Eruptions of Performance:  
Hank Morgan and the Business of Politics

DEREK PARKER ROYAL

WRITING TO William Dean Howells in August 1887, about a year and a half into his work on A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, Mark Twain commented upon the evolving nature of his political vision. This change, he wrote Howells, was fueled by a recent rereading of Thomas Carlyle: “When I finished Carlyle’s French Revolution in 1871, I was a Girondin . . . & now I lay the book down once more, & recognize that I am a Sansculotte!—And not a pale, characterless Sansculotte, but a Marat” (Twain-Howells 2, 595). His sympathy for the revolution and its liberating possibilities grew to an almost blind admiration, so much so that by the time his novel was finished in 1889, he would write to Howells: “Next to the 4th of July & its results, it was the noblest & the holiest thing & the most precious that ever happened in this earth. And its gracious work is not done yet—nor anywhere in the remote neighborhood of it” (T-H 2, 613). The backdrop to this democratic enthusiasm was a Europe that, to him, was still mired in the dark ages, a decaying bastion of immorality, blind servility, and human bondage. During this period of his life, there was no starker contrast than that between the American project and the lingering legacies of monarchy.

Twain was increasingly concerned about the oppressive political systems not only abroad, but at home as well, and his support for fledgling labor movements and burgeoning republics gave him the opportunity to vent his burning anger at injustice. Even A Connecticut Yankee, his heteroglossic
foray into political rhetoric, could not contain his ambitious ire between its covers. In what has now become one of Twain’s most critically quoted passages, he told Howells upon the novel’s completion that “if it were only to write over again there wouldn’t be so many things left out. They burn in me; & they keep multiplying and multiplying; but now they can’t ever be said. And besides, they would require a library—& a pen warmed-up in hell (T-H 2, 613).

Contemporaneous with his progressive enthusiasms was, paradoxically, Twain’s whole-hearted investment in capitalism. From his early days in the California mining camps he had schemed to attain financial success one way or another, but no project had ever so violently seized his imagination—and his purse—as did James W. Paige’s typesetting machine. On one level, Twain’s faith in this technological wonder complemented his political liberalism. As Justin Kaplan writes:

The Yankee and the Machine were twinned in [Twain’s] mind. Both were tests of a perfectible world in which, contrary to all his insights and experiences, friction and mechanical difficulties were equivalents of ignorance and superstition. Both expressed a secular religion which had as an unexamined article of faith a belief not in eternal life but in perpetual motion. (281)

Yet, in a more profound way, his investment presupposed a strong capitalist impulse that stood in sharp conflict with his progressivism. It encouraged a frontier individualism not dissimilar from that nurtured by the financial magnates whom Twain warmly befriended later in his life. Those who invested in technology and capital helped to create a new cultural, if not aesthetic, elite. By conflating the status of both artist and technological innovator, Twain betrayed in no uncertain terms the desirability of a position far above that of the common worker: “An inventor is a poet—a true poet—and nothing in any degree less than a high order of poet” (Business Man, 14). The writer as capitalist, then, held a privileged position in Twain’s mind that was in many ways irreconcilable with his more democratic tendencies.
Along with the tensions inherent in Twain's discordant roles as democrat and capitalist came the increasing specter of failure that hounded both projects. Paige's typesetting machine, the most immediate symbol of progress for Twain, turned into a financial bane that became a tragic obsession for the author. By the time he finished *Connecticut Yankee* in late 1889, Twain had sunk about $150,000 into Paige's "poetic" expression, with no tangible hope of ever seeing a return. So too with his hopes for the American project, constantly tested by robber barons, lynchings, and political corruption. Wedged between the peaks of his financial hopes and liberal enthusiasms were the deep valleys of social and political despair, a darkening of a creative vision that would eventually lead Pudd'nhead Wilson to place in his calendar, "It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it" (*Pudd'nhead*, 224).

During this time the creative outlet for Twain's tenuous balance of eagerness and disappointment was Hank Morgan, a pragmatic common man who comes to Camelot with an eye for enterprise and a head full of liberal ideas. In one sense he represented for Twain the democratic impulse and the possibility of the revolution whose "gracious work is not done yet." Hank is a one-man show of political emancipation, a living advertisement that promises to free the masses with a grand spectacle of staged effects. Yet, underneath all of the glitz and showmanship lies a darker reality that periodically bursts forth in an angry volley of destruction. This is the Yankee who tells Morgan le Fay to hang her musicians and who destroys the last remnants of knight-errantry in one horrific explosion. Taken as a whole, Hank Morgan is the creative embodiment of Twain's problematic relationship with political authority. Hank may have been intended as the salvific spokesman of nineteenth-century liberalism, but throughout the novel his project is continuously being undermined by his authoritarian tendencies, usually springing from business interests, working alongside his contemporary progressivism. The conflict between the writer as revolutionary and the
writer as capitalist found its full expression in the figure of Hank Morgan. This can be seen by focusing on the compositional dynamics of Hank and exploring the ways in which Twain uses him to express the various discourses operating within the text and within the culture at large. The problem of interpreting the Yankee—his ambiguous intentions, his multi-voicedness, and his lack of a centered morality—is symptomatic of Twain's own problematic relationship with political and business authority.

Twain's focus on authority and authority figures not only permeates his later fiction, but can be traced back to some of his earliest writings. Embedded in texts such as *The Innocents Abroad*, *Roughing It*, and *Life on the Mississippi* is a fascination with men of power—rulers of nations, stage drivers, and riverboat pilots—that at times borders on the deeply reverential. In the boyhood tales Twain creates major characters like Tom Sawyer (whose showmanship both playfully entertains and selfishly manipulates) as well as minor figures such as Colonel Grangerford and Colonel Sherburn (men commanding power through the barrel of a gun) that significantly impress their audience, most particularly the young Huckleberry Finn. As dominating as these early figures are, it is not until his later writings that Twain most fully explores the dynamics of power and its place within the culture of his time. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and the unfinished Mysterious Stranger manuscripts, he reveals the volatile and potentially dangerous side of authority, a duplicitous manner that complicates any attempts at benevolence. What is more, in all of the major works preceding *A Connecticut Yankee*, Twain invests opposing impulses within different personalities, and any dialogue between those impulses takes place on the level of character interaction. Tom, Huck, and the narrators of the travel books may all be (to one degree or another) complex characters, but none truly possess a collection of voices that express themselves in a constant state of violent contradiction. In *A Connecticut Yankee*, however, the political and philo-
sophical oppositions are contained within the single vessel of Hank Morgan, making character assessment difficult, if not impossible, in ways that it is not for Tom or Huck.

Indeed, critics have read Hank in any number of ways, many of which are antithetical to one another, and none of which suggest in and of themselves any adequate sense of closure: as a model liberal democrat, a dictator, a robber baron, a showman, a political machine, a colonizer, an entrepreneur, and an artist. (For further discussion of Hank in these guises see, respectively, Everett Carter, Chadwick Hansen, Ann Douglas, Judith Fetterley, Thomas Fick, David Sewell, Lome Fienberg, and John Dinan.) Yet if the conflict within Hank is a dialectic between any of these possibilities, it is one that refuses a synthesis. As George Toles describes it, Twain’s creative imagination can be likened to a house of non-adjoining chambers: “Situated in one room, his vision successfully accommodates itself to its dimensions, however limited. For the time being, no other room exists. After an indefinite period has elapsed, [the author] awakens, as it were, in another room, and the process repeats itself” (65).

Furthermore, there is no neat progression in the novel from one ideological space to another, such as from emancipator to enslaver/destroyer, no steady disenchantment with either liberalism, technology, or Arthurian romance. The democratic and authoritarian sides of Hank are present from the very beginning, creating an irresolvable tension that, far from weakening the novel, on the contrary highlights one of its central themes: the unsteady dynamics of political authority.

Hank’s democratic spirit is clearly evident throughout the text in greater or lesser degrees. Like a true nineteenth-century liberal, his sympathies rest not with persons and their offices, but with constitutional ideals. “You see, my kind of loyalty was loyalty to one’s country, not to its institutions or its office-holders. The country is the real thing, the substantial thing, the eternal thing; it is the thing to watch over, and to care for, and be loyal to” (Yankee, 112). To Hank, in the guise
of a Jacksonian democrat, the proletariat or freemen hold a privileged position:

They were the nation, the actual Nation; they were about all of it that was useful, or worth saving, or really respect-worthy, and to subtract them would have been to subtract the Nation and leave behind some dregs, some refuse, in the shape of a king, nobility, and gentry, idle, unproductive, acquainted mainly with the arts of wasting and destroying, and of no sort of use or value in any rationally constructed world. (109-10)

It would not do the Yankee justice to suggest that his words are without sincerity or that he operates in a primarily Machiavellian way, merely spouting off a rhetoric of liberation in order to better make his way into the vestments of “Bossdom.” Nor is it solely patriotic cant. Twain’s notebooks and letters of the time are filled with similar sentiments, especially when making Europe the subject of his musings. To his English publisher he wrote, “I wanted to say a Yankee mechanic’s say against monarchy and its several natural props” (Twain’s Letters 2, 524-25). The 1888 publication of Matthew Arnold’s “Civilization in the United States” left Twain particularly incensed. In his essay, Arnold argues that despite its material prosperity, America lacks any real sense of cultural distinction, and contrasts its nagging philistinism to the civilization evolving from European history. All of this confirmed Twain’s belief in an England whose mannered refinements masked a deeper savagery. His notebooks bear witness to his outrage against Arnold’s “superficial polish” (Notebooks, 383), filled with arguments and invective that he would later transfer to the mouth of his working-class Yankee: “There are shams & shams, there are frauds & frauds, but the transparentest of all is the sceptered one. . . . A monarchy is perpetuated piracy. In its escutcheon should always be quartered the skull & cross-bones” (401). In the novel Twain makes various attempts to deconstruct Arnold’s binary opposition between English culture and American philistinism. For instance, when Hank and Sandy witness a Chaucerian procession of
the noble pilgrims, the Yankee notes the nascence of English culture:

What they regarded as the merry tale went the continual round and caused no more embarrassment than it would have caused in the best English society twelve centuries later. Practical jokes worthy of the English wits of the first quarter of the far-off nineteenth century were sprung here and there and yonder along the line, and . . . you could note its progress all the way by the sparkling spray of laughter it threw off from its bows as it plowed along; and also by the blushes of the mules in its wake. (Yankee, 194)

Making pigs of nobility, idiots of knights, and "human sheep" (114) out of one of the most heralded societies in Western culture, Twain constructs a clear juxtaposition between the barbarous tradition of Arnold's England and the republican legacy of America.

Yet, bubbling just beneath the surface of Hank's liberation rhetoric is an ambition that refuses to be contained. During the above-quoted speech to a roadside audience of haggard peasants, Hank notices that there is one who demonstrates a sincere interest in his words. "This one's a man," he strategically notes. "If I were backed by enough of his sort, I would make a strike for the welfare of this country" (112). After Hank waxes democratically over the violent tyranny of the crown and the need for a "new deal" to sweep it away, he reveals that "I got [the man] to lend me a little ink from his veins; and with this and a sliver I wrote on a piece of bark—Put him in the Man-Factory" (114). The irony here is overwhelming. In order to make his "strike," Hank transfers the letting of blood from an existent regime based on divine right to a nascent one based on capital. He performs a similar transfer when he later frees one of Morgan le Fay's torture victims. Seeing a young man stretched out upon the rack for a crime he probably never committed, Hank asks the queen why she held him accountable in the lack of evidence. In words that betray his commodified jurisprudence, he implores le Fay, "Where is the profit?" (154). Using his leverage as a representative of Arthur, Hank soon secures the freedom of the
condemned man and his wife. He then goes on to employ the rhetoric of democracy to consolidate his own means to power: “I’ll book you both for my colony; you’ll like it there: it’s a Factory where I’m going to turn groping and grubbing automata into men” (157). The Factory, then, becomes a political way station between varying structures of authority. Mixing politics with business, Hank consigns his thankful flock to a space that is at one and the same time a much-lauded sanctuary of freedom and the production line to a future apocalypse.

The Yankee’s keen business sense is what allows him slowly to consolidate his power. After erecting himself as “The Boss”—an apt term for the former Connecticut foreman—he attempts to undermine the establishment by commodifying its ideology. The knightly quest becomes a salesman’s game to unload cakes of soap and stove polish, creating a need where one did not exist and thereby ensuring Hank’s continued growth. At the Valley of Holiness, he spots a particularly alluring business opportunity. One hermit whose “fame had penetrated all Christendom” demonstrates his faith by rapidly bowing as he prays. Hank ruminates, “It seemed a pity to have all this power going to waste,” so he makes of the hermit a human motor for a primitive sewing machine, able to turn out “upwards of eighteen thousand first-rate tow-linen shirts, which was ten a day” (213-14). These debasements do have their democratizing purpose, for by turning chivalry and medieval faith into a commercial venture, Hank would be striking a blow at what he considers the primary source of slave mentality. “This would undermine the Church. I mean [it] would be a step toward that. Next, education—next freedom—and then she would begin to crumble” (139).

Again, his humanistic code eventually gives way to a darker incompatible vision. The intended beneficiaries of his egalitarian enterprise also become chattel for his civilization factory, making of the entire enterprise a nihilistic machine constructed solely for self-preservation. This gets to the heart of Hank’s double-edged view of man. Alongside all of his maud-
lin sentimentality and his impassioned diatribes against social, economic, and political inequality is a bitter contempt for the single-mindedness of the common worker. The tenuous dynamics of this attitude become especially poignant in his acquaintance with Marco. After listening to Marco express his joy in the death of his master, a treasonous comment in certain circles, Hank celebrates the man’s admission as an instance of pure bravery: “There it was, you see. A man is a man, at bottom. Whole ages of abuse and oppression cannot crush the manhood clear out of him. Whoever thinks it a mistake, is himself mistaken” (300). Yet, with a terse condemnation that would embarrass even Twain’s vilified Matthew Arnold, Hank himself makes that very mistake. Immediately after this laudation, Hank notices Marco’s condescension to a slave, and he cries in a state of exasperation “Well, there are times when one would like to hang the whole human race and finish the farce” (302). This inconsistent view of human nature is prevalent throughout the text. Intermingled with all of his sympathetic and empowering rhetoric lie contemptuous references to the people as “white Indians” (20), “children” (30, 67, 94), “animals” (40, 54, 109), “nothing but rabbits” (63), “intellectual moles” (67), “donkeys” (93), “modified savages” (108), “human sheep” (114), “big children” (120) “a polished up court of Comanches” (129), “incorrigible idiots” (234) and finally, perhaps the Yankee’s most demeaning and poignant epithet, “human muck” (427). His readiness to disown his democratic discourse and condemn the human race does not necessarily expose his compassion as false—just as his compassion does not preclude his contempt—but on the contrary, it reveals the unsteady juxtaposition of competing impulses at work in Hank in an almost symbiotic fashion. Hank’s egalitarian attitudes bring him closer to working-class Camelot, and as a result give him the popular recognition he craves. At the same time, this recognition feeds into his need to “boss” the population into a productive collection of subordinates, a problematic condi-
tion which be at times counters with another foray into democratic rhetoric.

In his oration on "the ever-memorable and blessed Revolution," Hank again exposes the inherent tensions within his vision of liberty. "There were two 'Reigns of Terror,' if we would but remember it and consider it: the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon ten thousand persons, the other upon a hundred millions" (111). What are the horrors of the "momentary Terror" of freedom, he reasons, in comparison to the "real Terror" of monarchy? This passage fosters a curious exercise in political double reading. On the surface Hank uses the "blessed Revolution" as a comparative device to illustrate the unfathomable atrocities of feudal governments. Below the surface, however, another language is at work. By constructing a tenuous binary and dwarfing one atrocity to another, he is actually encouraging a rationalization of terror. "What is the horror of swift death by the ax," he argues, "compared with life-long death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty and heart-break? what is swift death by lightning, compared with death by slow fire at the stake?" (112).

In this sense, the figure of Hank as an empowered hero is complicated by his willingness to view people, not as an end in themselves, but as a means to a purely abstracted and highly problematic notion of progress. In the struggle toward a better world, such arguments of terror are often used for ideological posturing, by both revolutionaries and reactionaries alike.

Even though Hank realizes that it will take a violent revolution, not a series of gradual reforms, to overturn the institution of chivalry, he nevertheless distances himself from that possibility. "What this folk needed, then, was a Reign of Terror and a guillotine, and I was the wrong man for them" (183). His intentions for change are subtler and more peaceful in nature, yet at the same time they betray a design for domination that runs counter to the democratic rhetoric he
CONNEC\textsc{JICUT YANKEE}

easily espouses. This exposure becomes apparent as soon as Hank enters the kingdom. Being “a practical Connecticut man,” he takes account of his predicament and sets his goals accordingly:

I made up my mind for two things: if it was still the nineteenth century and I was among lunatics and couldn’t get away, I would presently boss that asylum or know the reason why; and if on the other hand it was really the sixth century, all right, I didn’t want any softer thing: I would boss the whole country inside of three months. (17)

Once he discovers his temporal location, he quickly realizes the unlimited entrepreneurial possibilities of his rule: “I wouldn’t have traded it for the twentieth [century]. Look at the opportunities here for a man of knowledge, brains, pluck, and enterprise to sail in and grow up with the country. The grandest field that ever was; and all my own; not a competitor nor the shadow of a competitor” (62-63). It is strikingly obvious why Hank prefers Arthur’s world to his own. Here he, an inconsequential factory foreman back in Connecticut, is the most educated man in all England, and to Hank knowledge equals power. His audience is ignorant of the sources of his jerrybuilt “miracles,” and Hank is content to keep them that way. Indeed, their ignorance is the source of his power. When the monks of Camelot witness his newspaper for the very first time, they are spellbound by it—“Ah-h—a miracle, a wonder! Dark work of enchantment”—and when they inquire as to its nature, Hank purposely denies them the knowledge. He would much rather be admired than be understood, as he basks in the monks’ complete reverence:

These grouped bent heads, these charmed faces, these speaking eyes—how beautiful to me! For was not this my darling, and was not all this mute wonder and interest and homage a most eloquent tribute and unforced compliment to it? . . . I sat motionless, steeped in satisfaction, drunk with enjoyment. Yes, this was heaven; I was tasting it once, if I might never taste it more. (262)

Hank craves admiration in an almost orgasmic way, for it is something that was absent back home. In the nineteenth century he is nothing more than a common worker and “could
drag a seine down the street any day and catch a hundred better men than myself” (63). His Jacksonian celebration of the free laborer, all that is “useful, or worth saving, or really respect-worthy” in a nation (109), begins to pale when placed alongside the promises of a reputation. Herein lies the paradox of Hank’s mission in Camelot: if he succeeds in educating and liberating the freemen, then he ultimately loses the source of his power, privileged knowledge. The effects of mass enlightenment would place Hank in a society that could produce, in his own words, “a hundred better men than myself,” a condition that he finds far from satisfactory.

Hank easily falls prey to these entrapments of the ego. There are moments when his self-aggrandizement seems benign, nothing more than the Jeffersonian admission of equality that he carries throughout Camelot. His pronouncements, Hank is careful to add, should never be seen as absolute: “That wasn’t a law; it wasn’t gospel; it was only an opinion—my opinion, and I was only a man, one man: so it wasn’t worth any more than the pope’s—or any less, for that matter” (161). Hidden within this egalitarian text lies another, more menacing meaning, indicating another double play at work. On the one hand, the target of Hank’s criticism is the Church, his most formidable opponent and the primary obstacle to individual expression. Yet Twain is careful to reveal that it is the Pope, the absolute power in sixth-century Catholic England, and not King Arthur, the Pope’s metaphysical subordinate, to which Hank chooses to compare himself. An implication here is that by juxtaposing his opinion and the Pope’s, Hank is exalting his position within the community. In this reading, the offset words “or any less, for that matter” contain an elevated, if not foreboding, ring to them. They are at once a noble admission of individual autonomy and a carefully constructed challenge that smacks of the most grandiose ambition.

Hank’s egoistic assumption of authority is born out elsewhere. Although he abhors the titles of the nobility, Hank quickly and gladly dons one of his own—The Boss—when he
sees that it will suit his purposes: "That suited me. And it was a pretty high title. There were very few THE's, and I was one of them" (69). Even before he is bestowed with his courtly title, he maneuvers his way into the graces of the crown by assuming one of his own—"the Supreme Grand High-yu-Mucka-muck" (39)—while at the same time indirectly comparing his mission with that of both Columbus and Cortes, two other outsiders, "mysterious strangers" if you will, who did not hesitate to place themselves in a privileged position. In order to democratize Camelot, an essentialization of his own power becomes, in Hank's eyes, a necessity. "I was no shadow of a king; I was the substance, the king himself was the shadow. My power was colossal; and it was not a mere name, as such things have generally been, it was the genuine article. . . . I was a Unique" (63). He does not hesitate to refer to himself as "a real artist" (39), "a superior man" (38), and "a superior being—and I was. I was aware of that” (224). Along with all of these earlier statements, then, it comes as no surprise when, on the gallows in London, Hank places his life above that of King Arthur's. His position becomes "more important, not merely to me, but to the nation—the only nation on earth standing ready to blossom into civilization” (373). Here he takes the ultimate step in authoritarian politics: the will of the nation becomes embodied in the will of its "boss." Hank personifies, in many ways, Rousseau's highly problematic notion of the general will, a "natural" social contract by which individual interests are vested in a sovereign body that, by the mere fact of its existence, represents the collective interest of society.

This emphasis on a reputation is central to Hank's power machine, and in his own practical way he realizes it. From the very beginning he sows the seeds of his success by manipulating the masses. He performs his "miracles" with a flurry of bravado and the intention of stupefying his audience. "The money's in the details," he tells the reader, "the more details, the more swag" (74). Similarly, "I never care to do a thing in a quiet way; it's got to be theatrical, or I don't take
any interest in it” (309). This is the Tom Sawyer side of Hank, the performer who knows that showing off with a variety of effects is the best way to capture an audience. Such colorful displays have their own formulaic methods. Much like the lesson Twain had learned on the lecture circuits early in his career, Hank explains that “it is always a good thing to let your audience have a chance to work up its expectancy” (221).

In the Valley of Holiness, he reveals a formula that goes a long way in explaining the mesmerizing effects of the Nuremberg rallies:

When you are going to do a miracle for an ignorant race, you want to get in every detail that will count; you want to make all the properties impressive to the public eye; you want to make matters comfortable for your head guest; then you can turn yourself loose and play your effects for all they are worth. I know the value of these things, for I know human nature. You can't throw too much style into a miracle. It costs trouble, and work, and sometimes money; but it pays in the end.

The grand display with Merlin's tower, for instance, is commodified in terms of Hank's authority: it “solidified my power, and made it impregnable” (62). This is exactly what the Yankee wants. By investing in a reputation, Hank realizes that he will later be able “to turn it to some valuable account” with the awe-stricken multitudes (226).

To Hank, nothing is more important than the recognition of his authority by the masses. “To be vested with enormous authority is a fine thing; but to have the on-looking world consent to it is a finer” (62). As with any authoritarian, as long as the Yankee possesses this recognition, his stature is assured; when it begins to wane, he becomes both disturbed and resentful. After the explosion of Merlin’s tower, Hank cannot understand why it is that nobody asks him for his autograph. Similarly, he becomes upset immediately after the restoration of the holy fountain when another magician attempts to steal his spotlight. After defeating his rival and assuring his reputation was “in the sky again,” Hank takes a business school approach to the political lesson to be drawn:
"Yes, a man can keep his trade-mark current in such a country, but he can't sit around and do it; he has got to be on deck and attending to business, right along" (236).

Perhaps this greed of recognition and its place within Hank's political program are nowhere more evident than in his encounter with the blacksmith Dowley. Hank and King Arthur are traveling the countryside masquerading as peasants in order to give the king a firsthand impression of his impoverished subjects, thereby making the Yankee's democratizing task easier. On their journey, they befriend Marco and treat him to a grandiose banquet that will impress his guests, one of whom is the relatively well-to-do Dowley. What begins as an exercise in good will soon becomes for Hank a game of economic one-up-manship. Dowley, a self-made man prone to boastfulness, becomes a "crushed man" by comparison when he learns how much the feast costs, and Hank cannot help but take comfort in the blacksmith's defeat: "Yes, Dowley was a good deal wilted, and shrunk-up, and collapsed; he had the aspect of a bladder-balloon that's been stepped on by a cow" (319).

Later, during a discussion with Dowley on political economy, Hank's competitiveness takes on a much more aggressive tone: "I rigged up my pile-driver, and allowed myself fifteen minutes to drive him into the earth—drive him all in—drive him in till not even the curve of his skull should show above the ground." When Dowley does not fall for Hank's rhetorical traps, the Yankee feels that he "could have shot him, from sheer vexation" (324). His fantasy of murder and burial leaves no question as to the underlying focus of his intention. In an egomaniacal flourish filled with contempt for his adversary, Hank rails:

think of the circumstances! the first statesman of the age, the ablest man, the best informed man in the entire world, the loftiest uncrowned head that had moved through the clouds of any political firmament for centuries, sitting here apparently defeated in argument by an ignorant country blacksmith! (328)

What enrages Hank so is not Dowley's reluctance to admit defeat—he is, after all, only an "ignorant country black-
smith”—but the admiration bestowed upon him by his audience. Even under the guise of peasant garb, Hank still demands recognition. The scene concludes with a violent brawl from which Hank and the king are strategically able to extricate themselves. “We stepped aside and looked on while they rolled and struggled, and gouged, and pounded and bit, with the strict and wordless attention to business of so many bulldogs” (338). It is significant that it is the Yankee’s business reputation, his views on free trade, that ignites the party’s distrust and violently turns one of his much-heralded freemen against another. When Hank puts his aggressive reflex down as a mere display of “human nature,” something that “anybody would have done” (328), he reveals the self-serving impulses that underlie even the most noble rhetoric of collective freedom.

As Hank demonstrates time and again, there always rests a dark and potentially destructive force hidden below the democratic gloss of his actions. Much like his transplanted nineteenth century, “fenced away from the public eye” yet “booming under its very nose,” Hank possesses both the promise of liberation and threat of annihilation, a smoldering dialogue of conflict that Twain effectively captures in the image of the volcano: “There [the civilization factory] was, as sure a fact, as substantial a fact as any serene volcano, standing innocent with its smokeless summit in the blue sky and giving no sign of the rising hell in its bowels” (82).

Volcanoes held a particular fascination for Twain. In his earliest works they function as a symbol for both desolation and regeneration—see for instance the ascent of Vesuvius in The Innocents Abroad and Sam’s Haleakala expedition in Roughing It—as well as a metaphor for Twain as a writer (Lynn, 248). In an extended yet highly revealing passage from Life on the Mississippi, Twain uses volcanic imagery to describe the dynamics of oration and how such eruptions of performance violently capture its audience. With words that could effectively describe Twain’s hell-warmed pen as well as Hank’s own brand of miracle-making, he says:
And now the stranger stepped back one pace, took off his soldier-cap, tossed it into the wing, and began to speak, with deliberation, nobody listening, everybody laughing and whispering. The speaker talked on unembarrassed, and presently delivered a shot which went home, and silence and attention resulted. He followed it quick and fast, with other telling things; warmed to his work and began to pour his words out, instead of dripping them; grew hotter and hotter, and fell to discharging lightnings and thunder,—and now the house began to break into applause, to which the speaker gave no heed, but went hammering straight on; unwound his black bandage and cast it away, still thundering; presently discarded the bob-tailed coat and flung it aside, firing up higher and higher all the time; finally flung the vest after the coat; and then for an un timed period stood there, like another Vesuvius, spouting smoke and flame, lava and ashes, raining pumice-stone and cinders, shaking the moral earth with intellectual crash upon crash, explosion upon explosion, while the mad multitude stood upon their feet in a solid body, answering back with a ceaseless hurricane of cheers, through a thrashing snow-storm of waving handkerchiefs. (394-95)

This volatile force seething beneath the surface of Hank's placid liberalism is what turns a potentially constructive conversation with Dowley into a violent free-for-all. When Hank prepares to take on the blacksmith in debate, he does so gradually, building to a crescendo effected to explode into a most dramatic climax. He states, in language reminiscent of the above passage:

Well, when I make up my mind to hit a man, I don't plan out a love-tap; no, that isn't my way; as long as I'm going to hit him at all, I'm going to hit him a lifter. And I don't jump at him all of a sudden, and risk making a blundering half-way business of it; no, I get away off yonder to one side, and work up on him gradually, so that he never suspects that I'm going to hit him at all; and by and by, all in a flash, he's flat of his back, and he can't tell for the life of him how it all happened. (Yankee, 328)

Similarly, Hank destroys Merlin's tower in a "vast volcanic fountain of fire" (59), and in the Valley of Holiness he employs a combination of ghastly phrases and fireworks to create a spectacle that will solidify his reputation. Standing before 250 acres of the valley's faithful, Hank carefully builds on
audience expectation and then lets loose with "one of the best effects I ever invented": "There [the fires] were, all going at once, red, blue, green, purple!—four furious volcanoes pouring vast clouds of radiant smoke aloft, and spreading a blinding rainbowed noonday to the furthest confines of the valley," followed by "a vast fountain of dazzling lances of fire [that] vomited itself toward the zenith with a hissing rush, and burst in mid-sky into a storm of flashing jewels!" (221-23). Even his newspaper, a vehicle designed to help destroy chivalry and the Church, is aptly titled, the Weekly Hosannah and Literary Volcano.

During his last years in Camelot, Hank has a difficult time maintaining the tenuous balance between progress and destruction. At his jousting match with Sir Sagramour he effectively eliminates the remaining obstacles to his sixth-century Utopia, but does so in another volcanic volley of force. Twain has stripped away the last remnants of Hank's liberal rhetoric, leaving only a farcical and hyperbolic violence characteristic of some of the best southwestern storytelling. (Many read the violence at the end of the novel as an abrupt darkening of Twain's narrative vision. However, in terms of the compositional significance of the novel, see Howard G. Baetzhold [459] and Everett Carter [432]. Both demonstrate that the carnage at the end of the novel was planned from the beginning, and that in conceiving it Twain was pulling from his early southwestern experience.) After cleanly downing ten knights with his revolver at the jousting match, Hank basks in the euphoria of the moment, for "the march of civilization was begun. How did I feel? Ah, you never could imagine it" (393). His project is complete: civilization comes to Camelot in the form of mass production, communication, and travel, and Hank even makes plans to export his form of government overseas. But perhaps his most effective—and most ironic—success comes when he indoctrinates the nobility into a capitalist ideology. Hank turns the Round Table into a medieval stock market, temporarily leaving Camelot to run itself, and once again business interests—in this case Sir Launcelot's
insider trading—transform democratic intentions into a deadly violence. After the war and the interdict, The Boss responds with his final volcanic eruption of authority, one that completely exposes the megalomaniac tensions at work in his character. Standing before his small band of youthful warriors, Hank rallies the forces with a cry, "We will kill them all," which is followed by a "loud and long continued applause" (433). The dramatic performer has learned his lesson well, for with the mere touch of a button—one of the most powerful images of vested authority—he brings his show to a thunderous standstill with a firestorm of "fifty electric suns" and gatling guns that "vomit death," killing twenty-five thousand men (a number greater than that of the "minor" Reign of Terror he refers to earlier). Resounding joy is Hank's only response to such a holocaust: "There was a groan you could hear!" (440).

The apocalyptic crescendo at the Battle of the Sand-Belt, as sudden and as drastic as it may seem, is but the final expression of a dialectic tension incapable of any true synthesis. Hank's utopian aims are never able to withstand the surges of his own inflated ego, and in the end the whole enterprise breaks up, as if out of a sense of childish frustration. Twain may have intended to use the Yankee to celebrate the American project, but he was nonetheless familiar with the capitalist engine behind that system, and how its dangers lay in an uneasy state of negative possibility. A democratic liberalism fueled by an economy that nurtures an unrestrained individualism can easily give birth to saviors and tyrants alike—yet with no ready means of distinguishing one from the other. Such an arrangement is tenuous at best, deadly at worse. This, whether intended or not, is perhaps the ultimate lesson to be drawn from Twain's problematic hero. Behind the amusing exhibition of the Yankee's lariat, lies the self-serving reality of a dragoon revolver.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


