Speaking at the Lord Mayor's Banquet in Liverpool, England, in the summer of 1907, Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) compared himself to “the little skipper” of the Mary Ann. Exchanging greetings with the captain of “a majestic Indiaman,” her decks swarming with sailors and a capacious cargo of Canton spices, the skipper identified his vessel as “Only the Mary Ann, fourteen hours out from Boston — with nothing to speak of.” For one hour in every 24, Twain indicated, he was as meek as the Mary Ann 14 hours out, carrying vegetables and tinware. But in the other 23, he acknowledged, “my vain self-complacency rides high ... and I am the Begum of Bengal, 123 days out — and (a sigh) homeward bound!”
By his own admission vain (and lazy), Twain was a complicated man. These characteristics, among many others, are captured in Volume 3 of his autobiography. A complete compilation of material he dictated (and the manuscripts he labeled as dictations) between March 1907 and December 1909, this volume captures Twain at the end of his life, when he was willing to record (for posterity) his heretofore private opinions “about every matter under the sun.”

With tongue in cheek, for example, Twain explains that he wears white clothes in the winter as well as the summer because he prefers to be “clean in a dirty world; absolutely the only cleanly-clothed human being in all Christendom north of the Tropics.” And he expands on the importance of “the pause” in public lectures. Audiences need time to absorb the absurdity of a situation. But if the pause is off, “by the five-millionth of an inch,” Twain maintains, the audience has time “to wake up from its deep concentration in the grisly tale,” foresee the climax, and the joke falls flat.

In these years, at least, Twain was candid, cantankerous and cynical as well as comical. Although Theodore Roosevelt, he proclaimed, was “the most formidable disaster that has befallen the country since the Civil War,” the vast majority of the American people loved, and even idolized, him. This simple truth, Twain added, is not a libel on the intelligence of the human race because “there isn’t any way to libel the intelligence of the human race.” For this reason, moreover, every time the wobbly human race has been propped up on one side, “it toppled over on the other.”

Andrew Carnegie was a bore, Twain declared, who took “juvenile delight in trivialities that feed his vanity.” A clever calculator, he keeps his place “on top of the wave of advantage while other men as intelligent as he, but more addicted to principle and less to policy, get stranded on the reefs and bars.” By endowing libraries, Carnegie “has bought fame and paid cash for it.”

Awarded an honorary degree by Oxford University, Twain sought to purge himself “of thirty-five years’ accumulation of bile and injured pride” by noting that although American institutions conferred degrees to hundreds of individuals who were certain “to drift into obscurity ... I have seen our universities ... overlook me every time. ... This neglect would have killed a less robust person than I am, but it has not killed me.”

And Twain wrote a long, long manuscript (included in Vol. 3), recording in detail the
events that led him to dismiss Ralph Ashcroft, his business manager, and Isabel Lyon, his secretary, deeming the latter a “liar, a forger, a thief, a hypocrite, a drunkard, a sneak, a humbug, a traitor, a conspirator, a filthy-minded & salacious slut pining for seduction & always getting disappointed."

The explanatory notes added to Vol. 3 by Benjamin Griffin and Harriet Elinor Smith (assisted by six editors of the Mark Twain Project) add fascinating details about people, places and incidents mentioned by Twain. It’s a pity that they have been placed in the back of the book rather than at the bottom of each page.

The editors, for example, document the origins of Esperanto and Volapück, artificial international languages. Esperanto, they indicate, was used by a few government agencies, including the United States Army.

On a more somber subject, Griffin and Smith reveal that Twain at first advised American Rhodes Scholars who were upset over the selection of Alain Locke, a black scholar (who subsequently received a Ph.D. from Harvard, edited the literary anthology The New Negro, and became an important cultural critic), that their opposition was neither wise nor just. When he found out that Locke had received low scores on “popularity,” however, a character trait valued by Cecil Rhodes, Twain decided not to refer to the dispute in his talk to the students (even though he conceded that Locke’s unpopularity was due to his color), which he confined “to other and cheerfuler things.”

Undertaken to defeat the law’s “cold intention” to “rob and starve” his three daughters by ensuring “a new copyright life of twenty-eight years” for his works, Twain’s dictations ended in December 1909, following the death from an epileptic seizure of Jean Clemens, his youngest daughter. Already inclined to despair — and still mourning the death of Olivia Clemens, his wife, and Susy, his eldest daughter — Twain was inconsolable. With Clara Clemens living in Europe, he had thought he and Jean “would be close comrades — just we two.” Twain died on April 21, 1910. He lives on through his works, including this landmark publication.

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Autobiography
of Mark Twain

Volume 3

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and Harriet Elinor Smith

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