 123.

23 Twain cites Dickens’s American Notes (1842) twice, once to dispute Dickens’s earlier damning portrait of Cairo, Illinois, by remarking that, thanks to Cairo’s current heavy railroad and river trade, “her situation at the junction of the two great rivers [Arkansas and Mississippi] is so advantageous that she cannot well help prospering” (Life, 190). Regarding Dickens’s scoffing dismissal of the common appreciation of Mississippi steamboats as “magnificent,” or as “floating palaces,” Twain points out that such judgments are always based on the individual’s particular experiences and points of reference, and he asserts that, for those reasons, “The people were as right as was Mr. Dickens” (Life, 275).

24 See Parkman, La Salle, 306.


27 Parkman, La Salle, 299–300; emphasis added.

28 On savagery: In Following the Equator, Twain signals the white man’s mistaken notion “that he is less savage than the other savages” and emphasizes that “[i]n many countries we have taken the savage’s land from him, and made him our slave, and lashed him every day, and broken his pride, and made death his only friend, and overworked him till he dropped in his tracks”; Mark Twain, Following the Equator & Anti-imperialist Essays (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 212–213. See also Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Mark Twain and Race,” and Jim Zwick, “Mark Twain and Imperialism,” both in A Historical Guide to Mark Twain, ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).


Dædalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences
See also Twain, *Autobiography*, 274–276, in which he recalls that Henry’s tragic death was caused by a physician’s administration of a fatal dose of morphine and had been anticipated by a dream Clemens had.


35 See Levin, *History as Romantic Art*, 11–12, 236 n.50–51.

36 See Olin Harris Moore, “Mark Twain and *Don Quijote*,” *PMLA* 37 (2) (1922): 324–346; and Krause, *Mark Twain as Critic*, 118 n.7.

37 At the age of twenty-five, Clemens considered Oliver Goldsmith and Cervantes’s *Don Quijote* his “beau ideals of fine writing”; Krause, *Mark Twain as Critic*, 118. See Mark Twain’s Letters, Volume 1, 1853–1866, ed. Edgar Marquess Branch et al. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 117.


39 The noted Twain scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin writes: “Americans may have constructed a new society in the eighteenth century, but they articulate what they had done in voices that were largely interchangeable with those of Englishmen until well into the nineteenth century. Mark Twain became the voice of the new land, the leading translator of what and who the ‘American’ was”; Fishkin, foreword to *Following the Equator* by Twain, xii. Twain’s singular achievement in *Life on the Mississippi* was to define what “America” itself was, wresting one of its major “marvels,” as Twain called the Mississippi, from its European detractors, surveying American society, and assessing the role that literary culture played in it.