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# Mark Twain: Freedom, Imperialism and Selective Tradition

When I look at critical work on Mark Twain, I am struck by the extent to which it has been invested in establishing Twain as the symptomatic American writer. He is seen as the creator of a new national American literary vernacular idiom, promulgator of quintessentially American values such as frontier spirit, and a champion of free speech and social criticism. These virtues in turn are then distilled as *the* defining elements of national character.

As a non-American national, I find something troubling in this approach. I do not dispute the validity of the established nationalist reading of Mark Twain *per se*. But I have found that my interest in the texts and the history with which they are involved is continually frustrated by this other insistence on the national parameters of the texts. I have always thought that I enjoy and value the texts, and yet am also aware that I do not value them for this reason. Is my valuation of the texts then invalid? What in any case is the basis for my valuation of them?

The more I have tried to answer this question, the more I have found that the nationalist-symptomatic readings of Twain are enmeshed with a deeply conservative nationalist politics. The nationalist-heroic approach is founded on a selective tradition, keeping the spotlight firmly on those Twain texts which sustain this reading. To question that selection and that reading is to open up an alternative current in the reception of Mark Twain's work, examining how the texts might be valued without necessarily endorsing an extreme form of cultural nationalism.

In the recent political climate in Britain and America, the figure of Mark Twain has been used as a kind of bridging figure. Twain is seen as a comic genius to whom we can all relate, thus creating a kind of fellow-feeling on both sides of the Atlantic and cementing the 'special relationship' between both countries. That this should occur during a period of jointly prosecuted aggressive overseas foreign policy on the two governments has suggestive political implications. In this regard it is interesting that one B.B.C. commentator on the funeral of Ronald Regan compared the up-bringing of President Regan to a Huckleberry Finn style idyll.  Britons and Americans were invited to put all differences behind them through this nostalgic appeal to America's most established literary hero. It did not seem to strike anyone as odd that these invocations of nostalgia and rural idyll were greatly in contrast to the very un-idyllic foreign military pursuits being prosecuted by both nations at that very time.

There is a deep irony here, because this attempt at bridging two cultures masks an earlier and much more complicated bridge – in precisely this area of aggressive overseas expansion. Historically, the moment of British High Imperialism in the nineteenth century also signals the point at which America enters the world stage as a militaristic and pseudo-imperial power. When the US joined the European governments at the Berlin West Africa Conference of 1884-85, to negotiate commercial and territorial rights in the Congo basin, it had in effect become as much of an imperial power as Britain.[1] Between these two expanding empires there was a good deal of traffic in commerce, culture, and ideas.

In this paper I wish to demonstrate that there is a political unconscious at work in late nineteenth-century American literature. This unconscious takes the form of a complicated negotiation of the relation between American and British political and imperial interests. I am using Twain as a case in point, to highlight this complexity.

The nineteenth century public sphere in America is one of great anti-imperial activity. This gives rise to the social criticism for which Twain is perhaps best known. Yet this criticism feeds into the established nationalist reading of Twain, where Twain and his characters are somehow taken to embody the voice of a nation's conscience and thus tell the nation all of the best things about itself.

My reading of Twain is more complex. I do not in any way dispute the idea that Twain was an important social critic - there is overwhelming evidence to support this view. But this approach to Twain seems insufficiently historical. There is also evidence to suggest that Twain's work, like much of late nineteenth century America, was inextricably bound up with the practices and ideologies of imperial Britain, even while the man himself was an outspoken critic of imperialism. I do not wish to score points against Twain personally, but I do wish to stress this important historical limiting factor. The historical congruence of British and American imperialism at this time was such that Twain's political criticism could not out flank it. Thus I wish to demonstrate how Twain's work was involved in the structure of American imperial expansion, despite his own egalitarian politics.

Implicitly here I shall be interrogating the concept of freedom – and the uses and abuses to which this word has been recently subject. The established nationalist reading of Twain sets Twain up as the moral mouthpiece of America, endlessly campaigning for freedom and justice. This move implicitly invites us to celebrate the conditions of freedom which enable such public critique in the first place. By highlighting the selective nature of such an appropriation of both *freedom* and *Twain,* I hope to bring the analysis up to date with a very urgent contemporary concern. For what Laura Chrisman has called the *imperial unconscious* binds Britain and America to imperial policies through this ratifying appeal to a notion of freedom. [2] And this imperial unconscious has not yet obsolesced. On the contrary, in Iraq today, it may only just be reaching its zenith.

My title phrase *selective tradition* will be recognisable to anyone who is familiar with the work of the late Raymond Williams. Much of Williams's work was invested in breaking down the inherited distinction between a high minority art and a mass culture by demonstrating the mutually constitutive nature of each. In particular Williams was interested in the category of literature as it emerged from roughly the sixteenth century onwards, initially with an emphasis on learning, giving way to a valorisation of works of imagination or creativity which was in turn superseded from the nineteenth century onwards by the emerging idea of a national tradition. This is defined as the body of works which carry the best of all literary and cultural production from within a nation's literary history, the quality of which derives from their embodiment of some kind of transcendent truth, unity or universality of experience. By definition works that do not or cannot be made to conform to these categories are not part of the nation's literary heritage and must therefore be excluded, along with whatever experiences or values they express, from the national tradition. This process of relative valorisation or exclusion is what Raymond Williams refers to as a selective national tradition. It is a version of the past that is intended to connect with and ratify the present.[3]

According to Jonathan Arac, even before his death Twain had already been identified by cartoonists inside the United States as 'our' Mark Twain and represented in imagery which 'made him equivalent to the national icon of Uncle Sam.[4] The name Mark Twain has become associated almost exclusively with the instinct for moral right which critical writing has detected in the character Huckleberry Finn from the time of Lionel Trilling onwards.[5] What Trilling called the opposing self, or again, the un-coerced self, is precisely the individual who can best be relied upon to self-regulate via an assumed instinct for right. In as much as this can be seen as an ideological position it is related to the American Republican doctrine of laissez faire – with what consequences for social and political life, I shall explore.

The naturalised sense of unfailing moral right confers a degree of cultural and moral authority on whoever chooses to wield it. I do not wish to dwell here on the established canonical readings of Mark Twain but I would mention in passing two recent readings from the world of postcolonial criticism – I will return to each later. Aijaz Ahmad talks about the 'overwhelming presence'[6] of Mark Twain as a dissident voice within the increasingly bourgeois world of nineteenth century American literature. Nicholas Harrison has drawn attention to the 1999 University of South Africa edition of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* Produced as response to the editors' perceived fashion for Conrad bashing in postcolonial studies, this included a section entitled 'Four Great Reformers.' Provocatively, Conrad was one of the great reformers. The others were Edmund Morel, Roger Casement and Mark Twain.[7] And there you have it, Mark Twain, social critic, great reformer.

Samuel Clemens - as Twain was born - was very interested in the way writing has a capacity to present as natural what is really carefully contrived. The mechanisms by which this semblance of naturalness is created are often concealed. Much of Clemens's work was invested in laying bare mechanisms of artifice which are antithetical to the simple, un-contrived modes of expression for which *Huckleberry Finn* is celebrated. But at the same time, Clemens was not immune to indulging in literary concealments himself.

Consider the opening line of the novel *Huckleberry Finn.* 'You don't know me without you have read a book by the name of *Tom Sawyer.'* It masks the author's self-presentation as a self-presentation. For Mark Twain is present in this sentence, in his role of author of 'a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.' But the presence is masked; he is not explicitly referred to in the sentence. Furthermore, the text creates an impression of being reluctant to invoke Tom Sawyer any more explicitly than it does Mark Twain. It refers to a prior novel which goes 'by the name of' *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as if this is merely a popular way to speak of that novel, and as if really it has a different name. In this respect we may think of another famous opening from American literature. Melville's *Moby Dick* begins 'Call me Ishmael' rather than 'My name is Ishmael.' Thus Clemens invites readers to align his novel with the richest vein in the American canon from page one while the masked self-presentation of Mark Twain means that the all important market presence is simultaneously activated and occluded.

Another manipulation occurs in Twain's less well-known *Following the Equator* (1897). The chapters are introduced by subtitles culled from an imaginary publication entitled 'Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar.' That is to say, the text of *Following the Equator* posits the existence of another, prior text from which it is deriving cultural authority. Often the ensuing chapter demonstrates the sagacity of the maxim in question.

Chapter headings, subtitles, illustrations are all part of what Gerard Genette terms 'paratext,'[8] those facets of the text whose function is to guarantee the text a destiny consistent with the author's purpose. 'There is no such thing as the queen's English,' proclaims one of the Pudd'nhead maxims.[9] The subsequent chapter goes on to illustrate this point. The subtitles in turn help to put Clemens's point across. The disrupting of official modes of discourse, in this case the decentring of standard English, is achieved.

Recognition that standard English is a social construct, bound up with concerns of class and class-interest, is crucial to a materially grounded analysis of culture. Clemens participates in the decentring of official rhetoric and in a tangible way contributes to changing the terms of exchange in which social relations are couched. At the same time, his deployment of paratextual features designed to further his own literary career shows that on top of the disavowed official culture which he sweeps away, he is not immune to imposing a new dominant canon – his own. Few writers in the English language have been so greatly canonised and so widely discussed as Mark Twain. Such attention constitutes nothing less than the establishment of a new official culture.

In the case of Twain almost every public presentation was a process of concealment since Mark Twain itself was a pen name, a mask which came to be endowed with a certain political authority. That the value provided by this authority was not – and is not – only expendable by Clemens I shall demonstrate in the rest of this paper.

No author can command complete control over all of the reading experiences that a reader might bring to bear on his reading of the novel under consideration. There is a kind of conflict between the readerly and writerly tendencies of a text; that is between the necessary fact that readers will attribute different meanings and values to a text according to their own predilections, and that aspect of the author's work which *presents* the text as containing a stable, generally applicable meaning which the reader simply absorbs passively. The paratext of a text is specifically orientated towards ensuring that the author's purpose is fulfilled; his point put across.

Paratext is in some ways a disingenuous feature of the text. It appears to make the job of the *reader* easier when really what it makes easier is the accomplishing of whatever the *writer* wishes to achieve. To a reader, this is a long way from Trilling's un-coerced self in American literature. Paratext forecloses the possibility of reading against the grain of the author's work. It constricts possibilities and limits the scope for individual response by leading the reader along a linear path whereby the (unstable) meaning of a text is presented as if it were unquestionable. Consider the following passage from Twain’s *Following the Equator*:

> When I scribbled in my note book a year ago the paragraph which ends the preceding chapter, it was meant to indicate, in an extravagant form, two things: the conflicting nature of the information conveyed by the citizen to the stranger concerning South African politics, and the resulting confusion created in the stranger’s mind thereby. But it does not seem so very extravagant now. Nothing could in that disturbed and excited time make South African politics clear or quite rational to the citizen of the country because his personal interest and political prejudices were in his way; and nothing could make those politics clear or rational to the stranger, the sources of his information being such as they were[10].

Information here is like meaning in a literary text: something derived from external sources in conflict with each other and hence something to which we can have no unmediated access. Clemens is discussing the Jameson raid, an incident in the Transvaal which led to the outbreak of the Boer war. Depending on his sources, he might think that the Boers are a lawless rabble, constantly in need of control; that British intervention is a necessary evil in maintaining order; or that intervention is an outright act of unjustified aggression. We as subsequent readers would be similarly compelled by our sources to select one out of a range of positions.

But is this inevitable? Clemens laments, ‘I had no personal access to the Boers – their side was a secret to me, aside from what I was able to gather of it from published statements.’[11] His realisation that his understanding of the situation is dependent upon and restricted by source material provokes in him (and demands in us) an attitude of scepticism towards the source. He sets about disrupting the official version of the Jameson raid by seeking alternative accounts:

> By liquefying the evidence of the prejudiced books and of the prejudiced parliamentary witnesses and stirring the whole together and pouring it into my own (prejudiced) moulds, I have got at the truth of that puzzling South African situation.[12]

Here we see Clemens as reader, construing his own meaning from records – the Parliamentary report – that purport to say the opposite of what he *makes* them say. The word he uses for this is *liquefying*; melting down an officially sanctioned narrative of a historical event and using the same elements remoulded so as to fit in with a new political agenda. This is reflected in the conclusion he reaches and which follows in the text. It is proffered in two numbered stages. He concludes firstly that the Uitlander capitalists of the Cape area felt certain grievances but wanted to obtain redress by peaceful means. Secondly, he concludes that they were provoked into insurrection exclusively by the self-seeking figure of Cecil Rhodes, who saw an opportunity for personal gain and advancement.

Clemens warns us that this conclusion has been built in his ‘own (prejudiced) moulds.’ The parenthetical word ‘prejudiced’ has a vital part to play here. Despite all the paratextual features that I have suggested implicate him in a process of imposing his writings and ideas on the reading public, this word is a visible disclaimer. The new conclusion comes in a numbered sequence, a new arrangement of the pre-existing material. Clemens’s use of the word ‘prejudiced’ allows us to think that he has at least imposed his new order on the material in such a way as to keep open the possibility of subsequent readers formulating yet another sequence of their own. That is, it makes us think that Clemens has made visible to us the areas in which other individuals might disagree with him, and not sought to portray his conclusions as if they were absolutely fixed.

But I would suggest that there is a more fundamental concealment here from which the appearance of self-critique – the opposing self - deflects attention. For in placing responsibility for the Jameson Raid solely onto one self-seeking individual Cecil Rhodes, Clemens absolves the imperial power, the government of Great Britain, of any responsibility. It is almost as if Clemens has offered the well-known voice of Mark Twain as an instrument of empire. Could it be that aware of an audience and hence a market on both sides of the Atlantic, Samuel Longhorne Clemens, writer-for-profit, was not willing or able to risk offending the sensibilities of a metropolitan colonial readership and hence jeopardise his own sales figures?

My contention is that within the established tradition of the dissenting individual, Twain was involved in political, commercial and cultural processes which intersected with those of colonial Britain. The inextricability of this relation extended to the degree of enacting a rapprochement towards imperial practices and values. This seems to be at odds with Twain’s position as vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League. And this hints at my overall argument: that imperial discourse was in fact a far more varied, fluid and even at times contradictory body of work than subsequent postcolonial criticism would allow. Discourse analysis has become rigidly codified – colonial discourse is something to be found in the writing of imperial England and France between about 18880 and 1900 and nowhere else.

This doesn't examine the real contradictions. Just as Conrad can be listed as a great reformer as well as a propagator of imperial values, so other writers might occupy positions of extreme ambivalence vis-à-vis imperialism, while not being thereby rendered any less powerful. It seems to me that the following passage would be by now notorious as an example of imperial discourse if it appeared in a novel by Kipling or Conrad:

> Usually the woman is a slender and shapely creature, as erect as a lightning-rod, and she had but one thing on – a bright coloured piece of stuff which is wound about her head and her body down nearly half way to her knees, and which clings like her own skin. Her legs and feet are bare, and so are her arms, except for her fanciful bunches of loose silver rings on her ankles and arms. She has jewelry bunched on the side of her nose also, and showy cluster rings on her toes. When she undresses for bed she takes off her jewelry, I suppose. If she took off anything more she would catch cold.[13]

This is Twain in *Following the Equator* discussing a generalised figure, Indian woman. He performs the classic orientalist encoding of the east as feminine in Imperial discourse, and its conqueror from the West as masculine. One notable feminist critique of Raymond Williams's definition of selective literary traditions with which I opened this paper has come from Morag Shiach.[14] She accuses Williams of failing to take into account precisely the ways in which a national literature is coded masculine by those who construct it. When Aijaz Ahmad wrote of the overwhelming presence of Mark Twain, his other example of a great reformist writer inside the mainstream tradition during these foundational years of American cultural imperialism was a woman – Emily Dickinson. But it is I think significant that she did not gain full recognition until much later.

The overt sexualisation of the female body Twain employs here and its assigned metonymic function in relation to India as a nation enacts the classic orientalist coding of Asian nation as female and fragile, waiting only for penetration by the Modern male Western explorer. In Kipling or Conrad, writers in whom we are accustomed to detecting these imperialist assumptions, this would not surprise us. But in anti-imperial Twain, where our preconceptions I would suggest are somewhat different, what is the effect? Imperial discourse is revealed to be more fragmented and varied in operation, and disseminated from a greater number of metropolitan centres, than we have so far thought.

In the Spring of 2003, a new website appeared on the World Wide Web, entitled the 'Mark Twain for President 2004 Campaign Headquarters.' It is broadly speaking a satirical website, casting an eye over contemporary political events. Its editor, Jim Zwick, is an expert on the use of the internet as a resource for teaching. He is also the editor of *Mark Twain's Weapons of Satire: Anti-Imperialist Writings on the Philippine-American War* and is thus very much involved in promulgating the image of a Mark Twain who unquestionably champions equality and speaks out for freedom.

Twain2004.com makes manifest the relation between representations of Mark Twain during the last one hundred years or so and social processes which are unfolding today. It consists of a series of articles written as though Twain really were running for American president. These take the form of fictitious press releases, interviews and news reports, incorporating extracts from Twain's vast body of social criticism. It includes sections on universal health care, animal welfare, corporate relations and most significantly the crisis in Iraq. The satire enables Zwick to implicitly criticise Republicans and Democrats, helping readers with the real presidential election in mind to imagine alternatives to current US military policy. In an article under the title 'Mark Twain Disputes Bush Favorable Rating' we are told that

> Polls used to determine presidential approval ratings are biased because they offer no real choice. Many people just want to approve of the president. When asked why they approve, many respond by saying 'he's our president', they 'stand by the president', or with similar statements that indicate that they confuse support for the president with patriotism towards their country… When an alternative poll is offered, poll results change dramatically.[15]

What Zwick's website implicitly argues for is what Edward Said terms contrapuntal criticism.[16] That is, a refusal to have one's ideas contained within narrowly defined inherited categories, and a simultaneous carving out of alternatives. I would suggest that this is lacking from Twain studies.

Of course, the anti-war and anti-imperialist sentiments Zwick expresses here have ample precedent in the original writings of Twain himself. As American troops directed by President McKinley were involved in annexing the Philippines to the USA (1899-1902) and thus placing the USA alongside the colonial powers of Europe, Twain composed his anti-imperial essay 'To the Person Sitting in Darkness.' He laments the annexation of the islands because the Philippine war had been a chance to liberate that country from the Spanish empire and 'add… another honourable deed to our good record.'[17] This chance has been blown.

Towards the end of ‘To the Person Sitting in Darkness,’ Twain reproduces some of the headlines from dispatches that he read during the conflict. He seems to have been particularly arrested by the headline ‘Real War Ahead For Filipino Rebels’[18] for he took the relatively unusual step of footnoting it. We thus read the footnote before continuing to the next headline. The note reads: ‘“Rebels!” Mumble that funny word – don’t let the Person catch it distinctly.’ Its insertion between one headline and the next - ‘Will Show No Mercy!’ – demonstrates Twain’s awareness that the sequence of a narrative affects the way its content is received. His suspicion of the ‘funny’ word ‘rebels’ is grounded in the fact that this was in fact a means for officially explaining away any kind of resistance to colonial expansion. Although the war in the Philippines was declared over by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1902, the Brigandage Act of November that year defined all further armed opposition to US occupation as criminal banditry, in effect defining away the possibility for liberationist struggle. All of this bears an uncanny resemblance to the designation of suspected terrorists captured in Afghanistan in 2001-02 by American troops and subsequently held without recourse to law in Cuba’s Guantanamo Bay as ‘non-lawful combatants.’

This is not simply a happy terminological coincidence. The semantic conjuring trick is used for exactly the same purposes in both instances, despite the century that separates them. On both occasions the ‘funny’ word is ‘mumbled’ in order to deflect awkward questions about the nature of imperialism. It is easy to see why Zwick thinks that using Twain in a reformulated text such as twain2004.com can make a real difference to how we view the world today: refusing to let troubling political questions about war in Afghanistan and Iraq to be simply explained away. But in as much as this fails to take into account Twain’s position on the inside of those centres from which imperial power was exercised it performs only a selective reading of Twain.

On 3 March 2003, shortly before the outbreak of the Second Gulf war, Faber and Faber issued an anthology entitled *101 Poems Against War.* To prepare the way for this, several of the poems were excerpted in Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper of 15 February. These included a section of the poem ‘America America’ by the Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef:

I too love jeans and jazz and *Treasure Island*
And John Silver’s parrot and the balconies of
New Orleans.
I love Mark Twain and the Mississippi

steamboats and Abraham Lincoln's dogs.
I love the fields of wheat and corn and the
Smell of Virginia tobacco.
But I am not American.[19]

Youssef invokes the name Mark Twain to form a kind of fellow-feeling with his readers in the West, effectively announcing that he shares the same passions, the same lifestyle, the same love of peace and freedom that they enjoy. It is exactly the same kind of imagined community which I showed earlier that Twain forged with his own readers. Analysis of how Twain can be invoked and set to use in the contemporary political framework thus involves a double movement: looking back to Twain's writings as they were originally composed on the one hand, and looking at the situation in which we wish to deploy them for a fresh purpose on the other. The process of looking back towards Twain as a champion of liberation contends with a simultaneous movement in the other direction, away from Twain, leaving behind in his work what is not necessary for Youssef's representation and only selectively drawing on the past to create a different present.

Youssef's invocation of Mark Twain, man of liberty does not refer to any of the anti-imperial or anti-war writings Twain produced in the way that Zwick's website does. The main atmosphere is one of nostalgia – looking back at the peaceful days of steamboats and children's adventures even while the storm clouds of war are gathering. It is because they are gathering that Youssef feels the need to create a new sense of community, which he achieves through activating the name Mark Twain.

Yet it is possible to return to the writings of Twain even here, and find that the use to which they are being put is not absolutely consistent with Twain.

I have already suggested that Twain was at times involved with the processes of imperialism even as he appeared to speak for the oppressed. My point is not that he somehow betrayed or deceived those people in whose democratic interests he is generally assumed to have spoken, in an act of epistemological bad faith. Rather it is that the nature of his position, travelling as a guest of the imperial power as a paid reporter, necessarily brought his individual interests into complex relation with those of the suffering groups he sought to aid.

The work of Edward Said, who more or less invented colonial discourse analysis, still seems to be exemplary in this respect. Said showed how the fiction of, for example, Jane Austen, was part of an expanding imperial structure, without making direct personal charges against Austen herself or practising a rhetoric of blame.[20] This is exactly the point I wish to make about Twain's colonial writing. American colonialism was aimed at the commercial exploitation of the Congo Basin just as Twain's anti-colonial writings, especially *Following the Equator*, were involved in commercial processes of their own. It is within this understanding of how commercial, political, cultural and imperial processes inter-relate that it is possible to reconcile the anti-imperial Twain with a propagation of certain imperialist assumptions.

The immediate occasion for Youssef's anti-war paean is provided by war in Afghanistan and Iraq. While Twain was travelling around the equator, British India stretched as far as what is now thought of as Afghanistan. To invoke Twain from the anti-war perspective might be strengthened by a look at what Twain himself wrote of colonialism in India. In India he heard an address given before a Rajput prince and wrote it up in the following way:

> A century and a half ago an address of thanks could have been put into small space. It would have thanked the prince –
>
> 1. For not slaughtering too many of his people upon mere caprice;
> 2. For not stripping them bare by sudden and arbitrary tax levies, and bringing famine upon them;
> 3. For not upon empty pretext destroying the rich and seizing their property
> 4. For not killing, blinding, imprisoning or banishing the relatives of the royal house to protect the throne from possible plots;
> 5. For not betraying the subject secretly for a bribe into the hands of professional Thugs, to be murdered and robbed in the prince's back lot.
>
> Those were rather common princely industries in the old times, but they and some others of a harsh sort ceased long ago under English rule.[21]

The criticism of Britain as oppressive colonial power has vanished altogether. It is replaced by a cringing exultation of what British rule in India has achieved. What irony there is – the description of cruelties as 'princely industries' and the giving of thanks for their removal – is directed against the Indian subjects rather than the colonial masters. No self-conscious reference to Twain's own prejudices is invoked. As with the South Africa passages I discussed earlier, it is as though Clemens is serving directly as a spokesperson for empire because imperial interests are the same as his. Resisting one repressive stratagem, the (cruel) caste system of India, leads Clemens to uphold the (cruel) system of imperialism. Struggling against repression in one sphere was not to Twain (and is not today) incompatible with upholding the bonds by which another form of repression operates. The selective tradition which insists on Mark Twain, Social Critic occludes the fact that Twain cannot be taken as an unquestioned voice of emancipation. The selections by which we remember him are everything.

The current dominant selection – the great reformer Harrison referred to in the University of South Africa edition of *Heart of Darkness* – is at odds with Twain's actual practice in South Africa and India. That this great reformer image is also fully endorsed by the other postcolonial critic I earlier mentioned, Aijaz Ahmad, is all the more alarming because Ahmad's book *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* set out specifically to challenge established nationalist canonical readings of postcolonial texts. My aim is not to score petty points against Harrison or Ahmad but to demonstrate the extent to which the dominant selective tradition in Mark Twain scholarship has been entrenched – emphasising first southern humour and then social criticism, but never this other aspect.

*Following the Equator* is scarcely available today. It is not published by Penguin, Oxford World Classics, Wordsworth Classics or any of the major sources of inexpensive and therefore readily accessible reading material. Neither does it feature on any college or university syllabus I have examined in Britain or the United States.

The Twain novels which are available from these sources and do feature on syllabi are tales of adventure – overtly non-political fables. If, as Fredric Jameson suggests, the final horizon of all criticism must be a political horizon,[22] I must examine reasons for the omission.

The discrepancy between Twain's readily accessible adventure fables and the less disseminated political writing severs from daily political and cultural life those writings which in fact were meant from the beginning to play a vital part in it. We thus receive only a selected version of Twain's life and work. This is interestingly reflected on the jacket notes to Michael Moore's recently re-issued book, *Downsize This.* The notes proudly proclaim that in Michael Moore America has discovered its latest comic-satirical talent *in the tradition of Mark Twain.*

Doesn't this seriously misrepresent both? For Michael Moore, witty guy as he undoubtedly is, is concerned more with political intervention and change than with mere comedy. Yet the manner in which he was first booed and then silenced at the 2003 Oscars ceremony shows how his work is already being forcibly incorporated into and mediated by a dominant selective tradition. This seems to be what Stephen Greenblatt means when he suggests that 'subversion… is not the negative limit but the positive condition for the establishment' of a dominant social order.[23]

This is even more apparent in the case of Twain. The selective canonical tradition emphasises first the adventurous and comic, thus eliminating oppositional political thought. But then a deeper disjunction opens up because neither the (little-disseminated) anti-imperial work nor the (widely available) fables allow us to acknowledge that Twain was at times involved in the conservative imperial processes which both the fables and the political writings negate. Faced by this recognition of reactionary tendencies in a writer who is supposedly celebrated as embodying a nation's instinct for moral right, a concession is made and the selective tradition in Mark Twain studies is modified. So now we see the outspoken individual, the un-coerced self, as an exemplary agent of a nation's social criticism. Implicit in this of course is an invitation to celebrate the conditions of freedom – provided by the nation – which enable the outspokenness. Simultaneously obscured are the reactionary tendencies within the tradition. In effect it tells us that as long as everybody knows that Twain was an anti-establishment figure it does not matter that nobody reads his criticisms; they could do if they wanted to. This creates the impression of a well-ordered and democratic cultural life in which every viewpoint is guaranteed a hearing.

But every viewpoint is not guaranteed a hearing and the illusion of debate is just another way of glossing over this fact in support of existing hegemonic structures.

I opened this paper with Raymond Williams's definition of *selective tradition* and it is with Williams that I wish to conclude. For Williams insists that any tradition is selective 'in the precise sense that we take the meanings- and not only the achieved meanings; also if we are serious the difficulties – that we feel and discover we need.'[24]

*Following the Equator* is available neither through the supposedly accessible medium of the internet nor through the canonical circles of mass publishing houses and universities. The difficulties it presents are that it will not fit neatly into a selective tradition that emphasises either comic genius or a canonical celebration of instinctive moral right. Canon formation is the result of different lobbies working with different agendas in mind. They create the illusion of open and equal debate even while they suppress whole strains of work that would not support that illusion. They thus affect the world not as it was one hundred years ago, but as it is today and as it will be tomorrow. In a small sense therefore, if we can alter canon formations, we can change the world.

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[1] See Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism,* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), p13.

[2] Laura Chrisman, ‘Imperial Unconscious? Representations of Imperial Discourse’ in Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp498-516.

[3] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature,* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977), p116.

[4] Jonathan Arac, *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p5.

[5] Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination,* (New York: Doubelday, 1950), *passim.*

[6] Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory,* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992), p51.

[7] Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism,* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), p56.

[8] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p407.

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