The Reverend Mark Twain

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THE OVERLAND MONTHLY was hardly alone in its repeated estimation that Roughing It (1872) was a “grotesque” production (“Anonymous Review” 580, 581). In the years following the book’s publication, many reviewers noted the presence of the grotesque in Roughing It. Writing in Appleton’s Journal, George Ferris lauded the “grotesque and irresistible form” present in Twain’s work (17). B. B. Toby, reviewing the book for the San Francisco Morning Call, criticized the illustrations as “even more grotesque than the text,” yet found the “grotesqueness and absurdity” of the text strangely appealing (1). As for Twain’s most perceptive critic, William Dean Howells applauded the “grotesque exaggeration and broad irony” as peculiarly fitting for depicting the West, “for all existence there must have looked like an extravagant joke, the humor of which was only deepened by its nether-side of tragedy” (754). Twain himself similarly summed up life in the West: “It was a wild, free, dis-
orderly, grotesque society!” (*Roughing It* 392). In fact, when *Roughing It* first appeared, however wildly their estimations of the book’s literary qualities varied, reviewers agreed on one assessment: It was new; unexpected; grotesque.

This “big California & Plains book,” as Twain called it, is often viewed as the writer’s bid for membership in Irving’s “classical school” (MTL 4:309). Twain attempted to adhere to Eastern models, in such interpretations, more than it stood against them. If *Roughing It* fails to achieve “classical form,” then, it is not for want of trying on Twain’s part, but rather from want of talent. This “modern” view began with Van Wyck Brooks, who saw Twain’s book as part of his effort to become a “conventional citizen” (82). Hamlin Hill, too, states that “In part at least, *Roughing It* was a personal act of contrition on its author’s part for the life he had led prior to coming under the refining influence of his bride, her family, and the entire cluster of Eastern values they represented” (“Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*” 10). Most famously, Justin Kaplan decreed that Twain’s *Roughing It* was his first application for membership to join the social order” (81).

If *Roughing It* was such an application, it was rejected as far as the literary world went. Those who endorsed Twain’s work in the 1870s did so either because they found it grotesque or in spite of that fact. No one denied it. An anonymous reviewer writing in the *Manchester Guardian* for March, 6, 1872, disapproved of *Roughing It* on precisely these grounds, complaining that Twain suffers “an inability to distinguish between the picturesque and grotesque” (“Anonymous Review” 7). Time and again, reviewers of *Roughing It* contrasted Twain’s “grotesque” aesthetics with the aesthetics of “the Irving school,” “the classical school,” or more generally “the picturesque.” The dichotomy between Irving and Twain is probably ill-considered, for the earlier writer certainly made prosperous use of the grotesque; one need only recall Irving’s description of Ichabod Crane at the supper table. Nevertheless, the reviewer correctly implies that while Irving and Twain belonged to the same family of writers—that is to say humorists—they are properly classed as belonging to different branches of that family.

Early reviewers rightly labeled *Roughing It* “grotesque,” for it burlesques classical conceptions of imagery and form. *Roughing It* differs from the “classical school” by employing what Mikhail Bakhtin terms “grotesque realism,” whose “essential principle . . . is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (RW 19). The grotesque provides Bakhtin with a major element of his theory of

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“Carnival,” celebrations and actions that turn the world topsy-turvy, creating unexpected opportunities for the creation of “something more and better” (RW 21). Grotesque images admirably serve that purpose. Distortions of our idealized and abstract views of the world typify grotesque realism’s images: “they are ugly,” Bakhtin asserts, “monstrous, hideous from the point of view of ‘classic’ aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed” (RW 21). How many examples of such degraded images could one find in Roughing It! All in the work is “degraded”: the “Noble Red Men” are “prideless beggars” (127); the tea is “slumgullion” (24); the preacher is a “gospel-sharp” (311), and even the narrator himself suffers from a “native imbecility” (403). Everything in the book undermines the ends and means of classical aesthetics. An unsympathetic reader of Roughing It, if one can even imagine such a monstrum horrendum, might assert that the book brims with unrelated anecdotes, inexplicable events, and a general disorderliness. A sympathetic view of the form is that Roughing It embodies the landscape of the West: Roughing It lopes along like a coyote then darts away in a flash; gusts like the Washoe Zephyr; slides from one story to the next like Tom Morgan’s ranch; and finally bucks readers three counties away like the Genuine Mexican Plug or an exploding silver mine. The old prospector in chapter 28 informs the narrator, “nothing that glitters is gold,” and the dictum holds true for the entirety of Roughing It. Twain’s rewriting of the old proverb presages his revision of the “golden” aesthetics of the “classical school” to the grotesque realism of the “unclassical” school.

There is plenty of evidence that Twain himself feared his book would be a “grotesque” production even as he wrote it. On April 26, 1871, Twain wrote to “Mother” Fairbanks, “I am pegging away at my book, but it will have no success” (MTL 4:381). Later, he wrote to Orion that it “will be a tolerable success” and commented to his publisher, Elisha Bliss, that at least it will be “pretty readable” (MTL 4:386, 389). Calling Roughing It “pretty poor stuff,” Twain feared negative reviews, so he ordered his publisher to keep a lid on advertising for the book until the subscriptions had been accomplished. (MTL 5: 76; See also MTL 5: 308–9). Even as grotesque realism was his early forte, Twain feared the label. Writing to Thomas Bailey Aldrich on January 27, 1871, Twain seemed almost defensive, pleading that Bret Harte had “trimmed & trained & schooled me patiently until he changed me from an awkward utterer of coarse grotesqueness” (MTL 5: 316). Most significant, however, is Twain’s statement in a letter to William Dean Howells, after reading his review of Roughing It:
Since penning the foregoing the “Atlantic” has come to hand with that most thoroughly & entirely satisfactory notice of “Roughing It,” & I am as uplifted & reassured by it as a mother who has given birth to a white baby when she was awfully afraid it was going to be a mulatto. I have been afraid & shaky all along, but now unless the N.Y. “Tribune” gives the book a black eye, I am all right. (MTL 5: 95)

Twain’s fear that Roughing It might turn out to be a “mulatto” or to get a “black eye” provides a carnival embodiment for his book, highlighting its grotesque attributes and elevating them above classical aesthetics. Roughing It is not a “white baby,” to adopt Twain’s analogy. In fact, it is in a sense a “mulatto” of a work, not a “tragic mulatto,” but a “comic mulatto,” a carnival combination of high and low. Typical of all grotesque images, Twain’s “mulatto” combines death and life, the birth of a baby with a black eye and perhaps black blood. The harsh humor of the comment certainly has racist undertones, and from that perspective it degrades precisely that which his age elevated and idealized: white motherhood.

Considering his misgivings, Twain’s elation at Howells’s review is not surprising. Twain found the composition of Roughing It unexpectedly . . . rough, as it turned out. The work was difficult for precisely the reasons that Twain had once thought it would be easy; Twain began, not from a tabula rasa, but rather by compiling the book in part from previous articles he had written as well as history and statistics gleaned from other sources. How could one achieve a unified book through such methods? Could one hope for authenticity or anything approaching Irving’s “classical school”? The eminent historian of the West Walter Prescott Webb observes that, “The realities of the West, the far country, have created an illusion of unreality. The West was not a land where anything could happen; but rather, it was a place where the unexpected was sure to happen, where the Eastern traditions and conventions would not hold out, and where Eastern practices would no longer work” (481). During much of the composition, however, Twain was unable to see the justice of such claims and still measured his success by Eastern models, models that would assay as grotesque or mulatto anything less than the “glittering gold” of the “classical” school. Beset by doubts about the quality of his work and his method of composition, Twain wrote again to “Mother” Fairbanks, “This book has been dragging along just 12 months, now, & I am so sick & tired of it” (MTL 4: 418–19).
Shortly thereafter, however, a new tone emerged. “I wrote a splendid chapter today, for the middle of the book,” wrote Mark Twain to his wife, Olivia. “I admire the book more & more, the more I cut & slash & lick & trim & revamp it” (MTL 4: 443). The date was August 10, 1871.

What had changed Twain’s attitude on August 10? Significantly, the “splendid chapter” he had written that August day was chapter 53, “The Story of the Old Ram.” One of the book’s most celebrated passages, this chapter features the narrator Jim Blaine, whose stories deviate from the classical mold. As Twain wrote in later years:

The idea of the tale is to exhibit certain bad effects of a good memory: the sort of memory which is too good, which remembers everything and forgets nothing, which has no sense of proportion and can’t tell an important event from an unimportant one but preserves them all, states them all, and thus retards the progress of a narrative, at the same time making a tangled, inextricable confusion of it and intolerably wearisome to the reader. (MTE 217–18)

Grotesque characters abound in chapter 53, their stories strangely united by a grotesque lack of plot. The story is a tour de force of the seemingly pointless story, going nowhere but delighting readers even as the narrator never quite gets around to telling “The Story of the Old Ram.” Writing Roughing It by relying on his own memories, his previous publications, letters provided by his brother Orion, and the guidebooks and works of history he always used, Twain himself may have feared becoming one who “forgets nothing” and who has “no sense of proportion” (MTE 217). Twain made comedy out of the notion that Roughing It might resemble Jim Blaine’s story, using the grotesque to take real fears and, as Bakhtin asserts, turn them into “amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (RW 47). As John Bassett maintains, Roughing It is “a kind of literary manifesto” (93), and it is achieved largely through the organic synthesis of grotesque form and content, the manifesto in miniature, “The Story of the Old Ram.”

ROUGHING IT AND
“THOSE FINE MORAL HUMBUGS”

Indeed, “The Story of the Old Ram” is a microcosm of Roughing It, for it reveals the aesthetic order and logic beneath the delightfully disordered
and illogical surface; moreover, in chapter 53, Twain’s “grotesque realism” is a form of *parodia sacra*, responding to the subgenre of “Providence Tales,” stories that chronicle Providence’s rewarding of the just and punishment of the wicked. Central to the story is Jim Blaine’s assertion, “Prov’ dence don’t fire no blank ca’tridges, boys” (366). Throughout the passage, Jim Blaine explains the mystery of “Prov’ dence,” arguing that “[t]here ain’t no such thing as an accident” and “ain’t anything ever reely lost” (366), a theological concept Twain burlesques in *Roughing It* near the start of his career and in “Letters from the Earth” (1909) at the tail end of it when Satan discusses why the fly had been allowed to survive on Earth: “Provvidentially. That is the word. For the fly had not been left behind by accident. No, the hand of Providence was in it. There are no accidents. All things that happen, happen for a purpose” (424). Through Jim Blaine in *Roughing It*, Satan in “Letters from the Earth,” and from a myriad of characters in between those works, Twain restates in parody the definition of Providence asserted in chapter 5 of Presbyterianism’s foundational text, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*: “God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least” (178/6.024). Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, similarly asserts that “all events whatsoever are governed by the secret counsel of God” (I:173). These texts provide the original for the genre of Providence Tales—and for Twain’s burlesque of them. “The Story of the Old Ram” is rightly classed with such ant igenre works as “The Christmas Fireside for Good Little Boys and Girls,” known also by its subtitle, “The Story of the Bad Little Boy That Bore a Charmed Life” (1865). The title of the work announces its form and content, but like other examples of this type of story, this one explicitly establishes itself in relation to the genre of what Twain calls “Sunday-school books” (407). These “mild little books with marbled backs” are constructed with a number of traditional elements, including periodic structures featuring a series of narratives strung together to reveal how God’s providence operates in the world (408). In his sketch “Christian Spectator” (1865), Twain responds specifically to a periodical that contains “one of those entertaining novelettes, so popular among credulous Sabbath-school children, about a lone woman silently praying a desperate and blood-thirsty robber out of his boots” (395). This is precisely the sort of thing Jane Tompkins defends in her influential book *Sensational Designs* when arguing that “their sensationalism ultimately lies not so much in the dramatic nature of the events they describe as in the assumptions they make
about the relation of human events to the spiritual realities that make them meaningful” (154). Tompkins blames the widespread distaste among modern readers for such tracts and Sunday-school books on the notion that the “theological assumptions are different from ours” (154). In fact, the theological assumptions contained in those works were difficult for many people to accept back then, and Tompkins finds herself in the untenable position of trying to defend what was, even in its own era, viewed by many people as contrary both to reality and, if one may make the distinction, to doctrine. Job, after all, was a good man who suffered. Twain burlesques the works Tompkins lauds, criticizing them as aesthetically bad in part because they were ethically and theologically wrong. Twain rightly calls the Christian Spectator “one of those fine moral humbugs” (395) that misleads readers with its Providence Tales. Simply put, in this popular distortion of Providence, the good are always protected and rewarded while the bad are always either redeemed or punished. One thinks of such distortions in Increase Mather’s An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences (1684) and Cotton Mather’s Magnalia Christi Americana (1702), both of which helped to establish in the popular mind the idea of Providence as a destiny that is manifest, rather than the “secret counsel of God.” Twain cribs his structure for “The Christmas Fireside” from literary descendants of these books. He inverts the structure, so that the opposite happens, and when his protagonist fished on Sunday, he “didn’t get struck by lightning” (409). The series of actions becomes a chain of expected actions that do not happen, so that even when the boy steals a rifle and goes hunting on the Sabbath, he “didn’t shoot three or four of his fingers off” (410). This structure, similar to what Edgar Branch calls the “genre of the ‘missed item,’” is constructed of absences, nullities, and stories-that-aren’t and had a tremendous influence on the structure of Roughing It (Introduction 21).

“The Story of Mamie Grant, the Child Missionary” (1868) is one of the most amusing of these broad burlesques of the genre of Providence Tales, and Franklin Rogers identifies it as a “condensed burlesque of such temperance literature as that written by Timothy Shay Arthur” (Introduction 32). Twain names Arthur in the text, when his protagonist Mamie hopes that one day her missionary efforts may appear “in a beautiful Sunday School book, and maybe T. S. Arthur may write it. Oh, joy!” (39). “The Story of Mamie Grant, the Child Missionary” follows the parodic pattern in that Mamie’s proselytizing is the ruination of her family, as she distributes religious tracts to bill collectors instead of paying them what is owed. Ultimately, Mamie’s family loses their home. Structurally,
this story adheres to the pattern employed by T. S. Arthur in *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room and What I Saw There* (1855). Episode by sentimental episode, Mamie tells stories of the depraved and wicked, just as in Arthur’s narrative each visit to the barroom reveals further depravity. With each tale Mamie relates, her father gets into more and more trouble. Just as the miller in Arthur’s narrative becomes “bloated” and “disfigured” and eventually is killed by his own son (172), Mamie’s father is brought down by his daughter’s actions.

These stories, drawn from periodicals like the *Christian Spectator* or books published especially for the Sunday school audience, provide typical content and form of the Providence Tale, and it is that genre that renders Mamie insensible to the demands of reality—that a mortgage must be paid, for example. One of the tracts Mamie distributes is “The Blasphemous Sailor Awfully Rebuked,” depicting a sailor who is immediately punished by thunder and lightning after cursing (37). This example of a “special providence” in which God’s judgment is visited upon an individual was one of Twain’s particular disagreements with how the concept of Providence was popularly employed. When Mamie reflects on the sailor’s story, she asserts, “Imagine, Oh, imagine that wicked sailor’s position! I cannot do it, because I do not know what those dreadful nautical terms mean, for I am not educated and deeply learned in the matters of practical every-day life like the gifted theological students, who have learned all about practical life from the writings of other theological students who went before them, but O, it must have been frightful, so frightful” (37). The burlesque of the “Sunday-school book with a marbled back” rests on this fundamental disjuncture between reality and theology. The theological concepts, notably Providence, illustrated by these marble-backed books are inherently “bookish” and divorced from a close connection to the “practical life” Mamie refers to. These “gifted theological students’ know of Providence from other books because they cannot know of it in the same way from reality, for in reality, it is obvious that good people do not always prosper nor are bad people always punished. In the Sunday-school books, however, that is often precisely what does happen. Bearing titles like the anonymously written *Willy Graham; or, The Disobedient Boy* (1844) and *The Polite Boy. With Illustrations. By Uncle Madison* (circa 1860), these books inculcated social and religious virtue through stark contrasts of angelic and fiendish behavior, and the rewards and punishments thereof. Ironically, “Grandfather Twain” does learn from writers like “Uncle Madison,” for he adopts their literary models for parodic purpose and to
reconnect Providence with reality. The grotesque form of *Roughing It* so often commented on is a twisting of these Providence Tales, just as “The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper” (1870) responds to “all the Sunday-school books” as a model but explodes into burlesque with Twain explaining that in his Providence Tale, “there was a screw loose somewhere, and it all happened just the other way” (374–76).

Similarly, in such works as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), “About Magnanimous- Incident Literature” (1878), and “Edward Mills and George Benton: A Tale” (1880), Twain burlesques the entire genre of Sunday-school books, inverting the typical structure, so that even as he adheres to the episodic structure of the Providence Tale, the actions do not illustrate what they are seemingly designed to, the beneficent working of “a bountiful Providence,” as phrased in the latter tale (748). One sees in the *parodia sacra* of *Roughing It*, too, just such an adoption and distortion of the narrative plan of the Sunday-school book. A drunken silver miner seems an unlikely spokesperson for Providence, arguing to the larger world that “everything that people can’t understand and don’t see the reason of does good if you only hold on and give it a fair shake” (366). The *parodia sacra* in this passage is the perfect example of Bakhtin’s assertion that one sees in such writing “the entire spectrum of tones—from reverent acceptance to parodic ridicule—so that it is often very difficult to establish precisely where reverence ends and ridicule begins” (“Prehistory” 77). Twain cannot be accused of reverence, for burlesque is at once a criticism of popular literary distortions of Providence and a rejection of classical aesthetics. Yet, Twain’s burlesque of the genre returns the concept of Providence to its original explanation that defines it as a “mystery.” The story, then, is both a formal and ideological burlesque of the Providence Tale. Ironically, the restored definition of Providence provided Twain with an explanation of how a writer brings order to chaotic materials, making the grotesque beautiful, even as he makes the idealized concept of Providence grotesque.

All around the cabin, everyone has quieted down to listen to Jim Blaine’s story. The narrator awaits expectantly, having long desired to hear this “stirring story” and “wonderful adventure” (361, 367). Chapter 53 is a frame story, featuring a frame narrator who introduces “The Story of the
Old Ram.” One of the most familiar narrative structures in the writer’s repertoire, the frame story has long been a common feature of world literature and has been a particular favorite in this country since the advent of dialect stories like “The Big Bear of Arkansas.” Readers love the illusion that as they read they are listening to a good story from a good storyteller. A frame story creates that intimacy and immediacy, as a speaker directs the story toward the “you” of the audience. Convinced that “The Story of the Old Ram” is a “stirring story,” the frame narrator watches Jim Blaine closely for weeks, hoping to catch him “satisfactorily drunk” and in the perfect condition to tell the story (361). The anticipation he feels is nearly palpable as Blaine holds forth on the empty powder keg. Jan Harold Brunvand calls chapter 53 “the old greenhorn hoax of a ‘sell,’ the long-winded, pointless narrative that makes a laughing stock out of a poor dupe who expects to hear a legitimate funny story” (61). The laughing at the end of the story is of the conspiratorial sort. “The tears were running down the boys’ cheeks—they were suffocating with suppressed laughter—and had been from the start, though I had never perceived it,” the green Twain informs the green readers who have likewise been “sold” (367). Twain used this form many times. In “A Reminiscence of Artemus Ward” (1867), he portrays himself as tricked by the complicity of Ward and the other fellows. The difference between the Artemus Ward sketch and chapter 53 of Roughing It, however, is that Ward was complicit and aware of the trick, unlike Blaine who truly is oblivious to the plot being hatched. Just as in “The Story of the Old Ram,” there is a moment of epiphany in “A Reminiscence of Artemus Ward” when Twain announces, “Then I saw that I had been sold” (233).

It is well to remember that “The Story of the Old Ram” is, in fact, an aesthetic object. What with the believable dialect characters and the effective frame story, one might just believe it was recovered by Twain and not created by him, just as some critics are still “sold” by Twain’s claim that his 1874 masterpiece, “A True Story,” really was “repeated word for word as I heard it” (578). As Jim Blaine’s audience quiets down, the reader anticipates hearing a “story” that follows the classical formal dictates of a story, featuring narrative, plot, and characters that relate to the action. Grotesque realism, as Bakhtin defines it, is “hideous and formless” and rejects the “aesthetics of the beautiful” (RW 29). Reading Twain’s story, one expects a narrative adhering to the aesthetics of the beautiful, but one finds an aesthetics of the grotesque. One should qualify this immediately, for even the violation of the form acknowledges it; there can be no grotesque realism without classical aesthetics, so it only
seems “formless.” Twain’s “The Story of the Old Ram” is one of the most grotesque examples of American writing ever produced, and one of the most delightful.

Blaine’s first sentence, even in dialect, adheres to the classical mold: “I don’t reckon them times will ever come again” (361). The narrator will focus, as such narratives so often do, on times past, on “them times.” But, as the narrator observes later, “the mention of the ram in the first sentence was as far as any man had ever heard him get” (367). In the beginning of chapter 53, Twain labels the story “stirring.” At the end of the chapter, Twain calls the story that is never told “a wonderful adventure.” These descriptions sound like nineteenth-century ad copy for a narrative well within the bounds of traditional aesthetics, reminding one, too, that Providence Tales are often adventure stories, packed with “stirring action.” While the story begins and ends with a nod toward the conventions, in between the “stirring” and the “wonderful,” the expected traditional narrative fails to materialize. Like the parodic Providence Tales, this sketch is notable for what is missing and for what does not happen. The expected story that Twain does not tell in chapter 53 of *Roughing It* is the much applauded “The Story of the Old Ram.” Had we actually been told the story of the Old Ram, it would have been both “stirring” and “wonderful,” we are assured, but Jim Blaine has never told the story, and so it remains “a dark mystery” (361, 367, 368).

The absent story is always present, however, for the form such a narrative would have taken is the means by which we measure what in fact transpires. Perhaps, then, those critics who insist that Twain’s *Roughing It* has much in common with eastern models are, in some sense, correct. Robert Edson Lee, for example, in his book *From East to West,* charts the changes Twain made in material he reused, terming the end result “a washed and weakened version” (109). Joseph Coulombe, too, asserts that the book proves “Twain subdued his blunt western vernacular voice, endorsed many stereotypically eastern values, and moderated his impulse for harsh social satire” (238). Twain responds to classical and traditional form, but his very acknowledgment violates its central tenets, creating antigenre. Perhaps, as Formalists would argue, the new form is born simply because the old form is moribund. Likewise dead is the ideology immanent to the genre, the popular distortion of Providence itself. The Providence Tale is the target, in the inseparable totality of its ideological and formal aspects. Michael McKeon suggests that the Providence Tale contains within it the germ of the “tall tale,” for by its very nature, the form seeks to explain inexplicable events (101).
Thus, Twain finds an element of the ludicrous in the form itself, an element he extends to the extremes of absurdity.

"YOUR GAME EYE HAS FETCHED LOOSE, MISS WAGNER DEAR"

The story Jim Blaine does tell is one that “always maundered off, interminably, from one thing to another” (367–68). Providence Tales do maunder off, but they tend to maunder off from one event to another, just as Twain focuses on his “variegated” travels, not from one character to another as happens in Jim Blaine’s narrative. In “How to Tell a Story” (1895), Twain differentiates between two types of stories, asserting that the “humorous story depends for its effect upon the manner of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the matter” (201). The “high and delicate art” of the humorous story involves the method of delivery, but in written work, one may say it relies on the form that Twain devises to approximate the “manner” (201). Formally, Twain’s “Story of the Old Ram” is an antigenre and responds at every point to the “Sunday-school book.” Like “The Story of Mamie Grant, the Child Missionary,” this sketch is episodic, as are the models they burlesque, but it “makes strange” the Providence Tales once so popular. No form is blank, and in reality Roughing It constantly burlesques established texts, particularly the Sunday-school books with their flawed definitions of Providence. If we think of the point or nub of the story as a bullet and the reader as the target, Jim Blaine is no threat to anyone, for a “blank cartridge” is a cartridge containing plenty of gunpowder, but no shot. Such a cartridge appears normal on the outside, but lacks what really makes a firearm dangerous. With a blank cartridge, as with Jim Blaine’s story, there is noise but no conclusion. Blaine populates his story with one grotesque character after another. Rather than focusing on the ram, or the story of the ram, Blaine moves from one recollection to the next easily, as each person reminds him of another. However grotesque, the situation is realistic, and one that many people have experienced when speaking to older relatives; one day we, too, perhaps will tell such stories. While Blaine himself maintains that “Prov’ dence don’t fire no blank ca’ttridges,” the speaker himself does. He develops a story with a “charge,” so to speak, but with no bullet/thesis to hit the target. He reminds one of Twain’s self-description in “Old Times on the Mississippi”: “my memory was never loaded with anything but blank cartridges”
(341). Symbolically sitting on an “empty powder-keg,” Blaine is himself a “blank ca’tridge” (361). He “draws a blank” and forgets to actually tell the story he has announced, leaving—it would seem—only a blank page in his wake.

With Blaine, Twain creates the perfect storyteller. In “How to Tell a Story,” Twain asserts that “the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it” (201). Blaine, of course, is truly unaware that there is anything funny about his story, or nonstory. He is the perfect unself-conscious narrator. When Twain revised the yarn for performance on the platform, he accentuated this aspect of the story, drawing the narration out so long that Blaine even seems unaware of the passing of time from “them times” to “these times” (see MTE 218–25).

Similarly, the characters whose stories he does relate are themselves “blank ca’tridges,” so much so that one must conclude blankness is the thematic point of the story, just as formally the work is a burlesquing antigenre of Providence Tales. There is the one-eyed Miss Wagner, for example, who borrows an ill-fitting and ill-matched glass eye from Miss Jefferson, “to receive company in” (363). Miss Wagner strives for an aesthetic completion, a sense of classical beauty that others would applaud. Instead, the eye, too small for Miss Wagner, “would get twisted around in the socket, while t’other one was looking as straight ahead as a spy-glass” (363). Of course, the eye frequently fell out, so Miss Wagner unknowingly turned “her old dead-light on the company empty” (363). With her blank expression, Miss Wagner, too, is a sort of “blank ca’tridge.” The focus on incompleteness, emptiness, and blankness permeates the description; like Blaine’s story, Miss Wagner’s eye goes off in diverse and inappropriate directions; there is no motive force behind the eye, and it, too, “maunders off.” As the description continues, we discover that Miss Wagner is also bald and missing one leg. Miss Wagner qualifies as grotesque to begin with, and she renders herself even more so with her attempts at completion. By embracing a classical aesthetic that she cannot possibly attain, Miss Wagner embodies Bakhtin’s notion that grotesque images illustrate the “eternally unfinished” nature of reality (RW 256). Miss Wagner is an American version of Gogol’s Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov, who awakens one morning to discover that his nose is missing, leaving only “a completely empty, flat place” in its stead (207). The story charts Kovalyov’s grotesque attempts to regain his nose, which has gone on to live a life of its own, a life of some celebrity. Miss Wagner, too, is ever in a state of incompletion. Even her glass eye refus-
es to stay put. She responds by being always “considerable on the borrow” in her attempts to find prosthetic limbs, wigs, or glass eyes (364). For Twain’s revision of classical aesthetics, Miss Wagner is the grotesque Beatrice to his silver-mining Dante, Jim Blaine.

The coffin-peddler Jacops is another such character. A despicable old buzzard, he camps outside of “old Robbins’s place” with a coffin, hoping to earn the ailing man’s trade (364). His narrative, like the others, is incomplete, for he hopes to conclude by making his sale and burying his customer. Old Robbins, however, deceives him and buys the coffin with the agreement that if he does not like it after trying it out, he will get his money back and more. Robbins figures that “if he missed fire he couldn’t lose a cent” (365). To “misfire” is again to be a sort of blank cartridge, something that is incomplete, but in this case even the gunpowder does not fire: nothing happens. As it turns out, Robbins is only in a trance, not really dead at all, and so the character sketch ends with the coffin as empty as Miss Wagner’s eye socket. The grotesque imagery presents the reader with a death-in-life scenario that makes light of what ordinarily one fears.

Just as Robbins’s coffin is empty, there is nothing to put into William Wheeler’s. Wheeler was pulled through the machinery in a carpet factory and “his widder bought the piece of carpet that had his remains wove in” (367). The body has, in a sense, disappeared into fourteen yards of three-ply carpet. Since the days of Homer, the carpet has served as a symbol of aesthetics, just as the female figure has, and one leaps at the chance to categorize William Wheeler’s mishap in the mill as a “yarn.” The storyteller is a weaver of stories, one who fashions a work of art out of many narrative strands. Howells nodded to this concept in his review of *Roughing It*:

A thousand anecdotes, relevant and irrelevant, embroider the work; excursions and digressions of all kinds are the very woof, as it were; everything far-fetched or near at hand is interwoven, and yet the complex is a sort of ‘harmony of colors’ which is not less than triumphant. (755)

Howells is certainly correct that there is deeper level of “harmony” in *Roughing It*. Still, grotesque imagery, actions, and people dominate the work and must play a role in whatever “harmony” emerges. All the disparate elements of the book are interwoven in Twain’s complex imagination, but as an example of grotesque realism, *Roughing It* retains an unfinished, grotesquely harmonious quality. Incompletion, and not the
“finished” quality of the “aesthetics of the beautiful,” provides *Roughing It*’s aesthetic power, for the harmony cannot be understood without considering the relation of Twain’s text to the Providence Tales it burlesques. While tempting, the idea that *Roughing It* responds to the new “content” of the West is untrue, for the book’s new form is born not to express new content, but because the old form is dead. Henry James would not count the unfortunate Wheeler’s story as the inspiration for his own metanarrative, “The Figure in the Carpet,” although in that story, too, the “primal plan, something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet,” is the answer to “the thing we were all so blank about” (290). In short, Blaine’s assertion of providential order is on one level not borne out by the seeming lack of order in his story, a story populated with blanks, absences, and grotesques.

**“THERE AIN’T NO SUCH A THING AS AN ACCIDENT”**

There are no accidents in “The Story of the Old Ram,” however, and one should not overlook Twain’s satirical “Prefatory” at the beginning of the book:

> This book is merely a personal narrative, and not a pretentious history or a philosophical dissertation. It is a record of several years of variegated vagabondizing, and its object is rather to help the resting reader while away an idle hour than afflict him with metaphysics, or goad him with science. (n. pag.)

Similarly, in 1885, Twain warns that those “looking for a moral” in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would be “shot.” Just as there is a “moral” in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Roughing It* contains the occasional “philosophical dissertation,” albeit very humorous ones, and “afflicts” the reader with metaphysical questions. Bassett claims that chapter 53 is “an attack on interpretation,” for “[n]ot only does it omit any signified for the ram, it hides or indefinitely defers the signifier” (98). However true Bassett’s statement is, like so many comments focusing solely on linguistic aspects, it misses the point. Similarly, one should not accept Twain’s opening rejection of metaphysics at face value, as does Bruce Michelson, for whom Twain was “playful and game-loving” and not a “metaphysician” (“Ever Such” 28). Since when are the two
mutually exclusive? Michelson argues that “Roughing It depends for its success on being an act of play itself, taking full advantage of play’s temporary dominion over truth” (39), but it is well to remember that play, like humor, is serious business and does not exclude truth. Flannery O’Connor might have been thinking of Twain in “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” when she writes that “In nineteenth-century American writing, there was a good deal of grotesque literature which came from the frontier and was supposed to be funny; but our present grotesque characters, comic though they may be, are at least not primarily so” (817). The dichotomy between humorous and serious writing is impossible with Twain, however, and he writes with a seriousness and humorousness of purpose few other writers attain. Truth and humor happily cohabitate in the sketch when Blaine announces that “there ain’t nothing ever reely lost; everything that people can’t understand and don’t see the reason of does good if you only hold on and give it a fair shake; Prov’dence don’t fire no blank ca’tridges, boys... There ain’t no such a thing as an accident” (366).

To support his view of Providence, Jim Blaine relates the story of his Uncle Lem whose back was broken when a drunken Irishman carrying a hod of bricks “fell on him out of the third story” (366). Blaine’s interpretation of the event is, again, an appeal to Providence to explain why bad things happen to reasonably good people like his uncle. The answer is clear: Uncle Lem was there as a special providence to break the Irishman’s fall; the Irishman in turn broke Uncle Lem’s back in several places. The interpretation is stultified, however, by the presence of Uncle Lem’s dog, which might have served to save the Irishman’s life at his own expense, rather than Uncle Lem’s. Blaine’s explanation is classic:

Why didn’t the Irishman fall on the dog? Becuz the dog would a seen him a coming and stood from under. That’s the reason the dog warn’t appinted. A dog can’t be depended on to carry out a special providence. Mark my words it was a put-up thing. Accidents don’t happen, boys. (366)

James Caron argues that “A tale designed to illustrate the workings of providence ought to tell how Uncle Lem was miraculously saved at the sacrifice of a stranger. Faith in the plan of God, in his wisdom and mercy, would naturally flow from such a wondrous event” (162). That is indeed the form Twain parodies, and Caron would be correct if this were a Providence tale and not a burlesque of that form. Twain’s story can only be understood by what it burlesques. Jim Blaine’s tale responds at all levels
to those “marble-backed Sunday-school books” with their tales of good rewarded and evil punished. Those books do not jibe with reality, nor even do they jibe with theology. The Providence Tales themselves are inaccurate depictions of doctrinal definitions of Providence, and take the “secret counsel” Calvin described and attempt to render it manifest; moreover, Calvinist definitions of Providence make no claim that good acts are rewarded on earth. Calvin defines a “special providence” as simply the belief that “particular events” are designed by God for a specific end, citing the whirlwind that plunges Jonah over the side of the ship as an example (I: 78). When one considers the many instances of “special providences” in the scriptures, it becomes clear that quite frequently human pain results, and not the blissful narrative Caron describes. Ironically, Jim Blaine’s Providence Tale is truer to theology and reality, for even if he claims to see a pattern that by definition must always remain a mystery, at least his tale recognizes that we live in a world where tragic things happen: a world where people, like Uncle Lem, have their backs broken; where people, like William Wheeler, are killed in industrial accidents; and where people, like Miss Wagner, sometimes lose eyes, limbs, or even hair. In “Man’s Place in the Animal World” (1896), Twain makes the following comparison:

For style, look at the Bengal tiger—that ideal of grace, beauty, physical Perfection, majesty. And then look at Man—that poor thing. He is the Animal of the Wig, the Trepanned Skull, the Ear Trumpet, the Glass Eye, the Pasteboard Nose, the Porcelain Teeth, the Silver Windpipe, the Wooden Leg—a creature that is mended and patched all over, from top to bottom. If he can’t get renewals of his brickabrac in the next world, what will he look like? (89)

Just as with the stories in Roughing It, Twain makes readers laugh at their own “human condition.” Twain’s genius is that he turns the “dark and terrifying” elements of reality into “ludicrous monstrosities” (RW 47), liberating readers for a time from the terrors of living in the world. In Twain’s world, fear becomes laughter; Providence explains the everyday “roughing it” that people experience, and Twain’s grotesque parody of those providential explanations helps us to laugh at a joke that sometimes seems to be at our expense.

Twain often criticized those who explained miraculous or catastrophic events by invoking the theological concept of “special providences.” In his version of the Apostles’ Creed, written sometime in the
1880s, Twain followed his positive assertion “I believe in God the Almighty” with a qualification: “I do not believe in special provi-
dences” (“Three Statements of the Eighties” 56). Similarly, in such works as “Letter From the Recording Angel” (1887), Pudd’nhead Wilson (1894), “As Concerns Interpreting the Deity” (1905), and the “Little Bessie” dialogues (1908–9), Twain embedded in various literary forms his rejection of special providences. His novels, too, contain such references, with one of the best presentations being the dialect discussion of special providences in The Refuge of the Derelicts that occupies all of chapter 11 (1905–6). The characters Aunty Phyllis and ‘Rastus argue about how it was that ’Rastus happened to be on hand to save a young girl from a run-
away horse:

“You is de man dat’s allays sayin’ de’ ain’t no sich thing as special provi-
dence. If ’twarn’t for special providence, what would ‘a’ went wid dat buggy en harness? Who put you in dat road, right exactl
y in de right spot, right exactl at de right half-a-second?—you answer me dat, if you kin!”

“Who de nation sent de hoss down dah in sich a blame’ fool fash-
io?” (238)

The chapter ends with that core question, for Twain does not reject providence, per se, but human presumption. This is particularly so when the term is used as a cover-up for human incompetence. For just that reason does Mary in “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1899) deride the “designs of Providence,” exclaiming: “Ordered! Oh, every-
thing’s ordered, when a person has to find some way out when he has been stupid” (400). One of Twain’s undated proverbs states, too, that “There are many scapegoats for our blunders, but the most popular one is Providence” (MMM 946).

If Twain saw human stupidity as one motive for appealing to Provi-
dence, an inflated sense of human worth is another. In a notebook entry in 1886, Twain imprinted this diatribe:

Special providence! That phrase nauseates me—with its implied impor-
tance of mankind & triviality of God. In my opinion these myriads of globes are merely the blood-corpuscles ebbing & flowing through the arteries of God, & we but animalculae that infest them, disease them, pol-
lute them: & God does not know we are there, & would not care if he did.
(MTNJ 3: 246–47)
Twain’s rejection of the special providence really reinforces the general concept of Providence. Criticizing the aggrandizement of humans and the concomitant trivialization of God, Twain lambastes the hubris of humans in presuming to explain divine purposes. It is left to Jim in *Tom Sawyer’s Conspiracy* to give the orthodox view: “You can’t relieve Prov’dence none, en he doan need yo’ help, nohow” (164). Providence, in Twain’s view of the world, is simply a given. Those who try to explain Providence are stultified, just as in the book of *Job* God speaks from the whirlwind, chastising those who would presume to explain His ways. The correct human response to the mystery of Providence is the blank of language, silence.

Time and again, Twain invokes providential explanations as a catch-all term that people employ to bring order out of chaos, but at its heart the term cannot explain the inexplicable, as it seems designed to do. “Providence leaves nothing to go by chance,” Twain informs us in *Roughing It*’s chapter 38. “All things have their uses and their part and proper place in Nature’s economy: the ducks eat the flies—the flies eat the worms—the Indians eat all three—the wild-cats eat the Indians—the white folks eat the wild-cats—and thus all things are lovely” (247). Until the introduction of the list, Twain’s statement is a typically providential one, but then there is “a screw loose,” just as in “The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper.” All things are not lovely, of course, they are grotesque, but that, Twain argues, is reality. The most typical image in *Roughing It* is that of the lone tree growing on the Mono Lake island, surrounded by “venomous water,” “scorched and blasted rocks,” and “jets of steam” (251). Conjoining life and death, the “small pine of most graceful shape and most faultless symmetry” seems to Twain “like a cheerful spirit in a mourning household” (251). In *Roughing It*, Providence is the point d’appui of Twain’s grotesque realism; even the imagery surrounding the fate of William Wheeler suggests that the grotesque warp and woof of the universe has a place for humankind within it, even if it is a design with “a screw loose.”

What is at stake in *Roughing It* is, then, quite a serious game after all. In the context of the burlesque of Providence Tales, the pervasive imagery of blankness and degradation might well seem a nihilistic vision. Grotesque imagery of blankness, death, and destruction might suggest a world in which there is no beautiful master text, just as there is no real “story” in Blaine’s drunken recollections. The master text, however, is always present in the parodic response. One should not assume that a burlesque of Providence destroys the original text, for
quite the contrary is true; it reconnects it with reality and so rejuvenates it, just as Twain’s “Colloquy between a Slum Child and a Moral Mentor” (1860s/1880s) shows the vast gulf separating theological terms and practical reality, particularly the gritty reality of a slum child. Twain provides a footnote for this work: “Respectfully recommended for the Sunday School books” (109). In his fine analysis of Twain’s translation of Heinrich Hoffman’s Struwwelpeter, or “Slovenly Peter,” J. D. Stahl concludes that Twain “adds a strong flavor of fascination with the absurd, grotesque, and violent to his rendition” (177). Stahl notes Twain’s use of “Puritan theology” (177), and one might reasonably claim that Twain’s translation of the text amounts to a parody of it. Hoffman’s texts, with titles like “The Story of Cruel Frederick,” “The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches,” and “The Story of Augustus Who Would Not Have Any Soup,” are as didactic as any of the Sunday-school books, but become, in Twain’s translations, parodies of the original. Paula Uruburu connects the development of the American Grotesque to the Puritan “plain style,” an attempt to use rhetoric of the commonplace in sermons. Citing Thomas Hooker’s comparing Grace to “a great Onyon” that hangs in a house, growing bigger and bigger, seemingly by its own volition, she traces the use of grotesque imagery to convey religious ideas to the later development “by our writers to infuse everyday objects, things of the most mundane and often ugly reality, with an ‘inner life’ of their own, in fact, to rely upon the use of the familiar in order to illuminate that which appears unknowable or unfamiliar” (33). Her brilliant study convincingly traces the influence of the plain style on Edward Taylor, Mary Rowlandson, Edwards, and others down through the twentieth-century development of the American Grotesque.

Significantly, in this regard, Twain took time out from his “California & Plains book” to write his occasional piece “About Smells” (1870). In this work, he roasts the Reverend T. De Witt Talmage, a Presbyterian minister who had complained about the odor of working men attending church, a subject Twain later burlesques in “The Second Advent” (1881), as discussed in chapter 4. In “The Indignity Put upon the Remains of George Holland by the Rev. Mr. Sabine” (1871), Twain likewise castigates a minister, calling him a “freak of Nature” for refusing to officiate at the funeral of an actor (517). One might suggest Twain saw Mr. Sabine as a “grotesque” because of his adherence to a “picturesque Christianity” that violated the fundamental principles of its namesake. Conversely, Christ, in fraternizing with sinners and tax collectors, was from a pharisaical viewpoint a grotesque.
Just as Twain delighted in correcting Talmadge and Sabine, he must have delighted in having Jim Blaine tell of the missionary who was eaten by cannibals, for through this burlesque he suggests that only by becoming grotesque can one bring life.

That there missionary’s substance, unbeknowns to himself, actu’ly converted every last one of them heathens that took a chance at the barbacue. Nothing ever fetched them but that. Don’t tell me it was an accident that he was biled. There ain’t no such thing as an accident. (366)

A parodic Christ figure, the missionary contains both death and life, as the imagery of grotesque realism does. Having the cannibals eat the missionary degrades the oh-so-high-and-mighty and illustrates in fiction the same sense Twain expressed in his journalist pieces that those who would minister to people must not stand apart from them. The consuming of the missionary by cannibals is really a burlesque of transubstantiation as they partake of the body of Christ through the missionary who sought to bring them into the body of Christ, the church. The symbol of communion becomes real. We laugh at the absurdity of the situation, at the indignation of the missionary’s relatives, and at Blaine’s insistence that it all makes sense. Still, Twain makes his point with humor and hostility that true mission work means, in some sense, sacrificing oneself as the Reverends Sabine and Talmadge most demonstrably did not. Symbolically, mission work means empathizing with those to whom one would minister, rather than pushing away day laborers, theater folk, and man-eaters.

Lest one deduce from these examples that Twain simply disliked the clergy, one should note that during the composition of *Roughing It* Twain likewise leaped to the defense of deserving ministers; in “Mr. Beecher and the Clergy” (1869), for example, Twain defends the Reverend T. K. Beecher, who had been expelled from the Ministerial Union of Elmira, New York. His crime? He held popular and well-attended meetings in an “opera house” (291). Looking at these and other occasional pieces that Twain wrote during the *Roughing It* years, one notes that Twain consistently champions those who bring the gospel down to the common person. In chapter 47 of *Roughing It*, the famous meeting between the minister and Scotty Briggs has as its main theme the translation of the gospel of Christ into the language of the people. Twain tells us pointedly that “Slang was the language of Nevada. It was hard to preach a sermon without it, and be understood” (309). For this reason,
the “spirituel new fledgling from an eastern theological seminary” has to learn the new language and bring the gospel to the people who need it (309). There is some truth, then, to Julian Markels’s assertion that “Roughing It is rhetorically assured and consistent in its deflation of establishment religion” (144), so long as we understand that Twain is using the grotesque to bring religion down to the “reproductive lower stratum,” as Bakhtin phrases it, in order to provoke rebirth (RW 21). Structurally, at least, with his burlesque of Providence Tales, Twain criticizes popular American theology, purifying the definition of Providence and restoring to it its dominant sense of mystery.

“The Story of the Old Ram” differs from Twain’s journalistic pieces in that it is a literary piece, but the message is similar: the very idea of Providence exists because the world is grotesque. The finished and the beautiful have no place in Roughing It precisely because they are not real. In Roughing It, the grotesque becomes the norm. Beginning with the assumption of a fallen world populated with fallen people, there is nothing surprising in the reality depicted in Roughing It. Rather than depicting the West, then, as a sort of exception to the rule, Twain uses the West to depict the reality of a world in which everything is grotesque; the new form is not called into being by new content, but rather by the dead literary form that never did adequately express the old content. Creating a story without the typical appeal to classic aesthetics, Twain connects grotesque images of the body and Providence in a “carnival mesalliance” that unites, Bakhtin asserts, “sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low” (PDP 123). Elevated to an almost meaningless panacea for any ill, Providence as a term is a “blank cartridge,” in the sense that William James deems any philosophical term too abstract to be useful as a “blank cartridge.” “Pragmatically, then, the abstract word ‘design’ is a blank cartridge,” James argues. “It carries no consequences, it does no execution” (52). Similarly, Twain finds Providence, as used popularly, too abstract to provide solace amid earthly ill, so he brings the concept down to earth. Even the gun-slinging metaphor begins the work of degrading the abstract theological concept to street-level reality. With the metaphor, Twain reminds his readers in very graphic ways how violent reality is, how blank and incomplete the world is, and reminds us just why people appeal to Providence in the first place.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of critics view Blaine’s story as Twain’s rejection of the theological concept, rather than a burlesque of a literary form and a clarifying of a theological term immanent to that form. Tom Towers, for example, provides a typical summary of the
book’s argument: “there is no scheme in myth or science which will account for the awful facts of human life” (“Hateful” 15). Likewise, Lee Clark Mitchell contends that “Roughing It lives up to its title and, like the drunken story that Jim Blaine tells of his grandfather’s old ram, never quite succeeds in getting to the point” (69). Simply put, Roughing It asserts the truth that Providence does explain everything, but that we cannot know what that explanation is; as Calvin reminds us, Providence is “the secret counsel of God” (I:173). Twain’s sketch is so brilliantly done, so designedly done, it supports the argument that there truly are no accidents, but it does not assert the beauty of the result. Throughout his career, Twain portrays chaos and confusion as givens of human life, as fundamental law. As Lawrence Berkove observes about the content that produces the form of Roughing It,

[Twain] saw postlapsarian life as designedly hellish, marked by man’s Sisyphean efforts to escape God’s curse of Adam: that he would earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. Roughing It’s underlying unity—and the book is far more unified than has been generally recognized—is largely accomplished by the thematic operation of Twain’s bitter belief not in the justice of this view of existence but in its empirical accuracy. (23)

In short, Twain may or may not have “liked” his Calvinist inheritance, but it orders his work nevertheless, particularly in his burlesque of popular theological stories in Roughing It.

Twain certainly had plenty of evidence that reality was grotesque and not picturesque even as he wrote his book. Some facts of Twain’s life during the composition of Roughing It support a view of the world—not just the West—as a place where everything happens all the time, or as Webb says, where “the unexpected was sure to happen” (481). During 1870–71, Twain experienced the birth and illnesses of children, the visit of Olivia’s closest friend, Emma Nye, who would then contract and die of typhus in the Clemens home, and the subsequent severe illness of Livy herself. All of these facts provoked Twain to write Elisha Bliss,

I had rather die twice over than repeat the last six months of my life. . . . If I dared fly in the face of Providence & make one more promise, I would say that if I ever get out of this infernal, damnable chaos I am whirling in at home, I will go to work & amply & fully & freely fulfill some of the promises I have been making to you—but I don’t dare! Bliss—I don’t dare! (MTL 4:365–66)
One must be careful of making too much of this letter, but Twain’s attitude does seem almost fearful, evincing a certain canny wariness that Providence truly fires no blank cartridges, but live ammunition. A universal plan may exist, but it is not our plan, and Twain often links Providence with fear. One recalls that Huck is slapped by Providence and that Captain Wakeman in *Roughing It* has a “hand like the hand of Providence,” suggesting a threatening force (425). In the letter, too, one sees Twain dwelling amid chaos, the chaos of everyday life, yet stating that there is some order or plan to the universe; there is, not coincidentally, the very real fear that God’s plan may not necessarily be our plan. In contrast to the Providence Tales he responds to, Twain defines Providence not as something desirable but as something factual; the term asserts a trinity of violence, sovereignty, and mystery. Providence simply is, and no human opinion about it or explanation of it is likely to be helpful, useful, or accurate. In “Reflections on the Sabbath” (1866), Twain rejected the idealizations of the “Sunday-school books” with their ubiquitous “good little boys . . . who always went to heaven, and the bad little boys who infallibly got drowned on Sunday,” vowing: “I hold that no man can meddle with the exclusive affairs of Providence and offer suggestions for their improvement without making himself in a manner conspicuous. Let us take things as we find them—though, I am free to confess, it goes against the grain to do it, sometimes” (39).

How Twain reacted to grotesque reality outside of his literature is telling. Twain remembered the days of Emma Nye’s illness and death as “among the blackest, the gloomiest, the most wretched of my long life” (MTE 251). His response to the horror, however, was to seek shelter in the grotesque. “The resulting periodical and sudden changes of mood in me, from deep melancholy to half-insane tempests and cyclones of humor,” Twain reflected, “are among the curiosities of my life” (MTE 251). During that time, as he tells it, Twain made his famous “crude and absurd map of Paris” that grotesquely distorted the real map of France’s capital (MTE 251). Time and again in Twain’s writing, one sees the use of the grotesque to make light of reality during times when reality horrifies, turning the monsters of real life, as Bakhtin suggests, into “amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (RW 47). Twain retreated into the grotesque, finding it more comforting than the Sunday-school books that were obviously untrue.

Certainly, there is heavy irony in having the symmetrically inebriated Blaine deliver a sermon on Providence; the fools in Shakespeare get all the best lines, too. That Blaine is “symmetrically” inebriated suggests
a grotesque mesalliance of order and disorder, just as systematic theology is used to explain chaotic reality. Even the setting, with all the miners gathered around Blaine while he delivers his “sermon,” suggests a burlesque of a church service, “a grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols and their transfer to the material bodily level” (RW 74). Blaine’s first statement “I don’t reckon them times will ever come again” restates in parody “In the beginning.” What follows is a church service decidedly not divine, where whiskey, not wine, is shared, in which transubstantiation is a form of cannibalism, and in which one is unsure if the Reverend Twain’s gunslinger God is a lawman or a badman. The sermon argues that the Lord moves in mysterious ways, at times using odd instruments. Perhaps even very odd instruments like the poor Uncle Lems of the world. As David in The Refuge of the Derelicts observes, “sometimes the methods employed by Providence seem strange and incongruous” (189).

The blanks, the gaps, the events that do not happen, even the central assertion, “Prov’dence don’t fire no blank ca’tridges, boys,” with its double or even triple negative, connects chapter 53 back to Twain’s burlesques of Providence Tales. Just as “Sinful Jim” in “The Christmas Fireside” does not lose fingers when firing a rifle, is not struck by lightning, and does not go to jail, the Jim in Roughing It does not tell a story, but tells about people who do not have legs, arms, eyes, and so on (410). The moral of these burlesques of Providence Tales is always the same: mystery. “How this Jim ever escaped is a mystery to me,” readers are told in “The Christmas Fireside” (409). In chapter 53 of Roughing It, too, the story the narrator hopes to hear remains “a dark mystery” (368). Twain’s Providence Tale inverts the usual structure of the Sunday-school book and so returns the term to its original theological definition, classically expressed by Calvin as “the secret counsel of God” (I: 173).

Indeed, however grotesque it may be to have the drunken Jim Blaine deliver a sermon, time and again in Twain it is the vernacular character who bears satirical truth. Certainly, there are characters in Roughing It like the parson who talks to Scotty Briggs. And there are characters like Briggs himself whose honest vernacular provides “no mean timber whereof to construct a Christian” (317). A long line of dialectal characters in Twain deliver sermons that are a part of the deep penetration of Calvinism into folk consciousness. Consider Roxy in Pudd’nhead Wilson, for example, whose sermon on grace is a model of orthodoxy: “dey ain’t nobody kin save his own self—can’t do it by faith, can’t do it by works, can’t do it no way at all. Free grace is de on’y way, en dat don’t come fum
nobody but jis de Lord” (931). While putting theological language into the mouths of dialectal characters develops an honestly realistic fiction, their effect on the reader as grotesques is to create a carnival rebirth for these ideas, not to destroy them. In Roughing It, Twain proves himself to be of a like mind with William James, who was in 1872 formulating these ideas that he would set down decades later in his work Pragmatism: “The prince of darkness may be a gentleman, as we are told he is, but whatever the God of earth and heaven is, he can surely be no gentleman. His menial services are needed in the dust of our human trails, even more than his dignity is needed in the empyrean” (34–35). Just as Twain endorsed the Reverend Thomas K. Beecher for his popular sermons in opera houses, the actor George Holland for his “theatrical ministry,” or even his own character Scotty Briggs for his sermons in slang, he uses the grotesque in the character of Jim Blaine to bring Providence down from the empyrean to the human world of dust. Jim Blaine’s sermon renews understanding of just what the term Providence implies, explains why temporal disorder creates a desire for a godly order, and fosters a community of those united by laughing at our common condition.

With his use of theological language, Twain also pleads for the providential writer. With his work Roughing It, he admittedly composes a book out of many sources and of a subject matter that is chaotic and “variegated.” If Twain does treat metaphysics, he also brings to the fore questions about both the story and the story writer who must “cut & slash & lick & trim & revamp it.” In Blaine’s story, nothing is lost. Each character brings to mind another character and another story. Blaine, viewed this way, has “no sense of proportion,” just as Twain said. Blaine, that is, had no artistic sense. His story is a blank cartridge and fails to hit its target. Without any sense of authorial control, his story belies his own assertion that “Accidents don’t happen, boys” (366). Indeed, he proceeds accidentally. Twain’s story, however, is another story. In “The Story of the Old Ram,” Twain’s authorial control is at high pitch and, appropriately, it is nearly invisible.

Readers’ appreciation for chapter 53 in particular and Roughing It generally is directly related to its seeming artlessness; the more it violates classical aesthetics, the more readers love it. Beidler’s assertion that chapter 53 has “little to do with any plan of overall design” would have delighted Twain, for it proves that even a professor could be “sold” (46). The record of “variegated vagabonding,” the alliteration of which is a coy wink at the “classical school,” is a manifesto of grotesque realism.
The central role played by the grotesque in *Roughing It* undermines Dieter Meindl’s assertion that there is a “fundamental lack of affinity between realism and the grotesque” (106). On the contrary, where reality is grotesque, anything else would be insufficiently representational. A school of “grotesque realism” would demand writers whose greatest success lies in purposeful artlessness as they reveal reality through the grotesque. Moreover, the constant coupling of death and life, of negation and affirmation, is both a rejection of classical aesthetics and liberation from our fear of the rough world we live in. Twain makes the concept of Providence itself grotesque to further dispel the earthly terrors people try to explain as part of a sensible design of a God who oversees “all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least” (Westminster Confession 178/6.024). There is much evidence within *Roughing It* and in Twain’s life suggesting the Calvinist concept of Providence was deeply engrained in his ways of thinking about the world, yet Twain’s grotesque parody of Providence illustrates the fundamental human impulse to laugh at funerals, to whistle in cemeteries, and to crack jokes when we are under the gun, so to speak. Flannery O’Connor defends the grotesque on precisely these grounds, saying that such literature must be “violent and comic” (816). The Sunday-school book Providence Tale tries to explain away fears of chaos, but human fears are too much a part of this “dusty” world to be satisfactorily explained by an appeal to the empyrean. *Roughing It* is also a manifesto calling for a regeneration of our understanding of literary providence. Like God, the writer of grotesque realism “fires no blank cartridges”; the degree to which reality achieves no classical beauty is the very context that demands grotesque realism. In the beginning, Twain feared he might not produce literary gold, and in the end, he recognized that “nothing that glitters is gold” (188). *Roughing It* and its grotesque aesthetics are the only ore worth mining. With *Roughing It*, Twain achieves a new sort of literature that becomes a “classic” in its own right, all the while without becoming an exponent of the classical school.