CHAPTER I

Reverse Type

The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a plot of God.

—EDGAR ALLAN POE, EUREKA

In the “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” for instance, where is the ingenuity of unraveling a web which you (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unraveling?

—EDGAR ALLAN POE, AUGUST 9, 1846, LETTER TO PHILIP PENDLETON COOKE

Mark Twain’s Mysterious Stranger manuscripts are a set of three distinct, unfinished novels Twain composed between 1897 and 1908.1 The third text in this series of anarchic partial fictions on moral responsibility is No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger (1902–8). With its references to the growth of the industrial workplace and a burgeoning labor movement that would attempt to sever workers’ “workaday selves” from those selves who must be afforded time for “what we will,” the third of the Mysterious Stranger manuscripts takes modernity as its subject. It does not flinch from awful spectacles of human oppression and violence, some of them in a workplace Twain ought to have known well: a printer’s shop. For many critics, No. 44’s printer’s shop and its troublesome crew evoke Twain’s well-known financial debacle as a “venture capitalist” for the failed Paige Compositor. Coupled with the Panic of 1893, this ill-fated investment would surely have ruined Twain, had not Standard Oil president H. H. Rogers bailed him out with financial advice. Twain’s dream compositor was to have eliminated many of the most difficult jobs of the printer’s shop, along with the labor force that performed those jobs. Little wonder, then, that one critic has called the novel Twain’s “wish-dream of a supernatural shop” as well as a thesis on “threatened disintegration of personality” in the industrial age (Michelson, Printer’s Devil 210, 220). Following Forrest Robinson’s unelaborated but nevertheless intriguing claim
that we can describe the *Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts as “a succession of approaches to the question of human enslavement that are no sooner tried than they are found to be unworkable” (*Bad Faith* 233), this chapter treats No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger* as an exploration of historical contingency and free will. More specifically, this chapter argues that Twain’s manuscript experiments with the conventions of adventure detective stories to contend with interracial tensions and anxieties about governance and consent in an industrial age.

By the early twentieth century, Twain had already tinkered with the popular detective novel in its various nineteenth-century incarnations. Michael Denning has observed that “almost uniquely, Twain bridged the gap between the audiences of the cultivated novel and the dime novel” (208). In works such as “The Stolen White Elephant” (1882, written in 1878) and the unfinished “Simon Wheeler, Detective” (written in 1877) there are the bizarre disguises, fiendish villains, and improbable settings that regularly appeared in adventure detective stories. According to Grant Underwood, Twain recognized that in acceptable reproductions of the genre “disbelief [must] not merely be suspended: it had to be forcibly wrenched from one’s consciousness” (61). By the late nineteenth century, however, as the author increasingly abandoned realistic fiction for a blend of pessimistic parable and fantasy that was cynical when it was not utterly dystopic, Twain’s attitude toward detective fiction changed drastically. For Twain, whose later writings fixated on “God and the devil, time and space, the origins and status of knowledge, free will, determinism, and what he took to be the inherent perversity of human nature,” human history remained a major puzzle (Robinson, “Dreams” 454). In this period of his life, argues Underwood, Twain became “a structuralist in his relationship to the detective story,” inventing narratives “in which the mystery is the condition of man and the detective is a god” (210). In No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger* Twain turned to detective fiction to decipher the cosmos.

The magnificent ambitions of No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger* make way for Twain’s reckless expedition into the American racial imaginary and the irregular tempo of industrial life in the nineteenth century. For this reason, it supplies an expedient point of entry into the ways that texts on the margins of the genre cultivated detective fiction’s devices for their own purposes. Twain’s “cosmic” detection could not resemble the concise puzzle mystery that advances “the myth of the necessary chain,” taking as its only proper solution a single, unassailable “step-by-step path of logico-temporal recon-
struction" (Porter 41). If we were to situate No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger* within a linear genealogy of the detective genre, we might suspend it loosely between an Edgar Allan Poe and an Agatha Christie. But Twain’s is a text that brooks no literary lineage in linear terms. It is anything but automated. In this way, No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger* resembles dime novel detective fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as ideologically ambivalent a form as the proto-puzzle mystery, with its narrative intemperance and extravagant digressions. With a sprawling chronology, supernatural spectacles, and dramatic shifts in narrative scale and speed, Twain’s manuscript wrestles to capture confrontations between labor and industry at the turn of the twentieth century—confrontations whose stakes were further complicated, it must be noted, by racial and ethnic tensions, as corporate bosses calculatingly recruited and manipulated immigrants, all-black convict labor, and African American “scabs” to undermine fragile forms of interracial cooperation and to quash possibilities for collective action. Twain’s narrative strains to accommodate the multiple illogics of the shop. Taking the detective genre’s tools as its own, it dramatizes how labor impinges on textuality while precipitating racial difference. It struggles to articulate individual and corporate resistance to a new ideology of industrial democracy, which would empower the working classes to think of themselves as consensual participants in a democratized realm of production.

Additionally, in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain produces a character well suited to negotiate the commotions of an industrial age. While this third *Mysterious Stranger* manuscript shares a desultory outlook with its two predecessors, the “strangers” of the first two manuscripts, Bruce Michelson argues, were “not sufficiently strange, not temperamentally free enough for the task of ultimate escape, from death, mutability, nature, cultural oppression, human stupidity—and from confinements of an individual self trying to figure all this out” (*Printer’s Devil* 219). By contrast, the mysterious figure in the third manuscript is so strange as to almost defy definition.² Twain’s formidable rogue, who can crack labor conspiracies, sweet-talk shop bosses, and sometimes act as informant, is charged, in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, with the task of navigating industrial life.

“No. 44,” the mysterious stranger of Twain’s third manuscript, bears a strong resemblance to the dime-novel detective. A sharp wit, a physical powerhouse, and a master at disguise, the dime-novel detective is indeed an invention of the industrial world and among the chief personae in many
popular literary depictions of American labor disputes. He is not merely the well-known Pinkerton agent who infiltrates the working classes on the company’s payroll, but also appears as a superhuman being whose materializations in the midst of workingmen radically reconfigures conflict and reshuffles every piece of plot. An imposter given over to serial charades, Twain’s No. 44 belongs to this breed of “avenger detectives” that populated dime novels. Most strikingly, No. 44’s antics in the industrial shop bring into view the infrastructure of racial competition that fractures collective action and paralyzes workers. No. 44 is an escape artist, a whiz at impersonation, a master of disguise and doublespeak, and thus of what Henry Louis Gates calls “signifyin(g)”: a “shadowing” or “(re)namin(g)” of (white) terms, since signifyin(g) is a critique of “(white) meaning” or even the “meaning of meaning” (47). Twain uses No. 44 for illustration and exegesis and as a creature of extravagant antics, not the least of which include a vexatious, interminable recital on the Jew’s harp, a minstrel routine as “Mr. Bones,” and a syrupy Stephen Foster medley. No. 44 also makes direct textual interventions with an extraordinary typesetter’s joke and a “Procession of the Dead” that is the manuscript’s finale.

Importantly, dime novels supplied an alternative to nineteenth-century realism or the quasi-realist prose of the evolving “clue-puzzle” mystery. They invited allegorical readings insofar as they relied on “magical transformations to compensate for the impossibility of imagining ‘realistic’ actions by powerful agents” (Denning 74). In No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, however, Twain amplifies and intensifies the allegorical dimensions of the dime novel to access affective and textual realms that constitute another order of prose fiction: an “expressive” realism. The dime novel’s digressive, roundabout plot is externalized in Twain’s impossible chronology of nested chronotopes, which leaps forward in time to register the degradations of the industrial workplace and to dramatize the dilemma of modern political consent. Besides these textual cogitations, Twain mobilizes No. 44’s symptoms of “strangeness” to elucidate the obstacles to interracial sociability in the shop: racial and ethnic antagonisms fostered by industrial life. Finally, No. 44’s assorted escapades end by denaturing narrative itself and, in doing so, demolish the industrial landscape that narrative buttresses. In Twain’s manuscript, this textual rebuttal to the crises of industrialism and modern political consent involves nothing less than the annihilation of whiteness.
“W R I T T E N  R E C O R D S  C A N  L I E”

No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger approaches the dislocations of industrial modernity and the problem of modern political consent from the distant past. Twain dramatizes the pull of modernity through the temporal-spatial arrangements of his text, which takes literary history as a portable scaffold, and shifts with increasing velocity through various chronotopic registers to alight temporarily on the bildungsroman. But modernity is a centripetal force, and the narrative lurches ever forward, in search of a form befitting the scale and speed of the observable world. There is an industrial landscape at the center of the manuscript, and Twain turns to the dime novel and its remarkable adventurer detective in search of coordinates for social cohesion that have nowhere to emerge but from this world of work.

The novel’s mise-en-scène is a heterochrony, countryside irregularly punctuated by temporal gradations and moving, like a set of nested, open-ended parentheses or an inverted telescope, from the “Dark Ages” to the turn of the twentieth century. The opening date is 1490, some years shy of the Reformation. “Some even set it away back centuries upon centuries and said that by the mental and spiritual clock it was still the Age of Faith in Austria,” the narrator remarks, and the evolutionary line is held fast by the devout and dim-witted, so that it “promised to remain so forever” (221). There is no world, it seems, beyond Austria. What lies outside is an extraterrestrial abyss. Inland, however, in the midst of this comatose countryside, is “our village” Eseldorf, mired “in the middle of that sleep, being in the middle of Austria. It drowsed in peace in the deep privacy of a hilly and woodsy solitude where news from the world hardly ever came to disturb its dreams, and was infinitely content” (221).

Just past this pastoral haven for spiritual imbeciles and intellectual buffoons (saddled with a village name that is at best impolitic) there is a “mouldering castle” where the primary action takes place (229). Here the medieval scenery deteriorates and the Middle Ages fall from view. To be sure there is a magician, a real snake-oil salesman who commands awe from all corners of the crumbling castle, but the business of the castle lies elsewhere, in the operation of a printer’s shop managed by a master craftsman (Master Stein) and staffed by various journeymen and apprentices. We have already leaped into the modern era, yet the inner workings of the shop turn on another anachronism: the very latest developments in movable type. And in addition
to an up-to-date printing apparatus, there is what would have been for Mark Twain a fundamental shift in nineteenth-century corporate arrangements: the labor union. Into the midst of this industrialized workplace riddled with labor altercations and union disputes the Mysterious Stranger descends. He deals in the “goods” of the future: frilled collars and tobacco, cornpone and “coon” shows, not to mention news of Christian Science and the Russo-Japanese War—as if the unforeseen (and unpremeditated?) fruits of Western civilization were unsystematically distilled onto a pallet of break bulk cargo, or as Twain subtitled his manuscript, “Being an Ancient Tale found in a jug and freely translated from the jug.”

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. In No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger “our village” Eseldorf is a setting the narrator August quickly abandons in favor of the castle, with its vocational promise, even though the publishing industry is censured by a Church dead set against the effects of mass production, which lead to “the cheapening of books and the indiscriminate dissemination of knowledge” (230). In spite of the Church, the printer’s shop goes about its business unobstructed. What’s more, its separate jurisdiction is also a temporal distinction, and its shifting coordinates in time and space are essentially a chronotopical shift. The chronotope, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin, is a temporal-spatial frame that delimits narrative genre and whose partial purpose is to parse the development of the novel as an apparatus of an expanding human cognizance of time (Tihanov 157). A chronotope is not to be differentiated from the human dispositions it informs, nor do subjects exist independent of its temporal-spatial arrangements. Life in Eseldorf, with its “mental and spiritual clock” stopped, is a bit like what Bakhtin designates “adventure time,” a genre in which time never enters as a dimension of human life or is suppressed entirely (157). No part of the world is jeopardized by the prospect of annihilation by time; then too, there is no chance the universe will be “remade, changed or created anew” (Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, 110). This seems right, and yet if we enter the drowsy village, with its “little homesteads nested among orchards and shade-trees,” there are signs of something closer to Bakhtin’s “folkloric chronotope”: a world that takes its tempos from the seasons; harmonious, cohesive; a place where private duties have not yet been ripped from public life (Tihanov 160).

Of course, the very idea of the “folkloric” drips with sentiment, and pastoral Eseldorf could scarcely emerge from Twain’s gauntlet of irony intact. Twain’s stance is most evident in the depiction of Father Adolf, the self-aggrandizing Aesop who throttles any folk contrariness with his insidious
susurrations and violent threats. August, Twain’s narrator and clearly some kind of dupe, remembers with pleasure that holy man about his seasonal duties: the funerals, where Father Adolf lost no opportunity to bestow “a staggering whack in the face” upon any disrespectful “oaf”; various suicides, over which Father Adolf officiated with morbid efficiency to ensure “for himself, that the stake was driven through the body in a right and permanent and workmanlike way”; and that familiar “procession through the village in plague-time” when Father Adolf traded blessings for cash (225). The politicking of this tyrant alone punctures the pastoral idyll. Nevertheless, it is not obvious why Twain would see fit to bludgeon his readers (or, if he never intended to publish the work, the paper it was written on) with yet another uninspired essay in human hypocrisy, religious or otherwise. Could it be he means to show us Austria and the Dark Ages as something other than a blackboard for his arithmetic on the moral frailty of the human race? August’s nostalgic reminiscences about the annual festivities of terror are simply naïve or, if we admit him capable of sarcasm, are of a piece with Adolf’s contention that in Eseldorf, “when you are in politics you are in the wasp’s nest with a short shirt-tail, as the saying is” (223). If it is naïveté plain and simple, Twain is doling out what Frederic Jameson calls the “irony of the intellectual,” which profits from the “incongruities of a peasant language and a peasant ignorance” (Seeds of Time 113). Otherwise we are anchored in a different kind of irony, irony as “some ultimate life stance and moral and political metaphysic” that orders reality (115).

But consider that Adolf’s routine brutality is the work of a bureaucrat, that his power pales before the influence of the briefly mentioned prince Rosenfeld, who owns the land to whom the livelihood of each villager is ultimately mortgaged, and whose occasional visits dazzle the townspeople “as if the lord of the world had arrived, and had brought all the glories of its kingdoms along” (222). After their quick stopovers in Eseldorf, this local deity and his retinue leave “a calm behind which was like the deep sleep which follows an orgy” (222), perhaps because the event necessitated some frantic bacchanalia orchestrated to entertain the prince. Is this uncontested service and submission the actual target of Twain’s derision? And, if so, is Father Adolf the inconsequential straw man for a duplicitous irony? Then we are dealing with Twain the vindictive exhibitionist, cutting up on every side with his “burlesque circus of authority’s violence” (Lewis 69), the Twain whose narrator (August) stakes his memoirs on a familiar paradox: “Written records can lie”—though Twain gives that screw a third turn—“unless
they are set down by a priest" (227). So Father Adolf supervises the villagers’ dream life, and if the villagers accept his demands, it is permission issued in the dark and mediated by blind irony, permeated with a “forbidden laughter” that repudiates all. But Prince Rosenfeld, the master of their wakeful state, cannot be deposed by the “no” of “yes and no.” To overthrow the despotism of the “folkloric,” Twain must provide a total shift in narrative habits: a crescendo of human consciousness that reaches its height in the castle perched on a precipice just opposite the outskirts of the village.

“The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied,” writes Bakhtin, and in the castle the dullness and duration of the folkloric dissolves into a makeshift modernity. It is crude space initially, but one that pushes forward with a technological enthusiasm that culminates in the printer’s shop, where men rapidly assemble plates of movable type. Later, the machinery runs with dizzying precision of its own accord. These technological developments are not simply the materials of modernity (and even industrial life, as I have suggested above). The mechanized industry, mass production, and alienated labor force are accompanied by temporal changes that irretrievably alter human experience. This experience, especially as it is narrated by August (lately of Eseldorf and still the lowest lackey in the print shop), also belongs to a chronotope, the bildungsroman. The task of the bildungsroman is to reconcile the buoyant, unfixable dynamism of modernity with modernity’s representation; as a result, this chronotope is precisely a formal contradiction (Moretti, *Bildungsroman* 6). Its subject is youth, the “specific material sign” of modernity’s energetic turmoil (6). But the force of youth must be checked, bracketed, abbreviated in the bildungsroman, since “only by curbing its intrinsically boundless dynamism, only by agreeing to betray to a certain extent its very essence, only thus, it seems, can modernity be represented” (6). Its objective, then, is the “interiorization of contradiction” (10), an enactment of social compromise and the truncation of the subject in its definitive sense. Franco Moretti asks,

How is it possible to convince the modern—“free”—individual to willingly limit his freedom? Precisely, first of all, through marriage—*in marriage*: when two people ascribe to one another such value as to accept being “bound” by it. It has been observed that from the late eighteenth century on, marriage becomes the model for a new type of *social contract*: one no longer sealed by forces located outside of the individual (such as status), but founded on a sense of “individual obligation.” (22)
In No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger* it is August who inhabits the newly unruly space of modern life and struggles to interiorize its anarchic course. As Schiller wrote to Goethe of Wilhelm Meister, “Everything takes place around him, but not because of him” (qtd. in Moretti 20). Like Elizabeth Bennett, August must refit himself to the world and apprehend it anew, and each act of conversation becomes an effort to absorb the world’s activity (Moretti 50). Like both, August has the fortune to be “polyparadigmatic”: each event of the novel takes its sense (should it have sense) from the “the internal harmony that it helps to bind or crack” when it crosses the threshold of his existence (42). But the bildungsroman requires contractual consent as its final stabilizing force. This union between the individual and the social order is a “reciprocal consent” which finds in the double ‘I do’ of the wedding ritual an unsurpassed symbolic condensation” (22).

Given the centrality of this “pact” between the individual and the social order, and the wedding vows that serve as its narrative emblem, August’s fanciful betrothal to Marget Regen (the niece of Master Stein) toward the end of the manuscript is not out of place. It is neither a saccharine, sigh-inducing interlude nor evidence of an old man’s self-indulgent digressions, as some critics have contended. Instead, it is a narrative checkpoint whose presence registers a genuine concern about modernity and the prospect of its representation. And in this intuitive litmus test, Twain’s gauge of the odds for reciprocal consent in the midst of magic technology, modernity fails miserably. Marget is dreaming when she bestows her affections on August, a youth who never charmed her in her waking moments. Meanwhile August plays the Svengali with Marget’s sleepwalking self, a dream creature who goes by the name “Lisbet von Armin.” August is, in essence, a paramour whose object of affection is an insensible puppet, hardly capable in her dream state of accepting his proposal—and yet Marget swoons before his miasmic enticement “in obedience to suggestion” and recites her wedding vows (349). Theirs is a shotgun wedding, for when August discovers Marget in a dream state, he begins “to volley the necessary suggestions into her head as fast as I could load and fire” until at last she makes “obeisance to imaginary altar and priest” and recites the marriage oath (349).

The problem of consent is at the center of the text: here, it is consent coaxed from an insensate; in Eseldorf, it is the villagers’ blithe assent to the will of a commonplace tyrant, and so on. Consent in its uglier arrangements comes up again and again in Twain’s *Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts. It is perhaps best embodied by the narrator of *The Chronicles of Satan*, who joins
in the merciless stoning of an innocent—as if his willingness to join the slaughter is the only measure of his inclusion in the race. This capitulation to another’s bidding illustrates Twain’s dark proposition in *What is Man?* that humans are “moved, directed, commanded, by *exterior* influences—solely,” a remark that implies, according to Forrest Robinson, “that humans are exempt, as machines are, from moral responsibility” (“Dreams” 455). Indeed, as Robinson points out, Twain is quick to exonerate any affiliate of the species, which “originates nothing, himself—not even an opinion, not even a thought” (qtd. in Robinson 455). And yet in Twain’s writings, the least of these creatures, however morally inept, is not exempt from shame. Twain’s young narrator, for instance, purports to have acted against his will: “All were throwing stones and each was watching his neighbor, and if I had not done as the others did it would have been noticed and spoken of” (150). Or there is the case of Twain’s well-known tongue-tied introduction to President Grant, after which ensued “an awkward pause, a dreary pause, a horrible pause,” during which Twain “merely wanted to resign,” and then, extraordinarily, voiced the single thought that came to mind: “Mr. President, I—I am embarrassed. Are you?” (*Following the Equator* pt. 2, 16).

If man is, in Twain’s appraisal, the fall guy, the easy mark who stoops to take direction, shame is the complement to his pathetic show of acquiescence or habitual deference to the mob. For the individual easily swayed, however, shame seems also to be the outward show of some invariable nature, the means by which one takes exception to one’s own deference, or rather one’s own failure to resign, one’s failure to *not* consent. To put this more briefly, shame signals the self obliterated by consent, a consent that pollutes like vile slopped onto a canvas—though (as we shall see) there is in Twain’s writings also the faint suggestion that some other part, like the person of Dorian Gray, escapes undisfigured.

And truly the business of consent annihilates the subject. Classical *bildungsroman* is predicated upon digesting social contradictions. It requires incorporating every subjective or partial view of events (*sjužhet*) into a totalizing, unassailable narrative system (*fabula*) (Moretti 70). Narrative restructuration brings with it the end of subjectivity, is even synonymous with the deterioration of the individual. Still the *bildungsroman*, which is, like classical detective fiction, “always and intimately linked to the solution of a mystery” (70), achieves its ends by regulating the narrative’s historic-diachronic dimension: “Not only are there no ‘meaningless’ events; there can now be meaning only *through* events” (6). *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger,* as I have
indicated above, gestures at this obligatory order but is plagued by temporal seizures, and the fits and starts in its historic-diachronic dimensions suggest why *sjuzhet* and *fabula* are perpetually misaligned. Twain draws on the parameters of the bildungsroman to give reality order and modernity an image of itself, but *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* is finally bereft of the act of genuine consent, that signature on the social contract embodied by the wedding oath.

In fact, Twain’s subjects of modern life are no less spellbound than their chronotopical predecessors. But what is the thing that obstructs the possibility of narrative order, leaving subjectivity intact but listless, lumbering forth like the living dead, embarrassed? What spoils consent, averting the marriage of *sjuzhet* and *fabula*, and thus turns time out of joint? Moretti warns us that “capitalist rationality cannot generate Bildung,” and in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* an industrial order ushers in its own obligatory propositions: bodies mechanized in the mirror image of machines; labor and capital divided by their interests; capitalist acquisition, that never-exhausted engine, ubiquitous. This world of work, foreign to Elizabeth Bennett and Wilhelm Meister but wholly defining August’s existence, baffles time.

Having steered the text through heterogeneous configurations of landscape that arise in the Middle Ages and wind up in the twentieth century, Twain finds fiction no longer has a form to fit to, or at least the bildungsroman will not do. But *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* proceeds as capitalism wrenches interiority from its ordinary forms. The bildungsroman, that thing which adapts *sjuzhet* to *fabula*, which quashes everything that is irregular, perverse, and indigestible in narrative to its guileless contours, which diminishes mystery to the mundane, is superseded at last by its lowbrow kin: the dime novel. And it is in this world of permanent disorientation and temporal bedlam, a sort of hinterlands where the past “cannot stop having been and returns in the future as it has been transformed by the future itself” (Torlasco 62), that a stranger arrives.

“WHAT A DEVIL TO WORK THE BOY WAS!”

The trickster figure “No. 44” parades through Twain’s novel as a far-fetched crossbreed engendered by the industrial age. He is a monstrous jumble of man, machine, slave, dog, and witch; Katzeyammer remarks, “Every time a person puts his finger on you you’re not there” (Twain 39). But what is to
be made of the fact that No. 44, whose supernatural alterity allows him to view the sum of human history and to sample the spoils of empire, bears the markers of a distinctly African American brand of servitude and, later, African American strategies of cultural resistance? With his serial charades, mercurial moods, and inexplicable talents, No. 44 is an unknown quantity. First tractable then tyrannical, humble then brazen, he raises the hackles of the workingmen and wins over Master Stein. Working in castle and then the print shop, No. 44 mediates the regimes of sociability and the fragile alliances among workers as well as the ethics of management. Codified in misgivings, suspicions, and outright hostilities, moreover, No. 44’s “strangeness” elucidates an infrastructure of racial competition nurtured in industrial life. His ambivalent entrenchment in the manuscript is instrumental, in other words, since Twain uses No. 44 to decipher and then detonate the industrial landscape.

First, there is No. 44’s numeric brand—a stamp of industrial make—the sort of designation that treats factory men as indistinguishable from the machinery they operate. What is of additional interest, however, is the conjecture in Twain’s text that the number signifies he is a convict of some kind. This rumor immediately surfaces, and when he does not “seize the opportunity to testify for himself,” kicks off “a low buzz [that] skimmed along down the table, whose burden was, ‘That silence was a confession—the chap’s a Jail-Bird’” (Twain 239). These suspicions of incarceration, given the presence of a “jail-number,” speak to another industrial enterprise that Douglas Blackmon has incisively called “slavery by another name.” The criminalization of black life in the South, beginning with Reconstruction and continuing far into the next century, supplied corporations with a workforce that had been captured and sold into involuntary and uncompensated servitude. In short, there is an articulation of the black subject through the consolidation of factory and penal signifiers.

Second, the rapport this pariah cultivates with the master of the shop adheres very distinctly to a model encouraged by the then prominent Booker T. Washington, who admonished black workers not to exert themselves seeking union membership. Washington insisted instead that blacks could surmount trade unions by appealing to employers and personalizing associations with management rather than struggling for union affiliation. Washington also attempted to persuade management of the black worker’s superiority, noting that he was “not inclined to trade unionism” and “almost a stranger to strife, lock-outs and labor wars; [he is] labor that is law-abiding,
peaceable, teachable . . . labor that has never been tempted to follow the red flag of anarchy” (qtd. in Foner, Black Worker 79). This brand of servile quietism characterizes No. 44’s filial engagement with Heinrich Stein, who generously exploits the stranger while the other workers call for his eviction from the premises. No. 44 fends for himself, endures the merciless bullying of the other men, and doggedly completes demanding menial tasks, exhibiting the kind of excessive investment in his work that matches Washington’s depictions of his own labor in the best-selling 1901 memoir Up from Slavery. Just as Washington diligently sweeps the recitation room at the Hampton Institute—the de facto entrance exam that will take him “up from slavery” and into economic solvency, No. 44 dutifully, almost farcically, applies himself to the tasks at hand.4

The protagonist August observes, “What a devil to work the boy was! The earliest person up found him at it by lantern-light, the latest person up found him still at it long past midnight. It was the heaviest manual labor, but if he was ever tired it was not perceptible. He always moved with energy, and seemed to find a high joy in putting forth his strange and enduring strength” (245). August’s appreciation of No. 44’s robotic, incessant labor dehumanizes the new arrival: No. 44 is taken for a workhorse and an unceasing mechanized apparatus. To the extent that his exertions have a diabolical cast, he is the sorcerer’s apprentice (and actually the magician Balthasar takes credit for his superhuman achievements); he is an apparition of what Freud calls the uncanny, when “a symbol takes over the full functions of the things it symbolizes” (“Uncanny” 244); and he is sometimes forced to eat out of the dog’s bowl. Again, we have the substance of neoslavery and all its degradations couched beneath pretensions to patriarchal benevolence, only here No. 44 faces added indignities from the other workers, who are vastly insulted at the prospect of taking him as their fellow. In fact, they decide to go on strike when the master elevates No. 44 to apprenticeship, a position he is accorded based on merit.

This brings us to a third example of the way that No. 44’s labor doubles as an indicator of race: he is designated a “scab,” or strikebreaker, at a historical moment when the terms “scab” and “Negro”—or more likely “nigger”—were used virtually synonymously (Foner, Black Worker 74). The rhetoric that annexed the stigma of the strikebreaker to the racial identity of African Americans was widespread, and efficiently circulated in the case of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Facing reports of discrimination in 1897, the AFL reaffirmed its nondiscrimination policies, insisting that “it
welcomes to its ranks all labor, without regard to creed, color, sex, race, or nationality,” yet in practice the organization not only fully supported Jim Crow policies, but also strategized to build unions that served the purposes of white skilled craft workers and were unresponsive to semiskilled workers, immigrants, women, and blacks (qtd. in Foner, Labor Movement 347). Ultimately, in 1901, the Federation’s executive council issued a statement exculpating itself for the dearth of black union members, claiming that “the colored workers have allowed themselves to be used with too frequent telling effect by their employers as to injure the cause and interests of themselves, as well as of white workers” (qtd. in Foner 352). Unions represented blacks and immigrants as “natural” strikebreakers, even though there was substantial evidence that the blacks and immigrants white employers imported to break strikes were rarely aware they were being used for such purposes, and generally sided with the strikers when they discovered the existence of a labor dispute (352). Moreover, unions kept membership out of the reach of black workers, systematically excluding them from craft unions by charging exorbitant initiation fees, requiring licenses they were not in a position to obtain, refusing them apprenticeships, and so on (349). Crucially, their methods (which supplemented other strategies designed to prevent black males from enjoying the benefits of full citizenship, such as the poll tax and grandfather clause) carefully elided accusations of discrimination, submerging racial hostilities in bureaucratic technicalities that effectively consigned African Americans to poverty wages in most industries.

Shunned, delinquent, sycophant, scab: these are the symptoms of “strangeness” with which Twain sketches interracial sociability in the shop. I am not suggesting that in No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger race is depicted as a proxy for class—or even that Twain’s character is black, but that race is configured, or made implicit, in aspects of economic life—something like Toni Morrison’s idea of a “a subtext” that is not part of “the surface text’s expressed intentions” but “still attempts to register” it (Morrison 66). Here, race is an economic expression, a set of signifiers that coalesce around an identity, and an unspoken condition that brings meaning and sense to the labor crisis at hand. When his companionship with No. 44 is exposed, August is laid bare by the disgust of his colleagues, who address him with “the most capable and eloquent expression of derision that human beings have ever invented” (263). The highest insult in the printer’s shop is the elusive expression “B-A”: “bottle-assed,” or in the Oxford English Dictionary “bottled-arsed,” printer’s slang that refers to type that is “wider at one end than the
other.” August is dismayed by the slur, at least enough to corroborate this particular smear on his character: “I was girl-boy enough to cry about it, which delighted the men beyond belief, and they rubbed their hands and shrieked with delight” (263). His sissified bawling over this “unprintable name” and its anatomical implications seems extravagant for a son of Eseldorf, whose residents are perpetually the butt of a joke, yet August finds it a tremendous humiliation, confessing it “shamed me as few things have done since” (263). To affix the dishonor of association with No. 44 to August’s body is to liken the “girl-boy” to the denigrated subject of neoslavery, forging a link where, as Kathryn Stockton puts it, “the sign of anality flashes along the track of blacks’ economic burdens” (32).

Organizing these racial signifiers around the entity No. 44, Twain uncovers the interlocking illogics of the shop that cultivate discord and mortgage individual interests in the process. The workers “insulted and afflicted him [No. 44] in every way they could think of—and did it far more for the master’s sake than for his own. It was their purpose to provoke a retort out of 44, then they would thrash him. But they failed, and considered the day lost” (Twain 264). Their attempt to induce an angry reply from No. 44 is not something to marvel at; clearly it approximates those racist encounters in which the victim is compelled to insult his oppressor, thereby legitimating his or her own violent repression. What is of interest is the men’s sense that this ruse is an offering to Stein, performed “for the master’s sake.” According to August, the worker’s revenge reverses the stranglehold; he observes that Stein “was privately boiling over them; but he had to swallow his wrath” (265). The implication seems to be that in order to keep his men from striking, the master is himself struck dumb: “He must see nothing, hear nothing, of these wickednesses” or his ruin is imminent, but is it not the case that his failure to object to this hazing is the mark of a mercenary complicity? Or that the workers’ efforts to lead No. 44 “a dog’s life all the forenoon” (264) exemplify their own dogged devotion to the master, and a supplement to Stein’s guise of liberality that would prove No. 44 unworthy of it?

In the print shop, August makes the much-badgered No. 44 his pet, wordlessly commanding the new drudge to perform unfamiliar tasks with perfect composure and, to the trained eye, without direction. August authors each telepathic memorandum that instructs 44 to handle printer’s type; nevertheless, it is with some awe that August observes the novice “did it like an old hand!” (256). August is the operating manual from which 44 obtains his instructions, but the precision with which the apprentice ex-
ecutes each command is a wonder to behold. And No. 44’s imitative faculty overshoots the mark, easily outstripping August at his own game and the rest of the workers as well when they take him for an “old apprentice, a refugee flying from a hard master” (257). In a predictably medieval approach to resolving their differences, the men in the print shop elect Adam Binks the shop’s “inquisitor” and authorize him to administer a test to 44. Binks bombards 44 with difficult questions, but to no avail: “He wasn’t competent to examine 44; 44 took him out of his depth on every language and art and science, and if erudition had been water he would have drowned” (258). August is first delighted by the mechanical skill of his human instrument; then the instrument outdoes its artist, and it becomes clear that August’s assistance was merely lip service. No. 44 takes on the role of the inquisitor, becomes the protagonist of the print shop and transforms the plot and, in doing so, assumes the place of the dime-novel detective.

“PRINTER’S-DEVIL”

In the puzzle mystery, what the detective discerns strips the world of artifice, and offers an unornamented image in its place. From among the bits and pieces of evidence before him the detective finds the fixtures of a false scenario and, pursuing this false front to its inventor, uncovers a criminal and the details of a crime. Deceit is abolished, and “the story of the crime” is delivered in this second “story of the investigation,” while the first story (which tells “what really happened”) replaces the sham world the criminal concocted with a world that is cogent and perfectly intelligible (Todorov 45–46). There is no such “double inscription” in the dime novel. Here, no feat of mental prestidigitation or cognitive flourish transfigures reality, turning it honest. Instead, in the very act of emerging from the fray, the dime-novel detective denatures the landscape the text has set before us and reports the truth. But are these not both, to borrow the terms of the printer, forms of narrative “retraction”? The clue-puzzle and dime-novel detective fiction reel in the world to cast it out it again; both guarantee that the proverbial low tide will show us who has been swimming naked. What must be emphasized about dime-novel detective fiction, however, is that the plot need not turn on the evidence but, on the contrary, may be transformed by the person of the detective who is hidden in the text: “He can be anyone; anyone can turn out to be the detective in disguise” (Denning 147). The individual whom
Denning calls the “proletarian” detective is not up to his elbows in locked rooms and ratiocination (148). This detective deals instead in disguise; his disguise and its revelation are forces that drive the plot.

Dime novels were a form of inexpensive mass-audience entertainment pioneered by the Beadle and Adams Company in the 1860s. While early dime novels, like Malaeska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter (1860), featured romantic frontier stories, by the 1880s and 1890s their subject matter gravitated toward crime and detectives, and they frequently incorporated class narratives and industrial settings. Dime novels quickly cooked up a hero distinct from the classical detective and his less cerebral twentieth-century successors (the hard-boiled sleuth, who very infrequently cracks a case with a burst of ingenuity, more often elbowing his way through the muck of a city stinking with corruption; and the procedural detective, up to his elbows in forensic data). This new hero of the dime novel was the avenger detective, an archetype of detective fiction distinguished by his penchant for vigilante justice, his totally implausible talent with disguises—some would call him an “American Vicdoq”—and his “uncanny method” with its near “extrasensory perception” (Hoppenstand 3, Cox 2). The classical detective and the avenger detective are men of very different species; to tell one from the other is no more difficult, Gary Hoppenstand notes, than discerning “the difference between the pathfinder, who picked and selected his clues, and the steamroller, which, like a juggernaut, propelled over clues and criminal alike” (136).

The adventures of the avenger detective are characterized by supernatural contact, narrow escapes, and protracted chases, all moderated by his moral purity. Typically the sleuth plays cat-and-mouse with the criminal and his or her equally felonious associates. For instance, the dime-novel detective King Brady (1882–98), who had not yet attained all those traits associated with the avenger detective, nevertheless belonged to a fictional cosmos that held the detective hero in high regard, as a “superior person” and spotless character (Hoppenstand 5). He bumps into supernatural beings in books like The Haunted Churchyard, where Brady, who “to a certain extent believed in ghosts” (10), is tugged by a gliding apparition with a “small, white and shapely hand” that leads him to a killer (32). In another series, the renowned Old Sleuth (1885–1905)—expertly assisted by Badger the Wall Street detective and the lady detective Maggie Everett—lures criminals to their doom. His successes are rather surprising, given his nearly monosyllabic exchanges with suspects and witnesses, and his utterly mystifying series of undercover getups. These include apparently foolproof disguises as
criminals; the crooks themselves are often in disguise as well, or, by a stroke of ineffectual brilliance, they try to bluff Old Sleuth, costuming themselves as undercover police agents who have infiltrated their own gang! Sleuth's fellow detectives wonder at his prowess, speculating that he possesses “supernatural powers,” or, in more extreme expressions of awe, that he “may be in league with the devil” (140). And Mr. Burton, the freelance detective of Metta Fuller Victor’s popular detective fiction The Dead Letter (1867), must be classed with the avenger detectives: he is a master of chirography, a man of infinite patience, and the father of the child clairvoyant Lenore, who conveniently supplies new leads should Burton be temporarily flummoxed as to the villain’s whereabouts. He humbly explains,

Malice and revenge have followed me in a hundred disguises—six times I have escaped poisoned food prepared for me; several times, infernal machines, packed to resemble elegant presents, have been sent to me; thrice I have turned upon the assassin, whose arm was raised to strike—but I have come unscathed out of all danger, to quietly pursue the path to which a vivid sense of duty calls me. (Victor 250)

Dime novel avengers included the likes of Manfred, the Ventriloquist Detective, Gypsy Frank, the Long Trail Detective, and Monte-Cristo Ben, the Every-Ready Detective. Mark Twain’s No. 44 belongs in the company of these indestructible bodies, with their superhuman strength, aptitude for disguise, and skill at impersonation.

The exploits of No. 44 are indeed a magic show in print. He is an escape artist of the highest caliber, repeatedly breaking free from fetters and cells (326). He chats with cats and other animals, “each in his own tongue, and 44 answering in the language of each” (312). This regular Agaton Sax even fakes his own death—a sort of spontaneous combustion with a “core of dazzling white fire” (309) and a pile of ashes, such that all believe he is consumed by “supernatural flames summoned unlawfully from hell” (311). And certainly he is fluent in the condition of man. He takes almost every opportunity to harangue upon the incompetence and hypocrisy of mankind, indelicately taking August as his audience. But it is his superb imitation of a printer’s devil that is most remarkable, because No. 44 employs his genius at disguise to gain access to the shop and the activities of Stein’s employees.

In this way, Twain casts No. 44 in a part frequently played by dime-novel and professional detectives alike: the undercover agent whose subter-
fuge supplies entry to a world of industrial intrigue. In fiction and in life, detectives were thoroughly embroiled in the turn-of-the-century struggles between workers and capital. Men affiliated with the Pinkerton Detective Agency infiltrated the workforce on behalf of industrialists or the state, and received plenty of bad publicity for their involvement in strikebreaking and union-busting, not to mention their alleged accountability for the bloodshed at the Homestead steel plant. Members of Pinkerton’s staff were widely perceived (and in some cases represented themselves as) proxies of the industrial capitalist system who ensured production would proceed without delay (Reilly 159). While they were certainly not “neutral observers,” Pinkerton’s agents and the employees of other private detective agencies were, however, embedded among the labor force. They “smoked, drank, and chatted” with other workers and had opportunities to witness and report on their grievances (Lichtenstein 67). Similarly, in Master Stein’s print shop, sociability is forged and alliances take shape when Twain’s No. 44 poses first as a novice, then as an “old hand.” When No. 44 plays telepathist, August’s introspections are involuntarily broadcast and the grievances of the miners made transparent. His intimate access to the shop floor and its denizens exposes every workingman’s quarrel with management, even as he inserts himself among their ranks.

The private detective’s ambivalent entrenchment was explicitly treated in the dime novel, whose detective often infiltrated the working classes. This was habitually true in novelistic accounts of the sensational case of the clandestine and purportedly criminal organization the Molly Maguires, which had ended with the execution of nineteen men in 1878 and 1879. Early fictional accounts sidelined the Molly Maguires, treating them as mere foils to the honest, law-abiding mechanics from the Pennsylvania coalfields that faced undeserved harassment. Soon afterward, however, popular serials set their sights on an antagonist for the Molly Maguires. The detective, an expert at dissimulation whose false front might mask a mechanic hero or a corporate spy, could play that role (Denning 122). Detectives in these novels took their cues from the real-life Pinkerton agent named James McParland (alias James McKenna), who wormed his way into the confidence of Pennsylvanian coal miners in order to procure sufficient evidence to sentence the nineteen men to their deaths. This use of the detective radically rearranged fictionalized accounts of encounters with the Molly Maguires. The dime-novel detective needed to be as talented at subterfuge as his shape-shifting
adversaries, the Molly Maguires, who were variously depicted as monopolist patsies, a gang of criminal thugs, or the “vengeful arm of the miners” (138).

In serials and dime novels, the Molly Maguires constitute a “multi-accentual sign”: a capacious signifier whose bearing is ever indeterminate (Denning 138). This was also true in life, since it was an all-purpose label for any organization capitalists like coal magnate Franklin B. Gowen found unpalatable. Pinkerton’s *The Molly Maguires and the Detectives* (1877), which was published months before McParland’s exploits were made public, already describes the Molly Maguires as a “dark-lantern, murderous-minded fraternity” whose reign of terror and murderous schemes are the equal of “those performed by the KuKlux and similar political combinations in the Southern states” (15–16). Of course, Gowen’s interests in regulating his employees extended beyond policing the Molly Maguires. In fact, he more or less invited McParland to instigate the kind of uprising that would justify a crackdown on all the miners, not just the Molly Maguires. These all-purpose villains provided opportunities for the detective to exercise his talents at disguise. McParland, however, was of an equally dubious disposition; he was an emissary of an outside agency and a de facto employee of Franklin Gowen. In his case, the man who embodied the “lineaments of a mechanic hero” was for all practical purposes also an undercover agent and a strikebreaker (Denning 122). By the same token, the disposition of the undercover fictional detective could turn on a dime. No less than the Molly Maguires, he constituted a multiaccentual sign. The detective hero of dime novels inevitably walked a tightrope between unions and bosses, which explains how the protagonist of Burt L. Standish’s *Dick Merriwell, Mediator; or, The Strike at the Plum Valley Mine* (1911) could identify men at work in the mines as “the meshing cogs of the human machine,” challenge company policies about wages and work, hide in the shadows to “obtain any information whatever about the strikers’ plans,” and finally discover that the men on strike are the honest dupes of the disguised villain George Clafin, whose “name was ex- ecrated throughout the labor world of the West as a traitor to the cause,” all within the span of a few pages (8, 9, 12).

Whereas dime novels once dramatized the daily hardships of ordinary coalminers, they shifted the spotlight to the undercover detective among them—and to the success of his successive disguises, as he insinuated his way into the shop. This fixation with the extraordinary masks and superhuman talents of an avenger detective invited allegorical readings of dime
novels, insofar as they relied on “magical transformations to compensate the impossibility of imagining ‘realistic’ actions by powerful agents” (Denning 74). Still, to depoliticize this turn to fantasy simplifies the work of dime-novel detection, which imbues the everyday degradations of the workplace with a magical potential that lurks just below the surface of things. Merging a quasi-realist mode with fantasy and revelation, dime-novel detection retroactively casts its quasi-realist contents into question. Given the detective’s genius at disguise, we are often far from a final disambiguation, and all the while guaranteed that a gauntlet will replace an impasse; only then will social cohesion prevail. If the dime-novel detective “can be anyone; anyone can turn out to be the detective in disguise” (Denning 147), what is first recognizable is temporarily out of joint. The world of production is warped because our hero inhabits it, defamiliarized because he is an unseen stranger in our midst. In this way, the mundane becomes part of an allegory-in-waiting. It demands scrutiny and foreshadows its own disfiguration.

In this same vein, Twain’s prevaricating narrative calls for a strategy of second-guessing. What are the motives, means, and makeup of his mysterious stranger? Skulking in that indeterminate terrain that splits insiders from outsiders and union allies from corporate goons, No. 44 radiates contrariety. More than mediating between the gripes and grumbles of the workingmen and the soft coercions of the boss, No. 44 becomes a textual device, a wrench in the engine of narrative that promises to disrupt it. By swapping alliances in the midst of shop conflict, moreover, this multiaccented figure can recriminate collective action and then support it. He is fluent in every form of shoptalk and loyal to none. What was in Twain hesitation and ambivalence about the effects of industry on the condition of man is in No. 44 wholesome duplicity, for his supernatural exploits, like those of the dime-novel detective, will certainly rewrite the stakes of the standoff between labor and capital and introduce forms of conciliations unimaginable from the shop floor.

Before No. 44 subjects the workers in Master Stein’s shop to the most terrible of his awesome talents, he appears to be a mere strikebreaker, and one whom the men can crack:

They knew the master couldn’t send the lad away. It would break his sword and degrade him from his guild, for he could prove no offence against the apprentice. If he did not send 44 away work would stand still, he would fail to complete his costly printing-contract and be ruined.
So the men were happy; the master was their meat, as they expressed it, no matter which move he made, and he had but the two. (Twain 266)

One of the many ironies lost on August is that the workers’ chauvinisms do not operate in their own economic interests. The effect of his comic ignorance is that he paints the master, Heinrich Stein, as the victim of the workers’ folly, a man with integrity destined for financial ruin. August’s image of the heroic, magnanimous shop boss plagued by his workers’ buffoonery doesn’t ring true, however, if we consider the political content of the strike: the worker’s spontaneous outrage at the prospect that their manhood, indeed, their conception of themselves as laborers will be violated by the tyrannical “liberalism” of the boss. When No. 44 is admitted to the castle, they rise up, determined “to protest against this outrage, this admission of a pauper and tramp without name or family to the gate leading to the proud privileges and distinctions and immunities of their great order” (252). But the boss issues a gag order, threatening to “turn adrift any man that opened his mouth”—an injunction that leaves the men “grumbling, and pretty nearly strangled with wrath” (252). It is Stein who has launched an attack on the social element of producer republicanism, slighting a nineteenth-century brand of labor radicalism that demanded the free contract of a man’s labor, imagining that political equality could surmount economic hierarchy (Camfield 104). Stein’s affront to union hegemony exposes his indifference to the will of the workers and ignites their worst suspicions of impotence in the face of management, even in spite of their vociferous exhibitions of dissent. Meanwhile, No. 44’s maneuvers, indeed, his very presence, draw out competing interpretations of industrial relations, each edged by irony or undercut by indecision, so that we encounter something like an affective historiography of the industrial age in Master Stein’s print shop.

“How undignified it was, and how degrading”

In No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, the psychic cost of accepting Stein’s decision to initiate No. 44 into the printers’ league is unbearable and, indeed, Stein’s manifestation of liberalism seems to cost the union men everything. “Their order, the apple of their eye, their pride, the darling of their hearts, their dearest possession, their nobility—as they ranked it and regarded it” have been devastatingly assailed by the master’s decision to allow No. 44 to
enter the craft (253). The workers’ antagonisms and their efforts to exclude him from the guild harken back to an artisan age, even as the technology of the shop announces its modernity and the men attempt to strike. However, No. 44’s subsequent magical interventions in the printer’s shop align the coordinates of the conflict with the evolving creeds of industrial democracy.

At the turn of the century, arguments in favor of industrial democracy relied on egalitarian ideals derived from the American political creed, the Social Gospeler’s vision of the Kingdom of God on earth, and one other modern proposition: a shift from a “state centered” to a “society centered” realization of democratic civic values (the democratization of the corporation) at a moment when workers increasingly perceived corporations and the corporate order as potential obstacles to individual autonomy in an arena that had eclipsed the terrain of civil and political rights (Harris 49). In Race, Nationalism, and the State in British and American Modernism, Patricia Chu argues that modern(ist) uncertainty was not, significantly, confined to an effect of the worker’s estrangement from the means of production at the turn of the century (28). Rather, citizens feared that aspirations to mass democratization had been irretrievably botched and that the coercive tactics of the modern state were only adroitly presented as “derived from the will of the governed” (Chu 29). Under such circumstances, industrial life became a locus of consensual and nonconsensual relations.

Industrial democracy proposed that the working classes could identify industrial life as a litmus test for the exercise of individual agency, regardless of race. Nevertheless, its criterion was particularly important to black Americans in the South, for whom the experience of mass democratization depended primarily on one’s relation to the program of state-sponsored peonage that revoked the civil rights instituted by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments. The uncertainty of the freed slave’s (and his or her descendant’s) access to free and consensual labor was an ever present menace in face of social mechanisms such as “the Lease,” the system commandeering black bodies and selling them as convict labor (Blackmon 121). Insofar as the self-organization of (mostly) white workers into unions made use of representative-democratic standards and allowed them to participate in collective bargaining with employers, however, the trade union could function as a unit of industrial democracy. This “constitutionalizing of American industry” imported governance into the economic system (Harris 52): “In short, through unions they could act like citizens in industrial life” (Mont-
Liberal reformers, who had wielded metaphors of feudal stratification to condemn the corporatist industry, approved of the trade union as a safe alternative to both statism and socialism. In their eyes, industrial democracy was the antidote to social unrest and, more importantly, could be administered in concert with their programs for social reform (Harris 48).

Still, skepticism about the union as a venue for voluntary action surfaced when workers impinged on the claims of capital, for instance during the 1880s, when strikes were timed to coincide with periods of high demand to capitalize on the vulnerability of employers. This is the case in Master Stein's shop, since the workers, enthusiastically led by Katzenyammer, propose to abandon their posts as a lucrative deadline approaches. August's reluctant acquiescence with the strike, by contrast, suggests the union is a force of coercion. At the turn of the century, any suggestion of “draconian” disciplinary tactics on the part of the unions paradoxically characterized employers as the defenders of workers' individual liberties (Montgomery 27). Along these lines, August presents the union as a stumbling block to the exercise of independent agency, and as a heavy-handed, nonparticipatory organization that bullies its members. In doing so, he shows his secret sympathies with No. 44 and canonizes Stein as his protector.

But Katzenyammer's impression that 44 is a rogue determined to embezzle their birthright is confirmed when the men go on strike. First, No. 44 produces invisible figures or ghosts who complete the work they have abandoned. Next, No. 44 supplies "the duplicates": exact reproductions and specular doubles of the entire crew—for which Katzenyammer, the foreman, calls him a "bastard of black magic" (306)—to take over the work when the men go on strike. The response to these scabs is, unsurprisingly, belligerence. Katzenyammer demands of his ghostly double, "Do you belong to the union?" and, calling upon his associates when the duplicate answers in the negative, cries, "Then you're a scab. Boys, up and at him!" (306). But their terror and fury at the apparition of these lookalikes soon turns into a piteous recognition: "If the Duplicates remained, the Originals were without a living" (306), and the life does seem to have been sapped from their bodies as they come to terms with these "very grave and serious facts, cold and clammy ones; and the deeper they sank down into the consciousness of the ousted men the colder and clammy they became" (307). The relation of the Duplicates to the Originals is, moreover, graphically parasitic and one-sided. August agonizes, "It was all so unjust, so unfair; for in the talk it came out that
the Duplicates did not need to eat or drink or sleep, so long as the Originals did those thing” (307) and adds to this unsanctimonious theft his counterintuitive grievance that “the Originals were out of work and wageless, yet they would be supporting these intruding scabs, out of their food and drink, and by gracious not even a thank-you for it!” (307). The boss gracefully leaves the workers to their own devices, meanwhile reaping the material benefits of his supernatural crew.

No. 44 is quick to affirm that a human is an automaton, and in this he echoes Twain in What Is Man?: “His mind is merely a machine, that is all—an automatic one, and he has no control over it; it cannot conceive of a new thing, an original thing, it can only gather material from the outside and combine it into new forms and patterns” (333). Even so, when Twain’s printer’s shop comes to be inhabited by a number of phantom workers, the union men who are flesh-and-blood counterparts to the phantoms are left miserable. For the members of Master Stein’s shop, there is no other interpretation but that they have been wrenched from themselves. What remains of them is that part capable of consent. The rest, their doubles, know nothing of volition and work without relenting. These creatures, their second selves, are undeniably a physical threat, which is undoubtedly why Stein’s employees want to verify the substance of the merry usurpers (the “invisibles,” the “Duplicates,” and so on) by physical contests and other procedures.

This mechanization of production, experienced as a disconcerting mismanagement of one’s own body, perfectly coincides with Chu’s description of a modernity characterized by “the fear of becoming nothing but a body endlessly consenting to its own lack of autonomy” (29). Chu uses White Zombie, a 1932 Hollywood film directed by Victor Halperin, as an example of artistic production that captures modern anxieties about the tenuousness of consensual governance. In this film, a sugar mill operated by zombies at the direction of their “Zombie Master” (a typically menacing Bela Lugosi) exemplifies the dreadfulness of government without consent, a dreadfulness to which Halperin gives full expression when the Zombie Master turns over the angelic Madeleine to a rich resident of the island, transforming her white body into an unfeeling, semimechanical object. In the film, the mechanized body of the “free” modern industrial worker and the commodified body of the Caribbean slave are simultaneously intelligible in the figure of the zombie, so that a historical anachronism is experienced as pure horror. Halperin’s film “rests its case on the idea that a barbaric past practice has intruded into modernity,” Chu explains, “while contradictorily asserting that the modern laborer (automaton) and the slave may come from the same moment” (25).
The twice-allusive image of Halperin’s zombies necessitates an inconceivable periodization, a history that refutes the defeat of slavery, not to mention the legislative events that were to inter it for good. Thus the film is disrupted by a chronological conundrum, as with those late Victorian crime novels that presented some “monstrous” variety of criminality as foreign to modernity yet required, paradoxically, they be interpreted in the terms of “scientific or pseudoscientific rationalism” that undergirded modern life (Peach 7). In Twain’s manuscript, too, the “Duplicates,” the “invisibles,” and No. 44 are atavistic monstrosities and technological marvels at once. More importantly, however, they are facets or facsimiles of the workingmen they mirror, never entirely “Other” and yet thoroughly strange.

The semblance of themselves the workingmen find in their identical “scabs” signals their recognition of something like interracial affinity, albeit tinged with terror and counteracted only by a desperate appeal to a “natural” hierarchy: “Originals” versus “Duplicates.” That the Originals aim to measure the exact extent of the Duplicates’ estrangement directs us to Chu’s most subtle point: The zombie does not just function as a negative example, whose lack of agency reassures us of our own civic brawn such that we might, without regard for our neurasthenic bodies and monotonous jobs, pronounce, Thank heavens we are not zombies! On the contrary, in the presence of the zombie we cannot announce with any certainty that “the living dead act without being overtly coerced but are not acting of their own volition” (Chu 27). Yet if the zombie evokes the slave, still we must recall, especially when the venue of our thought-experiment is Haiti (as it is in White Zombie), that “slave labor implies the capacity for revolt” (27). Twain’s puzzling parleys between “Originals” and “Duplicates”; his invention of “invisibles” who accommodate the market’s every ultimatum; and finally his masterwork, No. 44, who puppeteers each unusual event, suggest a deep ambivalence about any human capacity for consent or resistance in the face of an industrial modernity.

Thus it seems that the arrival of No. 44 at the castle is something like the earliest iteration of Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?—by which I mean the presence of the guest demands every man take his stance with respect to this convenient placeholder, thus dramatizing the incipient tensions that structure material relations. His presence is the proxy by which the workers and the boss express their own doubleness. In the case of the workers, this is a nascent conception of themselves as wage slaves alongside their ostensible identity as citizens of an industrial democracy—not as a code word for collective ownership, but as consensual participants structuring the world.
they live in. In the case of Heinrich Stein, his status as heroic defender of individual liberties against the draconian coercion of the union is juxtaposed with the temperament of an unfeeling capitalist whose absolute dependence on the new order of industrial unions can only be sorted out by availing himself of strikebreakers.

This reading of the strike is an alternative to the reading Bruce Michelson offers in his book *Printer’s Devil*, where he contends that Twain indulges in a succession of fantasies about printing in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*: first, the apprentice par excellence in the figure of No. 44, who learns the rounds immediately; after that, the arrival of Doangivadam, “friend of oppressed proprietors, foe of shop stewards and thugs,” to negotiate the terms between labor and management (218); next, Michelson calls the ghostly presences who take over the shop operations “ghosts of machines that never became what Mark Twain wanted—mechanical supermen to do the hardest, slowest work of the jour printers”; and finally the Duplicates, who work without pay and seemingly subsist on air (Michelson 217–18).

Michelson’s reading, I think, belies Twain’s careful attention to the emotional score of the labor conflict, as well as the unresolved tonalities in the text, which echo Twain’s own troubled relation to printer’s unions. We can see this confusion in his “The New Dynasty” essay from 1886, when he supported the Knights of Labor and, in Green Camfield’s words, “personified the labor union as the world’s king, the real nation that kings are supposed to embody” (98)—though the speech was in fact printed on the Paige Compositor, the “labor-supplanting” machine Twain hoped would revolutionize the industry. In this speech, Twain supported unions for the part they played in guarding against the tyranny of capital, but also as a moderate alternative to radical reform (Barrow 13). Twain’s ambivalence about labor is more strikingly documented in an address to the New York Typothetae, the association of employer printers, in January of that year. Twain decided not to use a speech he had drafted that forecasted monumental change for the industry with the introduction of his automatic typesetter and a depleted workforce; he abandoned this tactless oration in favor of a nostalgic portrait of his own experiences as a printer in the traditional apprentice system. The point worth pressing is that Twain could neither devise a way to synthesize these incongruous sentiments about the industry, nor feel comfortable with the effects of industrialization and mechanical invention more generally—David Barrow has gone so far as to suggest that Twain “exiled the connection between violence and technology” to his novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* as a way of alleviating his anxieties about the social consequences of his investment (20).
The concept of “industrial democracy,” which invited the working classes to imagine themselves exemplary citizens in the realm of production, was alarming insofar as the “tyrannical” law of the shop might overthrow the capitalist. But in No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, August explicitly reiterates his sense that the standoffs between labor and management are insurmountable. When the men demand “waiting wages” from the master for the time they spent on strike, August writes, “So there we were, you see—at a stand-still” (286). Neither master nor men are willing to submit to negotiations, even though the heroic itinerant printer Doangivadam has arrived, urging the men to resume their work. When the Duplicates arrive on the scene, August repeats, “So there it was—just a deadlock!” (306). Workers are stripped of the leverage necessary to move their employer, and the presses in the Master Stein’s shop never cease. From this purgatory of interminable print, however, No. 44 affects yet another revolution in textual relations, one that will reverse type.

“THE BLACK FACES THAT HAD BEEN DEAR TO HIM”

I have argued above that the eponymous hero of No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger bears a striking resemblance to the dime-novel detective. It is for this reason that we can confidently differentiate this manuscript from a sort of proto-postmodernism that is spellbound by self-referentiality and blighted by that dismal solipsism that drives authors to badger us by making a point of being in the text, as if it could have been otherwise, or was anyhow of special interest to us. Twain is not the “invisible” protagonist of the text; in No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, it is No. 44 who is given to immodesty and fanfare, and as the major operator in the text, he is also the one who counters a world of accelerated production with a series of “command performances” (i.e., the “invisibles,” the “Duplicates”) that alter the material world and, as a finale, unmake that world. This last undertaking, which abandons the world at its beginning, is quite different from the act of “undoing plot” as Catharine Gallagher describes it: “the unmooring of a seemingly fixed narrative moment, [which] activates ‘counterfactual possibility and throws the previously accomplished present into an unrealized state’” (qtd. in Levine 242). Gallagher’s variables are narrative acts and objects, and their conditional effects are scored on the human calendar, so her inquiry lies in the territory of the puzzle mystery where the pieces determine the picture. For No. 44, by contrast, the intricacy of this form of “undoing plot” is a diversion in and
of itself. In *The Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, Twain devotes attention to historical contingencies; however, it is the infrastructure of the *textual* world No. 44 is unmaking. It is no good, however, to plunge headfirst into an account of Twain’s profoundly baffling “Procession of the Dead” by trying, for instance, to imagine a story that undid itself. We can best approach this event by continuous increments, as No. 44 does, beginning with a more familiar exercise from the turn of the century: blackface minstrelsy.

Blackface minstrelsy is a paradox. According to Michael Rogin, it was predicated upon withholding freedoms expressed in the Declaration of Independence from blacks in America, and yet “Blackface staged the return of what the document repressed—slavery—by displaying the racialized body whited out beneath the Declaration’s universalist claims” (*Blackface* 17). A medium through which immigrants enunciated their “assimilatability”—as in Henry Ford’s now-notorious larger-than-life-sized melting pot, where his employees ritualistically shed their ethnic garments and emerged flag in hand—blackface minstrelsy was a “Declaration of Whiteness.” Its function was aspirational and imitative—an ingratiating striptease that surrendered through performance what could not conform to American(white)-ness, which is why “blackface was an alternative to interracial political solidarity, not the failed promise of it” (37). In *The Mysterious Stranger* this bit of legal-ese is conveyed in the language of the printer’s shop. No. 44’s first turn to minstrelsy marks his attainment of the post of “printer’s devil”—an apprenticeship to the printer’s office, so called because of the black ink stains the apprentice acquired in the course of his duties. No. 44’s response is the first of his several variations on race performance. Just after the promotion, “He got a little steel thing out of his pocket and set it between his teeth, remarking—it’s a Jew’s-harp—the niggers use it” (299). August is the lone audience to No. 44’s “extravagant and stirring and heathen performance,” but this cacophonous recital on the Jew’s harp and frenzied acrobatics are hardly light entertainment. In consideration of 44’s feelings, August endures the nerve-racking act with its “violent springing and capering” and its “most urgent and strenuous and vibrant” melodies, and is utterly enervated: “He kept it up and kept it up until my heart was broken and all my body and spirit so worn and tired and desperate that I could not hold in any longer” (299–300). August is immobilized in the presence of this comic whirling dervish, dazed by its perverse exuberance, or we might say that the perversity lies with August, who remains politely in thrall to a performance that damages him and is too embarrassed to report “how undignified it was, and how degrading” (299).

No. 44 oversteps all the limits of taste as though he were a force of an-
tigravity, or speaking in terms of blackface, a centrifuge that pares some stigma attached to the surface with a shower of white noise. His second act in this vein shifts from the aural to the visual. No. 44 decides “to flaunt in the faces of the comps the offensive fact that he was their social equal” by “doing a cake-walk,” sporting a real mess of garments: “embroidered buskins, with red heels; pink silk tights; pale blue satin trunks; cloth of gold doublet; short satin cape, of a blinding red,” and all this is topped off with a “lace collar fit for a queen; the cunningest little blue velvet cap, with a slender long feather standing up out of a fastening of clustered diamonds; dress sword in a gold sheath, jeweled hilt” (303). His outlandish Elizabethan garb critiques the honor bestowed on the craftsman whose professional privilege is to shoulder a sword. No. 44’s finery is preposterously lavish and far beyond the means of his fellow workers, moreover, so it adds an additional dig, insinuating the guildsman’s vulgar ambition is to belong to the tacky clan of the nouveaux riches. To summarize, as an insult to the institution he has entered, No. 44 amplifies the material privileges it awards so they cease to be emblems of respect and become emblems of idiocy. This deadpan double-speak chastens and demeans his supposed “fellows” by ridiculing the terms of their affiliation.

In these cases, No. 44 avails himself of a kind of generic extravagance, a painful overstatement that alerts us to an excess, or glut in the performance that is its own metacritique or form of undoing. A third scene offers another example: Toward the end of the manuscript No. 44 tries to cheer a despondent August with an opening act as “Mr. Bones,” complete with a “mouth [that] reached clear across his face and was unnaturally red, and had extraordinarily thick lips, and the teeth showed intensely white between them, and the face was as black as midnight” (354). The disembodied features that are not moved but move themselves, the artificial colors, everything surreal (“unnaturally red,” “extraordinarily thick”), and this inhuman image signal Twain’s impression that this particular installment of the “coon show”—and even those back issues for whom it is said Twain’s affection never dwindled—are uncanny entities. In this menacing mask, No. 44 sings Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home” in what August calls a “bastard English”—as if the lyric was ugly, or supplied by some deformed, illegitimate offspring of King James—and yet No. 44’s mawkish rendition of “verse after verse, sketching his humble lost home, and the joys of his childhood, and the black faces that had been dear to him” (356) draws tears to August’s eyes. No. 44 is satisfied with his achievement, but confesses, “I could do it if they were knot-holes” (356). Does he claim to coax tears from a stone? Or boast that these “black
faces” whom synecdoche has deprived of body and soul, “knot-holes” themselves, are stage effects, fixtures in the modern waterworks?

In *Playing the Races: Ethnic Caricature and American Literary Realism*, Henry Wonham suggests that Twain was convinced of the “radical authenticity” of the minstrel show, in spite of its demeaning burlesque; indeed, Wonham explains, “When reality is so extravagant that burlesque can do nothing to exaggerate its conditions, racial caricature becomes a type of realism” (132). This seems to be the case in the entertainments No. 44 offers August. Wonham explains that “caricature inscribes ethnic markers as inflexible features of identity, which only become more pronounced with every comical step the irreparable alien takes toward the fantasy of perfect assimilation” (38), but adds that the basic premise of caricature—that “the essence of identity can be gleaned through observation and interpretation of the exterior form” (13)—involuntarily concedes an argument against itself, that identity is an illusory “improvisational, fluid cosmopolitanism” that cannot be cemented (38). In short, by assigning “type” one dismantles the “typeface” for what it is: a signifier that repudiates its so-called signified to disassemble the codes of signification that produced it. As with dime-novel detection, the extravagance of the minstrel show calls upon its audience to disfigure its superficial contents. Paradoxically, its alternate realism is denoted by what resists caricature at the very moment that caricature is impressed upon us; the element of resistance lies in the excessive substance of the minstrel caricature. This is analogous to the subject of the unconscious that Lacan christens the “dit-que-non”:

An enunciation that denounces itself, a statement that renounces itself, ignorance that dissipates itself, an opportunity that loses itself, what remains here if not the trace of what must be in order to fall from being? (*Écrits* 300)

This subject withheld or, better yet, withdrawn by “nay-saying” is more brilliantly captured by the retroactive effect of the detective’s eruption from among the dramatis personae set before us in the dime novel. The dime-novel detective is the impersonal force who “can read the riddle because he is never personally involved” (Cox 8), but while he is concealed there is (or at least he will have been, after his triumphant appearance) something of the text speaks against itself.

When the dime-novel detective is at last an articulated agent, however, the text comes into its own as allegory. One body is now possessed of the
detective’s keen eye and purposeful gait, and he is the relentless, superhuman person whose “chameleon-like ability” paradoxically implied “that with the proper moral determination . . . anyone could alter—for the better—their physical reality” (Hoppenstand 137). The narrative is reformed according to his whims and only by his hand, though, never by an ordinary agent. But typically, the detective’s world-making resolves matters according to predictable patterns. His motives amount to what François Trouillot would call “more than blind arrogance,” because, as with the discovery of the “New World,” they institute “a predetermined lexical field of clichés and predictable categories that foreclose a redefinition of the political and intellectual stakes,” and impose a center of gravity to which all parts of the narrative are indemnified (115).

No. 44 is that force in No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, but he is scarcely interested in the world’s remediation. Instead, Twain adopts the incredulous reading-paradigm dime-novel detective fiction encouraged and appropriates its avenger detective to decommission the print shop. No. 44 tears suddenly through the surface of the text, as he has through time and space, to obliterate the industrial order in its entirety. This repudiation of industrial modernity follows No. 44’s abdication of race as an infrastructure of industrial relations. It is analogous to and an extension of the work of No. 44’s minstrel performance that, by its exuberant caricature, forswears its own vernacular as well as the socioeconomic and political regimes upon which it is predicated. In other words, Twain enhances and elevates the work of the dime-novel detective to the realm of textual performance, so that his renovation (or rather annihilation) of the world applies not only to the reality that text has configured, but to the text itself. Moreover, the exemplary and familiar act with which he begins to annihilate the world is blackface minstrelsy—an extravagant burlesque to which, in keeping with Wonham, we might attribute the dismantling of whiteness.

No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger’s telescopic chronology very pointedly connects the dots between the Reformation and the modern industrial society Twain confronted at the end of his lifetime, as if the United States were a direct descendant of the Bible Master Stein and his workers send to press, as if Gutenberg invented America. The key insight to be had here, though, is not that Twain charts a continuous lineage from Gutenberg to the current state of affairs, but that for Twain, the bookend to America, or the ultimate end of Protestant individualism that is its source, is industrial crisis—a calamity the dime-novel detective was designed to solve.

Twain’s “rejected” Typothetae speech reports,
We have seen methods of printing so changed that a press of today will turn off a job in a year which a customer of Gutenberg's would have had to wait nearly five centuries for—and then get it, perhaps, when interest in that publication had pretty much died out, and he would wish he hadn't ordered it. (Qtd. in Barrow 14)

Twain refers to the days of Gutenberg and Faust, rather than Gutenberg and (the more traditional spelling) Fust, for the moneylender who financed Gutenberg—perhaps a slip of the pen that indicates Twain's perception of print as a pact with the devil and a script with which the human race has been saddled. No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger is Twain's rebuttal to Gutenberg, his attempt to take the history it produced and “return to sender.” Accordingly, Joe Fulton describes No. 44’s final performance as “the aesthetic representation of what is in essence an ethical point” (186). No. 44’s coup de grace is the reversal of time itself, which Twain’s configures as a “tactile” joke, printer’s type set backward to indicate the counterclockwise turn of events. The prank begins when the sun rises in the southwest and the clock turns counterclockwise, and then every act of the previous day is repealed as the day runs in the wrong direction. No. 44 promises, “It will be the only perfectly authenticated event in all human history,” for no human is exempt from this “dizzying” torment of reversed speech and movement. Even this is only a narrative of time’s reversal, but the text takes itself seriously: to represent the reversal of time, the text we have already read returns, only now each word and each sentence is rendered in reverse order. This unreadable incantation is a real narrative retraction; this is as close as a text could get to swallowing itself up. No. 44 tells August that the effect is “patented. There aren’t going to be any encores” (396), though of course this strategy of retraction is also the premise of No. 44’s last act, the “Assembly” and procession of the dead, which begins after a complete descent into the “blackest darkness,” during which “all visible things gloomed down gradually, losing their outlines little by little, then disappeared utterly,” and then a “silence which was so still it was as if the world was holding its breath” (401).

The Procession of the Dead is a parade of skeletons, both the unknown and the known figures of history, coming finally even to “Adam’s predecessors” among whom there is one that No. 44 identifies as the “Missing Link.” The effect of these two displays is a complete retreat from the printed word, first of all, then a regression to a moment before the appearance of the species, at which point “44 waved his hand and we stood in an empty and
soundless world” (403). This annihilation of time and space is followed by 44’s revelation to August: “You are not you—you have no body, no blood, no bones, you are but a thought” (404), and then, one more remove: “The dream-marks are all present—you should have recognized them earlier” (404). It is, finally, the enactment of the “Pudd’nhead Wilson’s Calendar” fantasy about the “discovery” of the Americas: “It would have been more wonderful to miss it.”

In **No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger**, Twain forfeits bildungsroman for the sprawling, quixotic contours of dime-novel detective fiction and its remarkable adventurer detective. Twain employs the narrative-analytical tools of this subgenre (its detective’s preternatural expertise at disguise; its habits of narrative retraction; and its excursions into allegory) to gauge the degradations of the industrial workplace and to dramatize a crisis of modern political consent. Twain foregrounds the contamination of industrial relations by ethnic and racial competition with the ever-indeterminate figure of No. 44—a character’s whose faculties at disguise and supernatural exploits bring to mind the dime-novel detective, who often appeared among the dramatis personae in fictionalized accounts of nineteenth-century labor disputes. Crucially, Twain critiques regimes of sociality cultivated in the world of production without relinquishing or resolving his doubts about an “industrial democracy” that would take collective bargaining as the cornerstone of representative-democratic standards and individual agency. Nevertheless, **No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger** embellishes and externalizes the mechanisms of the dime novel to access another order of prose fiction precisely suited to these equivocations. It is an “expressive” realism whose terrain is metatextuality, such that social knowledge becomes accessible in the cadence of the plot: its chronotopic shifts; its narrative dislocations; and the retroactive revisions made possible by the dime novel’s tractable type and its supernatural sleuth. Mired in a cosmic “dead-lock” precipitated by industrial life, this last of the **Mysterious Stranger** manuscripts mines the tactics of dime-novel detective fiction to enact its own undoing. Finally, it is well worth noting that while **No. 44**’s prescription of “reverse type” eradicates all of time and space, his program of annihilation begins with the abolition of whiteness.