3 Mark Twain: the Torture of Excess

From the writing of his very first story, ‘The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County’, Mark Twain could never escape the imputation of being excessive. His credibility was always at stake. In this his predicament resembled that of Melville, since they were both strongly suspected of extravagantly embroidering the facts and even of shameless invention, yet on the face of it this should not have been much of a problem. Melville, after all, was presenting himself as a serious man and a truthful reporter, while Twain, as a self-confessed Western humorist, might be expected to relay tall tales as a matter of professional necessity. Yet this almost inevitably meant that Twain’s narrative would be received with a raised eyebrow and a knowing wink and that any pretension he might have as a serious writer would continually run up against the massive social fact of his current reputation and the all-pervading odour of mendaciousness. So Twain’s and Melville’s literary careers follow entirely different trajectories. Melville has to struggle against the demand for plain and unvarnished truth in order to create space for the claims of the imagination, while Twain has to struggle to write something that will seem convincing. In this connection, of course, the manner of the Western yarn-spinner becomes a serious liability. Since his endeavour is to take in some naïve and credulous auditor by palming off some grotesquely exaggerated tale as no more than a plain account of well-attested and authenticated facts, it is incumbent on him to unburden himself of his narrative with the utmost sobriety.

In ‘The Celebrated Jumping Frog’ Twain introduces his Western storyteller as follows:

Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair, and then sat me down and reeled off the
monotonous narrative which follows this paragraph. He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to which he tuned the initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm; but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed me plainly that, so far from imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter, and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in *finesse*. To me, of course the spectacle of a man drifting serenely along through such a queer yarn without ever smiling, was exquisitely absurd. (*Sketches New and Old*, pp. 27–8)

Twain is at pains to distance himself from Wheeler and merely presents him as a characteristic phenomenon of the frontier culture that can only be viewed with a kind of wonder. Wheeler's tale is quite inseparable from his manner of telling it, which involves overpowering the listener by trapping him in a corner and forcing him to listen to a continuous monologue that is saturated with circumstantial detail. Although the events he describes seem far-fetched, they acquire a certain weightiness through the evident involvement of their narrator, through his apparent concern to get the facts right ('in the winter of '49 – or maybe it was the spring of '50' – p. 28) and through the deftness with which the occasional litotes ('You never seen a frog so modest and straightfor-ard as he was, for all he was so gifted' – p. 30) is scattered amongst the hyperbole. The tale seeks to make its point with the tactics of the heroes it celebrates, by masking a high degree of sophistication and cunning behind an apparently artless and unprepossessing appearance. The illusion that Simon Wheeler conjures up is so powerful that Smiley looms up vividly in his mingled astonishment, bafflement and subsequent rage. But it seems that such a powerful rhetoric is almost going to waste by being lavished on so insubstantial a cause.

In reading Twain we become distinctly conscious of the United States as a new nation that lacks the stable and well-established social levels from which authoritative or apparently authoritative pronouncements can be issued. Excessiveness signifies that many battles are simultaneously in progress and, equally, that there is no particular confidence on anybody's part either that they should believe or be believed. The pretence of objectivity is