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IN 1867, AS Twain told the story in the San Francisco newspaper the Alta California, he approached the organizer of the Quaker City expedition to the Holy Land by having a colleague introduce him as Mark Twain, the Reverend Mark Twain. One might reasonably doubt that this really happened, but historical accuracy is in this case beside the point. More apropos is Twain’s use of the incident in the Alta California letters that he later revised for The Innocents Abroad (1869). It was a typical sort of joke for Twain—one with a barb to it. The Quaker City expedition was a high-minded expedition with a number of gatekeepers to expel riffraff, and Twain lamented in The Innocents Abroad that the “character and standing of every applicant for passage had to undergo the strictest assay by a Committee” (113). By masquerading, even if only in his writing, as the Reverend Mark Twain, “a clergyman of some distinction,” Twain springs a practical joke on the committee that, like all such jokes, contains an element of hostility (MTMB 114).
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This is a literary practical joke, however, and not just a personal one. Twain used the cruise to create the occasion for parody and burlesque. The noted author of the tall tale “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (1865) and such hoaxes as “The Petrified Man” (1862) and “Bloody Massacre Near Carson” (1863) would accompany a flock of wealthy, psalm-singing Easterners, ostensibly with the design of assisting the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher with his preacherly duties on shipboard. Twain’s literary masquerade as the Reverend Mark Twain, like his use of the cruise in his writing, is best understood as a parody of a genre. James Cox suggests that the “invention of ‘Mark Twain’ had been to impose a character upon a form” (129). One could say, too, that Twain’s genius imposed this form on literary forms, reinvigorating those forms through parody, burlesque, and creative revision. The Europe and Holy Land trip was, and remains, for many people a certain type of journey infused with a number of expectations. Twain’s recitation of the itinerary is telling. In the Alta California letters, Twain parodies the itinerary more aggressively than in The Innocents Abroad and blends his own words with those of the original, so that we have such sentences as these:

A stop of four or five days will be made at Alexandria, in Egypt, and the Ruins of Caesar’s Palace, Pompey’s Pillar, Cleopatra’s Needle, the Catacombs, the site of ancient Memphis, Joseph’s Granaries, and the Pyramids. They don’t go to Cairo, but I do not mind that, because I have been to Cairo once (in Illinois), and that was enough for this subscriber. (MTMB 113)

Even without Twain’s humorous interpolations, the text already shows signs of parody. The insistent use of the passive voice makes a spectacle of the reverential language so typical of what we might term a commercial litany, and one knows that it is only a matter of time before Twain breaks through the text to parody it with even greater force. In his revisions of the Alta California letters for The Innocents Abroad, Twain sets off the passage in a variety of ways to make the point very clear that the itinerary is something separate and apart from his own text; that the boundaries between the inserted text and Twain’s text are crystalline. The announcement begins just as an authentic broadside would, with the heading clearly demarked with bold caps, the date in italics, and the text in smaller font. The end of the inserted text is demarcated by the signing of the names of the organizers, and even with a P.S. appended at the bottom. Through these formal means, Twain introduces the inserted
text as a competitor with his own. Twain includes the piece in toto, he says, for “[i]t is almost as good as a map. As a text for this book, nothing could be better” (18). Twain makes his own point best: the original text, a devout itinerary provided by the organizers, provides the plan for his own book. The original text is a “map” that suggests the subgenre of Holy Land travel narratives. The broadside embodies the memory of the genre, providing Twain with the text for his book *The Innocents Abroad*. Despite their differences, both the letters for the *Alta California* and *The Innocents Abroad* bear the same functional relationship to the original: both create, in Bakhtin’s conception of parody, “images” of the original and so become “parodic doubles” (PN 51). In order to parody the original text, as Bakhtin notes, a writer must “re-create the parodied language as an authentic whole, giving it its due as a language possessing its own internal logic” (DN 364). Twain’s parodies express, as Maria Marotti suggests, “a double perspective, that of literary model and burlesquing subject” (34). The result of such a doubleness, however, is unpredictable. In his insightful analysis of Twain’s use of the travel genre, Jeffrey Melton sees the writer as both “conforming” and “rebelling,” both “following form and snubbing it” (46). Twain’s texts parody the original text and constantly respond to it, both implicitly and explicitly. Similarly, Twain’s introduction to the tour master as the *Reverend Mark Twain* is of a piece with his own plans to write letters from the trip and ultimately to compose a book that will parody the genre. Twain is an imposter, just as the work resulting from his presence on the trip will be an imposter. But not an imposter precisely. Twain’s work is not, in Jeffrey Duncan’s phrase, “a counterfeiting of the referential” (202; original italics), but exists in constant dialogue with the literary models with which the author works. Parody demands that the writer adhere to the formal demands of the genre, so much so that the original and the parody resemble horses in separate fields running parallel to each other, their paths always on the point of convergence.

A parody is a formal acknowledgement of, and deviation from, an established text, but the parodied text is not necessarily the object of the parody. Narrowly defined, a parody responds to a particular text, but the parodic work can, as Gary Saul Morson suggests, parody “the genre as a whole” (75). Morson calls such works “anti-genre,” though “burlesque” is the more usual term for works that adhere to and diverge from a recognized text or set of texts. Sander Gilman, in his superb study of the parodic sermon, notes that “parody cannot be defined by the ends which it is thought to achieve,” but must involve issues of “form” (2–3).
Such a distinction is crucial, for Twain’s use of parody is frequently misunderstood. Obenzinger rightly observes that *The Innocents Abroad* is “a parody of religious genres” (212) and notes Twain’s use of William Hone, the English parodist. He seriously misunderstands the relationship of the parody to the original, however, citing the equally confused John Marsh, who states, “Parody cancels Scripture; only Literature remains” (39). In fact, parody preserves the form it parodies, for parody embodies the form, its own deviations necessarily suggesting the original. Were a parody to truly “cancel” the aesthetic object it parodies, one would witness a formal literary murder/suicide. “Parody is viable only in so far as what is parodied is still alive,” observes Jurij Tynjanov (70). That is, the text that is parodied must be alive to begin with and the parody must not kill it, in fact cannot kill it. Twain’s masquerade as the Reverend Mark Twain burlesques the straitlaced pilgrims, but does not spell an end to preaching, pilgrimage, or holy travelogues.

More seriously, both Obenzinger and Marsh elide the difference between the parodied form and the object of parody, suggesting that the parodied form is necessarily the target. Quite the opposite is frequently the case. Twain parodied the Apostles’ Creed in his April 16, 1867, letter for the *Alta California*:

> Even Church congregations are organized, not on religious but on political bases; and the Creed begins, “I believe in Abraham Lincoln, the Martyr-President of the United States,” or, “I believe in Jefferson Davis, the founder of the Confederate States of America.” The genuine Creeds begin that way, although to keep up appearances they still go through the motions and use the ancient formula, “I believe in Jesus Christ,” etc. (MTMB 142–43)

Clearly, Twain parodies the sacred text, but uses it as a vehicle for social criticism, rather than as the recipient of that criticism. Neither burlesque nor parody always aims at the form itself, which is often used to critique some aspect of society; this is particularly true when Twain uses religious literary genres. Through his parody, Twain reveals the difference between what people say they believe and how they really believe, drawing a line between the “genuine Creeds” that people think and the “ancient formula” that is truly genuine. In doing so, Twain honors the ancient formula, elevating it as the standard by which contemporary society may still be judged. One sees here the truth that *parodia sacra*, the parody of sacred texts, is infused with a carnival sensibility, a spirit
of topsy-turvy that debases the elevated for the purposes, as Bakhtin suggests, of “renewal” (RW 83). In his 1817 trial for having published such parodies as “The Late John Wilkes’ Catechism,” “The Political Litany,” and “The Sinecurist’s Creed,” Englishman William Hone, whose edition of the Apocrypha Twain had read in 1867, successfully defended himself against charges of irreverence and blasphemy. In his defense, Hone stated that parodies of established religious texts, such as the catechism or the Athanasian Creed, are in essence “political” and that “the ridicule which the authors of the parodies attempted to excite, was not always intended to fix on the production parodied” (35). Such a distinction is crucial to understanding Twain’s use of parody, for a parodist’s use of established religious forms often honors those creeds and catechisms, using them for the purposes of social criticism. Hal Bush rightly reminds critics that Twain’s parodies often follow the “rhetorical stylings of the jeremiad” that oppose the “social injustice” of the Gilded Age (83–84). Incorrectly, many critics see the target as the text itself, when frequently the parody champions the cause of the religious text. Twain adheres to the genre in order to create a parody of it, frequently making the original the “hero of the parody,” in Bakhtin’s words (PN 51).

The irony of the original text becoming the “hero” of the parody is obvious but frankly inevitable. Consider The Innocents Abroad. The Holy Land trip is a subgenre of the travel narrative, and many of those who made the trip wrote books about their experiences. Twain’s parody of these texts, however, is an example of parodia sacra, for he makes light of the serious subject matter and devotional intensity of what are in essence the records of pilgrimage. By quoting and referencing previous Holy Land texts, Twain makes “heroes” of them, however ironically. Seeking to contrast his own realistic view of the Holy Land with the romantic view of his predecessors, Twain repeatedly takes to task books such as “Tent Life in the Holy Land” and “The Land and the Book” (409). Twain even quotes a long passage of a work by “William C. Grimes” as he discusses the beauty of the “Madonna-like” girls of contemporary Nazareth (423). In The Innocents Abroad, Twain quotes at length from this author, but provides the spurious name above and the manufactured title, “Nomadic Life in Palestine” for the book. Twain does this, he says, to spare the author, but also because

I am aware that this is a pretty voluminous notice of Mr. Grimes’ book. However, it is proper and legitimate to speak of it, for “Nomadic Life in Palestine” is a representative book—the representative of a class of
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Palestine books—and a criticism upon it will serve for a criticism upon them all. (426)

Identifying the book as representative of an entire “class,” Twain focuses on the traits of the genre, noting quite plainly that his own book will adapt this form, infusing it with a burlesquing attitude. One of Twain’s central criticisms is notable: “Our pilgrims have brought their verdicts with them. They have shown it in their conversation ever since we left Beirut. I can almost tell, in set phrase, what they will say when they see Tabor, Nazareth, Jericho and Jerusalem—because I have the books they will ‘smouch’ their ideas from” (406; emphasis in original). The predictability of the pilgrims’ comments on the Holy Land extends as well to the authors of the books from whom they “smouch.” It is necessarily true of Twain, too, for the writer of parody is compelled to take account of the stale original and adheres to the genre closely enough to allow parody to occur. “Form is content as imagined, not merely received: transfigured, not mimed,” suggests Dennis Donoghue (13). The truth is that neither form nor content is passively received and that every artist manipulates both. In his excellent analysis of Twain’s use of parody, Pascal Covici notes that the “common knowledge of the standard” allows parody, at the same time suggesting that readers are forced by the form to, “almost unthinkingly, participate in Twain’s desecration of what the reader himself might not be quite ready to abandon” (139).

Literary forms do not acquiesce in their own parody, however. A dialogue between the aesthetic object and its parodic image ensues, with the original reasserting its own rejuvenated form. Time and again, Twain attacks, adopts, and finally adapts literary forms that have become worn out and trite. The staleness and popular awareness of religious literary genres attract Twain, calling him to freshen the form, most frequently through burlesque. “The world grows tired of solid forms in all the arts,” Twain opined in 1900 (“Henry Irving” 193–94). Twain’s “desecration” actually breathes new life into the literary forms he uses. As Twain quotes the lengthy passages from the work of others, and follows closely the biblical itinerary that has been largely predetermined for him by the genre, one begins to ask the question: on whom is the joke? In order to parody any action or artifact, one must invoke the original. In his notebook entries for the trip, Twain establishes a “biblical itinerary” that joins biblical texts with geographical locations (see especially MTNJ 1: 458–79). Parodying the subgenre of theological travel books, Twain becomes a student of the established form and resurrects its importance,
making it the object of learned studies like the present one. Thus, he simply must write about the Holy Sepulcher, for instance, as every other writer about the Holy Land does. Twain quotes and parodies their work and so must follow in their footsteps, a fact that one feels in the very structure of *The Innocents Abroad*. "A genre lives in the present," Bakhtin declares, "but always remembers its past, its beginning" (PDP 106). Bakhtin and the formalists with whom he debated often discuss the "memory" of genre; a genre has memory in part because people do, but memory exists, too, in the generic structures of narrative. Roman Jakobson suggests that genres are governed by the same "implicational laws" that "are embedded to a great extent in the internal logic of linguistic structures" (Main 48). These internal and eternal qualities of a genre exist in dialogue with the present, forcing Twain to take account of the dictates of the genre. The genre insists that certain elements of content will be present and that certain formal traits will shape them, most often with the author’s blessing, but inevitably in any case; writers insist, of course, on having their say as well.

In this process, Twain becomes the "image" of the Reverend Mark Twain, if not the genuine article. Leland Krauth sees here "a bounded Twain—the proper Twain who honors conventions, upholds proprieties, believes in commonplaces, and even maintains the order-inducing moralities" (3). Krauth contrasts this "bounded Twain" with the "transgressive Twain" (3), but the dichotomies elide the fact that we experience both identities concurrently. Formally, the transgressive identity may very well serve the bounded identity; that may in fact be the "calling" of the transgressive Twain.

Twain often imagined himself as a preacher, or as the image of one, confessing to his brother Orion that

I never had but two powerful ambitions in my life. One was to be a pilot, & the other a preacher of the gospel. I accomplished the one & failed in the other, because I could not supply myself with the necessary stock in trade—i.e. religion. I have given it up forever. I never had a "call" in that direction, anyhow, & my aspirations were the very ecstasy of presumption. But I have had a "call" to literature, of a low order—i.e. humorous. (MTL 1:322)

Called to be a writer, but not a minister, Twain depicted his work as an author in theological terms, humorously describing himself as preacher, prophet, and even saint. Twain’s work frequently reminds one of the
Menippean satirists, who drew on traditional genres for their burlesques and “ostensibly improvised sermons,” as Gilbert Highet notes, even while developing their own views in response to their opponents (304). In the process, all sides speak up. No longer simply a prop for parody, the figure of the Reverend Mark Twain engages in a dialogue with his fellow reverends, whose intentions may be more high-minded, but whose stories Twain bears in mind while writing The Innocents Abroad. The implications of this fact are many, for the Reverend Twain both criticizes and honors the participants in this dialogue, all of those who have employed the genre before him. As a writer of parody, he often critiques, but as a writer of parody he must also, on the level of form and content, conform. These “ruling powers” of narrative, as Bakhtin calls them, are the “old order” left standing after whatever revolutions may have occurred in Twain’s beliefs (CMF 284). In sacred parody, Bakhtin observes, “it is often very difficult to establish precisely where reverence ends and ridicule begins,” and so it is it with Twain (PN 77). In “A Couple of Sad Experiences” (1870), Twain reflected on the difficulty of writing burlesque, citing specifically his hoax “The Petrified Man” as one example. “To write a burlesque so wild that its pretended facts will not be accepted in perfect good faith by somebody,” Twain writes, “is very nearly an impossible thing to do” (388–89). The “body of the burlesque” can catch a reader’s attention, deflecting attention from the “nub” or “moral of the burlesque” (389). Marotti is absolutely correct that “[l]iterary models stand for something beyond the purely literary work” and that Twain responds against the genres that embrace “the conventions of society” (51). The interaction is dialogic. A parody can renew a genre, but the interaction is mutual, for the parodic object has to take into account the ideological presuppositions of the genre. Genre talks back. After all, Twain follows the same subject matter as countless other pilgrims, and in the same order; he capitalizes the same words; he even uses the same intonations, sentence patterns, and exclamations. His own text becomes a “parodic double,” one that institutes a dialogue between the worldviews suggested by these two forms, the original generic object and the parody of it.

TWAIN AND THE FORM OF BELIEF

In the Alta California letters, Twain describes listening to the preaching of Edwin Hubble Chapin, who delivers his sermon with a
strong, deep, unmistakable earnestness. There is nothing like that to con-
vince people. Nobody can have confidence in cold, monotonous, inani-
mate utterances, though they were teeming with truth and wisdom. Man-
ner is everything in these cases—matter is nothing. (MTMB 175)

Twain’s criticism of vacuous preaching is fairly obvious, but the
interesting element here is his fascination with the form the preaching
takes: “Manner is everything in these cases—matter is nothing.” Even
while criticizing the lack of content in the sermons of this very popular
preacher, Twain recognizes the power of the sermonic form, registers the
power of the genres of belief. This study will make it clear that Twain
uses religious genres because manner is “everything.” Twain’s use of
parodia sacra engenders in some of his most important works just the
sort of dialogue one sees in The Innocents Abroad. The works discussed
in this study are of two types. On the one hand are the obvious parodies
and burlesques of religiously inflected literary genres. Examples of this
are Twain’s burlesques of Sunday school books in Roughing It (1872), his
burlesque of church services and hymns in The Adventures of Tom
Sawyer (1876), and his burlesque life of Christ in “The Second Advent”
(1881). On the other hand are works like Personal Recollections of Joan of
Arc (1896), What Is Man? (1906), and The Mysterious Stranger Manu-
scripts (1897–1908). In these works, Twain inhabits the forms of hagiog-
raphy, catechism, and prophecy creatively, and often with a tone that
might seem more serious. Still, Twain burlesques the religious genres in
every example, sparking a dialogue between form and content and rein-
vigorating the genres he employs. The prophetic works are a good exam-
ple, for in some works, Twain certainly does create a parody to ridicule
society, but in some other works the burlesque is more restrained and
closer to a literary version of a religious work. The best way to make this
point is to compare two works, one the rollicking burlesque “Barnum’s
First Speech in Congress” (1867) and the other the seething jeremiad
“The United States of Lyncherdom” (1901). In both works, Twain
employs the prophetic form to comment on racism during and after
Reconstruction.

“Barnum’s First Speech in Congress (By Spiritual Telegraph)” is an
example of the complexity of Twain’s response to the genre of prophecy.
This genre can be “renewed in new situations,” as Bakhtin observes, but
it is not freshly created by the author, “just as one cannot invent lan-
guage” (Notes 153). Certain traits typical of the genre will erupt into the
piece, even more so since this particular sketch is on the one hand a
hilarious parodic prophecy and is at the same time a serious critique of
public discourse, in particular bombastic political language. In 1865, P.
T. Barnum, the “Great Showman” and “Prince of Humbugs,” was also a
Connecticut state legislator. Barnum, best known for creating the Amer-
ican Museum and the “Greatest Show on Earth,” was also active in Con-
necticut politics as part of the Republican party. In 1865, he delivered a
speech to the legislature demanding that African Americans be given the
right to vote. By 1867, Twain may have accepted Barnum’s argument, yet
found his political rhetoric reminiscent of his professional patter as a
carnival barker luring customers to view the “Fiji Mermaid,” “the tat-
toed man,” General Tom Thumb, and the “Ethnological Congress of Sav-
age and Barbarous Tribes.” The three-ring circus Twain burlesques con-
joins political, religious, and carnival language in “Barnum’s First
Speech to Congress,” published during Barnum’s unsuccessful 1867 con-
gressional bid. Twain apprehends this “speech” from the future, report-
ing that Barnum will cry, “NO! Even as one sent to warn ye of fearful
peril, I cry Help! Help! For the stricken land!” (211). Twain patterns the
work rather obviously after prophetic form, satirically depicting P. T.
Barnum as a prophet, as “one sent,” who appears before the “menagerie”
of Congress (212). Twain’s references may be to bearded women,
dwarves, and giants, but he presents them in biblical patterns, such as
the repetition of certain phrases, references to “the pride of his
strength,” the use of introductions such as “O, spirit of Washington!”
repeated use of the word “ye,” assertions such as “The country is fall-
en!” and the concluding exhortation, “Rouse ye, my people, rouse ye!
rouse ye! rouse ye!” (212–13). The phrase “the pride of his strength”
comes straight from the Bible, with the most likely allusion Ezekiel 30:6,
“Thus saith the Lord; They also that uphold Egypt shall fall; and the
pride of her power shall come down.” In the context of Barnum’s sup-
port for Radical Reconstruction, those Egyptian slaveholders of the allu-
sion are really Southerners attempting to win the peace after having lost
the war. Twain’s sketch is a frankly hilarious burlesque of a nearly liter-
lar carnival congress; the prophecy is pointedly political, and one sees
what Bakhtin terms the “parodical prophecy” that follows a theological
form closely in order to create a sense of the ridiculous (RW 233). By par-
odying prophecy in the halls of Congress, Twain makes the leaders
appear ridiculous, suggesting, too, that we live in a diminished age,
when the prophets are little more than carnival bakers in a national
freak show.
Parodic prophecy should not be viewed as just a good joke, for the form, while adaptable to new situations, is not itself new and adheres to its origin. In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, John Calvin states that “the common office of the prophets was to hold the Church in suspense,” constantly reminding God’s chosen people that they were just that and calling them to account by virtue of that fact (II: 426). Barnum’s speech reduces contemporary politicians to the ridiculous, prophesying in ironic fashion the same destruction that Ezekiel calls down upon the Israelites. Even parodic prophecy, Bakhtin notes, “is a picture of utter catastrophe threatening the world” (RW 237). Like any biblical prophet, Barnum criticizes contemporary society. Commenting on the political turmoil during Reconstruction, Twain’s Barnum sees Congress’s failure to enact Radical Reconstruction as a return of “grim Treason” (212). The phrasing is carnivalesque, as Barnum laments that “once more helpless loyalty scatters into corners as do the dwarfs when the Norwegian giant strides among them!” (212). The serious element is not dwarfed by the hilarity, but rather made larger, grotesque, and unmistakable. “Where is the poor Negro?” queries Barnum, answering his own question by suggesting, “[H]e is free, but he cannot vote; ye have only made him white in spots, like my wonderful Leopard Boy from the wilds of Africa! Ye promised him universal suffrage, but ye have given him universal suffering instead!” (212). Barnum’s speech is undeniably comic, but it addresses a rot at the center of society. Twain’s presentation encourages us to laugh at the circuslike situation in Washington, but parodic prophecy, as Bakhtin observes, is not “philosophical affirmation” (RW 233). Twain makes a joke of the inflated political language and hyperbole that Barnum was famous for during his years as a legislator, at the same time creating a piece that identifies a real social and political problem: former slaves are now “free,” but enjoy only limited political freedom. Twain draws on Barnum’s 1865 speech in which he argued for removing the word “white” from the Connecticut constitution. Barnum attacked the one-drop rule that defined a person with any African American heritage as a black and therefore barred from voting. Barnum satirically suggested that Connecticut ought to “let a mulatto vote half the time, a quadroon three-fourths, and an octoroon seven-eights of the time” (Saxon 221). Twain’s burlesque version of Barnum’s 1865 speech, in which he laments that the law makes former slaves only “white in spots,” comically—and prophetically—attacks society. Twain’s presentation encourages us to laugh at the carnival scene in which the victorious Northerners are “cowering dwarfs” running in fear from the “Norwegian
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Giant” of the South. While rollicking and ridiculous, Twain’s parody does make a serious point, for laughter can be regenerative and play some role in the revival sought by prophetic form. Primarily, however, we laugh out of anger and in spite of the fact that the joke cracked in Washington is—once again—on us.

Several decades later, in “The United States of Lyncherdom” (1901), Twain again exploits the prophetic genre as prophecy itself, to create a scathing criticism of contemporary American society. To write this anti-lynching editorial, Twain applied the prophetic form, with all its familiar patterns of syntax, rhythm, and diction, to call America to account for its sins, political and general. The form gives Twain an instant authority that he would not otherwise enjoy. To a great degree, too, the form he chooses contributes to the content. Commenting on the relationship of form to content, Bakhtin asserts that content follows form and is not invented by an author, who “only developed that which was already embedded in tradition” (“Toward a Methodology” 166). Twain may choose the form, but that decision enforces a certain adherence to it, fostering the creation of a true jeremiad. Twain begins by stating, “And so Missouri has fallen, that great state!” (479). References to biblical passages are many, for the prophetic works feature many cities that have already fallen or are predicted to; witness Twain’s discussion of the prophecy of universal decay in The Innocents Abroad. Judging by Twain’s use of the word “great” as a qualifier following the identification of the place that has fallen, he may be referring to Revelation 14:8, “And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city.” Twain begins the second section with a formal prophetically invocation, “O, Missouri!” that, again, has many possible biblical sources, but recalls most obviously Jeremiah 4:14, “O Jerusalem, wash thine heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved” (see also Jeremiah 22:29 and Matthew 23:37). “O, Missouri!” has the unmistakable ring of burlesque to it, as does the title “The United States of Lyncherdom,” even if the editorial contrasts to “Barnum’s First Speech in Congress” in its formal seriousness. Twain creates “The United States of Lyncherdom” within the Christian prophetic tradition because, like the prophets, Twain delivers judgment on a people who have strayed from the truth. And it is not just political truth. Certainly, Twain criticizes a country that is founded on principles of democracy, that had fought a war over slavery, and that prided itself on the rule of law only to turn away from this grand inheritance; in the work, however, he specifically calls the South to account based on religious principles. As he argues,
"in my time religion was more general, more pervasive, in the South than it was in the North, and more virile and earnest, too, I think" (479). Twain immediately brings up the paradox that in this “region of churches” the citizens “rose, lynched three negroes—two of them very aged ones—burned out five negro households, and drove thirty negro families into the woods” (480).

Twain ends his antilynching masterpiece with an apocalyptic scene right out of the most vivid passages from the books of Ezekiel and Revelation. Discussing the number of lynchings in the United States, Twain suggests we should

place the 203 in a row, allowing 600 feet of space for each human torch, so that there may be viewing room around it for 5,000 Christian American men, women, and children, youths and maidens; make it night for grim effect; have the show in a gradually rising plain, and let the course of the stakes be uphill; the eye can then take in the whole line of twenty-four miles of blood-and-flesh bonfires unbroken, whereas if it occupied level ground the ends of the line would bend down and be hidden from view by the curvature of the earth. All being ready, now, and the darkness opaque, the stillness impressive—for there should be no sound but the soft moaning of the night wind and the muffled sobbing of the sacrifices—let all the far stretch of kerosened pyres be touched off simultaneously and the glare and the shrieks and the agonies burst heavenward to the Throne. (485)

The nightmarish scene recalls biblical descriptions of the Babylonian captivity, the defeat of the Israelites by enemy powers, and the destruction of Jerusalem. Here, however, no exogenous enemy creates apocalypse; the enemy swarms within American souls. Twain's rhetoric of human torches is extreme, but the lynching crisis and the prophetic form itself encourage such extreme rhetoric. Speaking of the prophets, Rabbi Abraham Heschel could have been speaking of Twain: “Their words are onslaughts, scuttling illusions of false security, challenging evasions, calling faith to account, questioning prudence and impartiality” (xvii). Twain’s American landscape illumined by the burning bodies of lynched African Americans is the fiery social criticism that is a counterpart to his earlier burlesque “Barnum’s First Speech to Congress.” As different as the two works are, Twain constructs both by burlesquing the prophetic form, adapting the genre of prophecy for his own social and religious jeremiad. To apply the distinctions discussed earlier, “Barnum’s First
Speech in Congress” is an “image” of prophecy, while “The United States of Lyncherdom” is prophecy. This is certainly not to elevate one over the other and implies no value of one over the other; indeed, perhaps the most important comparison to draw here is that there is little functional distinction between the two types, for whether burlesquing the genres broadly or adopting them with little burlesque, Twain embraces the original, and his work proceeds according to the dictates of the form. In both works, Twain adopts and adapts prophetic form to criticize and lament a “stricken land.”

TWAIN AND THE CONTENT OF BELIEF

Even if “manner is everything” for Twain, “matter” is obviously something, too, and if form engenders content, then content certainly engenders form. Twain’s interests and occupations led him to make certain aesthetic choices. The most ridiculous assertion made about Twain and the religious matter in The Innocents Abroad is that of Howard Mumford Jones, who suggests that “except for the chapters on Palestine in Innocents Abroad, where Twain could not avoid the topic, the name of Jesus scarcely appears in his work” (98). This is hardly accurate, and the chapter “The Second Advent” dispels the folly of his comment on Twain’s literary use of the Christ story. Of more concern is Jones’s suggestion that Twain discussed the religious matter only because the locale rendered it impossible to avoid. An odd determinism! One thinks of Shklovsky’s belief that “a writer’s consciousness is nonetheless determined by literary form. The crises of a writer coincide with the crises of literary genres” (Theory 171). Such assertions have some validity—after the writer chooses the genre. Twain embraces religious literary form in order to comment on the content such form poses; Jones behaves as though Twain simply happened to stow away on a ship—any ship—at random. Twain embarked on the Quaker City cruise to the Old World and the Holy Land to situate himself as an observer and parodist in that environment of devout attention to the geography of religion—it was what he later labeled “health-giving theological travel (“Hellfire Hotchkiss” 184). Twain’s impersonation as the Reverend Mark Twain fashions comedy out of the very situation he created. No, Twain’s deep and abiding interest in religion and the prophets had sources deeper than mere chance and propinquity. Just as Twain chooses religious genres for many works, he chose to go on the excursion for very specific reasons, but
The present study examines works in which the literary forms of religion and theology play an important structural role, parodically or otherwise. Given the dynamic relationship between form and content, it is useful at this juncture to consider the record of Twain's content of belief; however “extrinsic” such biographical concerns are, the theological ideas immanent in the forms he selects are obviously crucial for literary analysis. Recalling his baptism in “Reflections on the Sabbath” (1866), Twain labeled himself a “brevet Presbyterian,” having been “sprinkled in infancy” (40). So insistently did Twain portray himself as a Presbyterian that one must conclude the classification played an important formative role in his literary persona. In a speech entitled “Consistency,” delivered on December 2, 1887, to the Hartford Monday Evening Club, Twain stated

No man remains the same sort of Presbyterian he was at first—the thing is impossible; time and various influences modify his Presbyterianism; it narrows or it broadens, grows deeper or shallower, but does not stand still. In some cases it grows so far beyond itself, upward or downward, that nothing is really left of it but the name, and perhaps an inconsequential rag of the original substance, the bulk being now Baptist or Buddhist or something. (910; emphasis in original)

Twain never became anything so esoteric as a “Baptist or Buddhist or something,” but his literary work charts the ongoing dialogue among different denominations and faiths. Twain carried on a “virtually lifelong engagement with the religious ethos of his culture,” observes Stanley Brodwin, a thoughtful scholar for whom the same assertion could be made (“Theology” 221). Still, as admirable as is Brodwin’s work, his central description of Twain as a “countertheologian” is untenable, for the term implies a heterodoxy that Twain’s writing rarely supports (235). Neither does Twain’s work support similar assertions others have made: John Q. Hays’s discussion of the “apostasy from orthodox faith” that forced Twain into the “modern position of finding an alternative” (12); J. Harold Smith’s discussion of Twain’s “anti-orthodoxy” by which the writer “attempts to formulate an independent concept of Deity” (13); and Harnsberger’s view of Twain as “unorthodox” (17). The idea that Twain’s deity was, in the end, as Albert B. Paine suggests, “a God far removed from the creator of his early teaching” is thus demonstrably
widespread (1582). Yet, Twain’s work always involves Calvinist orthodoxy, often questioning it, occasionally reinforcing it, and sometimes invoking it in reactionary and chauvinistic ways. Twain’s work engages in dialogue with “Baptist or Buddhist or something,” that is, with the whole panoply of religious faith, but even his way of expressing the conversation reinforces the orthodoxy at the center of the dialogue. In a notebook entry near the turn of the century, Twain mordantly commented, “What God lacks is convictions—stability of character. He ought to be a Presbyterian or a Catholic or something—not try to be everything” (notebook 42, unpublished). Twain was “something,” but many commentators seem to feel that Twain was “everything.” This study will not address the wearisome and unknowable question of whether or not Twain was a Christian, but structurally, at least, “Mark Twain” is an identity that we can know better than Sam Clemens because it embodies and is embodied by literary form; in Twain’s work, one is on solid ground to assert that the form and content of belief remain in dialogue. Shurr’s study of Calvin’s influence on American writers holds true for Twain and orthodoxy:

From his generalized stimulus come the powerful controlling myths, the stories of our gods, the symbolic tales that express cultural values. It becomes immediately obvious, then, that his influence has not been a totally baneful one. Some of our best productions are given frameworks of steel by his harsh presence. (18)

For Twain, Calvin is part of the “old order” that William James talks about as remaining even after “violent revolutions in an individual’s beliefs” (29). According to a contemporary account, one of Twain’s fellow Quaker City passengers—a real preacher—presented him with a bust of Calvin as a wedding present. Twain dutifully placed Calvin on his writing table, plopped a top hat on the theologian’s head, and drew “a pair of spiral moustaches and a fanciful goatee” on his face, making him look “like a French barber” (MTPD 68). Later, Twain reportedly smashed the statue to bits. Whether true or not, the story illustrates both the revolution and what remained standing in the Twain’s persona, just as the writer’s often explosive use of religious literary genres reveals both iconostasis and iconoclasm. Remove Calvin, and there is no burlesque. A top hat, moustache, and beard are not in and of themselves funny. One needs a straight man. Without Calvin, there would be no Mark Twain.
Calvin's presence on Twain's writing table is symbolic just as his presence in Twain's work is undeniable. In contrast to the fairly common view of Twain as heterodox, his work in fact expresses a particular aversion to what he termed “Wildcat Religions.” At times, Twain seems like a comic version of Calvin himself, disparaging Mormons instead of Albigensians. Emerging straight from Twain's experiences in the Western mining camps, the term “wildcat” is a double metaphor, with the first meaning referring to mining. In *Roughing It*, he defines the term:

> These were nearly all “wild cat” mines, and wholly worthless, but nobody believed it then. The “Ophir,” the “Gould & Curry,” the “Mexi-can,” and other great mines on the Comstock lead in Virginia and Gold Hill were turning out huge piles of rich rock every day, and every man believed that his little wild cat claim was as good as any on the “main lead” and would infallibly be worth a thousand dollars a foot when he “got down where it came in solid.” Poor fellow, he was blessedly blind to the fact that he never would see that day. So the thousand wild cat shafts burrowed deeper and deeper into the earth day by day, and all men were beside themselves with hope and happiness. How they labored, prophesied, exulted! Surely nothing like it was ever seen before since the world began. Every one of these wild cat mines—not mines, but holes in the ground over imaginary mines—was incorporated and had handsomely engraved “stock” and the stock was salable, too. . . . One would suppose that when month after month went by and still not a wild cat mine (by wild cat I mean, in general terms, any claim not located on the mother vein, *i.e.*, the “Comstock”) yielded a ton of rock worth crushing, the people would begin to wonder if they were not putting too much faith in their prospective riches; but there was not a thought of such a thing. They burrowed away, bought and sold, and were happy. (285–86)

This lengthy passage provides an admirable definition of what Twain means by “wild cat” mines, but one also sees even here the language of religious enthusiasm, with terms of belief, prophesy, and faith that encourage the writer’s metaphorical application of the term to any religion that is off the “mother vein,” so to speak. In his notes for a speech against Bishop Staley’s missionary efforts in Hawaii, Twain criticized the bishop—not for serving as a missionary per se, but for running a “non-descript Church” (MTL 5:331). Twain refers to the bishop’s theology as “the wildest of all wildcat religions . . . if there is any of the pay rock of saving grace in its main lead, they haven’t struck it yet in the lower
level” (331). Twain specifically criticized Staley for conforming established religion to the “barbarous” Hawaiian religion (see Roughing It, Explanatory Notes 720). Twain uses the term “wildcat” to burlesque religious practices that are anything other than what he views as traditional Protestantism; in his view, they separate themselves from the truth as a wildcat miner separates himself from the known vein of gold. In 1865, Twain saved a comment in his writing notebook: “I’ve prospected all religions & I like the old Meth. best after all” (MTNJ 1: 78). That bit of (possibly) reported speech expresses Twain’s attitudes nicely, for he often casts denominational choices in mining or prospecting terms, but always ends up endorsing the “old” choice after all—though after criticizing all denominations. In his 1866 piece, “The New Wildcat Religion,” Twain contrasts the “old legitimate regular stock religions” with spiritualism, again using the metaphor of mining, wondering whether the wildcat “pans out” or not (134). To use the Formalist term, casting denominational politics in such ways “makes strange” the world of denominational politics, again asserting that only traditional forms of worship yield the “pay rock of saving grace.”

The original metaphor “wildcat” compares the isolated mines operated by lone miners away from the source of gold to the wildcat, that, in contrast to coyotes, for example, pursues its hunting alone and in isolated areas. The metaphor of this metaphor then is to apply the concept of the wildcat mine to religion, and Twain frequently employs this doubled metaphor to burlesque those who leave the usual denominations for a new religion, or for one that differs significantly from established Protestantism. Twain found his brother Orion a convenient subject for burlesque, for he dabbled in different religions. In “Autobiography of a Damned Fool” (1877), Twain describes the titular fool, clearly based on his brother, as “soft & sappy, full of fine intentions & shifting religions & not aware that he is a shining ass” (MTHL 1: 173). In “Schoolhouse Hill” (1898), the Orion figure is Mr. Hotchkiss, “a diligent and enthusiastic seeker after truth, and a sincere believer in the newest belief, but a man who had missed his vocation—he should have been a weather-vane” (190). “His good Presbyterian wife,” in contrast, “was as steady as an anvil. She was not a creature of change” (190). In the late work “Which Was It?” (1900–1902), Twain depicts Indiantown as a small village reminiscent of his childhood Hannibal. “Indiantown’s Christianity,” he notes, “was of the usual Southern breeds—Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist—and each had a church which was commodious but not architectural” (184). The lone wildcat who does not find the churches “com-
modious” in a spiritual sense is the Orion figure, here under the name “Hamfat.” The name itself seems a parody of traditional biblical names, suggesting someone who is ever chewing over some indigestible theological integument. Hamfat, we are told, is a “fervent disciple and advocate of every frantic ‘ism’ that had ever come his way” and “he had skirmished under the banner of every religion known to history, including Mormonism, infidelity and Voodoo, and was now ‘due to be an Atheist, next revolution of his spiritual bowels,’ as Dug Hapgood said” (277). Brodwin suggests that what Twain calls “wildcats” are really just “a riot of conflicting orthodoxies,” ignoring the main point of the term “wildcat”—its unorthodoxy (Myth 141). Orion was just such an unorthodox figure, and was in fact formally excommunicated from the Keokuk, Iowa, Presbyterian Church, a staid flock that took its theology straight and strong. Having rented a large lecture hall, Orion harangued a paying audience on the subject of his religious views, views considered heretical by his fellow Presbyterians (Lorch 378). In his defense before the Presbyterian Session, Orion announced that each person had “to make up his views satisfactorily to himself” (378). In his literary reworkings of the Orion figure, Twain makes the contrast equally vivid. On the one hand we have the “usual southern breeds” of the church. There is nothing exciting about these “breeds,” a fact that Twain depicts as both virtue and defect. Opposing them is the hyperemotionalism of “every frantic ‘ism.’” Propinquity is everything in art, as in romance, and by putting “frantic” and “ism” so close to each other, Twain inevitably suggests “fanaticism.” Twain’s burlesques of “wildcat religions” are both a philosophical attitude and an important structural element of his literature, with the conflict of orthodoxy and heterodoxy creating the structure of many of his works.²

If Twain most often depicts deviation from the “mother vein” of the church as foolish, he often depicts it as dangerous, for man “is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself,” Twain writes in “Man’s Place in the Animal World” (1896), “and cuts his throat if his theology isn’t straight” (85). Through his extensive study of history, Twain achieved a deeper appreciation for the dangerous possibilities latent in all religion, but he most often focuses on the danger of the wildcats. Twain contrasts his own Presbyterianism to wildcats like spiritualism in “The New Wildcat Religion”:

I do not take any credit to my better-balanced head because I never went crazy on Presbyterianism. We go too slow for that. You never see
us ranting and shouting and tearing up the ground. You never heard of a Presbyterian going crazy on religion. . . . No frenzy—no fanaticism—no skirmishing; everything perfectly serene. You never see any of us Presbyterians getting in a sweat about religion and trying to massacre the neighbors. Let us all be content with the tried and safe old regular religions, and take no chances on wildcat. (MTMB 134)

During the composition of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), Twain discovered that Presbyterians had, in fact, become dangerously enthusiastic about religion during the Covenanter period of Scots history, but even that knowledge only qualified his opinion; established “tried and true” religions may be confining, but they are at least safe.

The same cannot be said of those denominations that Twain depicts as “wildcats.” Twain classes Christian Science with the wildcats, making much of the term “claim,” referring to a practitioner’s healing through faith instead of medicine.

He calls it his “claim.” A surface miner would think it was not his claim at all, but the property of the doctor and his pal the surgeon—for he would be misled by that word, which is Christian Science slang for “ailment.” (CS 244)

Twain employs the literary device of “defamiliarization” or “making strange” to twist our view of Christian Science practices. Twain defines a “claim” as peculiar to the argot of Christian Science by appealing to a usage peculiar to mining, thus connecting the two on their only real similarity: both the miner and the Christian Science practitioner are looking for gold. The further usage of “claim” as an assertion likewise undermines Christian Science theology, rejecting its central doctrine as only a “claim,” a hypothesis.

Throughout his book *Christian Science* (1907), Twain similarly reveals his belief that Eddy’s religion was not divinely revealed, but was designed to make money. Like a surface miner, Eddy “is still reaching for the Dollar” (316). In the parlance of the 1860s, “wildcat” also signified illegitimately issued stock for mining operations, and when Joe Goodman, editor of the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* labeled Twain a “Puffer of Wildcat,” he referred to the common practice of playing up a certain wildcat stock to artificially increase its value (Fatout 44). In “My Late Senatorial Secretaryship” (1868), Twain clearly connects the con-
cept of a wildcat religion with wildcat stock when satirizing a “wildcat” church that would “issue stock” only to have “other denominations . . . ‘sell it short’” (258). Four decades later, this was Twain’s most serious criticism of Eddy, for her enterprise is like wildcat stock with no real value behind it. Twain considers Christian Science as just a religious version of the business chicanery he has seen before. “Twain constructs a deeply gender-coded opposition,” suggests Cynthia Schrager, “one that sets Protestant republican manhood against the feminine despotism of the Christian Science and Catholic Churches” (43). In Schrager’s view, Twain’s attack on Eddy is really a defense of “autonomous individualism” and a “nostalgia for the (white, male) self-reliant actor” (54). The grounds for Twain’s criticisms are quite the opposite. Twain rejects Eddy precisely because Eddy embraces individualism over community, innovation over tradition, and because she becomes a wildcat apart from the feminine “mother vein” of the church. Twain’s criticisms of the organizational structure of Christian Science center on its rejection of the real ore of religion, a creed. Christian Science began, Twain states ominously, “without a creed” (291; original italics), thus allowing Eddy to twist traditional forms of religion to her own ends, creating a “reformed Holy Family” that added her name to the list (287). She also fashioned “The Lord’s Prayer—Amended” (316). Twain himself rewrote religious creeds by practicing parodia sacra, but he does so either to purify traditional religion or to invoke traditional religion to purify society. However much Twain may criticize orthodox religious beliefs, he never tries to manufacture an alternative to them. The point of his “The Revised Catechism” (1871), for example, is that a new belief in the Dollar has replaced the old beliefs, not that the old has been literally revised. In fact, the literary object requires that the sacred text not be revised at all. Twain invokes the parodic image to criticize an age that has turned its back on the doctrine embodied in the catechism. Twain labeled his late work What Is Man? (1906) a “new gospel,” but it has much in common with the sacred texts to which it responds. In Twain’s view, Eddy perverts sacred text to create what will “be the most insolent and unscrupulous and tyrannical politico-religious master that has dominated a people since the palmy days of the Inquisition” (251).

Similarly, Mormonism, with its “western ‘peculiar institution’” of polygamy, was an exotic for Twain, and in Roughing It he time and again contrasts the two classes in the West, the Mormons and the “orthodox Americans” (166). His depiction of polygamous practices is voyeuristic—witness his discussion in chapter 15 of Mormon family life—but his
work depicts, too, the tyrannical aspects of the new religion, including the tradition of “Destroying Angels,” whom he defines as “Latter-Day Saints who are set apart by the church to conduct permanent disappearances of obnoxious citizens” (85). When Twain meets a “Destroying Angel,” he finds him more destroyer than angel. Within the book proper, the criticism of the sect is mainly parodic, but Twain refers the reader to two appendixes, “Brief Sketch of Mormon History” and “The Mountain Meadows Massacre.” Both appendixes explain Twain’s fear of Mormonism, based on both theological and political grounds. Twain derides Brigham Young for usurping the privileges of “apostle” and “prophet,” concluding that in the end he “proclaimed himself a God!” (547). Twain’s “The Mountain Meadows Massacre” is an example of the writer employing biblical form to criticize a wildcat religion whose use of revelations was, in his view, a manipulation of biblical genre and nearly an implicit parody of it. In 1857 a group of Mormons, dressed as Indians, attacked a group of settlers, killing 120 of them. Twain stresses the fact that the settlers were “gentiles” and that Brigham Young caused the slaughter based on a spurious “revelation” that they ought to do so (551). After describing the horrific massacre, Twain states, “the number of persons butchered by the Mormons on this occasion was one hundred and twenty” (552; emphasis in original). The biblical language emphasizes what Twain calls “the coveted resemblance to the Israelitish tribes” seen in Mormon self-representations (550). The burlesque addresses both the Old Testament God and the more contemporary question of those living out that ethos. Twain criticizes misuse of scripture, slavery of women in a “peculiar institution,” massacres, judicial intimidation, and threats to federal troops. He poses these problems as existing in a causal relationship to the Mormon deviation from “orthodox” Christianity.

Mormonism was hardly Twain’s bête noire, however. In a journal entry written sometime in 1884, sarcasm and incredulity ooze from the line: “Keep Catholics & drive out Mormons?” (MTNJ 3: 42). Twain does not call Catholicism a “wildcat” religion, and its dominant features for him seemed to be its visible connection with ancient observances and its historical involvement in politics. Those are hardly the traits of a wildcat, as he defines the term. Yet, in Twain’s works, those traits were precisely the attributes that set Catholicism apart from Protestantism as a danger for political, religious, and mental freedom. The idea of “mental slavery” was one Twain considered frequently, and if the “wildcats” are marked by the loss of individual will to the emotion of worship, Catholicism shares, in his view, a subordination of the will to the larger will of
the church and its dogma. From the beginning to the end of his career, Twain expressed some interest in Catholicism as a subject, but his discussions are nearly always marked by ignorance, fear, and loathing, both in his public and private writings.

What does it mean to label Twain “anti-Catholic”? Raymond Tumbleson neatly defines anti-Catholicism: “It is the ghost in the machine, the endless, neurotic repetition by self-consciously rational modernity of the primal scene in which it slew the premodern as embodied in the archetypal institution, arational and universal, of medieval Europe” (13). So was the Catholic Church for Twain, for it symbolized for him a “premodern” world of universal tyranny, a world he understood from the sermons he heard in childhood against the Catholic menace. That was the world of tyranny he imagined he opposed when, as a young man in 1861, he heartily recommended the book Armageddon: or the Overthrow of Romanism and Monarchy to his brother Orion. In this book, Samuel Davies Baldwin identifies the Catholic Church as the anti-Christ, predicting that the battle of Armageddon would be fought before 1875 in the Mississippi Valley (MTL 1: 120–21; Gribben Library 42). The prophetic form in Baldwin’s work that Twain was to put to such good use in the No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger was imbued with anti-Catholicism, and it is no accident that Twain sets two versions of The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts on the threshold of the Reformation.

At the core of Twain’s literature Catholicism remained the “alien Other.” When Twain wrote about the great Catholic cathedrals in The Innocents Abroad, his anti-Catholic biases were evident to everyone, even to Twain himself. Twain candidly admitted in The Innocents Abroad that he had “been educated to enmity toward everything that is Catholic” (479). Several journal entries from the 1880s are telling. Mark Twain’s writing notebooks are full of ideas for literary projects that he eventually wrote, but many ideas on these pages remained undeveloped. Here is one of them:


Twain wrote this entry in January 1884, many months before he would be handed in a small bookshop the copy of Morte D’Arthur by George Washington Cable. That picturesque event is often credited as
the genesis of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. A month later, in December, Twain would write his famous entry in his notebook, “Dream of being a knight errant in armor in the middle ages,” a dream that obviously provided the core to what would eventually develop into his novel (MTNJ 3: 78). These two popular origination fables, while to some degree true, must be qualified. Twain’s entry “America in 1885” is arguably one of the germs of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, and it is a very anti-Catholic bacillus indeed. Rather than sending a representative from the present into the past, however, for “America in 1985” he would, in a sense, graft the medieval past onto the future. Such a plot embodies Twain’s view of the Catholic church as an atavistic survival into the modern era. By writing his comment in 1884, Twain seemed to be thinking along the lines of dystopian fiction, planning to produce his play 1985 in the following year, 1885. The parallels to Orwell’s 1984 published in 1948 are inescapable, but the “Big Brother” of Twain’s world would be the familiar bugaboo, The Holy Father, the Pope. Similarly, Twain wrote in his journal a short time after recording his “dream of a knight errant” another subject for a dystopian tale: “America in 1985. (Negro supremacy—the whites under foot.)” (MTNJ 3: 88). In 1884, then, Twain conceived of several possible projects involving dystopian time travel. While it is impossible to know how Twain might have developed the two that he left on the pages of his notebook, it does seem fair to say that the subject matter in both cases is so reactionary that it suggests Twain held on to some of the more pernicious of his early bigotries. Throughout his life, Twain wrote comments betraying a fear that “Romanism” or “Popery” would take over the country, just as he had believed it when recommending Baldwin’s scurrilous volume to Orion. One sees the traces throughout his fiction, even in *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896), as discussed in chapter 5 of this study.

One must justify Twain’s dismissive attitude toward wildcat religions, on the one hand, and his championing of the importance of many denominations on the other. Having a few Orions around, shifting endlessly from one denomination to another, is a small price to pay for the political freedom that results from a fragmented church. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, Hank Morgan, while himself a Presbyterian, introduces a variety of denominations because he fears “a united church” and so begins an ahistorical reformation (127). In “The Secret History of Eddypus” (1901–2), the historian, who also mentions one “Mark Twain, the Bishop of New Jersey,” suggests that “this multitudinousness of sects was safety” (356).
Parody and burlesque are always double-voiced, however, and Twain's jokes about wildcat religions also comment on more traditional forms of worship and belief. Like the Quaker City excursion, Twain's western travels brought him into constant contact with a variety of religious practices. During his years in San Francisco, Twain wrote a number of burlesques of Oriental religions, and his several pieces about the Chinese Temple built by the Ning-Yong Company are good examples of his response. The first of these, written on August 19, 1864, “The New Chinese Temple,” introduces the “Josh house, or place of worship,” built by the Chinese for “their unchristian devotions” (41). Twain's description of the statue of Josh is both a realistic representation and a xenophobic rejection of the formal aspects of the worship, for after lavishing much attention on the “gold leaf” and the “glaring red” face, Twain concludes that “the general expression of this fat and happy god is as if he had eaten too much rice and rats for dinner, and would like his belt loosened if he only had the energy to do it” (41). Interestingly, Twain puts the Chinese temple to more sophisticated parodic use in the next installment, “The Chinese Temple,” using the figure of Josh to comment on his own Calvinist God and the concept of predestination. This “old original Josh” can “bless Chinamen or damn them, according to the best of his judgment” (44). Twain ends the passage by subjecting his own denomination to the treatment: “As far as we are concerned, we don’t believe it, for all it sounds so plausible” (44). Twain uses the exotic figure of Josh (his twisting of the proper term “Joss” to become the statuesque materialization of the western “josh” or “joke”) to “make strange” the Calvinist God so familiar to his contemporaries. He casts the traditional Christian doctrines into a milieu dominated by a rat-eating God whose celebrations include the “beating of drums, clanging of gongs and burning of yellow paper” (44). Twain's rendering of Buddhist practices here recalls his disparaging rejection of Mormon worship that includes “horns, and cymbals, and trumpets and all the ungodly paraphernalia of their choir service” (MTMB 149). Twain certainly is “joshing” throughout the sequence of essays, and while the burlesque is less pointed than some other examples, it falls into the purview of parodia sacra. When Twain suggests with wonderful assonance and alliteration in a third article, “The New Chinese Temple,” that he has become “imbued with Buddhism,” he is making a rather tasteless and highly humorous joke about the “infernal odors of opium and edibles cooked in an unchristian way” (45). At the same time, he continues the joke, saying that he has started to “imbibe, unasked, Chinese instincts” (45). Precisely what these are he
does not say. It does bear pointing out that Twain exploits the environmental determinism for humorous purpose that he uses with such formal brilliance in “The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut” (1876), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, and many others. While the burlesques about the new temple never rise much above low humor, one should note that Buddhism in the text remains strongly “Other,” and Twain employs words with negative theological connotations such as “unchristian” and “infernal.” He suggests there is some danger and horror amid what he calls, in yet another piece on the subject, “a sort of Celestial free and easy” (“Supernatural Impudence” 47).

Twain’s suggestion that these other denominations and religions are deviant is frequently unfair, but such burlesques are often covertly directed at his own denomination. Sometimes he criticizes directly. In his essay “Reflections on the Sabbath” (1866), Twain notes his own rank of “Brevet Presbyterian,” which affords one

the right to be punished as a Presbyterian hereafter; that is, the substantial Presbyterian punishment of fire and brimstone instead of this heterodox hell of remorse of conscience of these blamed wildcat religions. The heaven and hell of the wildcat religions are vague and ill defined but there is nothing mixed about the Presbyterian heaven and hell. The Presbyterian hell is all misery; the heaven all happiness—nothing to do. But when a man dies on a wildcat basis, he will never rightly know hereafter which department he is in. (40)

The passage really becomes a “parodic double” of the sort discussed earlier. Twain implicitly criticizes the wildcat religions, and the form itself asserts the superiority of the “mother vein” of the church, for the wildcats always deviate from that original source. Yet, how should Twain’s comment on valuing a faith in hell be read?

This early passage from the San Francisco years resembles Twain’s comment decades later in *Christian Science*. Writing this book, he presumably set out to write a text deriding Christian Science and its founder, Mary Baker Eddy. The form asserts this purpose in a myriad of ways, and yet, once again, Twain critiques his own denomination as well, here while discussing the subject of infant damnation.

At the same time, I do feel that the shrinkage in our spiritual assets is get-
ting serious. First the commandments, now the Prayer. I never expected to see these steady old reliable securities watered down to this. And this is not the whole of it. Last summer the Presbyterians extended the Calling and Election suffrage to nearly everybody entitled to salvation. They did not even stop there, but let out all the unbaptised American infants we had been accumulating for two hundred years and more. There are some that believe they would have let the Scotch ones out, too, if they could have done it. Everything is going to ruin; in no long time we shall have nothing left but the love of God. (317)

No one wants that! This superb burlesque aims at many targets. The reference to “suffrage” links the liberalizing of the church to current and ongoing political debate over women’s suffrage, suggesting the inevitable relaxing of creeds, political and theological. The language of Wall Street, with assets, securities, and stocks, hints at the financial forces often at play in religious enterprises. Twain’s criticism of both the liberalizing forces and also the conservative forces is crucial, and is an element of content that provides much of the structure for Christian Science. In some ways, the book is named inappropriately, for Twain lassoes many other religious groups into the dialogue. Nathaniel Hope Preston states that “[i]n later life Twain, as is well known, tried to assuage his metaphysical anguish through flirtations with Christian Science, ‘mental telegraphy’ and other religious phenomena outside the main stream of the orthodox Christianity he could not accept” (71). This is a common and mistaken assumption, however, for Twain’s interests in other religions or phenomena—these “flirtations”—were part of a serious exploration in theology, both of orthodoxy and wildcats. His interests in the medium “Miss X,” for example, were part of his larger interest in traditions of Christian prophecy and are so discussed in chapter 7 concerning No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger. Twain engages in dialogue with both orthodoxy and wildcats, never endorsing either one, for he proposes to establish a dialogue between the two. Twain’s burlesques of heterodoxy are most frequently critical both of the religious “wildcats” and of mainstream Protestantism.

Twain’s depiction of wildcat religions is consonant with his use of the formal aesthetic elements of traditional Christianity. Twain was above all thoroughly versed in the creeds and the forms of belief of his particular denomination. In the penultimate chapter of his massive biography of Twain, Albert B. Paine discusses the writer’s religion, commenting that “Mark Twain’s religion was a faith too wide for doctrines—
a benevolence too limitless for creeds” (III: 1584). If we take Paine’s comment to mean that Twain was constantly questioning the doctrines and creeds of traditional Christianity, the biographer is absolutely correct; nothing could be more untrue, however, than the suggestion that Twain was ignorant of, or disinterested in, the Christian doctrines and creeds. In fact, they provide the creative spark for many of his works. Similarly, Paul Baender’s assertion that Twain “felt dismayed curiosity at the creeds and disciplines of Christianity” is far too dismissive of the formal influence of the creeds and other religious artifacts. An “organic theory of literature,” Cleanth Brooks asserts, rejects the “old dualism of form and content” (568). In an organic study like this one, an intrinsic analysis of the works themselves can be buttressed by Twain’s autobiographical commentary, letters, manuscripts, marginalia, writing journals, and published works. Reading such material, two facts become clear: the Presbyterian version of Calvinism, its content, provides the theological assumptions for Twain’s religious dialogue; conversely, the formal genres of traditional religious belief provide a solid structural framework for Twain’s parodies of that religious content and of social issues surrounding them. One sees the unity in the attributed item “The Stock Broker’s Prayer” (1863), which parodies “The Lord’s Prayer,” but with a social target: “Our father Mammon who are in the Comstock, bully is thy name; let thy dividends come, and stocks group, in California as in Washoe” (93). Similarly, in his parody “The Revised Catechism,” Twain begins with the form, directing questions at the current political and social climate, and in particular the Tammany politicians. Twain’s parody of the Shorter Catechism substitutes modern values for the eternal verities of the catechism.

What is the chief end of man?
A. To get rich.

In what way?
A. Dishonestly if we can; honestly if we must.

Who is God, the one only and true?
A. Money is God. Gold and greenbacks and stock—father, son, and the ghost of the same—three persons in one: these are the true and only God, mighty and supreme; and William Tweed is his prophet. (539)

Along with the twist of the Islamic formula, “There is one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet,” Twain creates a parody of the catechetical form, but the form itself is not the object of parody. The trinity sub-
stituted for the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are the trinities of capital: gold, greenbacks, and stock. The parody occurs through the reader’s awareness both of the original form and content and of the point of divergence. The original *Shorter Catechism* is static, while the parodic image of it comments on the changing mores of the society. The social critique that ensues could not exist were it not for the history of the catechetical form. Twain directed the piece toward society, but one must point out that the vehicle for his critique, the catechism, is not content to criticize from the outside; inevitably, it advocates its own Weltanschauung as the best alternative to this latter-day corruption. Form, particularly when it is parodied, remembers its origins and will have its say. Twain, who so often relied on religious form for his own social criticisms, typically encourages such a complex dialogue; even if he had not, however, the form would have.

The fundamental focus of this study is that Twain conducted for the better part of six decades a theological dialogue in which much of the “old order” of belief remained standing, both in form and content, even in such works as *What Is Man?* and *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*. In fact, an analysis of Twain’s career shows an increasing reliance on the form and content of religious belief, and Twain uses these elements in traditional, though creative, ways. For example, as mentioned in the discussion of *Christian Science*, Twain wrote frequently on the subject of infant damnation, including treatments of it also in the *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* manuscript, “Aix-les-Bains” (1891), the *Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, and *What Is Man?* and marking passages in many books that he read on the subject (See Fulton, *Mark Twain in the Margins*, 41). It was an issue that vexed many during the nineteenth century due to the Calvinist concept of innate depravity and the practice of infant baptism. One can understand some causes of the controversy when reading Calvin’s assertion that “even infants bringing their condemnation with them from their mother’s womb, suffer not for another’s, but for their own defect” (I: 217). For us, a baby is a bundle of joy, but for Calvin a baby is “a seed-bed of sin” (I: 217). Calvinist doctrine thus seemed to assert that unbaptized infants would spend eternity in Hell, a prospect Twain found repugnant. He was not alone, and the debate over infant baptism and infant damnation was, in the words of Kenneth Ross of the Presbyterian Historical Society, “the abortion debate of the nineteenth century” (Interview). Twain dove into the fray, marking passages in books he read that discussed the doctrine, commenting on it in essays he wrote, and writing about it in longer works.
The most effective of such examples is Twain’s essay, “Aix-les-Bains.” One of the author’s most neglected masterpieces of the essay form, “Aix-les-Bains” is a beautiful reflection on eternity and the passing of creeds. It cannot be understood as such without an adequate grounding in the content that creates the form, for as Bakhtin asserts, ideological content can itself be “genre-shaping” (PDP 152). Concerned about the recent vote of the Presbyteries to maintain church doctrine as it had stood for centuries, Twain mentions the fact in the work, but in a larger sense the texts he responds to are the doctrines under debate that imply unbaptized infants would spend eternity in Hell. These doctrines, embodied or implied in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Shorter Catechism, and Calvin’s Institutes, are the ideologies that produce the form of the work. Twain’s burlesque of the debate is his own contribution to it, and is a frank prophecy that creeds change and even disappear.

Twain begins his piece by declaring the locale “enchanting,” then draws the reader’s attention to the word by saying, “It is a strong word, but I think the facts justify it” (1). The word, which Twain repeats elsewhere in the essay, conjures up images of chants and incantations, the religious magic of a bygone era. The essay as a whole adheres to the established tone, for Twain uses the locale to discuss the eternal truths of the human condition. The essay begins with sickness, with the recognition that people go to Aix-les-Bains precisely because they are sick. “All diseases welcomed,” an advertisement assures consumers, and a trip to the resort will cure rheumatism, gout, and nerves (1). Far worse than the myriad of minor diseases is the deeper ill experienced by these convalescents, one of whom is diagnosed with “an inflammation of the soul” (10).

Twain depicts the “soul-sickness” as a disease of the modern age, and finds in Aix-les-Bains the perfect locale for his spiritual ruminations. It is a place where one can, as Bakhtin says of Scotland, “see time in space” (“Bildungsroman” 53). There are, Twain tells us, “many layers of race, religion, and government” visible at Aix-les-Bains, and he brilliantly uses the metaphor of a book when describing the geological layers on exposed cliff walls as the “stratified chapters of the earth’s history” (2). Reading this “book,” Twain finds himself thinking of the procession of history, remarking on the Roman arches of the town, the Christian churches, and the telegraph office. Reminding us of Henry Adams, Twain identifies three eras in the world, all visible at Aix-les-Bains: “So there you have the three great eras bunched together—the era of war, the era of theology, the era of business” (2).

Aix-les-Bains is situated in the era of business, and this serves to
develop the context of infant damnation, for Twain focuses on the hellish aspects of this world. One main street is “Rue du Puits d’Enfer—pit of Hell street,” a connection Twain makes much of, for it leads directly to two “pleasure resorts—the Cercle and the Villa des Fleurs” (4–5). In them are casinos, and Twain describes the “fashionable gambling hell” to clarify that he is writing more about theology than gambling: “the moment you cross the sacred threshold and enter the gambling hell, off the hat must come, and everybody lights his cigar and goes to suffocating the ladies” (7–8). Structurally, Twain begins with the Calvinist text that he opposes, infant damnation, introduces Aix-les-Bains as a place wherein time is visible, and then proceeds to take us to a hell whose lords are chance and money, developing his presentation with infernal imagery of cigars, fire, and suffocation.

One realizes that had there been no Fall of Man, there would be no Aix-les-Bains, nor any Aches. (For “Aix-les-Bains” has its parodies—this “paradise” is only a paradise for rheumatics, that is, for people with “aches” and pains). This rumination on human ideas about God takes some unexpected turns as it follows not the dictates of parody, but the pull of the original doctrines Twain seemed inclined to refute. Twain soothes his anger that the presbytery voted to leave the doctrine of infant damnation unchanged by creating a burlesque sermon about the changes of our conceptions of God:

It is curious to think what changes the last of the three symbols stands for; changes in men’s ways and thoughts, changes in material civilization, changes in the Deity—or in men’s conception of the Deity, if that is an exacter way of putting it. . . . Mighty has been the advance of the nations and the liberalization of thought. A result of it is a changed Deity, a Deity of a dignity and sublimity proportioned to the majesty of his office and the magnitude of his empire, a Deity who has been freed from a hundred fretting chains and will in time be freed from the rest by the several ecclesiastical bodies who have these matters in charge. It was, without doubt, a mistake and a step backward when the Presbyterian Synods of America lately decided, by vote, to leave him still embarrassed with the dogma of infant damnation. Situated as we are, we cannot at present know with how much of anxiety he watched the balloting, nor with how much of grieved disappointment he observed the result. (3–4)

It is hardly heterodox for Twain to remind people that “[s]ituated as we are,” that is, here on earth, we cannot pretend to know what God thinks
when we argue over doctrine. Twain jokes further about the present God being a God of the business era who excels in “successful management of a complex and prodigious establishment” (3). The depiction reveals much about Twain’s narrative practice. Frequently beginning with a text that he criticizes or parodies, Twain then revels in the nuances of the debate. Here, he responds to the text of infant damnation and derides the synods that left it in place, more for their hubris than their decision, however. Indeed, the changing conception of God in the business era is itself a parodic double of doctrinal conceptions of God, depicting the deity as a captain of industry, shuffling papers, getting the job done. The “step backward” taken by the synod becomes double-voiced, for Twain almost literally steps backward, moving his own text further and further back in time, as if turning back the chapters of the geological record with which he began. Not unexpectedly, Twain invokes Eden.

The question provoked by a text that seems on its surface to announce the theme of liberalizing Christianity is this: if the changing conception of God and the revision of doctrines fashion a better environment for people to thrive, then why do people still suffer sicknesses of both body and soul, and, more to the textual point, why do they come to Aix? The answer is largely a formal one, for Aix becomes the locus of historical change, the one spot in the world that for the moment encapsulates historical change that can never completely destroy the early texts and creeds. The revision of doctrine is both inevitable historically, just as one geologic chapter succeeds the next, but is also, on some level, lamentable. The doctrine of hell Twain criticizes has been replaced by a real hell, and the text asserts a causal relationship may exist. Even though Aix is only a paradise for a fallen world, Twain describes the town and its surroundings as an insular Eden detached from the hell of modernity. Traveling by train to Annecy, Twain is struck by “a garden land that has not had its equal for beauty, perhaps, since Eden; and certainly Eden was not cultivated as this garden is” (12). This prelapsarian land is an imaginary realm, predoctrinal in its purity, where no break between God and humanity has occurred. Twain’s description brims with baptismal imagery as he observes bodies of water, imagines bathing in healing waters, and contemplates drinking curative waters. Twain writes that the lake itself is “a revelation, it is a miracle. It brings the tears to a body’s eyes it is so enchanting. That is to say, it affects you just as all things that you instantly recognize as perfect affect you—perfect music, perfect eloquence, perfect art, perfect joy, perfect grief” (12).

Twain ends by describing an old abbey that exudes a “mystery of
remote antiquity” (13). The details are telling. As a direct correlative to the Calvinist text introduced early in the essay, the “worn-out inscription” on the stone step is a temporal image encompassing the passing of time and written creeds. The worn-out inscription functions to remind the reader that the Calvinist text under debate will likewise be effaced by time, as it eventually was. Inside the old abbey, one of the ancient creeds survives, bearing the “Latin word commanding silence,” making the point that “silence” is the only command to which everyone without exception will one day adhere (13). The monks in the abbey are gone, and so necessarily adhere to the command. Two French women operate the abbey as a hostelry, thus connecting it to the third era, the era of business.

Yet, the pull of the past is so strong that it remains alive in the text and at Aix. The effaced text of the conclusion, like the Calvinist text in the process of effacement, exerts constant pressure on Twain’s musing. The era of theology cannot come back, but neither has it entirely disappeared. The God of the era of theology stirs within the pages of the text, for Twain’s essay becomes a kind of benediction in the end, one that transcends doctrinal dispute. Time flows on, doctrines change, but the curse that separates us from Eden remains to be removed by a court higher than the Presbyterian Synods of America. Ironically, as human ideas about God become more human, humans become more haggard and careworn. So these pilgrims strain their eyes, attempting to decipher the “worn-out inscription” on the stone and enter the “dead silence and security and peace of this old nest,” happy their return will “heal their blistered spirits and patch up their ragged minds” (14). What begins as a critique of a particular text on innate depravity and infant damnation becomes a reflection on the fallen state of mankind generally. While this essay cannot restore the God of the second era and his creeds, and does not seek to, the third era, Twain concludes, is not the haven humanity seeks.

AN ORGANIC APPROACH TO TWAIN

Scholars must, then, follow in Twain’s footsteps, or follow in the footsteps Twain followed, for the form and content that shape his texts in a tug of war are frequently missed by a world of scholarship that has little interest in theology or in rigorous formal criticism. “Aix-les-Bains” shows Twain writing, as he so often did, about a recondite point of theology,
responding to particular Calvinist texts. His concern over infant damnation can hardly be called a rejection of Calvinism any more than those Presbyterian synods voting to amend the doctrine rejected Calvinism. Both demonstrably take the issue very seriously. Still, Everett Emerson’s suggestion that Twain “judged himself a hypocrite and gave up trying to become a Christian” is a common one (37). Other writers, like James D. Wilson, attempt to show that “during the formative stage of his career, 1865–75, Clemens pursued the ‘reasonable religious folly’ of orthodox belief, and that his quest was deep, authentic and tied inextricably to his evolving esthetic understanding” (170). Both may be true, but ultimately such attempts to chart the fluctuating state of Clemens’s soul offer little for literary analysis. Assertions that Samuel Clemens believed in God, did not believe in God, that he wanted to believe in God but couldn’t, or that he did for a time believe in God, or that he did so believe in God are all equally useless. Of great damage, too, is the way such approaches obscure the fact that the “old order” still stands in Twain’s work in the concepts, the genres, and in the personae he employed. Drawing on an author’s biography deepens an understanding of the works, but the reverse does not hold. Literary artifacts support no claims whatsoever about the state of an author’s soul. One sees in Twain’s writing the continuing literary vitality of sacred form, both as parodia sacra and as literary adaptations of sacred forms. Twain’s work retains the forms of belief, and that, more than the man, must be the study of literary scholarship.

Likewise, an organic approach to Twain aims at the dynamic interrelatedness of form and ideology. Twain claimed there is “[o]ne right form for the story” and demonstrated throughout his career a remarkable facility for using a variety of literary forms, yet most scholars of the last decades have ignored the formal constituents of Twain’s writing (Autobiography 267). Formal analyses without social or biographical context have an inert quality, but ideological analyses ignore the aesthetic artifact. Amy Kaplan’s The Social Construction of American Realism provides a forceful example, for she begins with an avowed goal: “we can root this fiction in its historical context to examine its ideological force” (8). The litmus test of such criticism amounts to little more than, we shall praise works whose content we agree with and disparage those works whose content we despise. Jane Smiley adopts such a tack, faulting Adventures of Huckleberry Finn for not saying the right things. Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin is superior to Twain’s work, in Smiley’s estimation, because it contains “the power of brilliant analysis married to great wisdom of feeling.”
The editorial page of a decent newspaper will meet that benchmark, yet it is not literature. Shklovsky, in one of his cantankerous moods, exclaims, “Just imagine—Koni asserts that Pushkin’s significance lies in his defense of trial by jury!” (Sentimental 234). We might adapt Shklovsky’s comment to our own discussion: Just imagine, ideological critics believe Twain’s significance lies in his opposition to slavery! Jonathan Arac is absolutely correct to admonish contemporary critics who embrace Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as a great book because it is an antiracist text. To do so is no critical advance over John Wallace’s judgment that the work is not art because it is “racist trash” (16). Against the backdrop of critics like Steven Mailloux, for whom Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is an “ideological drama” (62), Arac rightly asserts that the book should be considered “an aesthetic object” (782). Twain is great not by virtue of what commendable statements he makes, but by virtue of how he embodies those commendable statements in commendable literature. Interestingly, Stacy Margolis, in her response to Arac and Smiley, asserts that “they are making claims not so much about what Huckleberry Finn means as about what it does” (329). Margolis is correct. We ought to be talking about how Huckleberry Finn means as a functional constituent of what the work means.

If such a turning away from the question of form is a dereliction of duty, other critics justify the move by blaming Twain himself. How could there be any formal concerns worth discussing in work like Twain’s that is so haphazard, so contingent, so formless? Of the many comments one could cite, perhaps Richard Chase’s is the most telling: “There has been a tendency in recent years to overestimate Mark Twain, particularly among those readers who are quick to object to any semblance of difficulty or obscurity in literature” (150). In Chase’s view, Twain’s reputation has been buoyed by those favoring simple, easy books. (See Tom. See Tom steal jam. See Tom run.) Assuming a writer is simple-minded, one finds simple things to say about the book. The assumption, or illusion, of Twain’s simplemindedness provides lazy critics with a means of avoiding the difficult work of interpretation: studying the genres Twain worked with, reading the works Twain read, and taking seriously the theological issues Twain seriously considered. More recent critics follow Chase’s lead. Richard Bridgman ostensibly analyzes travel in Twain’s work, though the critic hardly mentions the travel genre, and it is not difficult to see why. Twain, according to Bridgman, was simply too dim to illuminate the material, let alone have any sophisticated understanding of form. Instead, Bridgman focuses on the “hazy
moments in his travels . . . when Mark Twain encountered or thought of something that was sufficiently compelling for him to want to record it; yet when he translated it onto the page, it remained problematic, for his conscious mind had not yet mastered it” (4). Relying on Twain’s misrepresentations of his writing, and ignoring the great deal of real evidence in Twain’s work, Forrest Robinson similarly finds a Twain with no “conscious rhetorical strategy” (“Innocent” 43). One could waste a great deal of time proving the fallacy of such arguments, but one can simply cut through the Gordian Knot of the argument and let the works speak for themselves; Twain’s works speak so well that they simply cannot be the product of such a hack as the aforementioned critics believe. The present study will demonstrate Twain’s appropriation of the genres of religious belief, and his sophisticated rhetorical strategies in using them.

The point is this: Dreadful interpretive consequences result from assuming that Twain was careless and unsophisticated, for such an attitude discourages the kind of analysis scholars should always engage in anyway. Hershel Parker’s chapter on Twain’s Pudd’nhead Wilson in Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons is the perfect example of this tendency. Parker believes that “mere literary approaches such as the New Criticism” are not suited for Twain, for his aesthetic practices cannot support such an approach (145). Such ideas amount to self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, of the myriad of articles that have appeared on Twain’s great dialogue What Is Man? until chapter 6 of this study was published as a separate article, not a single scholar had considered it as a dialogue. Why is that? Indeed, as incredible as it seems, more often than not, Twain’s dialogue is referred to as an “essay,” with no discussion of the significance of form. While Twain’s Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc is obviously written as an experiment in hagiography, no one has conducted an extensive analysis of the formal influence of the Saints’ Lives on the work; “Martyrdom covers a multitude of sins,” as Twain argues, but it cannot efface the sins of criticism. Twain’s Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts are similarly read as evidence of Twain’s pessimism and despair, but aside from a few isolated comments, they have not been analyzed in relation to prophetic form—despite the fact that Twain compares No. 44 to the prophet Ezekiel and structures his narrative after Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Revelation. Twain relied on a variety of literary forms when structuring and developing his own works, and the proof is available in Twain’s comments, writing notebooks, letters, and—most importantly—the literary works themselves. A scholar might be excused for ignoring all evidence but the last.
The principal idea of this book is that Twain should be studied with an organic approach that unites formal and ideological awareness. Indeed, the interactions between form and content are the most productive places for scholars to situate themselves. The solution is not the “Neoformalism” some have called for, but an organic approach that engages the dynamic interrelatedness of form and content. The forms Twain employs are ancient, and in choosing them he makes an ideological statement that creates a dialogue with all of those who have used them before, whether the form is travel narrative, catechism, prophecy, creed, or even the Socratic dialogue. It is within this context that a scholar must conduct the analysis, and it cannot be done accurately without taking into account what Bakhtin terms the “two ruling powers” of narrative: form and content (CMF 284). The two exist in constant dialogue and irrepressible conflict.

This study differs markedly from most studies of Twain in that it takes seriously the writer’s uses of literary form; by focusing on sacred forms, rather than what Twain’s beliefs may have been, this study differs, too, from the handful of works that consider Twain’s involvement with theology. It is striking to note the extent to which religious issues have been excluded from serious scholarship of Twain, striking because Twain was more engaged in theological reading and thinking than virtually any other major writer of the 1800s, not excluding Hawthorne, Melville, or Twain’s Hartford neighbor, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Twain’s aesthetic, as distinct from any question of personal belief, exploits form and content to provoke sophisticated theological dialogue. Twain spoke frequently of his vocation to be a kind of preacher, and he certainly did preach to his society by using literary forms associated with religious belief. More significantly, however, his persona becomes a genre, an image of form as the Reverend Mark Twain. It is this persona that Twain used for half a century to deliver burlesque sermons and jeremiads. Through these sermons, Twain engaged with his society, and provoked a dialogue between religious form and content. In “Villagers of 1840–3,” Twain wrote of his childhood home, Hannibal, Missouri: “In sixty years that town has not turned out a solitary preacher” (33). As usual, Twain told the truth, mainly.