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## The Restructuring of History and the Intrusion of Fantasy in Mark Twain's 'A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court'

### I

Understanding the ways in which literary texts mediate historical experience remains one of the key concerns of American literary criticism—as the re-emergence of a historical criticism indicates. Its main research interest has been summed up by asking: "To what degree is language, or culture, or history, qualitatively *in*, essentially *in*, a literary work?"<sup>1</sup> One way of approaching this question is to deal with literary texts in which historical knowledge serves as material for narrative construction and attitudes towards history constitute a significant thematic and structural aspect of the text. In the following essay I want to suggest another possibility how history may be said to express itself through, and inscribe itself in, the literary text: namely, in the text's actual narrative structure, or more precisely, in the composite character and movement of its narrative discourse—including those parts which overtly do not seem to be concerned with history as a point of reference at all<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Roy Harvey Pearce, *Historicism Once More. Problems & Occasions for the American Scholar* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 15. Cf. also Murray Krieger, "Critical Historicism: The Poetic Context and the Existential Context," *Orbis Litterarum*, 21 (1966), 49–60; and *The Tragic Vision* (New York, 1960); Wesley Morris, *Toward a New Historicism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972); Morton W. Bloomfield, ed., *In Search of Literary Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); Warner Berthoff, *Fiction and Events. Essays in Criticism and Literary History* (New York: Outron, 1971). — Ursula Brumm has discussed forms and functions of history in American literature in several of her articles, among them "Thoughts on History and the Novel," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 6 (1969), 317–330; "The Historical Novel and Historicist Criticism. Notes on the Critical Reception of Scott and Faulkner," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft in der amerikanischen Literatur*, ed. Karl Schubert and Ursula Müller-Richter (Heidelberg, 1975), pp. 102–113; and "Forms and Functions of History in the Novels of William Faulkner," *Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 209 (1972), 43–56.

<sup>2</sup> The term discourse (*discours*) is drawn from the formalist-structuralist theory of narrative which distinguishes most consistently between story (*histoire*), the summarized set of events that the narrative is about (the what), and discourse (*discours*), its "set of

Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* seems an especially rewarding text for such a discussion of the relationships of fiction and history. Its numerous tensions and inconsistencies have provoked many perceptive readings on whose insights this article can draw<sup>3</sup>. What they all seem to have in common is a conviction that "that strangely confused book"<sup>4</sup> should not be dismissed as artistic failure but should be read as a culturally and aesthetically most instructive symbolic response to a crucial period of transition in American life, the 'Gilded Age.' What had been intended as a proud, self-assured "object-lesson in democracy," as Howells had called Twain's novel approvingly after its publication in 1889, had been more or less unconsciously subverted in the process of its fictional realization. The resulting disruptions and inner contradictions of the text—without altogether disturbing our sense of an enjoyable reading experience—are so rich and absorbing in their implications that the novel seems ideally suited to enhance our understanding of the interaction of literary text and history through a closer analysis of the text's own structural dynamic.

### II

Inevitably, our view of the complex ways in which history may enter fiction will be decisively shaped by our concepts of the specific characteristics and pos-

actual narrative statements" (the how). Seymour Chatman, "Towards a Theory of Narrative," *New Literary History*, 6 (1975), 295. However, in the context of this essay it is not so much the "order of appearance" which is being discussed under the heading of discourse, but the interaction of several narrative levels through which the reader is confronted with an especially complex version of the basic story. In this sense, the *histoire* of the *Connecticut Yankee* can be said to generate a number of discourses in which the principles of ordering, selection and emphasis vary—even contradict or subvert each other occasionally within the text.

In his essay, Chatman stresses the need to further differentiate between *histoire* and *discours*, as does Karlheinz Stierle in "Geschehen, Geschichte, Text der Geschichte," *Text als Handlung. Perspektiven einer systematischen Literaturwissenschaft* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1975), pp. 49–55. Their arguments cannot be pursued here, nor does a further differentiation seem necessary for our purpose of distinguishing several levels of narrative emphasis within the *Connecticut Yankee*.

<sup>3</sup> Of the many interpretations of the novel, I found especially useful Henry Nash Smith, "An Object Lesson in Democracy," *Mark Twain. The Development of a Writer* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), pp. 138–170, and *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress: Political and Economic Ideas in 'A Connecticut Yankee'* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964); Roger Salomon, *Twain and the Image of History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1961); Ursula Brumm, "Amerikanische Dichter und europäische Geschichte: Nathaniel Hawthorne und Mark Twain," *Geschichte und Fiktion: Amerikanische Prosa im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Alfred Weber and Hartmut Grandel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), pp. 85–108; Tony Tanner, "The Lost America—The Despair of Henry Adams and Mark Twain," *Mark Twain. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Henry Nash Smith (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), pp. 159–174.

<sup>4</sup> Tanner, "The Lost America," p. 161.

sibilities of literature. Many of the critical approaches which aim at a cultural or historical reading of literature continue to rest on an implied assumption of literature as a kind of social document which mirrors reality more or less truthfully. To argue against such views, it seems necessary to insist that literature's specific historical interest and value does not lie in a sociologically more or less accurate reflection of reality, but in the attempt to come to terms with that reality by reinterpreting and restructuring it symbolically. Reading political novels of the 'Gilded Age,' such as Henry Adams' *Democracy* or Twain and Warner's *The Gilded Age* as documents of the political corruption of the time would yield hardly more than second-hand information. Their cultural and historical interest lies in a "symbolic action" (K. Burke) designed to express and ease the tensions that were provoked by the collision of moral idealism with the political reality of the 'Gilded Age' which increasingly contradicted these ideals.

The "other world" of fiction offers specific possibilities of responding to such experiences of dissonance. Whereas its playful freedom to invent, change, condense, or transcend reality keeps us from experiencing immediate consequences of our tentative "symbolic action," it also enables us to create and try out responses to new and threatening experiences, to give expression to unacknowledged wishes and fears, aspirations and anxieties. This makes fiction a testing-ground to explore and experiment with the restructuring of an ever-changing historical reality by inventing stories.

*A Connecticut Yankee*, Twain's "most ambitious undertaking,"<sup>5</sup> is a case in point. In imagining a situation in which a Yankee living in the nineteenth century is plunged into the "dark ages" of sixth century England, Twain makes use of the playful freedom of fiction to remake a whole civilization from scratch—with the representative of his own value-system, a typical common man, in sole control of the intended social transformation. The novel which can be considered as an inverse utopian novel is clearly a fantasy, but one with a serious purpose: it has been characterized as "a *roman expérimental* and the question at issue is whether republican idealism and nineteenth century technology can redeem society."<sup>6</sup> The fictional device provides an ideal opportunity to expose the inferiority, injustice and backwardness of (English) feudalism by confronting it with the embodiment of common sense and moral idealism, the Yankee. Nineteenth century civilization is thus not only contrasted with feudalism, it is also tentatively rebuilt on the basis of reason, democratic principles and technological know-how. The Yankee transcends "real history" in order to restructure it according to his own ideals and convictions. However, in using fiction as a testing-ground for his own view of civilization, Twain also introduces attitudes and impulses of his own age which illustrate the growing tension between political ideals and individual aspirations

<sup>5</sup> H. N. Smith, *Mark Twain*, p. 138.

<sup>6</sup> Tanner, p. 161.

in the 'Gilded Age.' It is the main aim of this reading to chart the course of the intrusion of such aspirations and emotional dilemmas by focusing on certain fantasy elements in the novel.

### III

At first glance, the *Connecticut Yankee* appears as a book which intends to make fun of prevailing myths of chivalry. Its genesis has been described repeatedly and can thus be summarized briefly here.<sup>7</sup> As Twain's first notes on the project seem to indicate, the immediate attraction of the confrontation of medieval knighthood with the common sense views of the nineteenth century must have lain in the prospect of ridiculing another example of the kind of romanticist notions which Twain considered as harmful influence on a democratic society.

Roger Salomon has pointed out that Twain had based his hopes for a positive development of the American system on a belief in the common man's innate goodness which would be able to resist and transcend inherited prejudices hostile to democracy. In Twain's view this common sense was endangered by, among other things, a literary romanticism which kept the common man imprisoned in obsolete, pre-democratic images of a feudal past. To assault and ridicule these false ideals became a cultural task of great importance. The encounter of an irreverent vernacular character with European society and culture in *The Innocents Abroad*, the slashing attacks on "James Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" and many scenes in *Tom Sawyer* und *Huckleberry Finn* are all manifestations of a recurrent theme in Twain's writing of which *A Connecticut Yankee* promised to provide yet another version.

Gradually, however, Twain seems to have recognized another potential of his story. Although the humorous level of the novel never disappears from the text, other—more serious and explicitly political—goals emerge. The confrontation of romanticism and common sense is widened into a contrast of political and social systems, of "thirteen centuries of reputed Christian civilization" and an industrially advanced American democracy. The Yankee's function within the novel changes accordingly: from a vernacular character whose main role is that of assaulting romantic pretensions he develops into a self-conscious and engaged spokesman for a "Republic on the American plan" under whose guidance King Arthur's Britain is to be transformed into a modern civilization. In a time in which most of the European nations were still monarchies, his mission contained a significant political gesture: answering in particular English criticism of the United States which had enraged Twain, it was clearly intended as a renewed affirmation of the superiority of the American system over the many European

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Howard G. Baetzhold, "The Course of Composition of *A Connecticut Yankee*," *American Literature*, 33 (1961), 195—214 and H. N. Smith, *A Fable of Progress*, Chap. 2: "From Burlesque to Nightmare: The Genesis of a Fable."

nations which had not yet succeeded in getting rid of their feudal past. The Yankee's story, which after all begins with the proud assertion "I am an American," developed into an "object-lesson in democracy" and was enthusiastically received as such by Twain's American contemporaries. What this shift in emphasis entailed, however, was that Twain's philosophy of history, his yet intact moral idealism and his belief in progress were established as a premise to be tested in the course of the narrative.

## IV

From the outset, Twain's story seems well suited to stand the test successfully. In contrast to the blatant injustices and cruelties of the "dark ages" which he depicts, it is easy for both author and reader to agree on how good it is to live in enlightened and democratic times. Smith thus calls the novel "on the whole rather conservative . . . it implies an endorsement of the political and economic structure of the United States in the 1880's without basic changes."<sup>8</sup> What was affirmed in the novel, however, was not so much the actual state of contemporary American society but the political and economic principles underlying it. It was because these principles seemed threatened by indications of political and moral corruption, that it became tempting to reconstruct them once again on a fictional level. Fiction serves to restructure history, but it is exactly on this level of a fictional revision that the reality of the 'Gilded Age' re-enters the text in unsuspected ways.

One example of the revealing powers of the actual narrative statements which has gained the attention of several critics is provided by the exact nature of the changes which the Yankee brings to King Arthur's Britain. In describing how the Yankee introduced progress to this backward nation Twain cannot abstain from detailing what he considers to be progress. To be sure, the need for social and political reform, for abolishing slavery, for building schools and colleges are all emphasized by his narrator and the steps for achieving these goals are dutifully outlined. But it is undoubtedly no mere coincidence that technological novelties appear as the chief objects of the Yankee's interest. What stands repeatedly in the center of the narrative presentation are spectacular technological achievements with which the Yankee hopes to impress the wide-eyed natives and demonstrates his ingenuity and know-how to the reader.

What the Yankee concentrates on, in other words, is not so much democratic enlightenment as technological know-how. Progress is thus subtly but unmistakably equated with the advance of technology. The Yankee's strategy to convince the people of the advantages of nineteenth century civilization rests chiefly on the enthusiasm an advanced technology is expected to generate in a backward

<sup>8</sup> H. N. Smith, *Mark Twain*, p. 150.

people. And yet, in the apocalyptic ending of the book Twain seems to imply that an industrial revolution alone cannot lead to progress and enlightenment. The fictional test, based in large parts on an optimistic belief in technological innovation, ends with a gesture of fatalistic despair; rather than advancing the cause of progress and democracy, technology becomes the instrument for its complete annihilation. The novel ends, in Smith's words, with one of the "most distressing passages in American literature,"<sup>9</sup> the battle of the Sand Belt. At the end of it, James Cox writes, "Morgan is electrocuting knights so rapidly and so thoroughly that there is no way of identifying the dead."<sup>10</sup>

## V

How can this sudden and dramatic shift be explained? Smith himself, in his perceptive readings of the book, seems to be undecided: "The exact causes of this loss of faith are irrecoverable, but the evidence that it occurred is plain to be seen in the book itself."<sup>11</sup> Trying to name the force which lies behind the shift he quotes Salomon who speaks of "the oracle of his [Twain's] imagination, his intuition, unconsciously formulated conclusions . . . at any rate some force other than his conscious intention."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Tanner refers to "a lurking, if unacknowledged, pessimistic determinism . . ."<sup>13</sup> And yet, it seems to me, that part of the interest in the *Yankee* resides in the fact that important aspects of these "forces" break through in the novel much more clearly than implied by such explanations.

In his book-length study of the novel, *A Fable of Progress*, Smith himself has drawn our attention to this level of discourse by modifying his earlier view of the *Yankee*:

My earlier analysis had considered Hank Morgan, the protagonist of the story, in the long series of vernacular characters culminating in Huck Finn. This approach still seems valid to me, but I have become aware of another aspect of Mark Twain's thought which has led me to place Hank Morgan in a different context, to see him as a member also of the numerous company of businessmen in nineteenth-century American fiction.<sup>14</sup>

In the course of the novel, the Yankee is not exclusively defined by his identity as a liberator and technological innovator. The fictional evidence is indeed overwhelming that he is at the same time pursuing a most impressive career as self-

<sup>9</sup> H. N. Smith, *A Fable of Progress*, p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> James M. Cox, "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court: The Machinery of Self-Preservation," *Mark Twain. A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> H. N. Smith, *Mark Twain*, p. 170.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Tanner, p. 162.

<sup>14</sup> H. N. Smith, *A Fable of Progress*, p. 4.

made man. "His career," Smith points out, "resembles that of many industrial giants such as Carnegie and Rockefeller who were in the public eye in the 1880's."<sup>15</sup>

The social and material success which emerges as a by-product of the Yankee's crusade for democracy and his particular brand of idealistic politics is striking. In hardly any time at all the former superintendent of the Colt arms factory, who starts out as a slave in sixth century England, is effectively accepted as official "number two" of the whole nation, but in reality can be considered to be its secret ruler. His own choice of words betrays the extent of his economic and social aspirations: proudly he awards himself the title of "boss" of the whole country, and by doing so, draws attention to a partial displacement of the intended object-lesson in democracy by a highly gratifying personal success story in which the liberator has become an entrepreneur and benevolent monopolist.

In fact, considered in its entirety, the novel can be said to tell the story of a man who triumphs not primarily as an agent of progress but as a businessman. Inscribed in the idealistic mission of the Yankee which stands for Twain's attempt to restructure and, thus, to transcend history, is an unacknowledged individual success story which ties it closely to recurring popular fantasies of the 'Gilded Age.' Inevitably, these two narrative levels collide and influence the direction in which the novel develops.

One striking fictional complication is that the very people whom the Yankee intends to liberate on the level of the political discourse emerge as potential competitors on the level of the success story. To liberate them would imply to gradually give up the privileged position which enables the Yankee in his own words to "take advantage of such a state of things"<sup>16</sup> and which repeatedly appears as a source of ill concealed satisfaction in the text. A typical example is the Yankee's spontaneous reaction to his miraculous transfer to the sixth century:

... and if on the other hand, it was really the sixth century, all right... I would boss the whole country inside of three months; for I judged I would have the start of the best-educated man in the kingdom by a matter of thirteen hundred years.<sup>17</sup>

"To have a start of somebody"—the phrasing indicates that the politically conceived contrast of two stages of civilization is also experienced in terms of the nineteenth century rhetoric of competition. The transfer of the Yankee to the sixth century assumes significance not only as an ingenious narrative device to effectively contrast democracy and feudalism, but reveals unexpected attractions as a fictional short-cut to success.

<sup>15</sup> H. N. Smith, *Mark Twain*, p. 151.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Stormfield Edition, Vol. 14 (New York: Harper, 1929), p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Paradoxically, the Yankee's extraordinary success is only possible because the laws of competition to which he wants to convert the so-called "dark ages" are not yet successfully established. In fact, in the delighted anticipation of his competitive advantages satisfaction and relief can be discerned that this is the case. In the evocation of a dream land without competition we can sense the symbolic restructuring of fears and anxieties aroused by a historical situation in which inflated cultural promises of success—the "success-myth"—collided with reality. The dissonance takes fictional shape in a telling paradox:

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; not a man who wasn't a baby to me in acquirements and capacities; whereas, what would I amount to in the twentieth century? I should be foreman of a factory, that is about all.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly (and ironically) enough it is the pre-industrial England that has yet to be transformed into "a republic on the American plan" which thus becomes a golden "land of opportunity." Probably without any suspicion of what he was doing, Twain was submitting to the fictional logic of his own scenario and realized the "American dream" in a backward feudal state in which the Yankee eventually seems to feel more at home than in the 'Gilded Age.'

## VI

In fact, so extensively is the Yankee's success celebrated in the novel that it seems justified to speak of yet another level of discourse which is closely connected with the success story but clearly transcends it and approaches something like a fantasy of omnipotence. In the course of the novel, the Yankee does not only witness an extraordinary material and social success. In parts of the novel, he seems to move in a daydream world of absolute superiority and power—and, again, takes great delight in doing so. Even the role of businessman appears at a closer look to be just one example of a varying repertoire of roles within this fantasy.

While in theory the Yankee pays careful attention to social and political improvements, the actual narrative continuity and substance of the novel stems, in surprisingly large parts, from his focus on fantasies of self-aggrandizement and uniqueness. Again and again in the course of the novel the Yankee interferes with his declared political goals in favor of highly personal gratifications. In the process he does not merely become a successful entrepreneur but the best known and most highly esteemed member of society whose superiority takes shape in various roles and disguises. Temporarily, the role can even be that of the Cowboy

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

who challenges and defeats no fewer than twelve knights with his lasso and two revolvers in a tournament introduced as "final struggle for supremacy between the two master enchanters of the age."<sup>19</sup> The lasso which he uses in this contest may not be an adequate symbol of technological progress, as has been pointed out. Once we recognize that the fantasy of uniqueness and self-aggrandizement shapes the novel to a much greater extent than it has been acknowledged so far, it is, however, not quite as surprising to see Twain draw on stock devices of the Western formula in which similar fantasy scenarios of a victorious individualism are acted out in analogous duel situations. Seen in this way, the lasso is just another indication of the gradual shift of the Yankee from the role of liberator of a backward and repressed society to its widely celebrated cultural hero.

Again, this shift in emphasis bears consequences for the novel in which the final liberation seems repeatedly postponed in favor of yet another act of triumphant self-aggrandizement. While his involvement in the political and economic possibilities of his mission is resumed more or less in passing, the Yankee becomes eloquent in describing scenes which affirm his uniqueness and gain the admiration of the native population. What we witness in these recurring situations, which can be traced throughout the novel, is a striking reversal of priorities. The problem of introducing progress to a backward nation is overshadowed by a much more personal concern which may be aptly summarized by the question: "Who is the greatest in the land?" In particular, the recurring confrontation between the Yankee and the magician Merlin, although obviously redundant and patterned along adolescent wish-fulfilment lines, finds an explanation on this level of discourse. Merlin, who is initially introduced as a representative of an outdated superstition which the Yankee intends to ridicule and to overcome, may be considered as a ludicrous anachronism in historical terms. On the level of recurring moments of personal triumph, however, he is indispensable as an opponent who can be patronized and defeated at will and, thus, can provide the Yankee with feelings of invincible superiority.

Not surprisingly, concepts which we usually associate with the world of show business, play an important role in the novel: "Merlin is a very good magician in a small way, and has quite a neat provincial reputation."<sup>20</sup> After each of the public performances of the Yankee the amount of applause is carefully registered. His location in many of these scenes establishes and stresses the contrast of the unique individual versus the "mass." Moments recur in which the Yankee "stands alone in the presence of a vast multitude."<sup>21</sup> The Yankee clearly indulges in these situations: "I was even impatient for to-morrow to come, I so wanted to gather in that great triumph and be the center of all the nation's wonder and rever-

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>21</sup> H. N. Smith, *Mark Twain*, p. 163.

ence."<sup>22</sup> Such feelings of personal triumph are magnified in the course of the novel to extreme proportions, which suggest the idea of a fantasy of omnipotence: "Here I was, a giant among pygmies, a man among children, a master intelligence among intellectual moles."<sup>23</sup>

It is even more obvious than in the case of the success story that such fantasies are bound to contradict and subvert the declared democratic intentions of the book. The inherent contradiction becomes apparent, for example, in the contempt the Yankee shows for those whom he set out to liberate on the political level of the book: for the champion of progress their enlightenment should be the primary goal; for the cultural hero, however, their naive superstition remains the basis of his unique cultural recognition. In another striking paradox of the novel the Yankee's fantasy of grandeur depends on the very ignorance which makes him despair in his role as a democratically-minded liberator.

The restoration of the fountain in the Valley of Holiness, covering more than two chapters, is a good illustration of the dilemma in which the novel has become entangled at this point. A "miraculous" fountain has ceased to flow. While the naive and ignorant pilgrims of the sixth century respond to the situation by praying, it does not take long for the practically-minded Yankee to discover a "fissure" in the walls of the well as the source of the trouble. It would seem to be an ideal opportunity for the representative of progress and enlightenment to correct a superstitious misconception of reality by confronting the pilgrims with facts and "make them use their eyes instead of their disordered minds."<sup>24</sup> Rather than making use of the incident for its political mission, however, all of the novel's interest is focused on the show effects it allows. The actual reason for the accident is kept hidden from the pilgrims, so that the Yankee can—with the help of a few of his trained experts—pretend to have worked yet another wonder. When his plan succeeds the result is a nearly ecstatic feeling of omnipotence whose description openly exhibits the aspirations which have taken over the narrative at this moment:

When I started to the chapel, the populace uncovered and fell back reverently to make a wide way for me, as if I had been some kind of a superior being—and I was.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *A Connecticut Yankee*, p. 42 f.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199. The phrase is used with reference to Merlin, the embodiment of the backwardness of feudalism, but it could well be applied to the prevailing systems of superstition of the entire nation.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

## VII

"Morgan's miracles," Smith writes, "are intended to demonstrate the superiority of science to superstition."<sup>26</sup> They may have been intended that way, but in the course of their fictional realization they take on an additional and quite different meaning in demonstrating what technology can do in the hands of a clever entrepreneur and showman. Hardly ever do they contribute to the purpose of enlightenment. Their imaginative core is a fantasy of the kind of reputation one could obtain, and how much one could "take advantage of the state of things," if one could just once exploit the possibilities of superior technological knowledge. In analogy to the success story this fictional acting out of certain fantasies of uniqueness leads to another most instructive paradox: nineteenth century America has sustained the Yankee at a satisfactory but unspectacular level of existence, medieval Britain raises him to a unique position. The Yankee's fictional experiment results in the exploration of unexpected opportunities of self-realization in a backward feudal state. Again, one senses a significant response to crucial cognitive and emotional dissonances of the 'Gilded Age.' That such an inference is not too far-fetched is indicated by another revealing narrative statement: it is in one of his most triumphant moments that the Yankee projects his extraordinary cultural recognition back into the nineteenth century and thus reveals that his fantasy is also a dream for the 'Gilded Age,' in which he had never transcended the anonymity of an emerging mass society:

A proud moment for me? I should think so... Across my mind flitted the dear image of a certain hello-girl of West Hartford, and I wished she could see me now. In that moment, down came the Invincible, with the rush of a whirlwind—the courtly world rose to its feet and bent forward—the fateful coils went circling through the air, and before you could wink I was towing Sir Launcelot across the field on his back, and kissing my hand to the storm of waving kerchiefs and the thunder-crash of applause that greeted me!<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to note at this point that the destructive connotations of technology which eventually lead to the apocalyptic ending of the novel do first appear in connection with such fantasy elements. Proudly the Yankee reports how his two revolvers helped him to successfully defeat a seemingly invincible majority of knights. Much narrative space is given to boasts of how cold-blooded he faced the challenge, and little is made of the fact that it proved necessary in the course of the event to kill all of the knights.

The incident can serve as an indication of the role the fantasy of self-aggrandizement plays in parts of the novel and what it might have contributed to the apocalyptic ending of the book. It may be true that one reason for the ending must be sought in the fact that "Clemens chose a situation in which idealism was

<sup>26</sup> H. N. Smith, *Mark Twain*, p. 165.

<sup>27</sup> *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 391.

bound to fail" because "established historical fact precludes all possibilities of success."<sup>28</sup> This cannot account for Twain's particular narrative solution, however, and its abrupt transition from a comic to a melodramatic mode which, far more than by philosophical intention, seems determined by an emotional requirement. In the final apocalypse, Twain obviously does more than merely state the failure of idealist hopes. Far beyond a mere résumé, the ending is invested with an intensity of emotions which seems to draw its impact from an emotional logic powering the movement of the narrative. In this context, the persistence of certain fantasy elements well into the ending of the novel deserves notice and manifests itself most conspicuously in the Yankee's proud description of the book's final battle:

Within ten short minutes after we had opened fire, armed resistance was totally annihilated, the campaign was ended, we fifty-four were masters of England! Twenty-five thousand men lay dead around us.<sup>29</sup>

It was just because the novel had, in parts, indulged in such inflated daydream scenarios of being "master of England" that it could collapse into such an intense nightmare at the end.

In the fantasies of successful businessman and cultural hero, the Yankee has no single intellectual and moral equal in the book. Everything he does contributes to the intoxicating dream of a "superior man." The melodrama of defeat, on the other hand, along whose conventions the ending is obviously patterned, can be read as their inversion. When it has to be acknowledged that the fantasy cannot be convincingly upheld any longer, it collapses and submits to melodramatic gestures of despair and to a paranoia, in which "the rest of the world," threatening the inflated self, can only be encountered with raw aggression. The Yankee's contempt for the very people whom he initially set out to liberate is informed by anger and irritation about those whose backwardness did not lend itself to the Yankee's vision of reforming a nation single-handedly—which, after all, can now be recognized as a politically coded fantasy, too. If they obstinately insist on standing in the way of his goals, they deserve no better fate than the knights of the tournament who likewise did not want to recognize the superiority of the Yankee and needed a lesson. Thus, he who honestly and idealistically attempted to bring progress to those who acknowledged him as "superior man" brings total ruin and destruction at the moment they resist and disappoint him. Ursula Brumm has pointed out this emotional logic within the novel when she says: "When this alien world effectively resists conversion to the brand of modern civilization that the Yankee attempts to impose on it, all he can do is to destroy it."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Tanner, p. 162.

<sup>29</sup> *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 444.

<sup>30</sup> Brumm, p. 103: "Als sich diese fremde Welt jedoch seinem radikalen Zivilisierungsdiktat entzieht, kann er sie nur noch vernichten."

## VIII

Critics agree that the *Connecticut Yankee* is an aesthetically uneven work. To stress and explore its composite and multi-layered character, however, is not necessarily to slight its aesthetic and cultural significance. On the contrary, from a point of view which values fiction as realm of an experimental restructuring of reality the novel attracts interest because of the interaction of its various narrative levels. In its own way, one might claim the novel is "complex" to very effective purposes. It introduces complexities of meaning in which conflicting value orientations and subsequent emotional dilemmas of the 'Gilded Age' are made "visible" *qua* text. It is in this sense that the novel is related to its historical context and has its own historical "accuracy"—not as a reflection, but as a response which assumes the quality of a significant historical statement in its own right, once we acknowledge the "past" to include not only "real" but also "symbolic action."

Because Twain was an artist who did not force his own experiences into a strict preconceived aesthetic pattern, but composed in a rather spontaneous fashion, he gave expression to cultural fantasies and emotions which were no official part of his doctrine of progress. Our reading of the novel was thus not primarily concerned with a discussion of Twain's views of American and European history but tried to reassess the logic and consequences of the novel's complex interaction of narrative levels: how does the story take on fictional shape and historical meaning through the establishment and movement of its various levels of discourse?

It is absorbing to watch some unsuspected aspects of the Yankee's crusade for democracy emerge from the narrative statements themselves, if one supplements an explicitly "historical" reading, focusing on history as a theme of the novel, by a second reading which takes inventory of certain of its fantasy elements. In unfolding his political intention as narrative Twain has not only taught an object-lesson in democracy but has at the same time embedded it in a revealing fantasy which restructures history in terms of individual aspirations. As a result the actual narrative realization gradually subverts the principles on which the novel overtly rests.

With a scenario of transferring a practically-minded Yankee to the Middle Ages, Twain had put the instrument of progress into the hands of a completely trustworthy representative of his own political value-system, the common man. In part, the results reflect Twain's view of historical progress. The vernacular perspective of the Yankee succeeds in exposing superstition and inhumanity and the common man is set successfully on his way to introduce a new and more advanced civilization. Yet in doing this, another aspect of Twain's scenario retains narrative importance: the benefits of personal success and individual superiority

derived from the Yankee's range of nineteenth century knowledge. From being a means of progress knowledge gains unsuspected value as "capital to go into business in the sixth century with."<sup>31</sup> The introduction of civilization is again and again displaced by the pursuit of a self-interest which does not refrain from applying superior knowledge to personal ends. Analogous to the 'Gilded Age' itself the pursuit of success and unlimited self-realization undermines the ideals of a political democracy in which it is habitually employed as a political promise. The dilemmas of rapid industrial development in which technology can be used to serve the common man but also to "take advantage of the state of things" are thus involuntarily re-enacted. This collision of political ideals and individual aspirations remains unreconciled throughout the novel.

In his first notebook entry on the *Yankee* Twain had sketched his initial plan: "Dream of being a knight errant in armor in the middle ages. Have the notions & habits of thought of the present day mixed with the necessities of that."<sup>32</sup> The following examples "No pockets in the armor. Can't scratch" indicate that originally these "notions & habits" were conceived as the raw necessities of everyday life. Yet the "notions & habits of thought of the present day" which eventually emerged in the novel were of a different, historically and culturally much more significant and instructive kind. What had been clearly underestimated was the force of certain aspirations and obsessions in taking over both the society of the "dark ages" and the novel as a whole.

Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* has been habitually described as a test of a doctrine of progress which results in failure, as a bitter comment on an initially optimistic philosophy of history which Twain shared with other writers of his time. In Tanner's view it illustrates Twain's growing conviction that idealism must have been doomed from the start by the very nature of history.

The Yankee [writes Smith] finds it increasingly difficult to sustain this democratic faith. He begins to realize that the basic manhood of the mass of the nation can be corrupted by vicious institutions.<sup>33</sup>

What makes the *Yankee* such a remarkable and disconcerting book, however, is the fictional revelation that the Yankee himself, Twain's embodiment of his moral idealism, emerges as prisoner of certain popular aspirations and fantasies of the 'Gilded Age.' The gradual exposure of an unacknowledged economic and social self-interest in the idealist himself seems to add a new dimension to "the futile search for some form of idealism" which Tanner observed in the novels of Henry

<sup>31</sup> A report in the *New York Sun* of Mark Twain's comments about incidents to be included in chapters yet unwritten, cf. H. N. Smith, *A Fable of Progress*, p. 46.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. H. N. Smith, *A Fable of Progress*, p. 41.

<sup>33</sup> H. N. Smith, *Mark Twain*, p. 161.

Adams and Twain: the suspicion that the Yankee's mission may have been futile, not because of the "nature of history" and the inability of the "mass" of the people to transcend inherited prejudices, but because the premise of an ideal self might be a form of self-deception. It is not just a moral idealism despairing in the surrounding reality which breaks through in the *Yankee*, but an indirect admission of the extent to which that idealism itself has been affected by the realities of a rapid industrialization and the far-reaching social and cultural changes it entailed.

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