FOR A VARIETY of reasons, few substantive formal analyses of Mark Twain’s works have been produced. Yet Twain was always conscious of the creative potential afforded by traditional literary forms. “There is only one right form for a story,” Twain wrote in his autobiography, “and if you fail to find that form the story will not tell itself” (AMT 267).

Twain’s comment applies to his work generally, but the specifics of his comment are telling. Twain was referring to Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc, a work that builds on the traditions of fairy tale, epic, and hagiography; Twain exploits these forms, both critiquing, and conforming to, their ideological concomitants. When searching for the elusive “right form,” Twain often selected theological genres—saints’ lives, epistles, catechisms, psalms, hymns, creeds, Sunday-school books, tracts, and prophetic works. These forms provided Twain with familiar genres to use as literary forms in their own right, and always to burlesque or parody, often for the purpose of ecclesiastical and social criticism. This study examines Twain’s use of theological literary genres and the resulting interplay of form and content in his works.

Methodologically, this study is an organic approach, adopting the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s attempt to unify formal and ideological approaches to literary analysis. Readers will note that both the New Criticism and Russian Formalism play a significant role in the analyses contained in this book. The Formalists’ attempt to create a science of literary analysis is as crucial today as it was during and following World War I, in part because it enforces a discipline so often lacking in the ideological approaches to literature that still predominate. Victor
Shklovsky expresses the practical implications of Formalist ideas for criticism: “The formal method is fundamentally very simple—a return to craftsmanship” (SJ 232). In terms promulgated by René Wellek and Austin Warren, the present study is an “intrinsic” study of some of Twain’s works and examines genre, structure, and style, rather than an “extrinsic” approach considering aspects of Twain’s life, psychology, or historical era. The study is “organic” in that it adheres to the definition proffered by Cleanth Brooks that an organic approach confronts “the interpenetration of the form and matter” (568).

That said, to the extent that “form and content in discourse are one,” as Bakhtin asserts, this study also considers religious content (DN 259). When Twain draws on theology for terms like “providence” and “predestination,” it is important to define what he may have been talking about. Because one cannot understand religious content outside of context, one might assert that form and context in discourse are allied organically, as are form and content. Hence, when letters or biographical details inform the discussion, they are included. A fundamental assumption of this study is that comprehending how religious content is immanent in forms like catechisms, jeremiads, and hagiography is of far greater importance than discussing elements of biography. At times, authoritative works such as Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, The Westminster Catechism, or the creeds of the church provide important clarification for the discussion. Whether speaking of certain theological terms Twain used or the theologically inflected genres he chose, the discussion of the content—understood as including context—is provoked by the intrinsic interpretive demands of the works themselves.

This study ignores Samuel Langhorne Clemens’s religious beliefs, instead considering Mark Twain’s manipulations of theological form and content. Where Twain’s eternal mail should be forwarded is an unanswerable question that leads nowhere, except perhaps in circles. Exploring how this great literature works as literature is self-evidently important and needs no other ideology to strengthen its value. In these days when many critics ostensibly employed by their institutions to study literature spend more time writing about spoons, greeting cards, and the ideologies of shirt collars in the 1870s, one should take Boris Eichenbaum’s exhortation to heart: “It’s time to start talking about literature” (LE 65). With the advent of neoformalism, many serious scholars have started doing just that, and the author hopes that this study will contribute to the renewed debate over the relationship of formal and ideological attributes of literature.
Before such talk commences, however, I will exercise the author’s obligation and prerogative to acknowledge those who have made this study a rewarding and joyous endeavor. Baylor University has provided marvelous support for this study through reduced teaching loads, summer sabbaticals, and an excellent research assistant, Lori Tubbs. Departmental secretaries Lois Avey and Amber Adamek helped with a myriad of details associated with this project, and I am grateful for their assistance. I sincerely appreciate, too, the support of Maurice Hunt, English Department chair; Wallace Daniel, past dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; and David Lyle Jeffrey, past provost of Baylor University, in securing funding for research and travel. The Lilly Foundation and Baylor University’s Institute for Faith and Learning also provided a substantial travel grant for study at the Mark Twain Project at the University of California at Berkeley. Baylor’s University Research Committee provided travel funds for research in Hannibal, Missouri, Twain’s boyhood home. I would like to express my gratitude to curator Henry Sweets, for his assistance and hospitality. I am grateful as well to the University of Notre Dame and the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism for a generous travel grant that allowed me to work in the Hesburgh Library Archives. Portions of chapter 6 were originally published in *Essays in Arts and Sciences*, Volume 32. They are reprinted here with permission of Essays in Arts and Sciences, University of New Haven. The Center for Mark Twain Studies at Elmira College provided travel funding and delightful accommodations at Mark Twain’s summer home, Quarry Farm. My friends Mark Woodhouse and Gretchen Sharlow have made my stays at Quarry Farm personally delightful and professionally productive.

Among Mark Twain scholars, I would especially like to thank Alan Gribben, whose encouragement with this and other projects has been invaluable. It was Gribben’s scholarly work *Mark Twain’s Library* that revolutionized my understanding of the writer; it will always be required reading for any Twain scholar. The late, great Hamlin Hill provided significant support early in my studies of Twain, for which I will always be grateful. I feel privileged, too, to have as a Baylor colleague one of the great Twainians, J. R. LeMaster; for his colleagues and students alike he is a model of the patient, meticulous scholar. Finally, my serious study of Twain began many years ago in a seminar taught by Leland S. Person, whose close readings still inspire me in my own work.

I thank also my family for their unstinting encouragement and support of this project. My parents, Blaine and Phyllis Fulton, have shown
an ongoing fascination with Twain’s work that helps propel me forward on the sometimes trying days of research and writing. My wife, Hallie, has been my steadfast partisan, helping me keep alive all my initial enthusiasm. My children show signs of great character, for they enjoy Mark Twain nearly as much as their father. Once, after hearing “The Blue Jay Yarn,” my daughter Felicity asked a question the great writer himself would have enjoyed: “Papa, is Mark Twain dead?” For all of us who love the work of this wonderful writer, the answer is clearly a resounding “No!” This book is affectionately dedicated to my wife Hallie and our four children, Rory, Felicity, Alder, and Fiona. Their love and support make the dedication from the Roman poet Horace seem stingy for allotting them only half of my soul; they have it all.