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March 2002

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**"How the great do tumble"
Mark Twain's Later Articles
in the San Francisco *Daily Alta California***

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On November 20, 1867, Mark Twain wrote the San Francisco *Daily Alta California* to say that he had come home to America. It was the end of his tour of Europe and the Holy Land aboard the *Quaker City*, the trip that produced dozens of letters to the *Daily Alta* and, eventually, a book, *The Innocents Abroad*. These writings were enormously successful for Twain, as many papers picked up the articles written to California, and the whole country knew about him; he was, upon his arrival, a "national figure" (Kaplan 57). It was, for Mark Twain, a moment of major transition in his life and career: he moved beyond the provincial fame he had known as a journalist in the far western United States and literally moved out of the West altogether, for after coming ashore in New York City, he stayed on the eastern seaboard, going to Washington, D.C., "to stay a month or two—possibly longer" (20 November 1867).¹ This trip to Washington was a step in Twain's effort to define himself as a writer. His success as a colloquial western voice in Nevada and California, as a writer from the margins of the American states, the Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope, was unsatisfying to him. He wanted to be more than an amusing writer of specialized genre-pieces, yet he could not easily foresee the next step.²

This unsettled period in Twain's life produced, among other writings, fourteen letters to the San Francisco *Daily Alta California*.^{*} These articles, written and published between November 20, 1867, and August 1, 1869, have received almost no attention from Twain scholars. Yet, the letters demonstrate Twain's authorial maneuvering in this moment of literary identity crisis. Written from Washington, D.C., Connecticut, and Boston, these articles are examples of how Mark Twain negotiated the northeastern American world, a world considerably at odds with frontier experience. The articles, written not just by a westerner, but by an emerging

author of national fame, are the work of a writer who understood that the Northeast was the hub of the American literary market. Twain wanted *entré* into that market. The letters to the *Alta* demonstrate Twain's interaction with this establishment on a variety of levels. First, he is the outsider awed by the emblems of American cultural life. He is also the westerner endowed with enough "horse sense" to see the hypocrisy of politics and "culture." At the same time, he uses humor to establish a position of power for his perspective, creating an authorial voice that can see the upper crust from within *and* report the foolishness of it back to a western readership. He attains, in the words of Don Florence, a humor that offers "fluidity," that grants him "power and freedom" (7,8). And, with this freedom, he entertains a San Francisco readership trying to live a border life between frontier grit and metropolitan style.

The *Daily Alta California* in Context

Twain's funny articles in the *Daily Alta California* are part of a rich tradition of journalistic humor in the far western United States. The first paper of the American West, according to Frederic Hudson, was the *Flumgudgeon Gazette, or Bumble-Bee Budget* of Oregon, founded in 1844.³ This paper begins a regional trend of rascally western journalism steeped in satire. Hudson writes that the paper was "edited by the Long-tailed Coon, a sort of Pike County *Punch* affair. The motto read, 'Devoted to scratching and stinging the Follies of the Age'" (591). This satiric approach to journalism was not confined to Pike County, as other local papers appeared with titles like *The Wine, Women, and Song Journal*, *The Miner's Spy Glass*, and *Satan's Bassoon* (Walker 22). By 1870, just twenty-six years after the publication of the first paper in the West, there were 228 papers in California and Oregon (Hudson 592). By 1873, Hudson proclaimed, "The Pacific slope will not long be in the rear of the Atlantic slope in the number and wealth of its newspapers; indeed, the journalists in that part of the world even think that they are now up to the mark in point of ability and enterprise. Many of the papers published in San Francisco . . . stand well in the ranks" (591).

Specifically, the San Francisco *Daily Alta California* emerged from the adventures of Sam Brannan, a Mormon who came west in the hope of setting up an independent Mormon state, discovered gold, got wealthy, and then lost his wealth in land speculation and drinking. During his better times, he established a San Francisco newspaper called the *California Star*, which later united with an early-established Monterey paper, the *Californian*. Now unified, these two developed into the first daily paper in the West, the San Francisco *Daily Alta California*

^{*}A complete listing of the articles, in chronological order, is found in an appendix at the end of this essay. References to specific articles will be cited by date of publication.

(Walker 21). Experienced émigré journalists from the *New York Herald*, including John Nugent, William C. Hamilton, Edward Connor, and E. Gould Buffam, made the San Francisco paper “considerably more professional than its predecessors” (Belasco 6). Within its pages, Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard, Ambrose Bierce, and Bret Harte would all eventually publish.

Twain trumped into this San Francisco literary scene in 1864, fifteen years after the *Alta* began. He had some experience in western journalism writing for the Virginia City, Nevada, *Territorial Enterprise* starting in 1863, and late in that same year, he began submitting some articles to the San Francisco *Daily Morning Call* and *Golden Era* (Walker 187). It was not until his move to San Francisco in May 1864, though, that Twain began to become established in the city’s journalistic circles. He initially worked for the *Call*, but his early articles there were unsigned and lacked Twain’s now-famous style.⁴ He soon established himself with the other papers in town, and between October and December of 1864 he was writing ten weekly articles for the *Californian* (Walker 191).⁵ By 1865, many of Twain’s articles were being reprinted in papers throughout town, including the *Alta*.

The western editors’ desire to reprint Twain’s articles was likely because he, in Walker’s words, “spoke the language of the frontier humorist at its best. When it came to an exaggerated description studded with homespun epithets, who could beat him?” (322). In other words, Mark Twain emerged as the epitome of the western humor columnist, and such a talent was thoroughly appreciated by editors and readers. Newspapers nationwide were devoting significant column space to jokey, breezy, and satirical pieces. As Hudson detailed in 1873:

Our four or five thousand daily and weekly publications have columns of ‘Nuts to Crack,’ ‘Sunbeams,’ ‘Sparks from the Telegraph,’ ‘Freshest Gleanings,’ ‘Odds and Ends,’ ‘News Sprinklings,’ ‘Flashes of Fun,’ ‘Random Readings,’ ‘Mere Mentions,’ ‘Humor of the Day,’ ‘Quaint Sayings,’ ‘Current Notes,’ . . . These are the daily dishes set before our sovereigns. They are the comic departments of the regular Press. We need not count the names of our wits and humorists on the ends of our fingers . . . We are a nation full of such characters, perhaps a little thin here and there, but always in abundance and in good humor . . . Our wit . . . goes into all the papers. (695–96)

Twain’s “wit” was very good for business, as a popular humorist could make a newspaper’s success. As Walter Blair notes, little newspapers from small towns (like Iowa’s *Burlington Hawk-Eye*) enjoyed an extreme rise in subscription rates, earning almost a national presence, due to the popularity of a funny columnist (30).

The editors of the *Daily Alta* specifically sought to capitalize on the popularity of humorists like Twain by placing their articles in prominent positions in the paper. With a few exceptions, Twain’s letters to the *Alta* during this period were placed at the top of the front page, with large block letters emphasizing his name (Figure 1). While most articles were printed under rather vague headlines like “Local Intelligence” or “Letter from Washington,” Twain’s articles were printed with his name front and center: “Letter From ‘Mark Twain’” or “Mark Twain in Washington” were the most common. The *Daily Alta California* is a six-page newspaper with ten columns on each page filled with small print articles, notice after notice for auctions, sea voyages, and churches, and a multitude of text-only advertisements; the paper is black with crowded type. Yet, Twain’s name, bolded plainly with thick letters at a prominent place in the paper (typically right under the masthead that says *Daily Alta California*), emerges easily. Clearly the editors knew Twain’s value in the marketplace.

Figure 1



However, the articles Twain wrote for the paper were not necessarily indicative of the entire style: though the newspaper heralded its humorist, it also sought a more legitimate journalistic presence as a source of local, national, and international news. Large blocks of column space in the paper are given to telegraph reports and correspondence from reporters covering different beats. The September 6, 1868, issue of the *Daily Alta* exemplifies the content during the years Twain published his later articles with the paper. A significant section of the front page covers "Local Intelligence," devoted to brief reports on local happenings like a Soldier's and Sailor's Meeting and an ascendancy in public drunkenness, and other portions are dedicated to "Law Intelligence," "Pacific Slope Intelligence," and "Washington." A large amount of column space (and one of the few illustrations) is dedicated to telegraph reports, with subtitles like "Political News," "West Indian News," and "European News." On page two, "Religious," "Auction," "Editorial," and "Special Notices" dominate. Pages three and four are dedicated to various reprinted articles and stories from several different newspapers across the nation, including the *New Orleans Picayune*, *The New York Times*, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, *The Nashville Press*, and *The Chicago Post*. The last two pages are given to more notices for auctions, markets, and businesses.

Throughout these pages, of course, advertisements are plentiful. They imply a readership interested in a world much larger than frontier California, as merchants regularly offered "French Porcelain" and voyages to New York "in Ten Days!" While many of the advertisements promote local offerings, like Dr. Von Eisenberg, who could apparently cure deafness with only one application of his treatment, much of the column space in the paper is given to the broader world, suggesting that San Franciscoans in the 1860s thought of themselves as a point on a larger plane of human affairs; the newspaper indicates very little provincial thinking. Instead, the advertisements reflect consumers interested in sea voyages, imported goods, and the fashions of urban America.

In the November 15, 1868, *Daily Alta*, the desire for urban fashions is seen explicitly in the printing of "'Shirley Dare's' Fashion Letter: Description of Fall Costumes—A Discussion of the Morals of Dress," datelined New York City. Also, in the same issue, San Franciscoans are encouraged to attend "The City Gardens Grand Instrumental Concert" to listen to works by Verdi, Schubert, Bellini, and Hermann. A week later, in the November 22 issue, Paris fashions and Princeton news make headlines on the front page. Other issues include lists of the city's "Amusements," including opera, theatre, sacred concerts, "Professor Wallace's Exhibition"

in horse-training, and the "Anatomical Museum," a "palace of wonders" open late (5 February 1868); published lists of steamer passengers arriving in town (14 February 1868); and discussions of the Chinese labor force (1 August 1869). Though the multitude of advertisements for guns, livestock, and seed varieties clearly respond to the real needs of a relatively new community, the newspaper demonstrates that readers wanted amusement beyond the practical. The readers wanted to participate in the culture of the wider world.

In this context, the popularity of Twain suggests that discussion of the larger world was most satisfactorily seen through a perspective entrenched in the practicality and sensibility of the frontier settlements. Instead of getting news from reporters uncritical of the events they covered, the San Francisco readership seemed to prefer Twain's method: skewer the fools with the sharp point of mockery.

Twain in Washington and Hartford

The majority of the fourteen articles the *Daily Alta* published between January 1868 and August 1869 concern the experiences Twain had while briefly clerking in Washington, D.C., for Nevada Senator William M. Stewart and visiting Hartford, Connecticut, to deal with his editor, Elisha Bliss. In these articles, Twain clearly utilizes his western perspective as he "reports" events back to his California readers. His use of the outsider perspective is complex: it is often humbling and a source of anxiety, but it also allows him to comment from a position uncorrupted by insider status. Consider his description of meeting General William Tecumseh Sherman:

The conversation I had with this gentleman has considerable political significance, and therefore ought to be reported, I suppose. I said the weather was very fine, and he said he had seen finer. Not liking to commit myself further, in the present unsettled condition of politics, I said good morning. Understanding my little game, he said good morning, also. This was all that passed, but it was very significant. It reveals clearly what he thinks of impeachment. I regard this manner of getting at a great man's opinions as a little underhanded, but then everybody does it. People do it every day, as you can see by the papers, and find out as much as I did, and then rush off and publish it. (15 January 1868)

In this funny anecdote Twain is able to both lampoon himself and his powerlessness as a journalist clerking for a Nevada Senator *and* the foolish habits of politics and political journalism. His very visible sarcasm is also a subtle critique of the value

citizens give such meaningless gossip. He is saying, in effect, "Sure, I'm nobody in Washington, DC, journalism, but the somebodies are nobodies, too."

Often, he describes the self-serving and partisan politicians surrounding him in a terrifically sarcastic exaggeration of praise:

[O]ffice-seekers are wonderfully seedy, wonderfully hungry-eyed, wonderfully importunate, and supernaturally gifted with 'cheek.' They fasten themselves to influential friends like barnacles to whales, and never let go until they are carried into the pleasant waters of office or scraped off against a protruding hotel bill. (15 January 1868)

Other times, he offers surprising perspectives on prominent figures: "He is really very passable company, until he tries to be funny, and then Harris⁶ is ghastly. . . . I can forgive that person anything but his jokes—but those, never. While Harris continues to joke there will be a malignant animosity between us that no power can mollify" (28 January 1868). Or consider Twain's reaction at seeing the Union war hero and future president Ulysses S. Grant receive his guests at a reception in his honor:

Poor, modest, bored, unhappy Grant stood smileless, anxious, alert, with every faculty of his mind intensely bent upon the business before him, and nervously seized each hand as it came, and while he gave it a single shake, looked not upon its owner, but threw a quick look-out for the next. . . . He is not a large man; he is a particularly plain-looking man; his hair is straight and lustreless, his head is large, square of front and perpendicular in the rear, where the selfish organs of the head lie; . . . his uniform sat as awkwardly upon him as if he had never been in it before. (14 February 1868)

Though Twain would later venerate and befriend Grant, as well as publish his memoirs, this report humbles the Union war hero. With these reports back to San Francisco, Twain is de-mythologizing the people and institutions many in the West have only read about; he is using his outsider status largely as a democratizing force to level the playing field. Political appointees, Minister Harris, and even Grant are made, through Twain's words, into meager presences: selfish, corruptible, awkward, and homely.

Despite the moments of de-mythologizing, Twain still uses Washington's power to awe and captivate. He often subtitles his dispatches with phrases like "Mysteries," "More Mysteries," or "The Last Sensation," and writes of leaked

speeches, assassination theories, and legislation dramas. He clearly capitalizes on the mythos of Washington, DC, even in his decision to write about Minister Harris, General Sherman, and General Grant. These were nationally-known figures (Harris would have special appeal to Californians, as Hawaii, or the Sandwich Islands, was a matter of real interest to them), and Twain was sure to delight readers if he used celebrities as the topics of his letters. It was only an added bonus if he, as a writer endowed with the humor and "horse sense" of the West, could deflate the grandeur of their national reputations.

Twain's five articles from Connecticut (3 March 1868, 6 September 1868, 15 November 1868, 22 November 1868, and 1 August 1869) are even more complicated. Again, his writing depends on a certain degree of mockery, but the pristine world of New England provincial life was a more slippery target than the tomfoolery of Washington politics. He helps solidify the notion that New England is "the land of steady habits" by noting the disconcerting lack of smoking and drinking on the streets of Hartford (3 March 1868). This time, he suggests, he is truly an outsider: "I have to smoke surreptitiously when all are in bed, to save my reputation, and then draw suspicion upon the cat when the family detect the unfamiliar odor." He claims, "the morality of this locality is something marvellous [sic]" (6 September 1868). He's also impressed with his surroundings visually, saying that "You do not know what beauty is if you have not been here" (6 September 1868) and "I suppose I have looked upon almost the fairest vision the earth affords" (22 November 1868). Granted, he offers up some of his distinctive mockery (for example, he lampoons the extreme pride the citizens have in the Charter Oak in the March 3, 1868, letter), but he is gentler with Connecticut, which would be his home from 1871–1900. Instead of lampooning what he witnesses in Hartford, he reports benignly on sailing regattas and huckleberries. This comfort suggests a longing for the New England ideal, a longing for the sort of middle-class utopia that the Nook Farm neighborhood appeared to be. The letters from Hartford reflect, more than any other letter he wrote to the *Daily Alta California*, Twain's shifting sense of himself: his relationship to the American Northeast was blurring and the outsider status was no longer as easy to maintain. Surrounded by the glories of huckleberries and elegant homes, he realized that perhaps he wanted to be a New Englander.

Twain Sees Dickens

The specific origins of this Hartford attitude can, in many ways, be traced back to a decision Twain made to attend a reading on New Year's Eve, 1867. On that night

Twain saw Charles Dickens read from *David Copperfield*. For an emerging writer like Twain, seeing Dickens was a chance to witness someone who had achieved the sort of success most writers only fantasize about. Dickens was at the top of the literary establishment of his day. His reading tour of America had resulted in ticket-lines three-quarters of a mile long and street fights among those anxious for good seats (Dolby 187, 211). He was, in the words of Jerome Meckier, the “world’s first superstar” (135), one whose writing was embraced by the common reader and the literati alike. Dickens was representative of literary success, a “demigod” (Kaplan 65), less a human being than a personification of The Writer. Or, at least, that is the popular notion that led Twain to subtitle his correspondence to the *Alta* “The Great Dickens” (2 Feb. 1868).

But Twain’s subtitle was tongue-in-cheek, for his article reveals a much more complicated look at the writer. In fact, this article, dated January 11, 1868, is among the first in a series that begin to reveal Twain’s complicated relationship with the “high culture” of the American Northeast. Like so many other discussions about northeastern life that he sent back to California, this article follows a pattern: an initial reverence toward a cultural icon gives way to a distinct irreverence and is finally resolved with Twain, as the wit, in a position of control. However, unlike his discussions of Washington political life, Twain seems a little less ready to proclaim any superiority over Dickens; he indulges in his customary mockery, but he withholds the final punch.

Twain describes his experience seeing Dickens as one of expectation and disappointment. He sees Dickens first as

a tall, ‘spry,’ (if I may say it,) thin-legged old gentleman, gotten up regardless of expense, especially as to shirt-front and diamonds, with a bright red flower in his button-hole, gray beard and moustache, bald head, and with side hair brushed fiercely and tempestuously forward, as if its owner were sweeping down before a gale of wind, the very Dickens came!

His description reads like a viewing of royalty (a bejeweled, flowered, bearded patriarch) with a nod toward the Creative Genius (“tempestuous” hair). He describes “the very Dickens” in over-dramatic terms: when Dickens walks on stage, Twain writes, “He did not emerge upon the stage—that is too deliberate a word—he strode.” But this glorified picture soon fades into a new description. The “tempestuous” hair becomes “[t]hat fashion he has of brushing his hair and goatee so

resolutely forward gives him a comical Scotch-terrier look about the face,” which, Twain feels, is emphasized by “his portentous dignity and gravity.” But, in an effort to hold on to the grand image he had of Dickens, Twain immediately justifies this unfortunate appearance by claiming that his “old head took on a sort of beauty” when he “thought of the wonderful mechanism within it.” He rhapsodizes about Dickens’s ability to control fictional narrative and characters, and claims “This was Dickens—Dickens.” Twain clearly wanted it to be a big moment for him, for here he was, an emerging literary voice trying to get a foothold in the cultural establishment, watching the premiere icon of that world. He wanted to see his ambitions justified; he wanted to see greatness.

At this point in the article, though, Twain begins to establish the quality of voice he will capitalize on throughout his literary career. Twain entered Steinway Hall on New Year’s Eve seemingly full of the Dickens hysteria that was selling tens of thousands of his books and earning him \$200,000 on the lecture circuit (Kaplan 65). But, as he sat there, he thought, “Somehow this puissant god seemed to be only a man, after all. How the great do tumble from their high pedestals when we see them in common human flesh, and know that they eat pork and cabbage and act like other men!” Like so much of Twain’s work, this line reveals a perspective unimpressed by the pomp of conventional wisdom. He takes a grand subject like Charles Dickens and reduces him to a man eating a smelly plate of pork and cabbage. Seeing the writer on stage in a much-heralded public performance, Twain is struck by how *human* Dickens is, how real. It is a way of seeing that propels Twain beyond the northeastern cultural world he is concerned with infiltrating; once he actually sees this literary giant, he is struck by how small it all seems.

Twain’s next step is a natural one, given his credentials: he critiques Dickens’s performance as a reader. Twain had already earned a considerable reputation as a lecturer by late 1867, especially in the western circuit. And in New York he was pleased enough with himself to write sarcastically to his family from the Westminster Hotel in November 1867 that “when Charles Dickens sleeps in this room next week it will be a gratification to him to know that I have slept in it also” (Smith 104). So, Twain was confident enough to defy the standard praise Dickens received and tell the readers of the San Francisco *Daily Alta California* that Dickens “is a bad reader.” Twain writes,

I was a good deal disappointed in Mr. Dickens’ reading—I will go further and say, a great deal disappointed. The *Herald* and *Tribune* critics must

have been carried away by their imagination when they wrote their extravagant praises of it. Mr. Dickens' reading is rather monotonous, as a general thing; his voice is husky; his pathos . . . is glittering frostwork.

Significantly, Twain's estimation of Dickens directly contradicts the New York reaction represented by the "*Herald and Tribune* critics." By specifically pointing out the way his response differs from the New York response, Twain is capitalizing on his status as an outsider. He uses his fresh perspective to sway his California readers and claim a position of authority. Therefore, he is using his outsider status in two major ways: he rhetorically uses it in order to establish his narrator as a relatively naïve observer of the scene, but he transforms that naiveté to honesty as his article moves from reverence to irreverence. He suggests, then, that his position as a "visitor" allows him to see and understand American cultural life in a way those accustomed to it could not, and he extends this perspective to his readers in the West.

But Twain, as an admirer of Dickens's work, does pull his punch at the end of the section. He writes, "I have given 'first impressions.' Possibly if I could hear Mr. Dickens read a few more times I might find a different style of impressions taking possession of me. But not knowing anything about that, I cannot testify." In these sentences, one gets a rare glimpse at Twain second-guessing himself. His previous criticisms seemed resolute and decided, but now he willfully weakens his position. Was it just his respect for Charles Dickens that led him to leave himself in a position of doubt ("I cannot testify")? Or was something else driving him to temper his criticism, to maintain a respectably genteel position in his article?

Twain was not alone at this New Year's Eve performance. With him was Olivia Langdon, a daughter of a moneyed New England family and a sister to Twain's friend Charley Langdon. The Langdons were "mainstays of church and community" and active abolitionists, much like their friends the Beechers (Kaplan 77).⁷ Olivia was even mentioned in this article to the *Alta*: "I am proud to observe that there was a beautiful young lady with me—a highly respectable young white woman." The brief acquaintance of this New Year's holiday was the beginning of a long relationship Twain would have with her, as she would become, in February 1870, Olivia Langdon Clemens, Twain's wife.

Meeting and falling for Livy, as she was called, applied further pressure on Twain's identity: now, not only did his literary ambition push him to the marketplace of the American Northeast, but his personal life did too. Before he could court Livy, he had to establish himself as a respectable suitor in her world, someone who could

provide a stable life for a woman accustomed to the comforts of her father's wealth. After seeing her that holiday season, he worked to complete his first book, *The Innocents Abroad*. When he arranged the terms of publication for this book, he was still living the rather uncertain life of the journalist and lecturer, making money at an uneven rate. Therefore, when he dealt with Elisha Bliss, the publisher of *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain asked "what amount of money" he "might possibly make out of it. The latter clause," he said, "has a degree of importance for me which is almost beyond my own comprehension" (Smith 119). After settling the financial details, Twain prepared the manuscript (largely from material he had already written for newspapers) and turned it into Bliss in August of 1868. By the end of that month, with some assurances of a respectable income from the upcoming publication and promotional lecture tour, Twain visited the Langdon family at their home in Elmira, New York. Within two weeks, Twain proposed to Livy. She rejected him politely, and at the end of his stay in Elmira, in early September 1868, he wrote to her, "I do not regret that I have loved you, still love you, and shall always love you" (Smith 247). It was the first in a long line of love letters (nearly two hundred), and eventually Twain offered to let Livy "supervise his regeneration" (Kaplan 80). In a move that would undermine the rascally journalist persona he had developed in the West, he begged Livy "to scold and correct him, to lecture him on the sin of smoking, to send him texts from the New Testament, to tell him about Thomas K. Beecher's sermon on Sunday, [and] to send him Henry Ward Beecher's sermon pamphlets" (Kaplan 80).

The "correction" Twain—and Olivia Langdon—felt he needed before marrying depended on foregoing his "western" identity for a new, civilized middle-class self. Susan K. Harris argues that Twain's love letters to Langdon not only proclaim the willingness to change, but even adopt New England rhetorical patterns, specifically the "discourse of conversion." She writes, "With the skill of Jonathan Edwards, he records the course of his conversion, playing on Langdon's enculturation in . . . the discourse of conversion" (78). Olivia Langdon, after all, was not just a charming woman that attracted the writer, but a woman "raised in a world of Eastern respectability" (Willis 36). Writing to Jervis Langdon, his future father-in-law, Twain tried to explain that the stories leaking in about his past, including drunkenness and troublemaking, were as much a product of his region as his principles. He wrote, "I think that much of my conduct on the Pacific Coast was not of a character to recommend me to the respectful regard of a high eastern civilization, but it was not considered blameworthy there, perhaps. We go according to our lights" (Smith

357). Twain's language, which sounds in its hyperbole ("high eastern civilization") to be either faintly mocking or foolish, clearly reveals a split based on geography and culture, between the western and eastern United States. His clear desire to change, then, suggests a need to shake off the western character. He wrote to his sister Pamela Moffett during his courtship of Langdon that "When I am permanently settled—& when I am a Christian—& when I have demonstrated that I have a good, steady, reliable character, her parents will withdraw their objections, & she may marry me—I say she will" (Smith 295).

This "settling" undoubtedly would impact the writing of a man whose career had been built on a persona suspicious of "good, steady, reliable" characters, a persona suspicious of just about everything. It is telling that a man who had earned fame as a humorist from the West would court a woman that he hoped "could smooth out his western rough edges" (Willis 36). Olivia Langdon, for her part, identified the transformation of Twain's public identity as a humorist as key to his "conversion." She wrote in an 1869 letter that she wanted "the public . . . to know something of his deeper, larger nature—I remember being quite incensed by a lady's asking, 'Is there anything of Mr. Clemens except his humour?'" (qtd. in Willis 43). Langdon, who was "incensed" by such a question, surely wanted Twain to eradicate any suspicion of his superficiality and wished him to devote himself to the Christian gentility of her circle; Twain, in turn, wanted her help. He wrote to her: "You say to me: 'I shall pray for you daily.' Not any words that ever were spoken to me have touched me like these . . . I have been thinking, thinking, thinking—& what I have arrived at, is the conviction that I would be less than a man if I went on in my old careless way while you were praying for me" (Smith 250).

This surrender to the upper-middle-class values of the Langdon family is further evidence of the pressure Twain felt to become a part of the cultural establishment of the Northeast. Was this desire to belong what drove Twain to undermine his criticism of Dickens by claiming he might be misled by "first impressions"? Was this conversion what led him to dial back his mocking tone while in Hartford? Justin Kaplan notes that "within five years of their marriage, Sam Clemens the bohemian and vagabond had undergone a thorough transformation. He embraced upper-middle-class values. . . . Clemens began to find himself as a writer by joining the social order instead of freeing himself from it" (Kaplan 80–81). These articles for the San Francisco *Daily Alta California* were written at the moment when that shift begins to occur in earnest. While watching Charles Dickens read on New Year's Eve in 1867 and while writing back to California with a report a few weeks later, Mark Twain was

concerned with a multitude of identity issues. He was newly arrived in the American Northeast, the hub of the literary establishment, after years of making himself known in the distinctly different western territories. He was trying to get a literary career started in earnest with the writing of his first book, *The Innocents Abroad*. He was hobnobbing in circles he had admired from afar, though disappointed with the sad reality of "greatness." And he was trying to impress a girl. Twain's sharp wit gives his narrative voice a sure sense of control, but the man behind the pen certainly was not as confident as he seemed.

Twain Goes To Boston

On July 25, 1869, the *Daily Alta California* published Twain's thirteenth letter in this series, written from the headquarters of America's literary life, Boston, Massachusetts. This was, as Twain indicated in his title, "A First Visit to Boston." This first visit to the revered home of so many important figures in American literature, and the second to last in this group of articles for the *Alta*, is a useful concentration of many of the tensions weaving through these writings. In Boston, his complex identity and stance is highlighted: he simultaneously reveres the old city and self-consciously mocks his own reverence. Once again, he vacillates between respect and disrespect, between expectation of grandeur and disappointment at the meagerness of reality. Confronted with his own uneasy status as a western humorist in Boston, he finds a way, through his writing, to negotiate that difficult position. Often in Twain's career, "humor confers needed reassurance and control" (Florence 11), and this letter from Boston is no exception.

The letter to the *Alta* begins with an image of Boston as a labyrinth, a perspective that begins many of these letters. In his letter, Twain leaves the train sleepy-eyed, stumbles onto a boy looking for work, and agrees to let the boy carry his baggage and lead him to a hotel. As he walks behind the boy, he asks, "'why don't you go straight?'" The boy responds, "'Go straight in Boston—ain't he innocent, though?'" This exchange and its context establish Twain's portrayal of both himself and the city at the moment of arrival. Like the man sitting in the audience waiting to hear The Great Charles Dickens, Twain's narrator in this article begins by being overwhelmed. Twain had earned his fame through stories like "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," which uses the device of the naïve easterner being duped by the "streetwise" westerner, but here, in his journalism, the situation is reversed and modified. Twain is now the naïve one, the westerner is the "innocent," and the East, personified in the twists and turns of Boston's streets, becomes the

wild loop of power. Twain, asking the boy to “go straight” could be the narrator of “Jumping Frog” who is bamboozled into writhing within the convoluted narrative of Simon Wheeler’s story. Now, Twain positions himself as the stranger, and his power (as western colloquial hero) is initially gone.

Twain remains largely at odds with himself in Boston, never settling into one position; he cannot decide who he wants to be in this world, the visitor proud of his uncorrupted perspective on New England gentility or the sycophant yearning for entrance into the culture. He notes that his host for the trip is “Rev. Petroleum V. Nasby,” the satiric humorist and journalist, which indicates (as the by-line “Mark Twain” does) that we cannot read everything with expectations of sincerity. Nevertheless, Twain clearly establishes himself, as the narrator of the piece, as an outsider. He consistently refers to himself as a “stranger” there and seems anxious about his relationship to the city, claiming, “One must keep a careful rein upon his ‘gushing’ instincts, else he will shortly find himself loving Boston instead of merely admiring it—and such conduct as that would be undignified in a stranger.” He writes beautifully about the cityscape, claiming that the organic design “impels a man to assume a luxurious waltz-step” and provides a “Venetian picturesqueness of effect.” Importantly, Twain focuses much of his praises (seemingly sincere) on the *visual* beauty of the city. His “gushing” is not about the role of the city as a cultural center or a collection of Great American Artists (after all, the whole New England circle—Longfellow, Whittier, Emerson, Lowell—centered around Boston), but about “picturesqueness.” He is visually impressed, not morally.

This distinction becomes more clear as Twain’s section on “Boston Antiquities” begins. Here he clearly chuckles at the propensity toward historical self-importance. He laughs at the Boston Massacre, of which he writes “Nasby says it only consisted in the crippling of three mulattoes and an Irishman—and [Bostonians] still point out three or four places where it occurred.” His reduction of the event, troubling as the racial overtones are, clearly mocks the sense of self-righteousness that he perceives here. His continued discussion of Old South Church with the British cannon ball lodged in its side (“every time the Old South Church wears out they build another and stick the cannon ball in again, and go on overcoming the stranger with it as serenely as ever), Benjamin Franklin (“If it had not been for him . . . I wouldn’t have been so harried and worried and raked out of bed at such unseemly hours when I was young”), the site of the Boston Tea Party (“I shall always respect these Indians, for tea is a poor insipid beverage”), and Bunker Hill (“The view from the top of the monument is one of the grandest the continent can afford . . . I did not go up”) clearly show him unimpressed with this history. These are the events in

American history and myth for which Boston is famous, and Twain dismisses each one. By doing this, he de-mythologizes Boston for his California readers. He takes their expectations—and possibly his own—and tears them down piece by piece. By the end of this section, American icons are reduced to unimpressive events, annoying men, and a mediocre hill.

Twain, as one might expect, retains his power in his language, in the way he lampoons the reverence he feels early on in the piece. The de-mythologizing serves as a straightening of the labyrinth, a way out of the twists the little boy led him through. After a day or two with Nasby in Boston, Twain has mastered it. He now is again the savvy westerner, ably controlling his environment by revealing it as the sham that it is while maintaining his position as an outsider. Whereas before this position seemed an aspect of his anxiousness, by the end it is the quality that gives him his control of the situation. He transforms himself from a “stranger” worried about being “undignified” to someone with “foreign prejudices,” and finally to a man who brags that he has discovered the way “you can palm yourself on the unsuspecting . . . native, and so be respected.” Significantly, in a section of the letter titled “Boston Politeness,” Twain credits Boston’s citizens with the ability to “[teach] lost strangers how to find themselves.” Twain, himself, in the movement of his piece, “finds himself”; initially he is lost in a labyrinth, but by the end he takes control by whimsically deconstructing Boston’s righteous sense of itself.

The articles Twain writes for the San Francisco *Daily Alta California* between November, 1867, and August, 1869, are both an expression of tension and a movement toward the resolution of it. He at once reveals a mind that is at odds with the West/East dichotomy, struggling to reconcile two seemingly disparate cultural worlds, and a mind that finds power and control by applying the “horse sense” of the frontier to the high-falutin’ cultural life of the American Northeast. In Washington, it is easy to lampoon the foolishness; in Hartford, mockery is less reliable. When Twain sees Charles Dickens, he must confront his own understanding of himself. He says, finally, that “the great do tumble” when he sees him in person, but why would Twain feel such an obligation to write about that tumbling? Is it because of his readership, westerners who relish bringing the culturally elite down a peg? Is it because Twain himself needs to understand Dickens’s weakness and humanity in order to feel comfortable with his own ability and status? And when Twain enters Boston for the first time, he is confused—in a “labyrinth.” But he finds his power again in his outsider perspective, and he is able to reveal the elite status of Boston as a sham.

Through all the articles, one can sense a negotiation of identity, Twain's attempt to make decisions about who he was and who he wanted to be. The common thread, though, is vacillation between awe and mockery, the sense that the "great" exist but also "tumble." It is as if Twain consciously recognizes and rejoices in the common foolishness of humanity—Charles Dickens, after all, is just another man with hair like a Scotch-terrier and the righteousness of Boston is easily deflated—but instinctively feels a sense of reverence for this world he does not belong to. In the late 1860s, Twain wants to be a successful writer. He also wants to win the hand of Olivia Langdon, please his readers, and be taken seriously. Yet, he does not know how to do it, how to both be a part of the establishment and stand away from it, both a member of the literati and one who knows its humble foolishness. In the face of such tensions, he decides to do the only reasonable thing: be funny.

Appendix

A Calendar of *Daily Alta* Letters Discussed

1. "Letter From 'Mark Twain.'" *Daily Alta California*. 8 Jan. 1868. 1.
2. "Mark Twain in Washington." *Daily Alta California*. 15 Jan. 1868. 1.
3. "Letter From 'Mark Twain.'" *Daily Alta California*. 21 Jan. 1868. 2.
4. "Mark Twain in Washington." *Daily Alta California*. 28 Jan. 1868. 2.
5. "Mark Twain in Washington." *Daily Alta California*. 5 Feb. 1868. 2.
6. "Mark Twain in Washington." *Daily Alta California*. 11 Feb. 1868. 1.
7. "Mark Twain in Washington." *Daily Alta California*. 14 Feb. 1868. 2.
8. "Mark Twain in Washington." *Daily Alta California*. 19 Feb. 1868. 1.
9. "Mark Twain on His Travels." *Daily Alta California*. 3 March 1868. 1.
10. "Letter From 'Mark Twain.'" *Daily Alta California*. 6 Sep. 1868. 1.
11. "Letter From 'Mark Twain.'" *Daily Alta California*. 15 Nov. 1868. 1.
12. "Letter From 'Mark Twain.'" *Daily Alta California*. 22 Nov. 1868. 1.
13. "Letter From 'Mark Twain.'" *Daily Alta California*. 25 July 1869. 1.
14. "Letter From 'Mark Twain.'" *Daily Alta California*. 1 Aug. 1869. 1.

Notes

¹The correspondences with the *Alta* published between January 8, 1868, and August 1, 1869, were made available by the work of Barbara Schmidt, who posted them on the Internet. They can be found at <http://www.twainquotes.com/altaindex.html>. Though I

consulted the original microfilm of the *Alta* for accuracy and context, much of my work emerged from consulting the online versions, versions also used by Twain's most recent biographer, Everett Emerson. Parenthetical references to the specific articles are noted by date of publication, since the titles were often identical.

²Everett Emerson characterizes this period in Twain's life as full of "uncertainties about his literary identity." (Emerson focuses this discussion around Twain's New York experiences a year earlier, before leaving on the *Quaker City*, but is clearly making broader claims for a more lasting trend in Twain's thinking in these years). He writes, "The coarseness that he had identified with, even cultivated in the West—what part was it to have in the continuing development of the literary personality of Mark Twain? Samuel Clemens obviously did not know" (44–45). Kaplan specifically characterizes Twain's time in Washington the same way: "Clemens threw himself into a bewildering tangle of projects and seemed to run on nervous energy flogged by ambition, restlessness, the need for money, and, above all, an indecision about who he was and what he wanted to be" (57).

³Frank Luther Mott gives the *Oregon Spectator* (1846) status as the first Western paper, p. 288.

⁴In *Mark Twain and His World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), Justin Kaplan details the first time Samuel Clemens signed his name "Mark Twain" in 1863, signaling the beginning of the comic persona in his career as a journalist, pp. 53–54.

⁵This paper, though of the same name, is a different *Californian* than the one absorbed at the creation of the *Alta*.

⁶According to Twain's article, "Harris is Lord High Minister of Finance to the King of the Sandwich Islands."

⁷Twain also had dinner with Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe during this 1867 holiday season (Hoffman 135).

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