

**Elmira 2005:
The Fifth International Conference
on the State of Mark Twain Studies**

Keynote Session

August 5, 2005

Tom Quirk's Introduction of Ron Powers

I do not have a prepared text for this introduction. I have thought long and hard about it, but I never had the confidence to commit my thoughts to paper. So I have this nervous feeling that I may enjoy a Whittier birthday speech moment this evening.

I read recently a quote from a Twain letter. He's writing, I think, to Whitelaw Reid, and he says he has a juicy anecdote to tell him next time he sees him. He says, "Meantime, and preserving it in alcohol in my own person...."

I have been preserving this introduction (as some of you probably have seen me the last couple of nights) in my own person. In any case I do have notes, but I can't read them without my glasses.

You know the genre of the introduction is quite simple, particularly when you have an eminent person like we do tonight. You should rehearse the person's credentials. Ron Powers's are considerable, and I will get to those in a moment. But, I think the genre is essentially wrong because, as Twain was insistent upon, you need a sense of proportion to properly judge the merits of a thing. As he has Tom Sawyer say somewhere, "Caesar's servants didn't know how great he was. They were too close to him."

So, I thought I would talk about me for a second.

After all, I'm not without my credentials. . . .

When I was nine, I won an archery contest. Now, my father was the judge, but I was the only one that hit the bail of hay, so, I took it.

In eighth grade I won a trophy in basketball. Never mind that a friend/teammate of mine and I had switched jerseys so that the judge got us wrong. I kept the trophy.

And when I was an assistant professor I won a door prize. It was the twelfth edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. The thirteenth edition came out two months later. One consequence is that I once had a book manuscript rejected because it was bibliographically naïve.

Now, I instance these so that I can turn to the credentials of Ron Powers. I can't get through them all, and I don't mean to. I will start, though, by mentioning, because I think it's a significant fact, that he graduated



*Dr. Thomas Quirk, University of Missouri,
Conference Co-Chair, introduces Ron Powers.*

from Hannibal High School in 1959. That's not one of his honors or awards, by the way. Anyone could have done it. I could have done it, except for algebra, myself.

But, he did in fact go to the University of Missouri, my own home institution. And if the Journalism School had a lick of sense, they would have brought him back and given him an honorary degree, but they won't listen to me. But maybe they will very soon.

In any case I wish to give a digest, because I have other things to say – a digest of Ron's accomplishments. He has worn many hats – teacher; writer, of course; television commentator. He was a commentator for CBS news, CBS *Sunday Morning* from 1983 to 1988. And in 1984, he won an Emmy. He wrote for GQ magazine. He was a commentator for WMAQ-TV in Chicago, where in 1977 he also won an Emmy. He wrote for the *Chicago Sun Times*, as a reporter and columnist, and in 1973 he won a Pulitzer Prize in Criticism.

I think that that might give you a sense of perspective. That's why I mentioned my own credentials. At this point I wanted to propose a toast. However it turns out I am premature on that score, because right now people were supposed to march in with splits of champagne, but Michael Kiskis forgot to place the order. In any case I will propose a toast and you can have your beverage later. It's a favorite toast of Twain's. I think it's Irish, but I don't know. I'll ask you later. Or maybe it's Pudd'nhead Wilson's toast. But the toast is, "As you mount the hill of prosperity, may you never meet a friend." The reason for mentioning my own credentials is to tell Ron, that I lag behind for friendship's sake.

My anecdote at the opening comes from this book [*Mark Twain: A Life*], and I wish to say a little bit about this book in a second. But first of all, it's not his first book; it's his thirteenth book. I'm not going to mention all the titles; there are thirteen of them including two novels. Many, probably most of you, are familiar with *Dangerous Water: A Biography of the Boy Who Became Mark Twain*. Some of you have probably read *White Town Drowning*. Others of you may have read *Tom and Huck Don't Live Here Anymore*. In part, that is part of the reason for mentioning that Ron graduated from Hannibal High School. He has certifiable Hannibal credentials. He also in collaboration with James Bradley wrote *Flags of Our Fathers*, which was number one on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for five weeks, and on the list itself for forty-six weeks. At the moment it is in development as a motion picture, with Stephen Spielberg as the producer, and Clint Eastwood as the director. . . .Did I mention that I once won an archery contest?

I could go on, in this vein, because there's lots of stuff here to cite, but I won't. I want to turn my attention to this book and to give you a taste of it. It's a big book. It's a heavy book. It's 723 pages. And if you recall, I forgot how he phrased it, isn't it Dr. Johnson who said about *Paradise Lost*, "no one ever wished it were longer." I finished this book last week. I wished it were longer. It's a damn good book, Ron.

And I want to give you a couple of specimens. Only someone who grew up in a small town, and who was a writer himself, with a wonderful sense of humor himself, I think could have written this. And I won't read it all, but I will only read a few passages. It's in the early going of the book, growing up in Hannibal. And it goes . . .

The river meant everything to the town. It carried away tobacco, hemp, pork, and whiskey, and brought back cash. It offered a continuing vaudeville of floating humanity: the solitary canoeists – trappers, Indians – gliding past the town on the tide; the raftsmen and flatboatmen and the

keelboatmen. Mark Twain could never stop describing the Mississippi as seen through Sammy's eyes. "The hungry Mississippi . . . astonished the children beyond measure," he wrote in his first long work of fiction. "Its mile-wide breadth of water seemed an ocean to them . . . and the vague riband of trees on the further shore, the verge of a continent which surely none but they had ever seen before."

Nothing compared to the featured attraction. First the deep coughing of the engines from perhaps a mile distant. Then a series of whistle blasts that echoed off the hillsides. Then the emergence from behind the bluff of the towering white emissary from Somewhere most unmistakably Else: first the prow of the three-tired superstructure, the thirty-foot smokestacks pumping plumes of soot into the air; the high pilothouse and a figure at the knobbed wheel, staring ahead through the unglazed window; and then the rest of the boat's curving three-hundred-foot length, festooned with fluttering banners, pennants, the American Flag; the boat's name written in bright decorative script across the paddle-wheel casing to break the whiteness (22).

Ron Powers is a stylist. He is also awfully funny. And I am going to give you one more passage. This is when Twain is turning to the American Vandal speech, impatient because the book itself is slow in production. And he's got his lecture but he doesn't have his book. (Ron was telling me this afternoon that he was sent on a reading tour and a lecture tour for a novel, and there always was one stop ahead of the novel, so there is another point of identification.) But anyway this is the description I want to read . . .

The lecture, however, was ready. The finishing surge had kicked in after Mark stopped trying to please others, and homed in on the Holy Land adventure as he had experienced and understood it. In a day or two, he cobbled together a lecture of ninety minutes, taken whole, or lightly edited, from sections of the book manuscript. At the center of this work a gaudy figure preened himself, feet planted apart, green bottle-glasses covering his eyes. He clutched a parasol with one hand and a Bible in the other. His pockets bulged with trinkets and chipped-off specimens from cathedrals, the ruins of statues, the surface of the Sphinx. He was an American, his name was the Vandal, and he was ready to rock (252).

Another virtue of this book is its title which is only four words long. I tell you that because now I am going to read the title of tonight's lecture. And I'm going to dive right in and I hope to emerge on the other end of it with a verb in my mouth, but we will see. The title of tonight's lecture: "Of All Else, I Have Avoided Thee: On Finally Ending Thirty-odd Years on the Literary Lam and Facing Up to the Biography that a Transparent Person with Wings Instructed Me to Write Shortly After I Was Born, in Hannibal, Missouri."

Ladies and Gentlemen, Ron Powers.

(This Keynote Introduction is available on the Elmira College Center for Mark Twain Studies website with the permission of Dr. Thomas Quirk, University of Missouri.)

“Of All Else, I Have Avoided Thee: On Finally Ending Thirty-odd Years on the Literary Lam and Facing Up to the Biography that a Transparent Person with Wings Instructed Me to Write Shortly After I Was Born, in Hannibal, Missouri.”

Ron Powers

I think my father knew Hannibal better than anyone since Sam left town. He sold Fuller Brushes door-to-door there for most of his life.

Sometimes, when he came home to dinner at night, Dad would have a special announcement for us. He would say, “I was in one of them prom’nent homes today.”

By “prom’nent homes,” my father meant the scattering of wealthy households in Hannibal. There was still an aristocratic taint back in those days, but not much of one, so Dad only got to break this news to us about two or three times a year. But it never failed to tickle him. It meant that he’d had a pretty good payday. The ladies in them prom’nent homes had a lot of rooms to clean, so they usually bought a lot of Fuller mops and brooms and witch-hazel disinfectant.

But it meant something else, too. It meant that for a few minutes, Paul Powers of Nebo, Illinois had been able to brush up against that aristocratic taint: to touch the insides of a world that was otherwise inaccessible to him: a world of accomplished and sophisticated people who understood the way things worked, and made things happen. My Dad usually never made it past the kitchen, but he could at least peer down the hallway and get a glimpse of the light that fell on the bookshelves and the upholstered furniture.

I always used to dread that announcement of my father’s; it made me squirm. He was my Dad. I wanted to look up to him. I didn’t like



Ron Powers delivers his keynote address.

to hear him remind us that we were that far down on the Hannibal social scale. But as time went on, I realized that Dad's delight in these fancy households was not based on envy; it was based on pride. Pride on behalf of the town, of which he was, after all, a member. If a few of the folks in Hannibal could make it to this level, then it reflected well on everybody. It enriched us all. Dad's delight in the prom'nent houses was based on inclusion, not exclusion.

Tonight I stand inside your prom'nent home. And I feel the pride of inclusion. The Mark Twain Conference is your consecrated place. Your scholarship, your criticism, your teaching, your writing on the great and infinite subject of Mark Twain have exalted this campus and enriched America's understanding of this author, and of itself. In fact, considering the distinguished scholars here from Japan, Korea, China, Israel, the United Kingdom, Canada, Austria and other places, I should say that you have enriched the world's understanding.

So here I stand in the kitchen. I guess you could call me a salesman, like my father: my product costs thirty-five dollars, more than Dad usually made in a week, and at six hundred twenty-six pages of dense type, it's guaranteed to last you a lifetime. I'd sure be proud to put you all down for an order.

I am grateful for your hospitality—which really commenced nearly four years ago, when this project of mine began. I called on many of you for help. And you responded. You responded with information and harvested from your own research, and you responded with unlimited generosity. And you were willing to accept on faith that what you offered would not be profaned by a writer of unproven legitimacy and undeclared motives presuming to write one more life of Mark Twain.

The exemplar of all of you is Robert Hirst. Everyone here knows of the great cathedral of Mark Twain scholarship that Bob and his associate editors have been assembling out at Berkeley for nearly the last thirty years, brick by brick and footnote by footnote.

Bob didn't have time to help me. But he did it anyway.

Bob was a critical reader of my manuscript, advisor on matters of citation, source-material, accuracy and the thousands of small niggling questions that lie in the path of every work as factually dense as a life of Mark Twain. The book is dedicated to him and his colleagues.

I have heard admirers of Bob's lament that we will never see a Robert Hirst biography of Mark Twain, which would beggar the very concept of "definitive," and I think of the witch's prophecy to Macbeth out on the heath: "Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none."

But this is not true. The work you are building, Bob, is biography of a scale and sweep never before contemplated in scholarship or literature. It will stand, sole, incomparable, as long as men and women read. Thou art a king.

I could mention so many others: Tom Quirk, who passed along to me his daughter Ann's investigatory query that has such relevance for anyone trying to re-create a human life: "How do astronauts go to the bathroom?"

Meaning, *What was it like? What was it like back then, back there, at ground level, the level at which food was cooked and clothing was worn, and babies were cared for? What did Virginia City look like at night? What did the Eastern lecture circuit feel like from a train in the torrents of January?* Thanks to Ann Quirk, I decided to find out.

And thank you, Tom, for your own powerful diagnostic questions as you read portions of

the manuscript.

I thank Terry Oggel, who shared his scholarship of Mark Twain's late-life social criticism, even though I greeted him in my first e-mail as "Dear Terry Toggel." (If I'd just toggled Google and ogled Oggel, I wouldn't have made that mistake.) And Gary Scharnhorst, who sent me the files of interviews with Mark Twain, compiled for his forthcoming book on that subject.

My Hannibal friends Terrell Dempsey and Henry Sweets. Terrell offered me the wealth of his groundbreaking investigations into the true history of slavery in Northeast Missouri during Sam Clemens's time there. And Henry, the director of the Mark Twain Museum in Hannibal, supplied many arcane facts and some indispensable photograph permissions.

Here in Elmira, Gretchen Sharlow, Barbara Snedecor and Mark Woodhouse enriched my grasp of life at Quarry Farm, and Michael Kiskis answered my unscheduled knock on his office door for a discussion of his theory of biography.

I was able to follow most of it.

I thank Shelley Fisher Fishkin for her encouragement in the early stages of my work. Shelley actually *was* the transparent person with wings in the idiotic title of my talk. And I thank her for the great gift to the culture of her splendid Oxford Mark Twain.

I'm so sorry that Louis Budd is not with us here. I wanted to tell him what respect I have for him and what a debt I owe him. I revere his discerning great-hearted scholarship, always expressed in such graceful and disarming prose. I made extensive use of the contemporary reviews he compiled and edited. And I was guided through my writing by a thought of his that appears near the end of "Our Mark Twain."

"More recklessly than ever, western society is frittering away the strengths and pleasures of a shared tradition. Although [Mark] Twain foments revolt against dead values, his image can help us hold on to a viable past that will add resonance to the future."

I hope to convince you tonight how clarifying this thought of Lou Budd's has been to my aims, as I began to understand them.

I could go on, and I know you're afraid that I might. The point is that in a very real sense, "Mark Twain: a Life" is a collective effort involving so many of you. As the person who has organized your contributions into a narrative, I can only say that I hope I've represented you well.

What was my goal in writing this book? My goal was to make him fresh again. Challenge enough in itself, I think, when one is confronting this colossus. Mark Twain, like Lincoln and perhaps no one else in America's history, is at once over-written and inexhaustible.

I decided to proceed with as few pre-conceived notions of Mark Twain as possible. That wasn't easy—thanks to you guys, and the scholars who came before you.

There have been about forty biographies of Mark Twain, full or partial, as well as essays and critical studies numbering in the tens of thousands. This body of work is saturated with distinguished analysis and arresting ideas, many of which have taken on virtually the power of settled truth in our collective understanding of this man.

Among the most irresistible templates, as you all know, has been psychobiography. How could it not be? Let's face it—the man was a walking cry for help. His unconscious had an unconscious. His various anxieties, depressions, repressions, denials, deceptions, sublimations, his

embedded and empowered emprivilegements, his destabilizations, subversions, reversions, perversions, inversions, *new* versions. . .his personas, dualities, masks, impostures, inventions, self-inventions, re-inventions, and other “ventions” too numerous to mention. . .

All of these have become part of our common language for discussing Mark Twain. The old radio comedian Goodman Ace once defined “the novel” as “a long work of narrative fiction that has something wrong with it.” I think we can all agree that Mark Twain was a writer of long narrative fiction who had something wrong with him.

Unlike the rest of us.

I joke here, but in fact I recognize the legitimacy and in fact the profundity to be found in much of this diagnostic work. I very much admired Justin Kaplan’s seminal study of Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain. I suppose I would even help Van Wyck Brooks fix a flat tire if I had a spare in my trunk.

But I do believe that in the decades since Justin Kaplan’s study, diagnostic commentary *about* Mark Twain, however valuable, has all but replaced the evocation *of* Mark Twain. I’m well aware that biography as portraiture is out of fashion. I am also well aware that the society I live in is out of heroes, out of unifying cultural icons, out of sorts, and just about out of its mind with cynicism, mutual suspicion, and a collapse of faith in anything like a common vision of America.

I decided that if there is even the sliver of a chance that a biography these days might fulfill its ancient function—the illumination of an exemplary life—then I would take that approach. I’m willing to let this be the “something wrong” that my book has with it.

And so I decided to rid myself of weapons of mass deconstruction. And begin a journey of discovery as unmitigated by received opinion as is possible in this hyper-resonant field of endeavor.

This led me to a happy realization: that I could make this a book of voices. Or largely so. The voices drew me immediately, and they were irresistible. They called out to me from the volumes and the archives at Berkeley.

Mark Twain’s voice pre-eminently; ringed by the voices of those who knew him; and in the orbit just beyond theirs, the ambient voices of his America as that America transformed itself—and was transformed by him—over the seven and a half decades of his life.

Let me visit these categories in a little more detail.

His voice: His many voices: The tireless raconteur’s voice that poured forth from his letters. His *inner* voice; his dream-voice if I could get it—the voice unmediated for anyone else’s eyes. The voice of the notebooks and journals; that wild, antic, list-making, brooding, stream-of-consciousness voice fired by a consciousness that never stopped burning.

And placed in tension with the personal voice, I wanted that revised, mediated voice of his as it appeared on the page in so many varieties: in his journalism, his sketches, speeches, and his literature. And I wanted the countless voices that lived within that voice: Jim, and Huck, and Roxana, and Sociable Jimmy, and Mary Cord, and Colonel Sellers, and all the rest. The interlacing of his personal and his literary voices allows the reader to make connections between his life and his art far more revealing, far more intimate, than can be achieved by the biographer’s intervening elbow in the ribs. So: much of my strategy consisted in trying to stay the hell out of the way: to arrange the material itself, and let it flow; and not become a traffic cop between the reader and the subject.

The voices of those who knew him: Most prominently, Howells. The letters between Clemens and Howells.

After reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*,” Howells wrote, “I wish I had been on that island.” Well, I wish I could have been there at Ober’s restaurant in Boston with the two of them, noshing on those shoe-peg mushrooms.

The Clemens-Howells letters were actually what inspired the idea of a book of voices. Of all the lyrics that comprised the opera “Mark Twain,” his long comic and heartbreaking duet with Howells was the most affecting for me; the richest in humanity, and the best barometer of the shifting intellectual thought of the times.

I loved it when Howells was trying to get down with Sam, slip out from under the weight of Western letters, and just be a *guy*. Or more accurately, a boy.

Slogging along in the mud to the Centennial, till they had to give it up. Writing their goofy doomed Colonel Sellers play together and getting hysterical about it. What a glimpse into an American friendship of a kind that is almost unimaginable now. When I tell people that I wept for what I had to leave out—and I have—I’m thinking largely of stuff that began, “My Dear Clemens,” and “My Dear Howells.”

And of course Olivia, and Jane Clemens; and Susy. And Clara. (pause) I think it’s time to parole Clara; she’s served nearly a century for conspiracy to launder her father’s image; but she *has* some *things* to *say*. I was not prepared for the radiance of Clara Clemens’s prose in “My Father Mark Twain”: high Victorian, to be sure, sentimental and protective, yes; but punctuated by bursts of aphorism and intimacy and psychological depth. . .and *truth*. . .unavailable anywhere else.

Here she is recalling Howells sharing a joke with her father during a visit: “Both of them red in the face from laughing, with abundant gray hair straggling over their foreheads and restless feet that carried them away from their seats and back again.”

Clara was good with hair. Here’s her memory of a scene at Quarry Farm, beside the stone wall on a summer morning: “Aunt Sue was picking flowers, and my father had joined her before starting his day’s work. His lovely gray hair was shining in the sunlight and his arms, greatly agitated by his thoughts, made life dangerous for Aunt Sue.”



Ron Powers.

This is human life being captured in the moment of living.

Here is Clara on the touchy subject of Father’s anger: “When [his temper] escaped into the open, it was a grand sight. Here was the liberation of the caged wild animals of the earth.” And again: “. . .there was something so overtowering in his personality that my sisters and I often felt positive awe in his presence. It was a feeling so strong that sometimes it seemed as if a voice were saying: Take care. He may appear to be harmless, but without action or words he can smother you with the mere greatness of his intellect.”

I think that maybe she tacked on that

“mere greatness of his intellect” part just to be nice.

Images such as these collapse the distance between then and now. . .and between reader and page. They help create the state of reading unconstrained, which the late John Gardner called “the vivid and continuous dream.”

And then of course Orion, with his divine cluelessness; Orion who could not understand why Sam objected to the gorilla in his knockoff of a Jules Verne fantasy. Orion grudgingly tumbles to Sam that all right, maybe he *had* been reading “Journey to the Center of the Earth,” but he swears that his gorilla has nothing to do with Verne’s gorilla. Verne gives only a partial description of *his* gorilla, Orion points out, “and the thing turns out to be a dream.” Whereas “my gorilla is not an ape, as his is; mine is a gentleman.”

How much labored exposition on a biographer’s part would it take to capture the psychological truths contained in that little scene? A lot. (pause) Too much.

And then the rest of them; Twichell, and Mary Fairbanks, and the Cranes, and Bret Harte, and Henry Rogers. The whole dang gang. Heaven for climate—Sam’s crowd for society.

And finally the *ambient voices of America* as it transformed itself and was transformed by him: the high and morally improving diction of his literary predecessors Emerson and Lowell and Holmes, the *uber*-voices of the New England Renaissance, which his voice supplanted as representative of America.

The voices of the critics who reviewed his works *in his time*,—thank you, Mr. Budd—never quite getting it. Never quite equipped to fully recognize his innovations of tone and dialect and indirection, until late in his life they rushed past him with their new diagnostic tools, and misunderstood him on a far more sophisticated level.

The voices of the ministers who denounced him from the pulpit, and of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s snotty daughter Ellen; and poor Mrs. Thomas Bailey Aldrich; and the voices of the handbills and advertisements; and the voices in the hopeful fan letters written in gorgeous calligraphic swirl and sent to Hartford by the admiring schoolteachers and merchants out there where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night. And the voice of the Texas schoolboy Wattie Bowser. I’d really like to chill with Wattie Bowser.

You may be wondering: What’s with all the voices, *anyway*? Who cares about Orion’s gorilla? Isn’t it more biographically correct to say what one *thinks* about Orion’s gorilla?

Here’s what’s with the voices.

Novelists understand that dialogue reveals character; and that character is fate. The biographer’s “dialogue” is letters, journals, diaries, and the written work of the subject. The more that I can invite Mark Twain and the people around him to say what is on their minds, the less I need to speak for them: impose my 21st-century theoretical constructs on their wonderful 19th-century minds.

I would prefer that instead of your taking my word on the psychic relationship between Sam and Mary Fairbanks—what was really going on while she was smearing him with Egyptian jam—or the balance of hatred and pity that Sam felt toward Orion—or even whether Sam Clemens and Mark Twain were identical twins born in separate cities—I’d prefer that you read what they all have to say and make up your own mind. Collaboration between author and reader is a disappearing pleasure. With a storehouse like the one I had to work with, I could

hardly resist bringing it back, for at least one encore.

Now, I will admit that the urge to interpret can be overpowering—Mr. Freud has entered our DNA—and I couldn't always resist. I struggled against it. I only called him our first rock star once.

Well, twice. Three times, max.

I want to talk briefly about the sound and function of my own voice in the book. It is not always an uninflected voice. I did not always manage to keep it tonally neutral, or sequestered from the idioms and cultural references that betray my time and place. "Rock star," for instance.

I don't take this question of authorial voice lightly. I recognize it as an ethical matter: the biographer is not entitled to crowd his subject off the page with a glut of opinionizing and mannerism.

But any biography is to some extent a conversation between the present and the past—between the author's frame of consciousness and the subject's. Mark Twain was intensely curious about the time period he referred to as "a hundred years hence." To an almost uncanny degree, he was a prophet of it and an intuitive progenitor of it. He anticipated so much of our popular and political culture, and as I began to perceive this, I began to take note of it. So I hope that my occasionally "inflected" voice will be understood as a kind of salute back to him from the land of Hence.

I want to move on finally to identify what became my central source of fascination for Mark Twain as I wrote into his life. It was a quality that illuminated everything else that has endured about him. It is his consciousness. The sheer unabating intensity of his consciousness. The quality that made everything else about him possible. And sometimes, sadly necessary.

The great rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel enshrined this quality with the phrase, "radical amazement"—the sense of wonder that sometimes overcomes us at the sheer fact and great mystery of simply being alive. It was always overcoming Mark Twain; it never let up. Michael Lerner once said that Rabbi Heschel was the first person he'd ever met who took God seriously. Too bad Mr. Lerner couldn't have met Sam. Sam took God seriously enough to call him out for not existing—at least in terms of the Christian faith, as he understood it.

But then he took everything seriously. Chesterton said he was a quintessential American—an unfathomably solemn man. Typesetting, steamboat navigation, phrenology, chess, spoken language, silver-mining speculation, charades, shuffleboard, the precision of words, mechanical inventions, business investment, riding a bicycle. He wasn't very good at these last three things, but he took them seriously. He thought about them; he learned them, or tried to. He wanted to eat them. He took the measles seriously enough to want a case for himself. Everything that fell within his hearing or his line of sight was the most important thing in the world. *It was* the world. And when he went to sleep, he kept on taking it seriously, in his dreams.

But as with the voices, you may legitimately ask, *So what?* What is it that elevates this charged consciousness of Mark Twain's beyond a mere curiosity and gives it legitimacy as a biographical theme?

Let me try to explain it by calling your attention again to the words of Louis Budd in “Our Mark Twain”: “More recklessly than ever, western society is frittering away the strengths and pleasures of a shared tradition. Although [Mark]Twain foments revolt against dead values, his image can help us hold on to a viable past that will add resonance to the future.”

I believe that our culture has largely forgotten how to notice things. We’ve forgotten that there are things worth noticing. We live at a remove from the actual: in a world in which direct experience has been replaced by the movement of electronic impulses; a world in which “the land” has dissipated into “property”: “place” has melted into “venue”; “passion” has congealed into rage, and sex has been cyberized. We live in a world in which the astronauts never *need* to go to the bathroom.

Our language has atrophied along with this failure of radical amazement. It lasted for a while after Mark Twain was finished with it, to be sure: listen to the vibrancy of American language as spoken by James Agee in 1940, one of Sam’s many children except for a sense of humor. Which still leaves a lot.

Here is Agee struggling to burst through the limits of language and make us one with those Alabama sharecroppers he visited in the summer of 1936.

He says, “For in the immediate world, *everything* is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and *centrally* and *simply*, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of *itself* as a symphony, perhaps as *no* symphony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.”

I think Mark Twain would say “amen” to that. If he could bring himself to say, “amen.”

But just half a century after Agee, that radiance had dimmed to the point where our language could be seen as “industrialized.” Here is Wendell Berry, in his 1983 essay, “Standing by Words.”

Berry writes of “The specialist poet”: the writer who, “like an industrialist. . . is interested in words for the sake of what they can be made to produce.” This sort of poet, Berry charges, “degrades the subject to ‘subject matter’ or raw material, so that the subject exists for the poem’s sake, is *subjected* to that poem, in the same way as industrial specialists see trees or ore-bearing rocks as raw material subjected to their manufactured end-products. . .

Berry maintains that “the subject of poetry is not words, it is the world, which poets have in common with other people.”

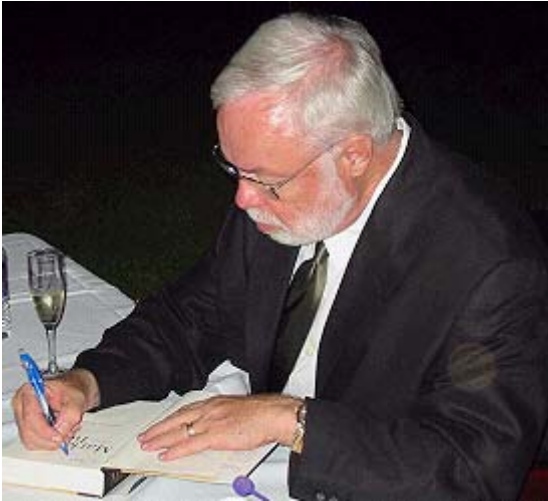
“The subject of poetry is not words, it is the world.” Listen to James Agee again:

“If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement.”

I believe that Mark Twain would have said “amen” to this as well.

The subject of Mark Twain’s consciousness, of *his* cruel radiance, and thus of his literature, was the world—which he had in common with common people. He was not interested in words for the sake of what they can be made to produce. He *was* interested in words as a means of conjoining with the world, and in that way, preserving it.

Think of those astounding letters back home that Sam wrote on his first breakout to the East from Hannibal in 1853. How could they possibly have been written by a semi-educated adolescent rube who'd probably never before been ten miles from the village where he was born? The descriptions of street life and the theater along Broadway; and of the Crystal Palace; and of the waterworks in Philadelphia; and of the debate on the Senate floor in Washington that he witnessed from the visitors' gallery.



Ron Powers signs his book,
Mark Twain: A Life.

Think of the second half of "Life on the Mississippi"—that great headlong pastiche of found text. Mark Twain saw to his horror that the Mississippi river and the life on it were dying away when he went back to it in 1882. Levees, electric beacon lights, fewer steamboats. . .the river belonged to engineers and bureaucrats. *Snag* removal, for god's sakes. And I think he was frantically gathering up the things he valued and trying almost to weld them onto the page for posterity: all those strange blocks of history and dying men's confessions and house-beautiful descriptions and the living ghost that was Hannibal.

Fragments of cloth; bits of cotton; lumps of earth.

The *same* with all those uncannily alive voices: "Records of speech," Agee said. Uncle Dan'l and Jim and Mary Cord and Huck and Colonel Sellers and all the rest.

The *same* with the inventorying of Greek and Roman architecture and women's fashions, and *terrain*, that spilled out of so many of his books. If you've ever tried to get landscape into words, you know it's hard work! Obsolete work, in our visual age. He does it again and again and again. And makes you realize how much more rewarding—how much more *tactile*—it can be to hear something described well, as opposed to merely looking at it.

The "sunrise" section that begins Chapter 19 in "Huckleberry Finn," which Harold Bloom has called the most beautiful prose poem yet written in English.

Here's a letter to Howells from Quarry Farm in August 1876: "Some of the sun-sets which we have witnessed from this commanding eminence were marvelous. One evening a rainbow spanned an entire range of hills with its mighty arch, & from a black hub resting upon the hill-top in the exact centre, *black* rays diverged upward in perfect regularity to the rainbow's arch & created a very strongly defined & altogether the most majestic, magnificent, & startling half-sunk wagon wheel you can imagine."

And here is one of my favorites, just an entry in his notebook written in October of 1884, while coming into Detroit at night by train. He'd been off the rails since before the electrification of cities. He writes,

"I saw for the first time a city where the night was as beautiful as the day; saw, for the first time, in place of sallow twilight. . .clusters of coruscating electric suns floating in the sky without visible support, & casting a mellow radiance upon the snow covered spires & domes. . .& roofs & far stretching thoroughfares,

which. . .reminded one of airy unreal cities caught in the glimpses of a dream.”

You see, this is what can happen to a biographer after he has given up his weapons of mass deconstruction. Which in my case, he doesn't know how to use anyway. Once you've abandoned a piecemeal dissection of Mark Twain, you're vulnerable to an invasion by the man entire, the consciousness entire, and the voices of his own time come flooding in, unfiltered by the comforting rationality of Freud or Foucault.

“A viable past, adding resonance to the future.”

I think we're ready once again for this flood that is the consciousness of Mark Twain.

For so many reasons.

We're ready for him to give us a model for believing again in the language that we use. And mis-use, to the point of violation. Sam will not stand for that.

We're ready for him to give us a model for believing again in the writer as truth-teller. For believing again that we can and must struggle to obliterate Official Language, Marketing Language, and the anesthetizing lingo of the Self—the limp narcissism that has so atomized and alienated Americans from one another in our time. We're ready to contemplate a world where everything matters; where every second counts; and the full day is smiling in the sun, and the songbirds just going it.

We're ready to believe again in the American voice, in all its variety, as an instrument of replenishment and poetry and laughter, instead of simply as a delivery system for rage-choked invective on a bumper sticker or a blog or a call-in radio show.

We're ready to believe that even our anger. . .our darkness. . .our bereavements. . . our blasphemous despair at the failures of the Damned Human Race, can be lent profundity and grace under the full radiance of our imaginations. Our consciousness.

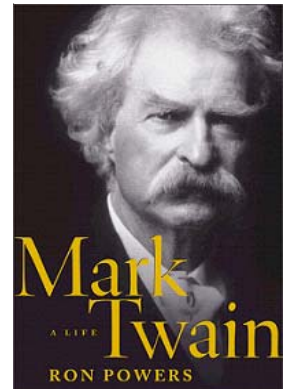
Well: (pause) as Jake says in “The Sun Also Rises,” “Yes, isn't it pretty to think so?”

I know that none of these pretty fantasies has a chance of coming true. I know, as any idiot should, that my book about Mark Twain will change exactly nothing. I know that books have long since ceased to influence the culture. I know what Auden said about this, many years ago: that poetry makes nothing happen. I know what Don DeLillo argued quite prophetically back in 1991 through his character Bill Gray, the reclusive novelist in “Mao II”: that “[Writers] are giving way to terror, to news of terror, to tape recorders and cameras, to radios, to bombs stashed in radios. News of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative. News is the last addiction before—what? I don't know. . . before we disappear.”

I know this. I know all of this.

But I don't have to believe it if I don't want to.

And that's why I wrote about Mark Twain the way I did. Thank you.



(This Keynote Address is available on the Elmira College Center for Mark Twain Studies website with the permission of Ron Powers, Middlebury, VT.)