"Prized His Mouth Open": Mark Twain's *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* In English, Then in French, Then Clawed Back into a Civilized Language Once More, by Patient, Unremunerated Toil

**MARC SHELL**

How is that gentleman who did speak by and by?
I think he German.
I did think him Englishman.
He is the Saxony side.
He speak the French very well.
Tough he is German, he speak so much well Italian, French, Spanish, and English, that among the Italians, they believe him Italian, he speake the french as the Frenches themselves. The Spanishesmen believe him Spanishing, and the Englishes, Englishman.
It is difficult to enjoy so well so much several languages.

— Mark Twain, "Introduction" to *The New Guide of the Conversation in Portuguese and English* (1883)

**THE COMBAT ZONE; OR, A CANADIAN IN AMERICA**

It's no accident that I, Marc Shell (born Meyer Selechonek), come to the problems of bilingualism with which the essay that follows — and much of the work of Mark Twain (born Samuel Clemens) — deals. I was born in Montreal in 1947, just after World War II, and raised in Quebec, where
questions of politics and language go hand in hand.\textsuperscript{1} In that colonial setting, I did not consider myself a member of a people conquered within the boundaries of its own homeland, as did my Mohawk and French Canadian neighbors: both these groups made claims, often mutually exclusive, for special territorial and linguistic rights based on their peculiar understanding of their particular group's unique autochthony or indigenousness. Nor did I consider myself a member of a conquering people — as did my English Canadian neighbors. Neither \textit{quebecois de souche} nor \textit{britannique de souche}, I was, like so many immigrants, somehow neither conqueror nor conquered — or perhaps, like a person split in twain, both at once. No matter what language I spoke on the streets — French, English, Mohawk — it was not mine.

Scholars from around the world still use Quebec as something of a case study for the sociology of multilingualism.\textsuperscript{2} It is not clear, though, just how typical or untypical an example of the politics of language Quebec is. My mother's generally Yiddish-speaking and Hebrew-praying Polish family often recalled for me, in Polish, the terms of a law enacted in Poland during "the liberal Polish revolution of the 1860s" which outlawed the use of Hebrew and Yiddish.\textsuperscript{3} (It was, of course, a law typical for nineteenth-century liberal nation states, but even now unilingualism informs and, in some situations, defines our notions of nationhood and statehood.) For me the example of Quebec has been useful for understanding the politics of language, and its literary experience has been valuable for understanding polyglot literature elsewhere in the world. In fact, the generally peaceful language problems of Canada have been one subject of my writing, from an early series of essays on bilingual advertisement published in French-Canadian in Quebec City in 1973 to a large-scale comparative study published in English-Canadian in 1994. Quebec's language conflict originates in a war of conquest (1763) and erupts intermittently in bloodshed (1914), terrorism (1971), a separatist movement, and such consequential political countermeasures as the War Measures Act (1973), which suspended \textit{habeas corpus} for many months.

Consider how language conflict pertains, on the level of urban development, to the bilingual city of Montreal. In Montreal the principal language border between the French-speaking east and the English-speaking west
runs along an east-west line once known as "The Main" or "The Combat Zone." In 1973, urban architects and planners, by building a commercial tower at our local meeting place of English and French, sought to contribute a solution for the linguistic and imperialist problem of Babel.

A newspaper ad for their then new building built on this line, Complexe Desjardins, quotes Rudyard Kipling's colonial poem "The Ballad of East and West."

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
tho' they come from the ends of the earth!

But how, if at all, in that linguistically amphibious Combat Zone, does one jump the abyss, as it were, between eastern French and western English? Or, for that matter, how do shopkeepers and shoppers translate on the line?

As a student I found one kind of answer in Twain's The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, apparently a children's story, written in a country where no two languages lord it over all others, but where one language dominates unofficially.

I read The Jumping Frog for the first time in 1967, while flying nonstop from Montreal, then celebrating Canada's constitutional centennial by hosting a World's Fair, to California, which was at the same time celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the publication of The Jumping Frog with a special international frog-jumping contest. That day I read The Jumping Frog in its English-language version. (The cover of my copy has decorative green cloth with a gilt jumping frog.) At the time it was clear to me that Twain likely had in mind not only the intralinguistic difference between the dialects of his western (California) and eastern (Yankee) English-speaking characters, but also the interlinguistic difference between Englishmen and Frenchmen. The very term frog, after all, means "francophone person." Thus the proudly binational quebecois singer Kevin Parent sings "about how proud he is 'to be a frog and a squarehead too.'" (English-speakers in Quebec are called les têtes carrées.) Likewise, the refrain of the
1960s quebecois *superfrog* Robert Charlebois, in his well known Franglais "Frog Song," goes:⁷

You're a frog I'm a frog. Kiss me,
And I'll turn into a prince suddenly
Donne moé des peanuts
J'm'en va t'chanter Alouette sans fausse note.⁸

Moreover, many Canadian and American singers at the time knew the old African-American inspired Cajun song *Saut Crapaud* (or *Saute Crapeau*) as sung by Columbus "Boy" Fruge (probably pronounced like "frog").⁹ (The work of Fruge, who hailed from Armaudville in Louisiana, is included in the *American Anthology of Folk Music*, which influenced Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan.) The Cajun Fruge sometimes seems stuck on a line between—or cleft in twain by—two linguistic worlds. Unable to leave the jumping-off spot, Fruge exists somewhere between two lingoes.

Twain criticizes humorless Frenchmen generally for being unable to translate, or language-jump, from English to French; his *Jumping Frog's* tall tale about how a shot-laden frog is rendered unable to jump—"like a Frenchman"—became the perfect vehicle. Two later versions of the story, which Twain published in 1875 together with his "original" English-language tale, suggest as much. One of these is a strangely introduced translation of *The Jumping Frog* into French. The other is Twain's "clawing" back of that French translation into English—or rather, into a literal English one might call Frenglish.

Such translinguistic concerns suffuse much of Twain's work. As for dialect, consider how, in *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhed Wilson* (1894), dialectal irregularity seems to match racial difference and even species variation. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), such difference drives the plot. The same dialectal theme suggests many of Twain's later essays on American interlingual difference.¹⁰ For example, "The Awful German Language," "The German Chicago," and "The Horrors of the German Language" recall the melting-pot influence of the German-American language in St. Louis. Twain grew up there with German or Germerican as one of his lingoes.¹¹ Looking back in 1898 on his German literary experiences in Missouri, Twain wrote in a curious Germerican lingo: "Als ich ein Knabe war und
wohnte in einem Dorfe on the banks of the Mississippi, schon lange away back in the early Fifties our paper ‘exchanged’ with the St Louis [German-language newspaper] Anzeiger des Westens.\textsuperscript{12}

It is in this vein of ethnic cosmopolitanism that Twain’s “Introduction” to The New Guide of the Conversation in Portuguese and English (1883) focuses on that Guide’s lexical and syntactic “Portenglish” blunders.\textsuperscript{13} One subject for relevant debate among Twain scholars has been whether Twain’s own “exchanges” with the German language help to explain his “predilection” for humorous compound words.\textsuperscript{14} Consider, in this context, Brown’s illustration of a “grand mountain range”: a word in Twain’s superficially bilingual A Tramp Abroad (1885).\textsuperscript{15}

In line with his fanciful meditation on interlingual difference, many of Twain’s works present make-believe translations of nonexistent original texts. These works constitute almost a genre in their own right, at least in an American context of European models. They include Adam’s Diary: Translated from the Original Ms. (1893); Eve’s Diary: Translated from the Original Ms. (1906); No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger: Being an Ancient Tale Found in a Jug and Freely Translated from the Jug (1916 [posthumous]); and Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc... by the sieur Louis de Conte [pseud.](her page and secretary) Freely Translated out of the Ancient French (1896).
In *The Jumping Frog* Twain presents a text that purports to be a rendering of an "original" text that he pretends exists, but does not. Twain also mocks interlinguistic translation, perhaps also intralinguistic translation, of actual texts.

A YANKEE IN CALIFORNIA ("MAYBE YOU UNDERSTANDS FROGS AND MAYBE YOU DONT UNDERSTAND EM")

The jumping-off point for Mark Twain's career as a national figure in the American literary world was *The Jumping Frog*. This was the "tall tale" that was called "quintessentially American literature" already in 1867. It "cata-pulted" the nominally and thematically amphibian Twain to fame.

Whence jumped to us this quintessentially American story?

The transmission of "the jumping frog legend" — from its "original source" to the story's narrator — is part of the puzzle of *The Jumping Frog* from the time of its first publication. The narrator had the story from Simon Wheeler, whom the narrator sought out precisely in order that Wheeler convey the tale to him.

Did the events reported actually take place? In his "Private History of the 'Jumping Frog' Story" (1893), Twain says "the thing happened in Calaveras County in the spring of 1849."

Were the events already reported elsewhere? Twain says that the tale may have been transmitted from a California newspaper where it appeared as "A Toad Story" — as if it were not only about an amphibian frog but also about "a person regarded as loathsome, contemptible, etc." (That is one of Webster's standard definitions for "toad.")

Are there earlier than nineteenth-century counterparts for the tale? In his "Note" written especially for the 1903 edition of *The Jumping Frog*, Twain seems seriously to wonder whether he may not have been an unwitting "literary thief" since he had discovered that there was a similar 1500-year-old ancient Greek counterpart. "The Athenian and the Frog," supposedly written in Boetia, was published in Arthur Sidgwick's classical Greek-language textbook; and Twain, following here "Professor Van Dyke of Princeton University," dryly compares that ancient Greek story with his
own, almost as if he, Twain, were himself a professor of folklore and mythology.24

But are those ancient Greek originals anything other than imitations of earlier versions of the tale? Or are they instead merely counterfeit modern productions made to look ancient? Twain eventually lets on that Sidgwick’s classical Greek Jumping Frog is really a paraphrase of Twain’s own Jumping Frog. Sidgwick had translated it into Greek and then surreptitiously inserted it into his textbook as a Greek “original” that students should translate into English.25

Such problems of literary transmission are further refracted by typographical “errors” in the text — of the sort that Twain may wittingly have inserted into original documents when he was typographer for the German-language papers of Missouri. In any case, Twain, in an interview reported in 1895, said the following about the origin of the name of “Smiley”: “He was a real character, and his name was Greeley. The way he got the name of Smiley was this — I wrote the story for the New York Saturday Gazette, a perishing weekly so-called literary newspaper — a home of poverty; it was the last number — the jumping frog killed it. They had not enough ‘G’s,’ so they changed Greeley’s name to ‘Smiley.’ That’s a fact.”26

The source games continued after Twain’s death. For example, in 1929 William Robert Gillis — the son of Steven Gillis who had been Twain’s “Jumping Frog” California companion — argued that many African-American tales inform nineteenth-century anglophone European-American tales, and claimed that Twain’s “trickster story” was originally an African-language one.27 In view of Twain’s interest in dialect and interlinguistic differences, it is noteworthy that William Robert Gillis does not say from which African language-group the jumping frog story came. It is as if Gillis is carrying on a tradition that muzzles the captive frog or fails to deliver from silence its “native language.”28

Twain asks us to read the English and French or Frenglish versions of his tale together: “I ask the reader to run his eye over the original English version of the Jumping Frog, and then read the French or my retranslation” (JF 4). If this is not a new kind of writing that Twain is presenting, it is, for most Americans, a new kind of reading that he is requesting. The reading is made more difficult because the page layout that Twain provides is
the commonplace sequential linear sort (first English, then French, finally Frenglish) whereas what the reader requires is a triple-column set-up in facing-pages format. Just such a format one found in the newspapers of New Orleans that earlier in the century had published the "same" stories in facing (English, Spanish, and French) columns; one finds a similar format in some editions of the Talmud; Twain’s own Extracts from Adam's Diary provides the reader with Adam's "hieroglyphics" printed to the left of Twain's English-language "translation." As it is, however, readers of the tri-lingual Jumping Frog must flip pages back and forth from English to French, from French to Frenglish, from English to Frenglish.

So Twain’s publishing practice exacerbates his game of multilingual "telephone tag" — a linguistic leap-frog Americanized for the multilingual "gossip" of the New World.29

A PARISIAN IN AMERICA; OR, LA GRENOUILLE SÄUTÉUSE DU COMTÉ DE CALAVERAS

Eh bien! I no see not that that frog has nothing of better than another. (JF 49)

Eh bien! I no saw not that that frog had nothing of better than each frog. (Je ne vois pas que cette grenouille ait rien de mieux qu’aucune grenouille.) (JF 50)

"Possible that you not it saw not," said Smiley, "possible that you—you comprehend frogs; possible that you not you there comprehend nothing; possible that you had of the experience, and possible that you not be but an amateur. Of all manner (de toute manière) I bet forty dollars that she batter in jumping no matter which frog of the country of Calaveras." (JF 51)

Simon Wheeler’s dialectal and oral interpretation of "The Jumping Frog" story is the starting point for the narrator’s story in much the same way that Twain’s Jumping Frog is the jumping-off place for the translator who Frenchified it as La Grenouille Sautéuse du Comté de Calaveras.
This translation was first published as part of a French-language essay, "American Humorists I: Mark Twain," in an 1872 issue of the Revue des Deux Mondes, an influential Continental journal in comparative literature and politics. Twain translates the title literally, into Frenglish, as Review of Some Two Worlds.

The "American Humorists" essay appeared under the name "Th. Bentzon." Who was this "Th. Bentzon"? Twain apparently first mistook Bentzon for "a gentleman": her real name was Marie-Thérèse [de Solms] Blanc (1840–1907). Bentzon (as I will call her) was a scholar and writer in the comparatist tradition of Mme de Staël, but with a penchant for frequent visits to the New World. From 1870 to 1900 Bentzon was the chief spokesperson on American affairs for the Revue. Her output was prodigious, yet her work has been all but overlooked by literary historians both French and American. I thus take this opportunity to sketch briefly those aspects of Bentzon's work which touch on the dialectal humorists of the United States and on the changing American language. Her "American Humorists II," also published in 1872, concerns dialectal humorists such as Artemus Ward, Josh Billings, and the bi-dialectal "accent writer" Hans Breitman (Leland Charles Godfrey).

In the same year Bentzon also published essays in the Revue on Harriet Beecher Stowe's My Wife and I and Bret Harte's M'llis as well as a more general study of Walt Whitman. (Harte was a special interest. Bentzon wrote about him again in 1878. Her translations of Hart's dialectal and humorous works include her popular Récits californiens [1873; 1884].) Bentzon also wrote on William Dean Howells, Henry James, George W. Cable, Edgar Fawcett, W. H. Bishop, and Francis Marion Crawford, and provided studies of Arthur Sherburne Hardy's But Yet a Woman, Edgar Fawcett's The Adventures of a Widow, George Parson Lathrop's Newport, and Edward Bellamy's Miss Ludington's Sister. Among Bentzon's books devoted to single writers would be A Typical American: Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1902).

Bentzon's noteworthy predilection for reviewing books about women matches her disposition to focus on woman writers. She thus wrote on Sarah Orne Jewett's A Country Doctor, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Octave Thanet (Alice French), Amelie Rives, Frances Hodgson, Grace Elizabeth King, and
Mary E. Wilkins. These essays constitute a basis for her *The Condition of Woman in the United States*, published in English in 1895. The feminist sympathies of that book may help explain the eclipse of the author's reputation, although that, in itself, does not explain the century-long duration of that eclipse.

Bentzon's thinking about the biculturalism of the *deux mondes* clearly informs her own fiction-writing. Her novels, published in English, include *Aline's Widowhood* (1882), *Remorse* (1878), *Jacqueline* (1893), *Expiration* (1889), *Love's Atonement* (1892), and *Georgette* (1892). For our purposes the most important would be her French-and-Creole novel, *Yette: Histoire d'une jeune Creole*, set in the French Antilles. Writing about the language of the Antilles, Edouard Glissant, in his *Le Discours antillais* (1981), argues that "lack does not reside in the ignorance [méconnaissance] of a language (the French language), but in the non-mastery (be it in Creole or in French) of an appropriated language." When American writers present shibboleth themes, Bentzon is quick to take them on. (Crawford, for example, discusses the shibboleth massacre on Easter Monday, 1282, when it is said that Frenchmen who could not pronounce properly the Italian word *ciceri* were killed.) Bentzon studies other literary *francophonies*: Louisiana, including the English-language popularization of Creole culture by George Washington Cable; the Caribbean, as in *Yette*; and the northeastern part of North America, as in her comparative study, *Nouvelle-France et Nouvelle Angleterre* (1899).

Bentzon often deals with pidgin and mixed-language literatures (see her writings about Ward and Billings), and she considers issues of malapropism, nonstandard orthography, and local dialect. In her review of *The Jumping Frog*, Bentzon thus focuses on interculturally "incomprehensible" aspects of the American idiom. In particular, English-language American terms describing humor, such as "jolly," "bluffy," "funny," "telling," and "queer," are, for her, "épithètes intraduisibles" (untranslatable epithets). Frenchmen, claims Bentzon, cannot understand the slang-filled American genre of the "eye-opener," the "screamer," and "tall tale." Bentzon argues that humorous American narrators make fun of themselves in ways foreign to "witty" French culture. "Humor," she says, is "the joking of an indi-
vidual who keeps a serious expression while joking."50 James Millington makes similar remarks in the 1880s about The New Guide of the Conversation in Portuguese and English: "A jest in sober earnest" is what he called this "incompetent" conversation-and-phrase Guide.51

Bentzon writes that "we French-speakers consider barbarous" all American work which toes the lines between standard English and slang and between one language and another.52 (Among relevant slang terms in The Jumping Frog would be the American j'oint [JF 13] which Bentzon weirdly translates into French as articulation [JF 29].) It is in the interstices between humor/wit and nontranslatability, says Bentzon, where the problem resides for the French translator of American "slang": "Mark Twain les conte avec un charme sauvage et une simplicité émue dont on ne peut donner qu'une idée imparfaite. Ce qui est intraduisible surtout, c'est ce qu[+] sic fait le principal merite de ces bigarrures, le style original et mordant, le tour idiomatique, le mélange bizarre et souvent pittoresque de néologie, de patois et d'argot qu'on appelle le slang" (italics added).53

Bentzon expressed high hopes for the "American language" of the future. Noah Webster had argued that the American language would eventually become an amalgam of all the languages spoken — or once spoken — in the New World. He had claimed further that the United States "will produce, in a course of time, a language in North America, as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from German, or from one another."54 Bentzon saw in American linguistic humor something of this Babel-like quality. She argued that although "l'anglais reste la langue mère" (English remains its mother tongue), the American language was in the process of becoming a "mélange" of other languages from all over the world — a "confusion of tongues." And in a utopian vein, she predicted that, "bientôt nous serons accoutumés à une langue américaine" (soon we will be habituated to an American tongue) — a language that would be universally human.55 Presumably American English would blend together English with French and myriad other languages in the same way that the English language centuries earlier blended together with French to form "the creolized language of Shakespeare."
AN AMERICAN IN PARIS; OR, THE FROG JUMPING OF THE COUNTRY OF CALAVERAS

The multilingual Kentish poet John Gower, who died in the fifteenth century, was the last of the great English poets to use Anglo-Norman. Whether or not Twain had Gower in mind when he translated Sieur . . . de Conté’s recollections of Joan of Arc, Twain did know the French language, at least to write it. In the 1903 edition of The Jumping Frog, in fact, Twain wrote: “I cannot speak the French language, but I can translate very well, though not fast, being self-educated” (JF 4).56 And “he speak the french very well,” claimed Twain in his “Introduction” to The New Guide of the Conversation in Portuguese and English. Nevertheless, Twain disliked the French “race.” In his 1899 essay about anti-Semitism, he wrote this about his antipathy towards Frenchmen: “I am quite sure that (bar one) I have no race prejudices.”57 That one race was the frog. He takes up a similar prejudice against the French in “How to Tell a Story,” a work in keeping with Mme. Bentzon’s assessment of him.58 Twain was easily put out by the articulate inability of the witty French to translate, hence to understand, his dialectally complex work about a frog (Frenchman) whose mouth is filled with shot in such manner that he may as well have had “no hind legs” (JF 14).59 That leglessness, we recall, is also the condition of the dog who defeated — really killed — the canine Andrew Jackson figured in The Jumping Frog.

On the interlinguistic level, then, the frog-jumping contest is recapitulated by the contest between two writers with pen names: Twain and Bentzon. In 1875 Bentzon published in the Revue an unfavorable review of The Gilded Age by Mark Twain and C. Dudley Warner; that year was also the start of the Revue’s publishing remarkable translations of Henry James’s “Dernier des Valerus,” “Premier Amour d’Eugène Pickering,” “La Madone de l’Avenir,” “Cousin et Cousine,” and “Quatres Rencontres”60 — but none of Twain’s. Twain, stung by Bentzon’s criticism of him as “barbarous” and likewise affected by the Revue, published in 1875 his “toothsome [mordant] reading” of Bentzon’s translation.

Twain’s linguistic exchange is suggested in Strothman’s depiction of him translating or retranslating. Twain here works with a jumble of six-sided letter blocks that are presumably able, if appropriately arranged, to
represent the written form both of the language, French, out of which Twain has to claw the translation and that of the language, English, into which he supposedly wants to claw it. (These two languages — French and English — share pretty much the same alphabet, so Twain needs only unialphabet blocks. There are, however, multialphabet blocks for converting ancient Greek, say, or African languages into and out of English.\textsuperscript{61}) Strothman’s blocks recall the tumbled-down bricks of a Tower of Babel, the urban building which the God of Genesis destroyed. God destroyed that Tower when the city-dwellers made their assault, or sault (the Old English word for “assault”), on heaven. That word’s homonym saut (the French term for “jump”) yields the jumpy adjective sauteuse in Bentzon’s title. Assa"ult is also the partial homonym of somersault (somerset [JF 16]) — which term Emerson uses in his celebrated essay on “the uses of great men” to name “merely” intellectual exercises.\textsuperscript{62}

In The Jumping Frog the term translation partly means “a jumping from one language to another.” Frog-jumping so understood is what the “Frenchman” does when, qua Bentzon, it bounds across the international oceanic divide from west to east, and what Twain does when, leapfrog style, he rebounds after Bentzon. This leapfrog is anthropomorphized when Smiley, a gambling addict, bounds after the wild swamp frog he must capture in order to make his wager.

There is another meaning of saut: “ransom for murder or manslaughter.”\textsuperscript{63} This meaning becomes especially salient when we consider, first, how the subject matter of Twain’s tripartite book presents a distinct “economics of translation” where Twain’s “clawing back” of Bentzon’s French into English apparently goes “unremunerated”; and second, how Twain’s various frog stories involve both “killing” and “payback.”

Twain’s tale is a killer. As Twain tells in his “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story,” The Jumping Frog put the newspaper Saturday Press out of business.\textsuperscript{64} Moreover, Wheeler’s tale might be able to “bore [the narrator] to death” (JF 6). Humor, moreover, must kill. What Twain dislikes in the French translation is that it kills the killing quality of his humor. “In French the story is too confused, and chaotic, and unreposeful, and ungrammatical, and insane; consequently it could only cause grief and sickness — it could not kill” (PH 127–28). (More generally, all language may kill — as Maurice Blanchot suggests.\textsuperscript{65})
25.3. "Turn one summerset, or maybe a couple." Original caption for illustration by F. W. Strothman in Mark Twain, *The Jumping Frog*. 
25.4. Detail from 25.2.

Twain claims, in his very title, that his work as translator goes “unre-
munerated.” Yet he does exact a payback (*saut*) for Bentzon’s murder, that
is, her translation into French, of his *Jumping Frog* (*grenouille sauteuse*). The
murder victim jumps back to life, twain-like, both itself and not itself,
thanks to a humorously metamorphic resurrection by translation that
more closely resembles barter than monetary exchange. Even so a butterfly
replaces the caterpillar — or a frog the tadpole. Just such identification also
happens in Platonic and Euclidean geometry — the sort of intellectual ex-
ercise that Emerson associates with *somersaults*. That is one reason that
Strothman includes geometric tools of comparison or monetary exchange
tables in his *saut* illustration. Presumably such translational instruments
help to “cipher” (JF 12) one group’s dialectal or linguistic meaning in terms
of another. *Saut*, after all, also means “to measure out.”

In *The Jumping Frog* Twain presents himself as feeling that he has been
*jumped* (suddenly attacked) by Bentzon. So he retaliates by *jumping* (sud-
denly attacking) the Bentzon text. *Jumping on* (“scolding”) Bentzon, or
maybe *jumping after* her (as Smiley does after the wild swamp frog), Twain
shoots down frog Bentzon’s critique. He fills the frog’s mouth with leaden
shot in much the same way that the Stranger in *The Jumping Frog* fills the mouth of the frog Daniel Webster and thus renders the other ineffective as a jumper. Daniel Webster can no longer jump; Bentzon can no longer kill American killing with her mordant froggy jumping.

Thanks to Twain’s retranslation, his English-language original work is “restored to the English after martyrdom in the French.”66 “Martyrdom” here, as in Twain’s biography of Joan of Arc, is the act of suffering “death as the penalty of . . . refusing to renounce . . . [a] religion or a . . . principle.”67 All Smiley has to do, in order to discover the wrong if not to right it, is to “turn . . . [the frog] upside down.”

Some moralist readers of *The Jumping Frog* are bothered by the apparent injustice that “he who was so good at ‘ketching’ [frogs] never ketched him [the Yankee]” (JF 231). (In his 1950 opera *The Jumping Frog*, the Berlin-born German-American composer Lukas Foss has Smiley capture the stranger and retrieve his money.) But as it turns out, Twain himself, though he does not win remuneration from Bentzon, does get back the shot: “the amount due to be paid at a tavern or for entertainment” (the dictionary definition). In her book *Littérature et moeurs étrangères* (1882), Bentzon moderated her criticism of Twain as barbarous. And she generously acknowledged the “witty revenge” of Clemens’s Frenglish translation of her French translation of his English “original.”68 Twain had the jump on her. Bentzon’s French translation of Twain was now, glossophagically speaking, part of his killing “American tale.”

Twain never reciprocated in complimentary kind. Whether this has to do with his generally strained relationships with women — or, for that matter, his becoming himself “the belle of New York” — I leave for another time.69

**THE MORAL**

In *The Jumping Frog*, frogs are not the only animals matched against each other in gambling contests. With only one or two exceptions, all the bets described in *The Jumping Frog* figure animals: horse-races, dog fights (including rat-terriers), cat fights (including tomcats; JF 9, 15), and cock fights (JF 9, 12–15).70
Smiley is always ready to bet on which bird will take flight first (JF 9), for example, or where “the straddle-bug” goes and how long it takes (JF 10, cf. 15). The tale that Simon Wheeler hopes to tell when the narrator walks out on him would have told about “a yaller one-eyed cow” (JF 24). The story of the dog Andrew Jackson, who dies because his canine opponent has nowhere to plant his prize jaws, foreshows that of Daniel Webster — the captive frog if not also the American statesman.

In the “talking-animal” tale of the sort that Aesop wrote in Asia Minor, the talking animals are thinly disguised human beings, and they talk, cartoon-like, just as if they were human. But unlike Frog and Toad — in the well-known children’s series — the two amphibians in Twain’s tale do not talk. Their dumbness is especially noteworthy for a story about so “naturally” musical and famously noisome creatures. As captives, Twain’s frogs have no voice of their own. There is no animal talking match, as there is in Aesop’s anthropomorphic fable “The Fox and the Crow.” (Twain’s animal fable is no “animal-groom” tale such as The Frog Prince, in which the amphibian is happily re-translated, like Bottom the ass in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, back into a human being.)

Neither is The Jumping Frog about animal “education” — pace the claims of the would-be animal trainer Smiley. True enough, we learn how to goad a captive animal into doing what it would do “naturally” — say to jump, which one spurs a frog to do by poking it with a sharp object — and how to compel that captive not to do what it otherwise would do “naturally” — say not to jump ship, which one compels it not to do by sticking it into a prison-box or filling it with shot. Hence the captive animals are never permitted to leave their “little lattice box” (JF 18) unless it be to entertain the master or earn money for him. Even so, Daniel Webster the frog can use his tongue to “snake a fly” (JF 17), as his namesake the human statesman could use his tongue to move the nation.

The Jumping Frog is also no traditional children’s fable, because it has no simple moral. In a talk of 1895, Twain did append a moralistic ending to the piece. “Don’t you put too much faith in the passing stranger. This life is full of uncertainties, and every episode in life, figuratively speaking, is just a frog. You want to watch every exigency as you would a frog, and don’t you ever bet a cent on it until you know whether it is loaded or not.” But let’s
25.5. "It might be a canary, maybe, but it ain't — it's only just a frog." Original caption for illustration by F. W. Strothman in Mark Twain, *The Jumping Frog*. 
not jump at this moralistic conclusion—a concluding moral offered by a passing stranger, a money-making sophist by the name Twain. Every translator has to make a jump, a leap of faith that he will land on the other side. Jumping as such means "passing suddenly from one thing or topic to another"; often "with omission of intermediate points; an interval, gap, chasm involving such a transition." In the lingo of late nineteenth-century electricity, a jump spark is one that is "produced by the jumping of an electric current across a space between permanently fixed poles, as in the ignition system of some engines." In most translation, in fact, we bank on the translation's being the jump equal of the original.

So we might say that two things—for example, a living person and a dead one ("the reports of my death are greatly exaggerated" said Clemens about Twain in 1910), or, as another example, some time today and some time yesterday—are in some ideal or geometrically measurable way, jump equals. The ghost in Hamlet: "Thus twice before, and jump at this dead hour, / With martial stalk hath he gone by our watch" (italics added).

Our own jumpiness about translating, perhaps speaking in general, produces the disease called "the jump," which is but another word for chorea, or that insanity of "delirium tremens" (JF 55) which Twain says arises precisely from confronting French grammar and lexis in English context and, perhaps, English grammar and lexis in French context.

THE JUMP BID

"Well," says Yank, "I'll bet liquors on it." A chalk line was made and the toad put down. They struck the boards behind the toad and he leaped six feet, then the frog leaped seven. Yank paid the liquors. ("A Toad Story," in Sonoma Herald, 1849)

On the one hand, Twain’s tripartite Jumping Frog seems to focus on how inadequate is Bentzon’s translation.

I think the fault must be in the translation. I ought to have translated it myself. I think so because I examined into the matter and finally retranslated the sketch from the French back into the English, to see what the trouble was; that is, to see just what sort of focus the French people got
upon it. Then the mystery was explained. In French the story is too confused, and chaotic, and unreposeful, and ungrammatical, and insane; consequently it could only cause grief and sickness—it could not kill.

(PH 127–28)

On the other hand, Twain hints that good translation—an accurate "exchange"—is an impossibility. "It may be that there are people who can translate better than I can, but I am not acquainted with them." And here, despite his not saying so, Twain is following Bentzon’s lead in her comments about the difference between French and American joking. Honoring the differences and similarities between languages (instead of expressing one meaning in two languages) has long been recognized as a goal of translation, especially for the bilingual reader and the humorist. After all, Clemens’s generically original study of intra- and interlinguistic jumping is set in the get-ever-richer contestant community of Angel’s Camp in California. A jump bid is a bid that is higher than necessary to increase the previous bid.

I have heard many explanations for Samuel Clemens’s *nom-de-plume*, which he first used in 1863. One of these has it that *mark twain* means "two fathoms" in riverboat talk. This explanation suggests to me the division into two, east and west, of North America, as by the Mississippi River, along which axis Twain grew up. At the time of the Civil War, the term *twain* hearkens also to the division of the body politic into North and South. Likewise, when it comes to the division of the individual human body, twain often informs tales about Siamese twins and Solomonic changelings. A second explanation for Clemens’s *nom* involves that author’s simply stealing his name from another writer. But let me place my bet on the proposition that when Twain wrote *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* in 1865, the term *mark twain* also meant "allow two free drinks." Clemens’s *nom* derives partly from the "on credit" drinking contests that he held with opponents in Virginia City’s famous Old Corner Saloon.

Just such a contest is the overt subject matter of *The Jumping Frog*, with its drinker of shots (of liquor) and its gambler who fills his rival’s dummy with shot (of lead). *That* frog dummy is named Daniel Webster, presumably after
the rhetorician from Massachusetts, known as "expounder of the American constitution," famously depicted as bearing a text in his hand. A speaker who could jump his way around and through the rhetoric of a land divided between slave and free, Webster managed to postpone the Civil War by about ten years thanks to his enabling California, the gamblers’ stage set for *The Jumping Frog*, to become slave-free.78 "Liberty and Union!" was Web-
25.7. "Dan'l Webster." Original caption for illustration by F. W. Strothman in Mark Twain, The Jumping Frog.
ster's nearly oxymoronic cry. Daniel Webster the frog couldn't jump ship, despite Nat Turner's Rebellion. Whether Daniel Webster the rhetorician ever could deliver Twain's humanoid amphibian named Daniel Webster from the weighted silence of its prison-box is almost another question.

Notes

This essay was originally a lecture delivered in Samuel Clemens Hall, in Buffalo, New York, on March 24, 2000.


3. In a letter to the President of the United States, Louis Marshall, President of the American Jewish Committee, cites the law: "In consideration for the admission to the enjoyment of equal rights the Jews shall renounce the use of a language of their own in speech as well as in writing. After the promulgation of this act, no legal act, no will, no contract or guaranty, no obligation of any worth, no accounts or bills, no books or commercial correspondence shall be written or signed in Hebrew or Yiddish." MS "Marshall to Wilson," 7 Nov. 1918. Quoted in George J. Lerski, "Dmowski, Paderewski and American Jews: A Documentary Compilation," p. 101; in POLIN: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies, vol. 2 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell for the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies, 1987):95–116.

4. Angels Camp, California (east of Stockton) still has an annual frog-jumping contest.


8. Transcriptions vary for the Franglais and/or Frenglish: for example, pinottes
instead of peanuts, and fausses notes instead of false note. This text is from Solution SN-905. New edition, 1992; Gestion Son & Image SN-905 CD. This is the recording of Robert Charlesbois called Longue Distance.

9. Fruge’s version is in American Folk Music; Vol. 2, Social Music, Folkways FA 2952/FP 292, LP (1952), cut# 37. Fruge sings with accordeon; recorded in Memphis, 18 Sept. 1929. Other recorded versions of the song include Saute Crapeau (Isom Fontenot AH 359c) and Wallace “Cheese” Reed (AH 415c), in the Saut Crapaud CD Squeeze: A World Accordion Anthology. Notes by Dick Spottswood.


12. "When I was a boy and lived in a village on the banks of the Mississippi, a long way back in the early Fifties, our paper ‘exchanged’ with the St. Louis Anzeiger des Westens." John J. Weishert, "Once Again: Mark Twain and German," Mark Twain Journal 12 (Summer 1965):16.


15. Mark Twain, A Tramp Abroad, illus. W. Fr. Brown, True Williams, B. Day, Mark Twain, and others (London, 1885), appendix D.

16. JF 19. Spoken by Smiley some time before the wager.

17. Writes Twain: “The ‘Jumping Frog’ was the first piece of writing of mine that spread itself through the newspapers and brought me into public notice,” in “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story,” North American Review 158 (April 1894).

19. *The Jumping Frog* has been the focus of American cultural works ranging from operas and songs to films and videos. See Lukas Foss, *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*, libretto by Jean Karsavina, after a story by Mark Twain (New York: C. Fischer, c.1951).


21. On “Toad Story” see *Sonora Herald*, June 11, 1853, and *San Andreas Independent*, Dec. 11, 1858. For the tale’s appearance in early newspapers, see Oscar Lewis, *The Origin of the Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1931).


23. Arthur Sidgwick’s *Introduction to Greek Prose Composition*, with exercises, was issued several times in the United States, including the widespread Ginn and Heath edition (Boston, 1877).

24. This is Henry Van Dyke (1852–1933).

25. “I could not help being suspicious of the Greek frog because he was willing to be fed with gravel” (JF 65).


27. For the report about Gillis, see Lewis, * Origins*, p. 27. See also William Robert Gillis’s *Memories of Mark Twain and Steve Gillis* (Sonora, Calif.: Printed by the Banner, c.1924) and *Gold Rush Days with Mark Twain* (New York: A. & C. Boni, 1930).

28. Twain begins his “Private History of the ‘Jumping Frog’ Story” with a reference to Hopkinson Smith’s “negro stories.”

29. The term *gossip* means “a humorous party pastime in which a sentence or anecdote is whispered from one person to the next around the group and the final version compared with the original statement” (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, Unabridged, s.v. “Gossip”).


33. RDM, Aug. 15, 1872: "Les Humoristes américains II."

34. RDM, June 15, 1872: "Un Romancier californien" (on Harte); RDM, June 1, 1872: "Un Poète américain: Walt Whitman."

35. RDM, Aug. 15, 1878: "L'Histoire d'une mine."

36. Récits was first published in Paris (Michel Levy Frères, 1873); new ed. was published in 1884 by the same house.

37. RDM, Feb. 1, 1883 to April 15, 1884: "Les Nouveaux Romanciers américains"; RDM, Aug. 1, 1885: "Les Nouveaux Romans américains."

38. Published in English in London by H. W. Bell.


40. Published in French as Américaines chez elles.


42. Pref. by Gilbert Gratiant (Morne-Rouge, Martinique: Editions des Horizons Caraibes, 1977). This is vol. 2 in the series Romans antillais du XIXe siècle.


45. Published in Paris: Lévy, 1899.


47. Bentzon, Littératures et moeurs, p. 323.

48. Twain, Jumping Frog; Bentzon, Littératures et moeurs, p. 321.

49. Cf. Hugh Reginald Haweis, American humorists, 2d. ed. (London: Chatto and
Windus, 1883). This work includes in its purview Artemus Ward with Mark Twain.

50. "L'humour . . . la plaisanterie d’un homme qui en plaisantant garde une mine grave" (Bentzon, *Littératures et moeurs*, p. 313).


53. Ibid., p. 335.

54. Quoted in Bailey, *Images of English*, p. 104. Noah Webster also said that in the Federal Procession there was "a scroll, containing the principles of a [new] Federal language."

55. Bentzon, *Littératures et moeurs*, p. 335. Bentzon includes this statement: "*The Innocents at Home* et *Roughing It* fourmillent d’anecdotes du même genre, qui prouvent l’heureuse impossibilité où l’on est d’éteindre même sous la fièvre de l’or les sentiments tendres et les besoins naturels du coeur... L’anglais reste la langue mère, fondamentale, mais c’est une nourrice vieillie dont les mamelles se tarissent souvent; elle ne peut exprimer que la civilisation européenne, et se trouve à court devant la surabondance d’idées, d’inventions, de découvertes, dont s’énergueillit la jeune Amérique. Pour designer des choses nouvelles, il faut des mots nouveaux; à la souche antique on a donc greffé peu à peu de nombreux emprunts plus ou moins défigurés, plus ou moins corrompus, faits aux dialectes variés dont les emigrants venus de tous les points du globe avaient doté leur patrie adoptive; les Indiens à demi exterminés ont eux-mêmes laissé quelques traces de leur génie local, absorbé par le génie supérieur et envahissant de l’Anglo-Saxon, qui est devenu comme l’architecte d’une nouvelle Babel. De cette confusion des langues ont jailli, pareilles à autant de pousses vivaces, les expressions neuves, énergiques, ingénieuses et hardies. C’est en Californie, — et il est facile de comprendre pourquoi — que la révolution se produit avec le plus de vigueur. Les audaces d’un Bret Harte, les témérités les plus grossières d’un Mark Twain nous étonnent encore; mais bientôt nous serons accoutumés à une langue américaine dont la verdure savoureuse n’est pas à dedaigner, en attendant les qualités plus délicates et plus relevées que le temps lui apportera sans doute" (Benzton, *Littératures et moeurs*, p. 335).


58. Twain writes in his "How to Tell a Story" that "the humorous story is Ameri-
can, . . . the witty story is French" (Writings, vol. 22, p. 7; cited in Wilson, "Mr. Clemens," p. 545).


60. RDM, March 15, 1875: "L’Age doré en Amérique"; RDM, Nov. 1, 1875; Jan. 1, 1876; April 1, 1876; Oct. 1, 1876; Dec. 15, 1878.

61. Boston Block & Toy currently have English, Cyrillic, Arabic, Hebrew, Sign Language, Braille, Greek, and Atomic blocks.


63. This term saut is probably originally Irish; see OED.

64. "I used to tell the story of the Jumping Frog in San Francisco, and presently Artemus Ward came along and wanted it to help fill out a little book which he was about to publish; so I wrote it out and sent it to his publisher Carleton; but Carleton thought the book had enough matter in it, so he gave the story to Henry Clapp as a present, and Clapp put it in his Saturday Press, and it killed that paper with a suddenness that was beyond praise. At least the paper died with that issue, and none but envious people have ever tried to rob me of the honor and credit of killing it." Twain, "Private History of the 'Jumping Frog' Story," p. 127, in Twain, How to Tell a Story and Other Essays (Hartford: American Publishing, 1901), pp. 120–30; hereafter abbreviated as PH. See also n.17.


66. That is how the 1875 edition of the American publishing house has it.


69. "I have to live up to the name which Jamie Dodge has given me — the 'Belle of New York,'" he once said, "and it just keeps me rushing." See Peter Salwen, "Mark Twain, the New Yorker: They Called Him the 'Belle of New York,'" New York Newsday, Nov. 29, 1985, special feature.

70. See, for example, the bet on when Parson Walker's wife will die (JF 10).

71. See Hamlin Garland's "Land of the Straddle-Bug," 1894. The pioneering venture, which was to occupy the talents of many novelists, receives Garland's
attention in “Moccasin Ranch” (1909), based on his homesteading experiences; it was originally published in 1894–95 under the title “The Land of the Straddle-Bug.”

72. Twain spent three months with prankster Steve Gillis at Jackass Hill and Angel’s Camp. “Jackass” was one of President Andrew Jackson’s nicknames.


74. The Clifton Waller Barrett Collection (University of Virginia) includes a transcript of Mark Twain’s first performance on the “Round the World Tour,” taken down by a reporter for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, which printed it 19 July 1895. In retelling his *Jumping Frog* tale, Mark Twain adds: “And Simon Wheeler said, ‘That has been a lesson to me.’ And I say to you, let that be a lesson to you. Don’t you put too much faith in the passing stranger. This life is full of uncertainties, and every episode in life, figuratively speaking, is just a frog. You want to watch every exigency as you would a frog, and don’t you ever bet a cent on it until you know whether it is loaded or not.”

75. OED, s.v. 5.


77. PH 130.

78. Daniel Webster endorsed Henry Clay’s plan to assure sectional equilibrium in Congress. Passed after eight months of congressional wrangling, the legislation admitted California to the Union as a free state. The legislative package known as the *Compromise of 1850* postponed the Civil War by a decade. See, for example, his famous speech of 7 March 1850.