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Competence, Power, and the  
Nostalgic Romance of  
Piloting in Mark Twain's  
*Life on the Mississippi*  
by Brian McCammack

Mark Twain's fascination with competence and power is evident in many of his characters, particularly in his largely autobiographical works that explore his formative experiences in the western frontier—*Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi*. While Twain admires aspects of both powerful characters and competent characters, in the final analysis competence commands more of his respect than does sheer power. He often expresses ambivalence toward powerful characters in his texts, while competent characters are almost always revered. Embedded in discussions of power and competence are conflicting romantic visions of a radically individualistic western American character. One vision derives from the myth of a Wild West violent individuality, the other from a more scientific and professional rugged individualism. Yet the relation cannot be so easily reduced to a sort of binary; there are many complexities and ambivalences prevalent in Twain's writing on this subject. Several critics have explored aspects of these issues as they appear in *Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi*, but the interrelations between Twain's attitude toward issues of competence and power and his romantic nostalgia for piloting the Mississippi have not been adequately explored. This essay will first explore the issues of competence and power as they apply to *Roughing It* and more extensively to *Life on the Mississippi*. It

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## 2 Southern Literary Journal

will then connect the issues of power and competence to Twain's romantic nostalgia depicted in *Life on the Mississippi*.

Before the reasons for Twain's differing attitudes toward competence and power can be examined, however, a working definition of what it means to be a competent character or powerful character must be offered. One way to articulate respective definitions and differentiate between competence and power is to examine characters that transparently exemplify each quality. Both types of characters appear in Twain's *Roughing It*. The quintessential powerful character of *Roughing It* is the outlaw Slade, who "was supreme judge in his district, and he was jury and executioner likewise" (*Roughing It* 63). Enlisted to clean up the desperadoes and outlaws along a portion of the overland stage route, Slade, ironically, becomes perhaps the most storied and feared outlaw of the West. All of Slade's power is derived from pure force. He rules with his gun, and morals or reason usually do not enter into the equation. This is essentially what a powerful character is for Twain: someone autonomous and violent in the solving of problems and construction of right and wrong. Although not every powerful character in Twain's fiction meets all of these criteria, a man like Slade represents an unquestionably powerful man. The powerful man takes complete control of his environment, shaping it to his needs or desires by any means necessary.

In stark contrast to the outlaw Slade, the exemplary competent character of *Roughing It* is Captain John Nye, who accompanies Twain and his fellow travelers on a portion of their western travels.<sup>1</sup> Twain writes that upon entering an inn where "there was no welcome for us on any face," Nye's memory of past acquaintances, along with his helpful competence in instances diverse in nature as stopping a runaway horse and mending a child's toy, so ingratiates Twain's group to the people at the inn that when they leave, they are "lamented by all" (*Roughing It* 228–229). Twain implies that a competent character does not necessarily try to overcome or control his environment like the powerful character. Instead, he negotiates it by working with what he is given. Nye does not attempt to use force to control the situations and people he encounters. Rather, he adjusts to them with good judgment and precision to meet his needs. Knowing that it would win him good favor at the inn, Nye produces "a later paper than anybody had seen for a week and sat himself down to read the news to a deeply interested audience" (*Roughing It* 229). It is this judgment, knowing exactly what he needs to do and when he needs to do it, that makes Nye a competent character. So Slade

and Nye essentially represent opposite ends of a power-competence spectrum, with Twain's characters residing anywhere on that spectrum.

Having encountered figures such as Nye and Slade in the experiences of his youth, Twain is exposed at a formative age to images of competence and power that end up recurring throughout his writing, particularly in *Life on the Mississippi*. Twain explicitly outlines key characteristics of a competent character when he writes that "A pilot must have a memory; but there are two higher qualities which he must also have. He must have good and quick judgment and decision, and a cool, calm courage that no peril can shake" (*Life* 118).<sup>2</sup> This definition also fits Nye in *Roughing It*, whom Twain says had "a good memory," "a singular 'handiness' about doing anything and everything," and "a spirit of accommodation that prompted him to take the needs, difficulties and perplexities of anybody and everybody upon his own shoulders at any and all times" (*Roughing It* 228). Analogous to Nye, Horace Bixby, under whom Twain apprentices for the bulk of his time as a cub, is the consummate pilot and competent character, possessing and exhibiting constantly each of the important pilot qualities Twain outlines. Bixby's memory is essential to his successful navigation of the river because, as he says to Twain, "There's only one way to be a pilot, and that is to get this entire river by heart. You have to know it just like A B C" (*Life* 76). Without such a methodical memorization of landmarks and their constant changes, Bixby would not be able to steer his boat safely or effectively. In a broader sense, an excellent memory allows competent characters to negotiate their surroundings effectively because they have a wealth of useful knowledge at their disposal. For instance, rather early on in Twain's apprenticeship, Bixby attempts to find a plantation landing in the middle of a pitch black night, when to Twain's as yet untrained eye, "all plantations were exactly alike and all the same color" (*Life* 75). Bixby is able to not only find the plantation by way of landmarks, but also to remember that at the upper end of the plantation, "the stumps there are out of water at this stage [of the river]" (*Life* 75), and therefore land the steamboat at the lower end of the plantation. Without this knowledge, a pilot could have risked running the steamboat aground on the stumps. Twain takes pains, however, to make it clear that not all pilots rest so high in his esteem and possess the same qualities as the competent Bixby.

The pilot who receives the brunt of Twain's ire and serves as a sort of antithesis to Bixby is Brown, whom Twain calls, among other pejoratives, an "ignorant, stingy, malicious, snarling, fault-hunting, mote-magnifying

#### 4 Southern Literary Journal

tyrant" (*Life* 152). In contrast to Bixby's memory, which brims with pertinent information, Brown's memory "was not simply a pilot's memory; its grasp was universal" (*Life* 118). Twain goes on to write: "Such a memory as that is a great misfortune. To it, all occurrences are of the same size" (*Life* 118). Not only must a pilot be able to remember a great deal of information, he must be able to differentiate between useful and useless information much in the same way he differentiates between skill and mere power. For Brown, the memory of dangerous stumps protruding from the water at a certain place and stage in the river would carry as much weight as the memory of what he had for breakfast that morning. The inability to perceive the significance of important memories could easily be destructive for a pilot.

Twain claims that, in addition to a finely tuned memory, an effective and competent pilot must be able to use good judgment to make quick decisions. After all, if a pilot cannot employ his memory as the basis for intelligent decisions on the river, then that memory is without purpose. In a more general sense, the competent character must act competently as well as think competently. For instance, it is essential that "a tongue hung in the middle" (*Roughing It* 228) of Nye's good memory, just as it is essential for Bixby to demonstrate the link between memory and effective decision making through speech when he lectures Twain on the changing shapes of the river. "Take this place where we are now, for instance," Bixby says. "As long as that hill over yonder is only one hill, I can boom right along the way I'm going; but the moment it splits at the top and for a V, I know I've got to scratch to starboard in a hurry, or I'll bang this boat's brains out against a rock" (*Life* 89). To navigate the river safely, it becomes apparent that Bixby not only needs an accurate memory of its different features, but that he must also act quickly, act appropriately, and so save the boat from danger.

Brown, on the other hand, demonstrates his poor decision making in attempting to run a cut-off where the current is particularly fast and difficult to negotiate. Twain writes that "all our preparations were useless. The instant the current hit us it spun us around like a top" (*Life* 147). It seems reasonable to suggest that if Bixby had been piloting the steamboat at the time, he would have either successfully negotiated the cut-off or would have been wise enough to respect the river's power and refrain from the attempt. Rather than negotiate and harmonize with the river, Brown attempts to overrun and control the Mississippi, a battle so obviously doomed as to make Twain's critique of dominance (on the human scale) the sharper.

Courage is the last quality of a competent pilot that Bixby teaches Twain, telling him that in “a dangerous place, don’t turn coward. That isn’t going to help matters any” (*Life* 121). When he first takes control of the boat, Twain steers it far away from the shore and from other boats, a move that slows the steamer down significantly. Bixby retakes control of the boat from the inexperienced cub, and Twain writes that Bixby “was going into danger again and flaying me alive with abuse of my cowardice. I was stung, but I was obliged to admire the easy confidence with which my chief loafed from side to side of his wheel, and trimmed the ships so closely that disaster seemed ceaselessly imminent” (*Life* 73). Bixby drives this lesson home by employing the help of the boat’s crew in deceiving Twain that he has steered the boat into dangerously shallow water. In fact, as Twain should know by now, the water is perfectly deep and safe. Twain loses his composure and is derided by the crew for his foolishness and cowardice when the ruse is revealed. Bixby then counsels Twain, advising him that the experience should serve as a lesson to trust his own judgment and remain cool in the face of apparent danger, effectively completing Twain’s training toward competence. Bixby’s actions seem to be the very embodiment of cool courage in the face of danger. In contrast to Bixby’s courage, Brown’s courage seems to have gone overboard into the realm of arrogance. Brown doubtless shows courage in his attempt to run the cut-off, but Twain speculates that “perhaps we were foolish to try the cut-off” (*Life* 147), because the current was flowing a good deal faster than the top speed the boat could possibly attain. In this case, it seems that courage not backed with sound judgment becomes mere foolishness.

The culmination of Bixby’s display of the defining characteristics of the competent man—memory, judgment, and courage—is his daring navigation of “the intricate and dangerous Hat Island crossing” (*Life* 81).<sup>3</sup> Risky enough in the daylight, Bixby attempts to make the crossing in the dark, remaining completely expressionless and calm as he directs the steamboat into water that steadily loses depth. Nearly running aground, Bixby knows from past experience exactly when to order his boat to go full steam ahead to make it successfully through the crossing. Without Bixby’s accurate and pertinent memory of Hat Island, the quick judgment of actually navigating the ship through the water, and the courage to keep one’s composure while almost running aground, the crossing would have been impossible. In other words, this sort of daring maneuver could only be executed by a pilot with a wealth of professional experience with its foundations in “exact observation, deliberate learn-

ing, and careful memorizing" (Branch 32), all of which Bixby stresses to Twain in order to mold him into an exemplary and competent pilot.

An important distinction to make when attempting to understand a pilot's competence is that it derives almost solely from experience and dedication to the profession, not from some innate or natural "sense" of the river. Eventually, pilots like Bixby know the river so well that they can tell the difference between a wind reef and a bluff reef, even though they are virtually indistinguishable. Upon encountering a harmless wind reef that Twain has mistaken for a dangerous bluff reef, he asks Bixby how he will ever be able to tell the two apart. Bixby responds, "I can't tell you. It is an instinct. By and by you will just naturally *know* one from the other, but you never will be able to explain why or how you know them apart" (*Life* 94). Although Bixby describes his keen eye as "an instinct," he more than likely called it this because, as he says, he could not find accurate words to describe what he meant. He was probably experiencing something akin to "muscle memory," the ability to perform a task effectively without any real conscious thought devoted to the task, only the unconscious responses that are the result of repetition.

Only from years of experience and exposure to the river can the knowledge that Bixby possesses "become ingrained to the point where it seems almost like intuition" (Mills 285). James Cox writes that a riverboat pilot "must have instinct—a deeply implicit and discriminating sensitivity to the face of the water" (111), and while this certainly resonates with Bixby's inability to describe how he can tell the difference between a wind reef and a bluff reef, Cox's statement seems to leave the emphasis more on some mysterious innate skill possessed by the pilot instead of experience and careful observation.<sup>4</sup> It is certainly a possibility that Twain meant to convey the impression that pilots needed something beyond pure experience in order to be at the top of their profession, but this seems to run counter to the keen eye and professionalism that Bixby has been drilling Twain in.

Just as it is difficult for Bixby to express the source of his knowledge, it is difficult to delineate a clear meaning for "instinct." Edgar Branch makes it clear that he believes Bixby's "instinct" is a product of experience, writing that "Bixby's 'instinct' can be learned and it is so represented by Mark Twain. It designates nothing inborn or innate. It is neither a mystical nor an intuitive capability" (34). The painstaking precision with which Bixby requires Twain to study the river implies that the type of competence Bixby possesses was attained through the same process. According to Twain, the memory of a competent pilot is developed "into a very co-

lossus of capability. But *only in the matters it is daily drilled in*" (*Life* 116). On courage, Twain writes that its growth is "steady all the time" (*Life* 119), but is only truly attained after the sort of training that he received from Bixby. The only quality of a competent pilot that could possibly be innate is judgment; Twain writes that "judgment is a matter of brains, and a man must *start* with a good stock of that article or he will never succeed as a pilot" (*Life* 119). It might be debatable whether or not Twain actually meant that judgment was innate or possibly cultivated before a cub comes to piloting, but in any case, the fact remains that at least two out of the three characteristics of a competent pilot are a result of training. In other words, complete competence requires hard work and repetition, not an intuition of some sort.

Nor is the training that Twain receives from Bixby the same sort of training that comes under fire in much of Twain's later work, perhaps most notably in *Connecticut Yankee*, *Puddn'head Wilson*, and "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg." In each of these works, training is responsible for the prejudices and immoral behavior of characters, creating a detrimental social hegemony—a sort of group-think that paralyzes individuals' abilities to apply empirical knowledge and think for themselves. Not so in the case of Bixby's careful training of Twain. The main difference between the training Twain receives toward competence in *Life on the Mississippi* and the training he expresses ambivalence toward in later works is that the former is a dynamic training that falls back on individual judgment at its core. The type of training that Twain is ambivalent toward, and largely disdains, is the type of training that is passive or that is ingrained in an individual who is not even necessarily conscious that the training has taken place. In his essay on "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg," Clinton Burhans, Jr. claims that "one of [Twain's] major aims is to show that such training in moral values must be empirical, not merely prescriptive" (376). Burhans goes on to point out that "Hadleyburg's fall is determined by the abstract training which the people had counted on to keep them forever incorruptible" (378). The training that Twain receives from Bixby is emphatically neither prescriptive nor abstract. Instead, Bixby gives Twain the tools to be able to make his own navigational judgments based upon the objective facts of the river. Once Twain has become an accomplished competent pilot in his own right, he never falls prey to the sort of group-think training that he blasts in his later work.<sup>5</sup>

Twain comes to admire competence, first through his association with steamboat pilots, especially Bixby in *Life on the Mississippi*, and



later in men he meets on his travels in the American West, especially Nye in *Roughing It*. In both these situations, competence could mean the difference between a high social standing and a low one, riches and rags, and even life and death. For these reasons, and as evidenced by the treatment competence receives in both *Life on the Mississippi* and *Roughing It*, it is apparent that Twain highly values the ability to accomplish tasks effectively. Having examined Twain's admiration of the competent character at length, it seems appropriate to contrast that admiration with Twain's treatment of powerful characters in *Life on the Mississippi*, perhaps the most notable of which are the river engineers.

Upon Twain's return to the Mississippi River to gather notes for the completion of *Life on the Mississippi*, he becomes aware that engineers from the United States River Commission have attempted to control the river in order to make it safer for the residents of river towns as well as more efficient for travel. Although upon initial inspection the engineers who are using calculated scientific approaches to attempt to contain the river appear to be competent characters, their arrogance and disregard for the reality of their environment betray their tendency toward power and violence. The engineers are not violent in the traditional sense of the word, but building levees and dikes to attempt to contain the river could be considered a violent and radical reconstruction of the landscape. Twain is conflicted between the benefits the engineers' work would bring and the brazenness of trying to control the powerful Mississippi.

Twain's ambivalence is evident when he states that the engineers "have taken upon their shoulders the job of making the Mississippi over again,—a job transcended in size by only the original job of creating it" (*Life* 205). By comparing the engineers' task of controlling the river to that of God's creation of the river, Twain not only underscores the difficulty of the undertaking but subtly criticizes the engineers' god-like arrogance of trying to contain and remake one of nature's purely powerful features. As John Brazil states, Twain "has decidedly mixed feelings about the efforts of the Army Corps of Engineers, to him the embodiment (*par excellence*) of pragmatic consciousness, to dredge and levee the Mississippi" (103). While he admires the pragmatic competence of pilots like Bixby, Twain is more reserved toward the pragmatic arrogance and power of the engineers. Within a half-page, Twain wavers between a claim that "one who knows the Mississippi will promptly aver—not aloud, but to himself—that ten thousand River Commissions, with the

mines of the world at their back, cannot tame that lawless stream” to a more unsure position of not feeling “full confidence now to prophesy against like impossibilities” (*Life* 205). So while Bixby is generally able to negotiate the river in harmony, the engineers attempting to control the river encounter more mixed reaction, from the river as well as from Twain. The power struggle between engineer and river produces an ambivalence in Twain toward both—a far cry from his unabashed celebration of the competent pilot.

Countering Bixby’s level-headed competence, the Mississippi River serves as the most dominant powerful character in the book, certainly more powerful than the river engineers if only by virtue of its origin. Although not as clear-cut as the outlaw Murel in *Life on the Mississippi*, Slade or Blakely in *Roughing It*, or Colonel Sherburn in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the Mississippi retains some of the characteristics of these powerful characters and is useful for a comparison to Bixby, considering that the two directly interact.<sup>6</sup> Applying the definition of the powerful character that was developed from the representation of Slade in *Roughing It* to the Mississippi River, one sees striking similarities.

Twain takes the first few chapters of *Life on the Mississippi* to impress upon the reader not only the Mississippi River’s rich history, but also its almost contemptuous disregard for human constructions. Cut-offs “have thrown several river towns out into the rural districts” and could have even theoretically “transferred a slave from Missouri to Illinois and made a free man of him” (*Life* 40). Twain makes reference several times to river towns turned into country towns and vice-versa by cut-offs, and it seems that if the river is capable of turning a slave into a free man, particularly given the importance of the slavery issue to Twain, then it is a force to be reckoned with.<sup>7</sup> Writing more explicitly about this phenomenon, Twain claims that when a cut-off becomes “twelve or fifteen feet wide, the calamity is as good as accomplished, for no power on earth can stop it now” (*Life* 147). As Sherwood Cummings succinctly states, “The river is obedient to the laws of physics but is indifferent to human weal” (218). This indifference particularly resonates with Slade’s indifference to physical opposition in *Roughing It*, typical of powerful characters. Bixby’s negotiation with his environment lies in stark contrast to this display of raw power.

Upon Twain’s return in 1883, the river is just beginning to recede from a flood, and its destructive work is evident everywhere. Twain reacts to the scene by expressing ambivalence toward the destruction that

the river has caused. When Twain writes that he sees “signs, all about, of men’s hard work gone to ruin, and all to be done over again, with straitened means and a weakened courage. [It was] a melancholy picture” on his return to the Mississippi Valley, he seems to express sympathy for the people whose lives were devastated by the flooding (*Life* 225). The Mississippi is at once “in all ways remarkable” (*Life* 39) and also capable of “the next most wasting and desolating infliction to a fire” (*Life* 230) when it floods. Twain never expresses this sort of ambivalence—at once appearing awed by the river’s overwhelming power and sympathetic to the people devastated by that same power—toward a competent character like Bixby. It arises time and time again when Twain writes about the river itself.

The Mississippi is capable of incredibly destructive power—flooding towns, tossing a steamboat about like a toy—yet it is also the lifeblood of the nation. Twain reminds the reader of the paradox before the main text of *Life on the Mississippi* even begins, including a snippet from *Harper’s Magazine* proclaiming that “the basin of the Mississippi is the BODY OF THE NATION” (*Life* 30). Twain goes on to claim, seemingly tongue-in-cheek, that the Mississippi drains land as far away as “Delaware, on the Atlantic seaboard” (*Life* 39).<sup>8</sup> Joke or not, it seems as though Twain wishes to portray the Mississippi as a national treasure that is a majestic and beneficial force as well as a dangerous one. As William Gibson points out, Twain “introduces occasional hints that the river is a Protean force, a power of nature equivocally benevolent and sinister” (57–8). Fittingly, Twain never portrays Bixby trying to control the river. Bixby merely adjusts to it with good judgment and precision to meet his needs, recognizing the limitations imposed by the river. Stanley Brodwin describes the Mississippi River as that “which the true pilot harmonizes within himself” (199), suggesting that Bixby, Twain’s example of the true (i.e., competent) pilot, is so in tune with and aware of the river that it becomes almost internal. Bixby is able successfully to negotiate the river’s power in every encounter they have; it is only when Brown, the antithesis to Bixby, attempts to overpower the river in a difficult spot that the river triumphs. Therefore, it seems that true competence always wins out over power.

NOW THAT IT HAS BECOME apparent that Twain’s admiration for the competent pilot runs deep, especially in comparison to the ambivalence he feels toward the powerful river, the nature of this admiration can be examined more closely. It seems that Twain harbors a romantic

view, through nostalgia and founded on his admiration of competence, of the essentially realist steamboat pilot.<sup>9</sup> Twain's romantic vision of the profession is evident when, looking back on the heyday of piloting, he reminisces about the fact that "there is no instance of a pilot deserting his post to save his life while by remaining and sacrificing it he might secure other lives from destruction" (*Life* 346), and goes on to list all the pilots killed in steamboat accidents, symbolic of a once noble profession now nearly dead. This romance of the riverboat pilot did not always have competent realism as its foundation, however, and it is increasingly threatened by the overwhelming pragmatic influence of technological changes that have occurred to the river since Mark Twain piloted it.

In the very beginning of the "Old Times" section of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain is drawn to the river for the status, the spectacle, and the independence that the river as well as the pilots on it appear to offer. Twain portrays river towns not unlike the town in which he grew up brought to life by steamboats—a life that quickly dies away when the steamboat leaves. Prior to a steamboat's arrival, "the day was glorious with expectancy; [afterwards], the day was a dead and empty thing" (*Life* 64). Twain resolves to run away from home and try to become a pilot so that he can earn "a princely salary" and return home "in glory" (*Life* 67). This particular type of romantic view of the river is based on the naïve glorification of show over substance that Twain becomes very fond of disparaging when he is enlightened by what it actually means to be a riverboat pilot.

Twain's romance with the profession of riverboat piloting evolves very quickly during his apprenticeship under Bixby. When he is awakened in the middle of the night to go on his watch with Bixby, Twain writes that "I began to fear that piloting was not quite so romantic as I had imagined it was; there was something very real and work-like about this new phase of it" (*Life* 74). It is not only getting up in the middle of the night that destroys Twain's naively romantic notion of piloting, it is the sheer amount of knowledge and level of constant attention that robs piloting of its simplistic virtues of glory and status. Just when Twain thinks he has the river learned, Bixby reveals some new aspect of piloting that Twain is crestfallen to learn he must master. Ironically, it is the very "work-like" nature of piloting—"the marvellous science" (*Life* 63)—that is the foundation of the independence and competence of riverboat pilots that Twain comes to romanticize when he looks nostalgically back upon the profession of his youth.

The amount of memorized detail and knowledge of one's surroundings identifies steamboat pilots as essentially realist characters more than the naively romantic visions Twain originally held. Pilots deal with the hard facts of the river, interpreting and acting upon data they observe, all the while drawing upon their experience. Although essentially realist, there is an element of romanticism—markedly different from his original naïve romanticism—that Twain lends to the pilots as a result of the training he receives from Bixby. Twain writes that “I loved [piloting] far better than any I have followed since, and I took a measureless pride in it. The reason is plain: a pilot, in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth” (*Life* 122). Although sharing independence as a characteristic, the competent character differs from the powerful character in the manner in which that independence is obtained and articulated. As William Gibson states, “The absolute power of the Bixbys, granted them for their ability to outwit so formidable an adversary as the Mississippi, had for its corollary—so Mark Twain tells the reader—absolute freedom” (63). Both the pilots' power and freedom come from the competence they display in negotiating the powerful Mississippi River, which, by contrast, derives its power from sheer force.

The new brand of romance with which Twain views the competent pilot is what Roger Salomon calls a “true romance [that] meant for Twain the independent struggle by a strong and capable individual against the forces that control human existence” (87). The “true romance” that Twain views piloting with is in stark contrast to the overblown notion of the profession that Twain started out with. His original romantic notions were more akin to the type of romance that he satirizes in southern culture, caused mostly in Twain's estimation by Sir Walter Scott, who did “more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote” (*Life* 327).

Fueled by Bixby's competence, the new romance with the science of piloting continues until Twain himself becomes an accomplished and competent pilot. At this point, Twain encounters a personal crisis of sorts, writing that while he had made a valuable acquisition in the ability to read the river as competent men like Bixby can, this knowledge also caused him to feel that “the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river” (*Life* 96). Sunsets that he used to appreciate for their aesthetic beauty when he was a passenger now only relay to him important information regarding the navigation of the steamboat as a pilot. As Stanley Brodwin states, “Nature's most primordial and awesome ele-

ment, the Mississippi, draws Twain to its heart in order to study its secrets, only to make the study rob him of the river's glory" (200). Twain mourns the loss of this naïve passenger's romantic notion of the river's beauty, while at the same time he gains a more informed romantic sense based upon competence and disparages naïve romantic notions. So what is the reader to make of this conflicted view of romance from Twain? On the one hand, he seems to be firmly entrenched in his romantic view of the competent pilot and the pragmatic values that such a character entails. On the other, he mourns the loss of the naïve romance that he seems to take such pleasure in disparaging.

First of all, it could be argued that Twain is not entirely disappointed at his perceived loss of the capacity to appreciate the river's beauty. Writing of the differences between the description of the sunset by a naïve passenger and a competent pilot, Paul Schmidt claims that "the pilot's view is easily the superior of the two" and that Twain's "subjectivity is no longer gratuitous, as it is in the passenger's description, but motivated and differentiated by the pilot's work. The excitement of control bubbles under the surface of his style" (109). In addition to this, it appears as though Twain did not completely lose his ability to perceive the river's beauty when he became adept at reading the river for critical data. Following the passage where Twain claims to have lost the ability to see the beauty of the river, he goes on to describe the beauty of a sunset (a passage that was necessarily written after this loss supposedly happened). As Shelley Fisher Fishkin points out, "Twain hasn't lost the river at all—for he evoked that wonderful sunset *after* he had supposedly 'lost' the ability to appreciate it" (124).

Similarly, on his return to the river, Twain gets up one morning with the four o'clock watch because "one cannot see too many summer sunrises on the Mississippi. They are enchanting" (*Life* 228). Going on to describe in great detail the beautiful sunrise on the Mississippi, it seems as though Twain has most certainly not lost the ability to appreciate the aesthetics of the river. The fact that *Life on the Mississippi* was written several years after he supposedly lost the ability to perceive the beauty in the river contradicts Twain's claim. It seems unlikely that Twain somehow regained the capacity to appreciate the beauty of the Mississippi after his long absence from piloting even though he "seemed to have forgotten the river, but [he] hadn't forgotten how to steer a steamboat, nor how to enjoy it, either" (*Life* 184). It appears as though Twain has gained a richer and deeper perception of the river from being aware of both its natural beauty and its less evident physical and scientific properties. It is

only the naïve romantic perception of reality that is not tempered with a realism founded on competence and pragmatic concerns that Twain disdains. Twain finds himself able to enjoy the simple aesthetic as well as the complex technical aspects of the river upon his return. However, the acquisition of scientific knowledge of the river is not the only thing threatening Twain's romance of piloting.

The Pilots' Benevolent Association also threatens the romance that Twain feels toward piloting by bringing a corporate-like group culture to what was an inherently individualistic profession. Formed to protect wages and keep pilots more effectively informed about changes in the river, the association is initially derided by the competent pilots. Eventually each pilot joins, however, and Twain nostalgically lauds the organization as "perhaps the compactest, the completest, and the strongest commercial organization ever formed among men" (*Life* 128). But the association also appears to take the emphasis away from the romantic notion of a competent pilot negotiating the river with only his experience as a guide. The competence of a group, thus, destroys the more romantic competence of the individual. As Twain writes, "The pilot who had formerly been obliged to put up with seeing a shoal place once or possibly twice a month had a hundred sharp eyes to watch it for him, now, and bushels of intelligent brains to tell him how to run it" (*Life* 133). There is evidence, however, that Twain exaggerated the influence of the Pilots' Benevolent Association on the profession. Edgar Branch asserts that "the 'association pilot' and the 'master pilot' were almost invariably—at one and the same time—one and the same person" and that Twain overstated the influence of the association for "dramatic impact" (33). In other words, competent pilots like Bixby were most probably always a part of the association, receiving help from various other pilots. Instead of the association "paradoxically [violating] the autonomy that Twain celebrates in his earlier praise of the pilot's authority" (Howe 433), it actually "consolidates the pilot's independence and power" (Horwitz 259). Hence the association effectively strengthens the romance of the competent pilot by protecting his authority and adding to the legend of the profession. The association is yet another example of pilots using their superior judgment and experience (i.e., competence) in order to negotiate the changing economic and natural environment.

A more serious threat to Twain's romantic notions of piloting is the advent of more sophisticated technology to the science of riverboat piloting.<sup>10</sup> Technology directly attacks the importance of the competent

pilot for Twain because it threatens to render the competence useless and irrelevant. If the aid of technology allows incompetent Browns to pilot riverboats as effectively as competent Bixbys, then the romantic notion of a competent riverboat pilot is effectively dead. Ironically, it is the competent pilot himself who contributes to the technology that has “knocked the romance out of piloting” (*Life* 204). The government has installed lamps to make crossings safer, and it is Bixby and another pilot, George Ritchie, who “have charted the crossings and laid out the courses by compass; they have invented a lamp to go with the chart, and have patented the whole” (*Life* 204). Roger Salomon writes that “with these innovations (reluctantly approved by Twain), the heroic adventurer became a functionary in a mechanized system” (93). In other words, the pilot is stripped of his autonomy and competence, merely following a course that is already charted out for him on a river that has been robbed of all its danger. Twain has such reservations about the effectiveness of the purely scientific approach to piloting that loses sight of the romantically competent pilot.

When getting up with the four o'clock watch one morning, Twain seems to take particular pleasure in writing that he “saw Ritchie successfully ruin half a dozen crossings in a fog, using for his guidance the marked chart devised and patented by Bixby and himself. This sufficiently evidenced the great value of the chart” (*Life* 355). Further illustrating Twain's skepticism toward science, a note earlier in the book, directly after Twain originally writes of Ritchie and Bixby's invention, indicates that in the manuscript Twain had sarcastically written, “Trusting in Providence is a very good thing, as far as it goes, but a chart and compass are worth six of it, any time. Statistics have shown this to be true” (*Life* 204). Earlier in the book, discussing the fact that the Mississippi seems to be shortening itself constantly by way of cut-offs, Twain speculates that eventually Cairo, Illinois and New Orleans will be one and the same town. Commenting on the scientific truths that led him to such a conclusion, Twain writes that “there is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact” (*Life* 147).

The comic ambivalence that Twain expresses toward science particularly resonates with his ambivalent attitude toward the river engineers and the river itself. It seems that Twain is particularly skeptical of the value of science when it does not take into account the competent responsibility that is typical of riverboat pilots. Twain's nostalgic romance



of the individual pilot survives regardless of such threats as technology and overwhelming pragmatic influences precisely because one must still be competent, above all else, to negotiate the power of the Mississippi River effectively. With the rise of the railroad and the opening of the West, Twain's romantic notion of a ruggedly individualistic and competent riverboat pilot was threatened by technology and a developing corporate culture. But despite these challenges, at least in *Life on the Mississippi*, the competent pilot still manages to maintain a firm grasp on his importance. One gets the sense that in Twain's world, whether riverboat pilots retain their preeminence or not, competence will always trump power no matter the odds.

## NOTES

The author would like to thank R. P. Lamb and S. K. Robisch for their constructive criticism on drafts of this article.

1. Considering that both *Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi* are largely autobiographical works, I will refer to the narrator of *Roughing It*, as well as the author, as "Twain." The same convention will be used for the cub and later full-fledged pilot narrator of *Life on the Mississippi* and the author. The differentiation of the writer/narrators, if any is necessary, can be extracted from context.

2. Incidentally, these are some of the same characteristics that could be used to describe Huck in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (i.e., the calculation and courage he shows in escaping from his father's cabin, not to mention the many times he utilizes his intelligence to protect Jim) as well as the Pony Express rider in *Roughing It*, two other characters in Twain's works who exemplify the competent character.

3. Edgar Branch discusses the possibility of the Hat Island crossing being fictionalized in his "'Old Times on the Mississippi': Biography and Craftsmanship," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 45.1 (1990): 73–87.

4. Edgar Burde seems to concur with Cox's analysis of what "instinct" means, writing that "the pilot follows the shape of the river he knows innately rather than the one he sees objectively" (882) in "Mark Twain: The Writer as Pilot," *PMLA* 93.5 (1978): 878–892. Howard Horwitz incorporates both training and natural instinct in his take on the subject, stating that "the knowledge is natural, untransmissible, even unlearned, although admittedly a product of laborious training" (256).

5. For further analyses of the effects of social training in *Connecticut Yankee* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, see the insightful articles of Mark Coburn, "'Training is everything': Communal Opinion and the Individual in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 31.2 (1970): 209–219; Lee Clark Mitchell, "'De Nigger in You': Race or Training in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*?" *Nineteenth-Century*

*Literature* 42.3 (1987): 295–312; and Brook Thomas, “Tragedies of Race, Training, Birth, and Communities of Competent Pudd’nheads,” *American Literary History* 1.4 (1989): 754–785.

6. Murel is an outlaw of the Mississippi Valley whom Twain likens to Jesse James, but considers James “a retail rascal; Murel, wholesale” (212). Blakely acts with force and violence in *Roughing It*, ignoring the normal procedures of justice (much like Slade). Colonel Sherburn enacts his own form of vigilante justice and then stands up to the “little one-horse town” (180) in Arkansas and mocks the citizens for their desire to lynch him in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998).

7. Twain mentions the Mississippi River drastically changing the geography of its surroundings on pages 177, 189, 190, 196, 225, 247, 257, and 280.

8. For a discussion of Twain’s claim that the Mississippi drains all the way from Delaware, see James Cox’s “Introduction” to the *Life on the Mississippi* Penguin Classics edition.

9. Eric Lott notes that “nostalgia was so rife in late 1840s blackface songs as to indicate a rather widespread preoccupation with traumatic parting, distance, temporal and geographic breaks” (191) and mentions Twain’s own fascination with minstrel shows throughout *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995). It is interesting to connect the nostalgia prevalent in the blackface shows Twain observed to the nostalgia he himself harbored for piloting on the Mississippi River.

10. One is also reminded here of Twain’s critical treatment of technology in *Connecticut Yankee*, his fascination with fingerprinting in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, as well as his own doomed personal venture with the Paige typesetter.

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18 Southern Literary Journal

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