Mark Twain as Critic

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Of Journalism and Art: A Mad and a Frustrated Fool

I

Much of Twain’s early criticism (including most of the pieces so far considered) grew out of a habit he had of burlesquing various kinds of newspaper articles. He was criticizing his trade in the act of pursuing it. His approach varied from that of a low-keyed spoof to an at times high-keyed use of the fool in his extreme condition, that of sheer idiocy. The object of this criticism was belittlement. Not only had familiarity bred contempt, but Twain was embarrassed by journalism and craved a wider horizon and a more prestigious field in which to exercise his talents. On the other hand, when he tried to write about a subject requiring cultivated sensitivity—like art, for example—Twain found himself beyond his depth. He therefore took refuge in the pose of a frustrated fool (which in a way he felt he was), and from that point of view defined a valid area of criticism.

In this chapter, I treat the contrast between Twain’s criticism of a subject he thought was culturally below him and one he thought was culturally above him. Since some attention has been given to his criticism of journalism, less will be done with it than with his criticism of art. First, let us look at some variations in basic technique. These will indicate Twain’s purpose in afflicting the muggins with outright madness.

In 1863, once Twain had begun to publish with some frequency in The Golden Era, California’s first, and at the time foremost, literary journal, he also began to look down on mere newspaper work, though he still continued to write for the press. In the next year when he moved up to the Californian, which surpassed the Era in literary distinction, he became even more contemptuous of journalism, in much the same way that, while writing Innocents Abroad and Roughing It, he would become
Early Criticism: The Muggins

scornful of “magazining.” Until he could at last consider himself a full-fledged author, Twain alternated between newspaper and magazine writing, and sharpened his criticism of the former. From 1863 to 1871 many of his magazine sketches were burlesques of contemporary types of journalism, some being reprints of items first published in newspapers. News, he lampooned in “The Killing of Julius Caesar, Localized” (1865); sensation, in the famous “Petrified Man” hoax (1862); the medical adviser’s column, in “Curing a Cold” (1863); the fashion column, in “The Lick House Ball” (1863); the exposé, in “The Facts in the Case of the Great Beef Contract” (1870); the interview, in “The First Interview with Artemus Ward” (1870); the agricultural column, in “How I Edited an Agricultural Paper Once” (1870); and the book review, in “A Book Review” (1871). Before he was finished, Twain had parodied journalism in the hinterlands and almost every stripe of journalist in sight, including the reporter, the agricultural expert, the reviewer, the feature writer, the political analyst, the editorial writer, and the muckraker. Many of the satires he reprinted in Sketches New and Old (1873) were of this sort, and publishing them in book form was his way of recognizing the merit of this branch of his early critical writing.

To be sure, he was far from being alone in writing such travesties. They were the stock in trade of feuding reporters and had long been a staple of Western journalism by the time Twain arrived on the scene. The fact that he did not always make the happiest choice of critical techniques was a result of his following the course of other reporters, whose invective was usually direct and obvious. What at first seemed to be the most promising method of criticism for Twain—simple irony—proved to be the least effective, and what seemed to be the least effective—foolishness—eventually proved to be the most promising method. In either case, Twain’s criticism of journalism was weakest when he was visibly angry without at the same time pretending to be somewhat mad.

Take, for example, his disgust with the carping theater critics. As word got around that arrangements were being made to bring Edwin Forrest out to the Coast, Twain was outraged at the thought of his probable reception. Lashing out at the critics, he tried to sting them with their own type of invective.
In God's name let him stay where he is.... I have looked upon him as the bulwark which enables us to defy the waves of European criticism.... and now, after all this, they would bring the illustrious tragedian out here and turn the inspired critics of the San Francisco press loose upon him. This will never do. These mosquitoes will swarm around him and bleed dramatic imperfections from him by the column.... Their grand final shot is always in the same elegant phraseology: they would pronounce Mr. Forrest a "bilk"! You cannot tell me anything about these ignorant asses who do what is called "criticism" hereabouts—I know them "by the back." But I do hope they will never get a chance to expose to the world what a poor, shabby, stuck-up impostor Mr. Forrest is.¹

In February, 1866, on learning that the great Forrest, acknowledged titan of the tragic stage and a man of exceeding vanity, was indeed coming to San Francisco in Othello, Twain, who had seen him in the role eight years earlier in Washington,² hung out a warning for him. In form, his open letter was a grade or two above the previous missive, improving in subtlety as it moved from ironic assertion to parody.

[The California critics] will soon let you know that your great reputation cannot protect you on this coast. You have passed muster in New York, but they will show you up here. They will make it very warm for you. They will make you understand that a man who has served a lifetime as dramatic critic on a New York paper may still be incompetent, but that a California critic knows it all....

How would you feel if they told you your playing might answer in places of small consequence but wouldn't do in San Francisco? They will tell you that, as sure as you live. And then say, in the most crushing way:

"Mr. Forrest has evidently mistaken the character of this people. We will charitably suppose that this is the case, at any rate. We make no inquiry as to what kind of people he has been in the habit of playing before, but we simply inform him that he is now in the midst of a refined and cultivated community, and one which will not tolerate such indelicate allusions as were

Early Criticism: The Muggins

made use of in the play of ‘Othello’ last night. If he would not play to empty benches, this must not be repeated.” (WG 101f.3)

In order to take the curse off a criticism of criticism, Twain introduced an element of foolishness into it. There was abundant foolishness in his wilder parodies, like those on the fashion column, where he caught the spirit of the type in the very process of exaggerating its style.4 However, as we have seen, the biggest stride Twain would take toward perfecting his satiric criticism came with his converting mockery into self-mockery, and letting the reader see not how much, but how little he seemed to know. Since it was pride that had to be chastened in critics, Twain dramatized that fact when he stirred up the muggins and set him to crowing. Thus, to his burlesque of the imagined gladiatorial review illustrating that time had not altered the “general style and phraseology of dramatic criticism,” he appended a reminder that neither had it altered the smugness of reviewers: “I have been a dramatic critic myself, in my time, and I was often surprised to notice how much more I knew about Hamlet than Forrest did; and it gratifies me to observe, now, how much better my brethren of ancient times knew how a broadsword battle ought to be fought than the gladiators” (IA I 360).

II

The most complicated role Twain would assign the muggins in his criticism of journalism was to turn him into a virtual idiot. The occasion was a feud the Californian had gotten itself into by pointing out the typical vices of prominent newspapers in the area. When the papers bristled back, Twain tried to vindicate

3. These comments appeared in his article “On California Critics,” in the Golden Era, February 25, 1866. As Ryan points out, Twain’s prediction came true, for Forrest, past his prime, was not favorably received by the San Francisco reviewers (“Frontier Critic,” p. 203).

4. Consider the following:

Mrs. F. F. L. wore a superb toilette habilée of Chambry gauze; over this a charming Figaro jacket, made of mohair, or horse-hair, . . . over this again, a Raphael blouse of cheveux de la reine, trimmed round the bottom with lozenges formed of insertions, and around the top with bronchial troches . . . . On the roof of her bonnet was a menagerie of rare and beautiful bugs and reptiles, and under the eaves thereof a counterfeit of the “early bird.” . . . (WG 35.)
the *Californian*. He created an idiotic mugwump who unintentionally parodied the styles deplored by the *Californian* and then perversely sided with those who defended themselves from its criticism. The principle behind the idiocy was quite simple: the more asinine the pride of the journalists, the greater the need of asininity in their critic. Twain’s persona was not only an idiot, but a comical phoenix who, in the course of the sketch, rose several times from the position of willing butt to mock those to whose mockery he had exposed himself.

The full title of Twain’s sketch was “The Facts Concerning the Recent Trouble between Mr. Mark Twain and Mr. John William Skae of Virginia City—Wherein It Is Attempted To Be Proved That the Former Was Not To Blame in the Matter”—which, as usual, was a blind, in this case for a chaotic lampoon of a Western news story. Purportedly, Mark Twain, the innocent correspondent, was given a story about a “Distressing Accident” by his friend Skae, who walked into the office late one night “with an expression of profound and heartfelt suffering upon his countenance.” Without troubling to read the dispatch, the sympathetic fool stopped the press and inserted it into the “first edition” of that issue of the *Californian*.

He had been hoaxed. The writer of the dispatch had made an imbecile attempt to crowd all of his facts into his opening sentence (all 231 words of it). He buried the news—in fact never got to it—confused past and present, forgot what he had started out to write, and in desperation ended with a moral on the evils of drink.

Last evening about 6 o’clock, as Mr. William Schuyler, an old and respectable citizen of South Park, was leaving his residence to go down town, as has been his usual custom for many years, with the exception only of a short interval in the Spring of 1850 during which he was confined to his bed by injuries received in attempting to stop a runaway horse by thoughtlessly placing himself directly in its wake and throwing up his hands and

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5. “The Facts” was printed in the *Californian*, August 26, 1865, *SOS*, 180–87. Twain republished the “Distressing Accident” from it in the *Galaxy* in October, 1870, in response to a clipping sent him by a reader who had found almost as garbled a piece of writing as Twain’s parody (*CTG* 85f.). He printed the entire piece again, but in a greatly revised form, as “Mr. Bloke’s Item” in *SNO* 216–20.
Early Criticism: The Muggins

shouting, which, if he had done so even a single moment sooner must inevitably have frightened the animal still more instead of checking its speed, although disastrous enough to himself, as it was and rendered more melancholy and distressing by reason of the presence of his wife's mother, who was there and saw the sad occurrence, notwithstanding it is at least likely, though not necessarily so, that she should be reconnoitering in another direction when incidents occur, not being vivacious and on the lookout, as a general thing, but even the reverse, as her own mother is said to have stated, who is no more, but died in the full hope of a glorious resurrection, upwards of three years ago, aged 86, being a Christian woman and without guile, as it were, or property, in consequence of the fire of 1849, which destroyed every blasted thing she had in the world. But such is life. Let us all take warning by this solemn occurrence, and let us endeavor so to conduct ourselves that when we come to die we can do it. Let us place our hands upon our hearts and say with earnestness and sincerity that from this day forth we will beware of the intoxicating bowl.

There is a pause, and then in the second edition of the journal Twain reports his editor's reaction:

The boss editor has been in here raising the very mischief and tearing his hair and kicking the furniture about, and abusing me like a pick-pocket. He says that every time he leaves me in charge of the paper for half an hour I get imposed upon by the first infant or the first idiot that comes along. And he says that distressing item of Johnny Skae's is nothing but a lot of distressing bosh, and has got no point to it.... He says every man he meets has insinuated that somebody about The Californian office has gone crazy.

The fool is taken aback. This is what he gets for trying to do someone a kindness. He determines to read the dispatch. He is puzzled and reads it six more times without being able to "get the meaning of it." Though "driven to the verge of lunacy," he amiably hopes his friend will annotate the next such story he brings in. At length the muggins sees the light, but the wrong one. He must confess that on reflection "after all this fuss that has been made by the chief cook about this item, I do not see that it is any more obscure than the general run of local items in the daily papers after all."

The benign idiot has twice thrust his head forward to have it bashed, and he will do it again. He thinks the newspapers under
attack by the *Californian* are liable to the same charge his editor had brought against Skae—which makes him take their part against the *Californian*! "You don't usually find out much by reading local items, and you don't in the case of Johnny Skae's item. But it is just *The Californian's* style to be so disgustingly particular and so distressingly hypercritical." This gets him launched. He proceeds to show how the *Californian* has unjustly berated the papers for the very thing each prides itself on. Its accusations are that the *Alta's* humorist, Stiggers, writes jokes that are devoid of meaning and humor; the *Flag's* poets write poetry that has neither meaning nor meter; the *Call's* grammar is made up of ungrammatical combinations never seen in the language before; and the *Bulletin's* country correspondent sends in letters that are rambling, precious, and cluttered with meaningless details.

Though obvious enough, Twain's irony would lose half its effectiveness were it not for his so completely entering the character of the idiot, which enables him both to question the *Californian's* hypercriticism and to sanction its justness. Hard as it is for the editor to put up with the idiot, it is even harder to endure his being one's advocate. Contradiction cannot overpower him; it is rather a device to overpower the reader and prevent him from reaching too soon for the tenor of the irony. The fool's abandonment of sense and his general disorganization become a paradigm of the mentality of the newspaper writers. What better man to defend them than a journalist who is of one mind with them?

If the idiot is disorganized, Twain's sketch is not. After the idiot's defense of the newspapers, he brings the reader back to something he may have overlooked in the all but forgotten dispatch by Johnny Skae. Continuing to damn what he praises, the idiot reveals that the dispatch was actually a compendium of the several vices the newspapers were accused of! Presumably, the San Francisco reader might have perceived this had he taken the pains to read it as carefully as an idiot had.

Now who but *The Californian* would ever have found fault with Johnny Skae's item. No daily paper in town would, anyhow. It is after the same style, and is just as good, and as interesting and as luminous as the articles published every day in the city
papers. It has got all the virtues that distinguish those articles and render them so acceptable to the public. It is not obtrusively pointed, and in this it resembles the jokes of Stiggers; it warbles smoothly and easily along, without rhyme or rhythm or reason, like the Flag's poetry; the eccentricity of its construction is appalling to the grammatical student, and in this it rivals the happiest achievements of the Call; it furnishes the most laborious and elaborate details to the eye without transmitting any information whatever to the understanding, and in this respect it will bear comparison with the most notable specimens of the Bulletin's country correspondence; and finally, the mysterious obscurity that curtains its general intent and meaning could not be surpassed by all the newspapers in town put together.

As Twain once remarked in a notebook, "It takes a heap of sense to write good nonsense." 6

III

If there was one place where the fool would have to be ruled persona non grata, it would be in the realm of art, over which to play the fool was to be the fool. Deepening the enigma of art criticism for Twain was the fact that he privately had no confidence in his taste, suspecting that if he liked a painting there was bound to be something wrong with it, and vice versa (see, e.g., I.A I 306f.). Nevertheless, regardless of whether the fool's mask was adopted in earnest or sport, it remained, with certain modifications, just about the only device through which Twain expressed a number of legitimate objections on matters of art, art appreciation, and art reviewing. For one thing, his muggins in art criticism was a fairly levelheaded chap; in direct contrast to the correspondent for the Californian, he was the sanest of Twain's critical fools. He looked hard for the values he was supposed to find in paintings and was frustrated that they should escape him. Almost no one seemed to be so wholly at sea about art as the muggins was, and yet he uncovered a number of real problems.

Since the best and most notorious examples of these early comments on art appeared in Innocents Abroad, it should be noted that they came at a time when Twain was using foolishness

Of Journalism and Art

of character for purposes beyond those of criticism, and at a
time, too, when he was beginning to merge the special abilities
of the muggins to draw fire from above and below with the com-
posite traits of a somewhat different Mark Twain from the one
he had been out West. Though he might be a fool, the Eastern
Mark Twain had compunctions about being an idiot. The sanity
of the muggins consequently owed something to Twain’s aware-
ness that in addressing a wider audience than that of San
Francisco he had first to tone down the Western wildness that
had forced him to part company with the earthy Mr. Brown.
He might curse the old masters as much as he pleased in private,
and later on, in A Tramp Abroad, he might say some idiotic
things about them in print (II 243-53) and throw in some non-
sense about Turner for good measure (I 243f.). He could even
return to the pose of the dunce as late as 1903, in a little sketch
called “Instructions in Art” and make himself out a madcap
painter with an uncanny ability to penetrate the obscurities of
his own unobscure paintings and dress them up in jargon.7 But
in 1869, a transitional year for Twain, it was not prudent for
him to publish his complaints against European art—however
just they might be—unless he could at the same time certify
that he was no Philistine. This he did with complete ease, for
once he put his mind to it, Twain could be an exceedingly im-
pressionable—indeed enthusiastic—appreciator of fine art.

Before the Cathedral of Milan, whose architecture and sculp-
ture were in good condition (unlike some of the old paintings),
the innocent traveler was captivated. Having looked at it for
half a night and all of a day, he exclaimed,

What a wonder it is! So grand, so solemn, so vast! And yet so
delicate, so airy, so graceful! A very world of solid weight, and
yet it seems in the soft moonlight only a fairy delusion of frost-
work that might vanish with a breath! How sharply its pin-
nacled angles and its wilderness of spires were cut against the
sky, and how richly their shadows fell upon its snowy roof!
It was a vision!—a miracle!—an anthem sung in stone, a poem
wrought in marble! (IA I 226.)

7. Originally published in Metropolitan; reprinted by Paine in Europe and
Early Criticism: The Muggins

As for the ornamental bas reliefs, a person might study one of them for "a week without exhausting its interest." Each of the Cathedral's beauties seemed inexhaustible. In the statuary "every face," Twain noted, "is eloquent with expression, and every attitude is full of grace" (I 227).

If Twain was capable of such abandon in his appreciation of art, one is entitled to wonder why he should have allowed himself to look like a backwoods scourge in heaping derision on the old masters. One explanation is that, in keeping with the total purpose of his book, he was more distressed by the tourist's unexamined reverence for the paintings of the masters (largely inspired by guides and guidebooks) than he was by the art itself. As Twain said in his Preface, he wanted "to suggest to the reader how he would be likely to see Europe and the East if he looked at them with his own eyes" (I xxxvii). With respect to paintings, in particular, he protested, "It is impossible to travel through Italy without speaking of pictures, and can I see them through others' eyes?" (I 307). Twain knew that the admireising tourist was too intimidated to report what his senses told him. For a person of ordinary honesty this was disgraceful, and somewhat frustrating. In order to get through to the tourist Twain had to speak of the paintings with a frankness shocking enough to penetrate his dishonesty. In objecting to the non-realistic

8. On studying the Palace of Versailles, the ravished republican went into even greater raptures:

Versailles! It is wonderfully beautiful! You gaze, and stare, and try to understand that it is real, that it is on the earth, that it is not the Garden of Eden—but your brain grows giddy, stupefied by the world of beauty around you, and you half believe you are the dupe of an exquisite dream. The scene thrills one like military music! A noble palace, stretching its ornamented front block upon block away, till it seemed that it would never end; a grand promenade before it, whereon the armies of an empire might parade; all about it rainbows of flowers, and colossal statues that were almost numberless, and yet seemed only scattered over the ample space; broad flights of stone steps leading down from the promenade to the lower grounds of the park—stairways that whole regiments might stand to arms upon and have room to spare; vast fountains whose great bronze effigies discharged rivers of sparkling water into the air and mingled a hundred curving jets together in forms of matchless beauty... (I 204.)

Twain's transport continued for more than a page, in the course of which he forgave Louis XIV for the "two hundred millions of dollars" he had spent on "this marvelous park" when bread was scarce.
compositional conventions of the religious paintings (a piece of unconscious Pre-Raphaelitism on Twain’s part), he tried to put into words what the tourist was probably thinking. Twain’s strategy was to make himself the butt of the tourist’s laughter in order to disabuse him of his folly.

In imitation of the tourist, Twain strained to see qualities no longer visible in “The Last Supper.” Rather than fake admiration for it, he admitted his frustration by taking the supposedly laughable view that to his “untrained eye” the copies seemed “superior . . . to the original.” Relying on his humble vision, he felt compelled to articulate what sensible people would shrink from saying after having seen what he had seen:

“The Last Supper” is painted on the dilapidated wall of what was a little chapel attached to the main church in ancient times, I suppose. It is battered and scarred in every direction, and stained and discolored by time, and Napoleon’s horses kicked the legs off most the disciples when they (the horses, not the disciples) were stabled there more than half a century ago. (I 247.)

To drive home his point Twain gave a dispassionately realistic description of what was left of the picture, and then brought on the tourists:

The colors are dimmed with age; the countenances are scaled and marred, and nearly all expression is gone from them; the hair is a dead blur upon the wall, and there is no life in the eyes. Only the attitudes are certain.

People come here from all parts of the world, and glorify this masterpiece. They stand entranced before it with bated breath and parted lips, and when they speak, it is only in the catchy ejaculations of rapture:

“Oh, wonderful!”
“Such expression!”
“Such grace of attitude!”
“Such dignity!”
“Such faultless drawing!”
“Such matchless coloring!”
“Such feeling!”
“What delicacy of touch!”
“What sublimity of conception!”
“A vision! a vision!” (I 248.)
Early Criticism: The Muggins

As far as his actual criticism of the painting is concerned, the persistent reasonableness and resultant frustration of the muggins combine to make something of a purist of him:

I am willing to believe that the eye of the practiced artist can rest upon the Last Supper and renew a lustre where only a hint of it is left, supply a tint that has faded away, restore an expression that is gone; patch, and color, and add to the dull canvas until at last its figures shall stand before him aglow with the life, the feeling, the freshness, yea, with all the noble beauty that was theirs when first they came from the hand of the master. But I cannot work this miracle. Can those other uninspired visitors do it, or do they only happily imagine they do? (I 249f.)

It is indicative of the sort of attitude Twain thought his persona should take in criticizing art that these remarks were not present in his original Alta letter on Leonardo, from which, incidentally, he also deleted Brown's expression of gratitude on learning that Leonardo had been dead for three hundred years, as well as such sentiments as, "We don't know any more about pictures than a kangaroo does about metaphysics."  

Of still greater interest is the fact that Twain made a virtue of necessity in taking the stance of a sensible fool who is frustrated at finding so little truth in discussions of the old masters. While revising the Alta letters for the book, he had fumed at the thought of his having to discuss the old masters when one could scarcely utter a word about them that was not platitudinous. To Emeline Beach, his young friend and shipmate, whom he asked to tell him all she could about the Murillos she liked, he had let off some steam: "Hang the whole gang of Old Masters, I say! The idea that I have to go to driveling about those dilapidated antediluvian humbugs at this late day, is exasperating." These feelings notwithstanding, he conceded that if jokes about the painters had been passable in newspaper letters, they would have to come out of the book. "I cannot afford to expose my want of cultivation too much," he said. Since he could neither


lie nor rage, Twain invented a suitable middle course, and thereby satisfied his conflicting desires to be frank and not to seem crude. But the operative principle, as he told Emeline, was to "invent." In conceiving his prize invention—his persona—Twain dispensed with fact in order to obtain a critical effect. Thus, instead of railing at the old masters, he characterized himself as a dullard, not quite able to discover the admitted beauty in the old paintings. He made a correction of just this kind in an allusion to Emeline, excising "people abuse me because I am so bitterly prejudiced against the old masters that I cannot see any beauty in their productions. It makes me perfectly savage to look at one of those pictures," and substituting "my friends abuse me because I am a little prejudiced against the old masters—because I fail sometimes to see the beauty that is in their productions." For his purposes as critic, there was in the long run much to be gained by Twain's saying that in deference to his good friends on board ship it gave him "real pain to speak in [an] almost unappreciative way of the old masters" (I 306; my italics).

What then were Twain's major complaints against the old masters—apart from his complaint against the tourist's adulation of them? In essence, he raised four questions, of varying degrees of relevance. Each concerns a neglected problem faced by the layman, and each is broached by a layman who wants to make a creditable attempt to like their work and is thwarted by the very sincerity of his demands.

First, he saw too many of the old masters crowded together in the Louvre and in the Roman palaces he visited. One painting detracted from another, so that the well-intentioned observer could not do justice to any of them. Baffled and abused, the fool capitulates, claiming foul play, and asks our indulgence:

If, up to this time, I had seen only one "old master" in each palace, instead of acres and acres of walls and ceilings fairly papered with them, might I not have a more civilized opinion of the old masters than I do now? I think so.... It begins to dawn upon me, now, that possibly, what I have been taking for

11. McKeithan, Traveling with the Innocents, p. 70; IA I 331.
uniform ugliness in the galleries may be uniform beauty after all. I honestly hope it is, to others, but certainly it is not to me. Perhaps the reason I used to enjoy going to the Academy of Fine Arts in New York was because there were but a few hundred paintings in it, and it did not surfeit me to go through the list. I suppose the Academy was bacon and beans in the Forty-Mile Desert, and a European gallery is a state dinner of thirteen courses. One leaves no sign after him of the one dish, but the thirteen frighten away his appetite and give him no satisfaction. (II 15.)

Second, adding to the oppression of numbers was the preposterous sameness of subject, which the inquisitive Mark Twain tried to bear as well as he could. The positions and expressions given saints and martyrs were indistinguishable from one picture to the next. "We have seen pictures of martyrs enough, and saints enough," he sighed, "to regenerate the world." Versailles and the Cathedral of Milan were unique; these paintings were not. Once again, it took a muggins to point out what everyone observed, but no one had the nerve to mention—that the monotony of subject matter precluded anything resembling an aesthetic experience. With remarkable restraint, the apologetic muggins uncompromisingly states his case. Ostensibly, he doesn't know any better than to say what is on his mind:

I may . . . as well acknowledge with such apologies as may be due, that to me it seemed that when I had seen one of these martyrs I had seen them all. They all have a marked family resemblance to each other, they dress alike, in coarse monkish robes and sandals, they are all bald-headed, they all stand in about the same attitude, and without exception they are gazing heavenward with countenances which the Ainsworths, the Mortons, and the Williamses, et fils [the supposed connoisseurs] inform me are full of "expression." (I 304.)

A corollary of this view, and the third of Twain's points, was that in their obsession with otherworldliness the masters had mainly ignored the rich life going on around them in the Renaissance world (II 16). (Breughel and Hogarth would have been more to his liking.) "To me," the muggins pleaded, "there is nothing tangible about [their] imaginary portraits, nothing that I can grasp and take a living interest in" (I 304). When the
thankful muggins did discover some “Venetian historical pictures” that gripped his imagination, he noticed that the painters could not resist patching on the “formal introduction of defunct Doges to the Virgin Mary in regions beyond the clouds,” which, he would humbly submit, “clashed rather harshly with the proprieties” (I 305).

Twain’s other point, which has to do with the morals of the masters, is not important. However, as part of the general indictment, and particularly as part of the muggins’ growing suspicion that he is being humbugged (the reward of his good will), it shows that even a fool can take only so much. Mark Twain lustily despised the masters for glorifying the “damned Medicis.” The thought that Raphael should have “pictured such infernal villains as Catherine and Marie de Medici seated in heaven and conversing familiarly with the Virgin Mary and the angels” was enough, by itself, he felt, to prejudice any honorable man (he hoped his female companions, who had chided him about this prejudice, would take note) against the old masters. He insisted that he simply had to “keep on protesting against the groveling spirit that could persuade those masters to prostitute their noble talents to the adulation of such monsters as the French, Venetian, and Florentine princes of two and three hundred years ago . . .” (II 331).

At bottom, except for the matter of repetitiveness, it cannot be said that Twain had much of a case against the paintings as such. His own feelings of inferiority when confronted with the old masters greatly narrowed the possibility of his making a valid aesthetic judgment of their work. It was a different story with American paintings, for he felt himself to be completely competent to deal with them, and he said as much in contrasting the Italian galleries with the Academy of Fine Arts in New York. In America, it was not necessary for him to feign personal frustration so much as to point up the comic frustrations inherent in his judging home-grown art. That was what Twain did when he had a brush with art criticism in New York, just prior to his boarding the Quaker City on June 7, 1867.
Early Criticism: The Muggins

On May 28, he took in the annual show of the National Academy of Design, and five days later attended a showing of Albert Bierstadt's gigantic painting, "The Domes of the Yosemite," the latest of Bierstadt's versions of his almost exclusive subject. Both reviews went back to the *Alta* in San Francisco (appearing on July 28 and August 4, 1867, respectively) as installments on the correspondence he was to send back from his trip to the Holy Land (*MTTM* 238–42, 249–51). In the first review he coyly made the most of his stated ignorance about art; in the second he by and large played it straight, presenting himself as a down-to-earth Westerner whose familiarity with the setting of Bierstadt's painting gave him a clearer perspective than that of the immigrant painter. In addition to discussing the paintings, Twain's object in both reviews was to show up the critics, as he claimed that their abuse had kept him away from the exhibits. He actually came to the same disapproving conclusion that the critics had, but, being averse to their cocksureness, pretended in his first review to be ill at ease in an art gallery, somewhat like the proverbial whore in church.12

The mode of apprehension in each experience—that is, the way that Twain lets us know what he knows—is based upon a certain sense of frustration, emanating in the one instance from his foolishness and in the other from his irony. His foolish attitude toward the Academy's show he would hide from New Yorkers and confide to his folksy Western readers. He is the bumpkin in the big city:

“There were two pictures that suited me, but they were so small and so modest that I was ashamed to let the other visitors see me looking at them so much, so I gazed at them sidewise, and "let on" to be worshipping the "old master" rascals. I had no catalogue, and did not want any—because, if a picture cannot tell its own story to us uncultivated vagrants, we scorn to read it out of a book. (*MTTM* 239f.)

In the case of the Bierstadt, it was upsetting that the painting should look so much "more beautiful than the original" scene.

12. He had earlier (1865) been "ordered" to do "an elaborate criticism" of the exhibit at the California Art Union, but apparently felt himself to be so completely out of his element that he funked it ("An Unbiased Criticism," *Californian*, March 18, 1865; *SO* 158–65).
"Some of Mr. Bierstadt’s mountains swim in a lustrous, pearly mist, which is so enchantingly beautiful that I am sorry the Creator hadn’t made it instead of him, so that it would always remain there" (ibid., 249, 250).

The letter on the Academy show is a review by evasion. If the reader wants to find out how good the paintings are, he may well be frustrated himself, unless he catches the meaning of Twain’s presumed frustration, in which case he will have gotten a sound review—a feat Twain did not quite have the self-assurance to attempt with the old masters. The key to his form is a satire on critics, established in his first paragraph, in which the muggins renounces all desire to rid himself of his born ignorance and acquire the knowledge that critics have. Using a metaphor which exactly prefigures his dramatic speculation in *Life on the Mississippi* on whether he had gained or lost more in coming to know the river (83–85), Twain asserts the virtues of an uninformed appreciation of art:

I am thankful that the good God creates us all ignorant. I am glad that when we change His plans in this regard, we have to do it at our own risk. It is a gratification to me to know that I am ignorant of art, and ignorant also of surgery. Because people who understand art find nothing in pictures but blemishes and surgeons and anatomists see no beautiful women in all their lives, but only a ghastly stack of bones with Latin names to them, and a network of nerves and muscles and tissues inflamed by disease. The very point in a picture that fascinates me with its beauty, is to the cultured artist a monstrous crime against the laws of coloring; and the very flush that charms me in a lovely face, is, to the critical surgeon, nothing but a sign hung out to advertise a decaying lung. Accursed be all such knowledge. I want none of it. (MTTMB 238.)

The art critics had been “so diligently abusing everything in and about the Academy of Design” that the muggins had “expected that a visit there would produce nothing but unhappiness.” He hoped that his ignorance would protect him from misery, and at the outset it did, as he freely admired “all the sea views, and the mountain views, and the quiet woodland scenes, with shadow-tinted lakes in the foreground, and... just revelled in the storms.” His joy is shortlived, however. After he takes in a “dreamy tropical scene” that he is not sure he ought to like, the
Early Criticism: The Muggins

principle of frustration becomes more pronounced, and delivers his review for him. He tries to reinforce his pleasure in simple representational beauties, but soon tires of them when he sees that they are overwhelmed by triteness and sentiment. This reversal begins with his scowling at an imitation "old master" and ends with his denouncing the hideous Moorish architecture of the Academy.\(^{13}\) It was particularly frustrating to find out what he had taken pains to keep himself in the dark about: that the critics were right in condemning the exhibit.

The first stage of his disillusionment is a fine example of the technique of the muggins—a speaking falsely as to particulars, but truly as to fundamentals: "And I know I ought to have admired that picture, by one of the old masters, where six bearded faces without any bodies to them were glaring out of Egyptian darkness and glowering upon a naked infant that was not built like any infant that ever I saw, nor colored like it, either. I am glad the old masters are all dead, and I only wish they had died sooner" (239).

He obviously should not have admired this painting, which was out of place in a gallery of contemporary American art. In all probability this "old master" was Edwin White's "St. Stephen's Vision," which aped the beatific subject and pious style of Italian Renaissance paintings. As the reviewer for *The New York Times* put it, White would have been better off painting what he had really seen instead of roaming back two thousand years to paint what he had imagined.\(^{14}\)

Twain said that out of three hundred paintings he had found thirty or forty that were beautiful. Since there were actually some six hundred paintings, he had arbitrarily doubled the

\(^{13}\) The museum, he wrote, "is barred, and cross-barred, and streaked, and striped, and spotted, and speckled, and gilded, and defiled from top to bottom, with infamous flummery and filagreed [sic] gingerbread, to that degree that the first glance a stranger casts upon it unsettles his mind for a week." The stranger, Twain thought, would first think it was a church, but one that no God-fearing Christian would worship in. He would also dismiss the possibility that it might be a hotel, a mansion, or a lunatic asylum planned by the inmates, and conclude that it was a pretentious stable built by a parvenu sportsman (*MTTMB* 241 f.).

\(^{14}\) *Times*, May 23, 1867, 5.
proportion of good ones, but to his shame had to admit that he had "gone and done the very same thing the art critics do—left unmentioned the works I liked, and mentioned only those I did not like" (241). He did single out for praise one of the few paintings that showed genuine talent and was to be commended by the critics, "The Hunter's Flask" by William Holbrook Beard, uncle of Daniel Carter Beard, who later illustrated *A Connecticut Yankee* and became a good friend of Twain's.15

The climactic admission—in which we observe how the muggins' trusting innocence was destroyed by sentimentality—came with his noting that "half the paintings in the Academy are devoted to the usual harmless subjects, of course."

You find the same old pile of cats asleep in the corner; and the same old party of kittens skylarking with a cotton ball; and the same old excited puppy looking out of a window; and the same old detachment of cows wading across a branch at sunset; and the same old naked libels marked "Eve"; and the same old stupid looking wenches marked "Autumn," and "Summer," etc., loafing around in the woods, or toting flowers, and all of them out of shirts, in the same old way; and there were the everlasting farmers, gathering their eternal squashes; and a "Girl Swinging on a Gate"; and a "Girl Reading"; and girls performing all sorts of similar prodigies; and most numerous and most worn-out of all, there was the usual endless array of vases and dishes full of grapes and peaches and slices of watermelon, and such stuff; and the same tiresome old tom-cat "laying" for a goldfish. (24of.)

15. "The Hunter's Flask," the *Times* critic noted, "is worthy of high praise, taking it for just what it is. The squirrels are admirably individualized. Nothing could be more drunken than the expression of the poor fellow who has sunk back in the grass . . ." (*ibid.*). Twain gave this description of the picture:

[It] was racy. In a little nook in a forest, a splendid gray squirrel, brimful of frisky action, had found a basket-covered brandy flask upset, and was sipping the spilled liquor from the ground. His face told that he was delighted. Close by, a corpulent old fox-squirrel was stretched prone upon his back, and the jolly grin on his two front teeth, and the drunken leer of his half-closed eye told that he was happy, and that the anxious solicitude in the face of the black squirrel that was bending over him and feeling his pulse was all uncalled for by the circumstances of the case. (*MTTMB* 240.)
Early Criticism: The Muggins

V

Since the muggins subsumed reasoning, when Twain loosened his ties with him he augmented the overtly analytic side of his criticism. On viewing Bierstadt's "Domes" he found himself in the position of dealing with a picture painted by an outsider and purporting to represent a Western scene well known to himself and his readers. At the Academy of Design show Twain had been the outsider, for which he had compensated by acting the fool. With Bierstadt, while the fool was not totally banished, the comparative base he operated on was converted into a framework for analysis. That base was explicitly one of realism: what the Westerner had seen as opposed to what Bierstadt wanted people to see.

"The Domes of the Yosemite" was the best of about a hundred enormous canvases Bierstadt painted of that general scene. This one measured almost ten by fifteen feet and was seen to best advantage from the balcony of a theater. It was shown at the Studio Building in New York in May, 1867, for the benefit of the "Ladies Southern Relief Association." Formerly, Twain had criticized from behind the mask of unknowing; on regarding Bierstadt's painting, he could not raise the issue that needed to be raised without seeming to be an expert. He therefore retained the aura of dullness associated with the muggins by giving some of his most incisive criticisms in statements of ironic frustration. It was to avoid going over to the side of the critics that he made his first ironic allusion to Bierstadt's having made the scene look "considerably more beautiful than the original."

Twain felt that, instead of magnifying an already magnificent effect of spatial grandeur (a technique for which Bierstadt was accused of "theatricalism"\(^{16}\)), the painter should have contented

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16. Oliver W. Larkin, *Art and Life in America* (New York, 1959), p. 209. One reviewer had objected that Bierstadt's perspective was faulty and that "The Domes" lacked real grandeur (Clarence Cook, "Mr. Bierstadt's 'Domes of the Yosemite,'" *New York Daily Tribune*, May 11, 1867, 4). That, at any rate, Bierstadt had created considerable confusion by mixing moods can be seen in a recent commentary which has it that "his Wagnerian interpretations often captured the grandeur, if not the light and air, of the real thing" (Alexander Eliot, *Three Hundred Years of American Painting* [New York, 1957], p. 95).
himself with trying to capture no more than the real grandeur of the twin mountain peaks. Moving from the general prospect, with the two peaks in each of the upper corners of the picture, to such particulars as the valley, the bluff, the trees, and the boulders, Twain found that everything was "correct and natural," but that this accuracy was precisely the reason why Bierstadt erred in manufacturing unnatural "atmospheric effects." He will admit that he has been smitten by those effects, for they are "startling"; the difficulty is that the frustrated observer will find nothing like them in Yosemite. Though he "may be mistaken," it does seem to be "more the atmosphere of Kingdom-Come than of California." One gets "dreamy lights and shadows" playing around the precipices "instead of the bald, glaring expanse of rocks and earth splotched with cloud-shadows like unpoetical ink-spots which one ought to see in a California mountain picture when correctly painted." Bierstadt's "soft and rounded and velvety" mountains are so "great an improvement on nature" that one laments being deprived of the pleasure of seeing them in nature.

To justify the realistic basis of his criticism, Twain made a distinction between a "picture," in which liberties taken for the sake of artistic form are permissible, and a "portrait," in which the painter leads us to believe that he is doing something from life that is impressive in and of itself. His argument was for the dominance of subject and for the functionalism of its separate effects, criteria which, when rigorously applied, exactly validate his frustration. "As a picture, this work must please, but as a portrait I do not think it will answer. Portraits should be accurate. We do not want feeling and intelligence smuggled into the pictured face of an idiot, and we do not want this glorified atmosphere smuggled into a portrait of the Yosemite, where it surely does not belong. I may be wrong, but still I believe that this atmosphere of Mr. Bierstadt's is altogether too gorgeous" (251).