The Reverend Mark Twain

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HAVING BILLED himself as the *Reverend* Mark Twain and *Saint* Mark at different stages of his career, it should surprise no one that in between those two points Mark Twain compared himself to the *Prophet* Samuel. In “Wit-Inspirations of the ‘Two-Year-Olds’” (1870), Twain relates the (obviously) fabricated conversation he had with his father upon the subject of his own naming. The infant rejects the name “Samuel,” even though, as his father points out, he was a “prophet.”

“What! There was Samuel the prophet. Was not he great and good?”
“Not so very.”
“My son! With his own voice the Lord called him.”
“Yes, sir, and had to call him a couple of times before he would come!” (405)

The boy’s objections notwithstanding, the sketch concludes with Judge Clemens naming his boy “Samuel,” another of Twain’s imagined identities, like his self-ordination as a Reverend or self-canonization as a Saint. In 1865, Twain had experienced such a “call,” perhaps, when claiming that he was answering a “‘call’ to literature, of a low order—i.e. humorous” that would “excite the laughter of God’s creatures” (MTL 1: 322–23). While Twain was never literally a Reverend Mark Twain or a Saint Mark, he frequently created a theologically inflected identity as a writer. His persona as a prophet, sometimes comic and often serious, encompasses his career, from first to last, with its apex the jeremiad No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger.

“PROPHECY: TWO BULL’S EYES OUT OF A POSSIBLE MILLION”

From his earliest days in Hannibal, young Sam Clemens had an intimate understanding of Christian traditions of prophecy, and of their expressions in folk culture. Ernest Tuveson discusses the formative influence of the specifically Christian cultural milieu Twain inhabited, with its knowledge of and belief in traditional biblical prophecies along with the millennial role many believed America would play in them. As discussed in the first chapter, Twain seems to have once accepted millennial prophecies about the Mississippi Valley. Tuveson notes the influence of Presbyterian beliefs in prophecy as well as those of wildcat groups such as the Millerites and Campbellites, noting that in Hannibal, the “millennium, apparently, was one of the liveliest issues in the popular mind” (216).

Early on, Twain was certainly a part of this credulous culture as much as he was apart from it; even as he accepted many folk-prophetic beliefs, he also exploited some of their pseudoscientific expressions for his own amusement. As Twain describes in his Autobiography, for several weeks he occupied an envied position as the chief subject of a traveling mesmerist, functioning essentially as a partner in crime to dupe and entertain the townspeople (50–58). More seriously, many people believed that Sam had foreseen the deaths of a schoolmate and of his brother Henry,
who died tragically when the steamboat he worked on exploded (HHT 58). Dixon Wecter reports, too, that the “primitive folk belief” of slaves and settlers alike created a milieu that gave credence to ideas of prophetic dreams and second sight (197; see also Twain’s Autobiography 5, 11). Reportedly, Twain’s mother, Jane Lampton Clemens, shared such beliefs in “anything mystic,” perhaps transferring them to her children (MTB 14). One can see folkloric and humorous traces of these beliefs after Sam Clemens became Mark Twain in such works as “Earthquake Almanac,” in which he pokes fun at the idea of predicting natural events as common as the weather or as cataclysmic as earthquakes. These “prophecies” were printed on October 17, 1865, after a major earthquake; like many prophecies it is retrospectively prophetic. “The Oldest Inhabitant—The Weather of New England” (1876) is similarly interesting, and it contains both a prophetic and punning riddle from The Merchant of Venice (“Who can lose it and forget it? / Who can have it and regret it? / Be interposer ‘twixt us Twain”) and a jocular dismissal of the almanac’s “reputation for accurate prophecy” (673–74). Twain also wrote many pieces relating to quasimystic quackery such as “Getting My Fortune Told” (1869) and “Mental Telegraphy” (1891). Even as an old man, Twain was drawn toward prophecy in its various forms. In a letter to William Dean Howells on December 26, 1902, Twain writes of a brush with a pseudoprophet:

Every day, from the first, Clara has been persecuted & worried & distressed by superstitions born of my Xmas story “Heaven—or hell” darkly divining prophecy in it; & for five months I have been persecuted by superstitions born of Cheiro’s prediction of 7 years ago—repeated in London 4 years ago: “In your 68th year you will become—rather suddenly—very rich. . . . This family has joked about Cheiro’s prophecy (while carefully keeping it in mind & cherishing it) for 7 years, & so have I—offering it to Mr. Rogers years ago at a heavy discount—but it has troubled me for 5 months now, as it might any old pagan. (MTHL 2:757–58)

This “Cheiro” was one Louis Hamon, a palmist Twain consulted in Europe (MTHL 2:758–59). Cheiro’s forecasts belong to the generic good fortunes provided by any such sham, and he resembles the “peripatetic phrenologist” who was “popular and always welcome” in the Hannibal of Twain’s youth (Autobiography 65). This phrenologist “was always wise enough to furnish his clients character-charts that would compare favorably with George Washington’s” (64–65). Remembering some of the
prophetic beliefs of his childhood in the autobiographical notes, “Vil-
lagers of 1840–3,” Twain tells a story satirizing both the pseudoprophets
and the sheep who willingly consent to shearing. Twain inscribes notes
on a Mrs. Holiday, who was “Old, but anxious to marry. Always con-
sulting fortune-tellers; always managed to make them understand that
she had been promised 3 by the first fraud. They always confirmed the
prophecy. She finally died before the prophecies had a full chance” (31).
Twain saw the chicanery that was such a part of folk prophecy, but he
also at some “old pagan” level was drawn to them, and his works reflect
this dualism. Alan Gribben has even shown that while Twain conceded
some “possibility of scientific validity” for phrenology, he repeatedly
focused on “the exploitations of a gullible public by charlatans”
(“Phrenology” 67). In the ultimate irony, Twain prophesied his own
death. Born when Halley’s comet was high in the sky, Twain often joked
that he was born with the comet and would go out with the comet; he
did, in fact, die in 1910, the year of the comet’s return. In the seventy-
six years between the comet’s visits, Twain accepted the appeal of
prophecies, if not always their legitimacy.

Of his early work, The Innocents Abroad (1869) contains Twain’s most
extensive commentary on prophecy. In this work, Twain devotes most
of chapter 38 to a criticism of those who “twist prophecy” to their own
ends (325). He expresses particular distaste for his fellow pilgrims, who
see in each ruined city in the Holy Land a fulfillment of one prophecy
or another. The “infatuated prophecy-enthusiast,” Twain contends,
abuses the prophecies, overlooking the “ifs” and other conditional lan-
guage of the original (324). The genre of prophecy, in both high Christ-
ian tradition and folkloric forms, is always “essentially related to time,”
as Bakhtin asserts, always looking to the past or future to criticize the
present (RW 235). Nearly every ancient city is in ruins; were all proph-
esied against? The “prophecy-enthusiast” implicitly assumes so, cites
chapter and verse, and proclaims, “How wonderful is prophecy!” (324).
Part of Twain’s point in this passage and, indeed, in The Innocents
Abroad, is to suggest that there exists a universal prophecy of decay that
will always be realized. Some thirty years later, in “Passage from a Lec-
ture” (circa 1900), Twain himself proclaimed a prophecy via the persona
of the “distinguished Professor of the Science of Historical Forecast,”
who foresaw the end of contemporary civilization because “everything
perishes” (399–401). In both of these works, separated by decades,
Twain derides prophecy, yet employs the prophetic form to criticize the
present.
In *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain’s criticism is not at all about the concept of prophecy, but really about the uses to which prophecies are put. Hubris is inherent in prophetic interpretation, as Twain observes, but it also makes the original prophet appear ridiculous. One could argue that Twain included the discussion of prophecy in *The Innocents Abroad* to teach his readers the art of interpretation, schooling them in how to read his own book. Repeated references to prophets and their prophecies, however, relate to time and decay. In his analysis of the history of realism, Bakhtin discusses writers like Sir Walter Scott who “could see time in space” (“The *Bildungsroman*” 53). In part, such an ability is to the author’s credit, but a landscape with a long history facilitates such an appreciation. The *Quaker City* trip afforded Twain the opportunity to “see time in space” in their true interrelatedness. Prophecy likewise embodies the unity of time and space. “The prophet, like other men, belongs to his time,” observes David Lyle Jeffrey, “yet he stands for a terrible moment also outside of temporal order: one foot in the *kronos*, the other in *kairos*, his ear to eternity and mouth toward the city” (26). The genre of prophecy is inherently related to the passing of time, which is visible everywhere on Twain’s tour of the Old World and the Holy Land. Twain particularly drew upon Leviticus, Revelation, and the prophets Elijah (435–36), and Elisha (438) in his work because prophecy as a genre conjures the historical panorama he himself hopes to literalize in his own writing.

Not surprisingly, both the traditional forms of Christian prophecy and their more popular expressions play a role in Twain’s fiction. Aunt Polly’s exclamation in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) remains one of the most pointed of Twain’s criticisms of the uses and abuses of prophetic claims: “Tom! The sperrit was upon you! You was a-prophecying—that’s what you was doing! Land alive, go on, Tom!” (144). Tom does go on, revealing bit by bit the conversation between Aunt Polly, Mrs. Harper, Mary, and the exemplary Sid that he had overheard when they all thought he was dead. Unaware that he had sneaked back from the island and hidden under her bed, Aunt Polly (naturally) believes that Tom has received a prophetic vision in a dream. Here, however, Tom is less a David who finds “the secret” in a “night vision” (Daniel 2:19) and is more like the false prophets in Jeremiah who “prophesy false dreams . . . and cause my people to err by their lies” (Jeremiah 23:32). Tom cruelly manipulates the beliefs that others have in prophecy to achieve his own ends, and his misuse of prophecy recalls Twain’s discussion of false prophecy in Mormonism (see *Roughing It* 546–47).
While Tom’s character is worthy of censure, Twain satirizes Aunt Polly, whom we laugh at and pity. She would willingly buy into Tom’s lies, twisting them into a prophecy. Similar folk prophecies abound in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885). One thinks of Jim, who uses the magical ox’s hair-ball to predict Huck’s future and warn him “to keep ’way fum de water” (22). The joke is hilarious, for Huck is on the water for most of the novel. Both examples amuse, but they make a statement about the prophetic genre. In each case, characters resort to belief in prophecies when they crave order and stability in a chaotic world. This is very much in keeping with the traditional uses of prophecy. Calvin suggests in his Institutes that the prophet had many roles within society, but that one was a “support” role that would sustain the church “until the advent of the Mediator” (II: 426). Similarly, however comic are the prophetic elements in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, they testify to an underlying need for the ordering religious vision only a prophet provides.

While Twain employed prophetic elements and forms in work spanning his career, one must say that as he approached the turn of the century, the prophetic genre played an increasingly important role, perhaps in part due to the convergence of uncertainties inherent in Twain’s business life, personal life, and within larger society as it picked its way between labor unrest and political upheaval toward the fin de siècle. Prophetic elements abound in Pudd’nhead Wilson (1894), for example. There is the reference to the prophet Nathan’s trapping of King David in a symbolic narrative, an event related in 2 Samuel 12:7; in Twain’s work, this appears when pseudo-Tom “felt as secret murderers are said to feel when the accuser says, ‘Thou art the man!’” (969). Prophetic dreams play a significant role in the plot, from the comic (the “colored deacon” who “could not resist a ham when Providence showed him in a dream, or otherwise, where such a thing hung lonesome and longed for some one to love”) to the unraveling of the mystery, a “revelation” that comes to David Wilson in a dream (927, 1043). Twain directly refers to biblical prophets, too, with the calendar epigraph of chapter 4 making reference to 2 Kings 2:23–25, a passage describing how children who had mocked Elisha were consumed by bears.

In the last decades of Twain’s career, one sees a complete rejection of prophecy as a legitimate theological practice colliding with a simultaneous exploitation of prophetic forms in his own work. In What Is Man? (1906), the Old Man affirms his faith in God, saying “I do believe He exists,” and is then asked by the Young Man, “And that he has revealed
Himself to man?” To this query the Old Man replies, “By His deeds and works, yes—as we experience them in our persons and see them in Nature. But not in any other way, so far as I know” (477). In *Christian Science* (1907), Twain’s assertion is even more blunt: “There is no prophecy in our day but history” (321). Most significantly, in “As Concerns Interpreting the Deity” (1905), Twain refers to the Roman use of bird sacrifice and the hubris of such attempts.

In view of the fact that it takes the Rawlinsons, the Champollions and the Indian experts years and years to dig the meaning out of the modestest little batch of hieroglyphs; and that in interpreting the intentions of God the Roman augurs never scored a single demonstrable success; and that from their day to ours all attempts by men to lay bare to us the mind of the Deity have as signally failed, it seems to me that now is a good time for the interpreting-trade to take a rest. (120)

The basis for Twain’s rejection of prophecy is twofold and, despite the intervening thirty-five years, agrees with his commentary in *The Innocents Abroad*. The prophets described in “As Concerns Interpreting the Deity” are of a various sort, but are brethren in their inaccuracy. Stultified by their attempts at interpretation, they are disrespectful to the sovereignty of God. Dismissing their efforts at the “interpreting-trade,” Twain derides them as charlatans trying to make money off of something rightly none of their business. In the article written “To the Editor of *American Hebrew*,” Twain similarly dismissed what he called “the trick of prophecy” (448).

**THE PERSISTENCE OF THE PROPHETIC FORM AND TWAIN’S “PROPHETIC FUNCTION”**

His rejection of prophecy notwithstanding, Twain embraced the prophetic form in his later years, sometimes for comic purposes, but as frequently as the only suitable vehicle for his own vision of truth. From the late 1890s until his death, Twain moved away from parodic prophecy to what Bakhtin terms the “high, proclamatory genres—of priests, prophets, preachers, judges, leaders, patriarchal fathers, and so forth” (“Notes” 132). In his brilliant “Mark Twain: An Inquiry” (1901), William Dean Howells, who early and often championed Twain’s potent cocktail of seriousness and humor, found the “graver and weightier”
subject matter of this later period somewhat off-putting, and questioned “whether they are really more important than the lighter things” (350). Howells was always the most perceptive critic of Twain, and while he criticized some of the social commentary and antiimperialist writings of the fin de siècle, he presciently described the “prophetic cast” of Twain’s later work, noting the “general recognition of his prophetic function,” even while fearing it might overshadow “the humor that has endeared him to mankind” (351). Howells’s comments are a stark reversal of his earlier championing of the serious side to his friend’s humor. Howells, it seems, felt the pendulum had swung too far toward glorifying the seriousness of purpose and wished to emphasize the humor that was such a part of Twain’s genius. Obviously, one must qualify Howells’s comments, for Twain always had this “prophetic function,” but the humor of such works as “Barnum’s First Speech in Congress” belongs to the genre of parodic prophecy, and the humor threatens at times to ride roughshod over the social criticism. Howells’s commentary is really a sensitive call for a balanced approach that would “keep Mark Twain what he has always been: a comic force unique in the power of charming us out of our cares and troubles, united with as potent an ethic sense of the duties, public and private, which no man denies in himself without being false to other men” (351). One should not forget that the writer’s brief masquerade as the Reverend Mark Twain actually continued in literary form as a burlesque device for the next half century, in one form or another.

Still, one work that reveals this later “prophetic cast” to Twain’s work is “Which Was the Dream?” begun in 1897 and never completed. The story begins with an extract from the diary of Mrs. Allison X, a name that surely suggests the “Miss X,” whose pseudonymous works included “The Art of Crystal Gazing” (1893), “Hypnotism” (1894), “Second Sight in the Highlands: A Provisional Report by Miss X” (1895), “On the Study of Spiritualisms” (1895), and the collection Essays in Psychical Research (1899). So impressed by her work was he that Twain wrote to the English editor who planned to publish the trial transcripts of Joan of Arc, suggesting that he commission Adela M. Goodrich-Freer, otherwise known as “Miss X,” to contribute an essay on the “Voices & Prophecies” of St. Joan (See MTHL 2:708–10). It is in this very letter that Twain announces his new writing on a “prime subject,” probably one of the various versions of the Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts (MTHL 2:710), and Tuckey discusses the influence that Twain’s reading of such works as Phantasms of the Living had on Twain’s thinking (26–27). Jason Horn, too, discusses the influence of William James and the Society for Psy-
Psychical Research (110–15), as does Susan Gillman (155–59). It was probably Miss X that exerted the greatest influence of this group, for she focuses on the whole variety of prophecies, both genuine and spurious, that people have engaged in; her chapter in Essays in Psychical Research, “Saint Columba, The Father of Second Sight,” contains a discussion of prophecies that contributed to Twain’s use of such material in No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger and other texts of this later period (295–326). In these same years, as he wrote “Which Was the Dream?” Twain again drew on folk elements of prophecy, including a nice touch of romance between the young Thomas X and his prospective wife, Allison, as they share an apple and count the seeds to “find out if everything was going to come out right and we get married” (37). The more serious elements of the prophetic genre grow from this scene as Thomas and Allison age. Their daughter, too, hopes that everything will “come out right,” but phrases her hopes and fears in higher Christian tradition: “I only pray that there may be a God—and a heaven—or SOMETHING BETTER” (50). In “Which Was the Dream?” Twain includes foretelling the future as a stock-in-trade of prophecy, but includes also the more significant element of our reaching out toward God and God reaching toward us, a pattern seen, too, in Joan’s prophecies in Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc. Jeffrey suggests that “the whole end of Hebrew prophetic texts” really consists of this primary goal: “to restore conversation with the original and ultimate Author” (29).

Whether Twain’s efforts represent a personal effort to connect with God is impossible to say, but his use of the prophetic form to reconnect society with God is inherently a form of social criticism, and suggests Sacvan Bercovitch’s apt description of the American jeremiad as “the ritual of a culture on an errand—which is to say, a culture based on a faith in process” (23). Twain’s use of prophecy involves both the faith in the idea of process and progress, but not necessarily faith in faith itself. In this unfinished story, a story in process, Twain presents a narrative that even in its incomplete state grippingly conveys the polarities of faith versus doubt in a world in which we are demonstrably not prophets. As Thomas X suggests, “unfortunately none of us can see far ahead; prophecy is not for us. Hence the paucity of suicides” (51). The condition the prophetic works speak to is precisely this state of unknowing, of hoping amid doubts for “SOMETHING BETTER.”

In Bercovitch’s description of the prophetic form, he observes that the form has other imperatives, too, and “the jeremiads included both threat and hope” (10). The other ingredient, considered from the audience’s
viewpoint, is the fear engendered by the threatening rhetoric. Consider this remarkable passage in his *Autobiography* describing a meeting of the tellingly named “Ends of the Earth Club” where the speaker delivered a jingoistic speech concluding with the statement: “We are of the Anglo-Saxon race, and when the Anglo-Saxon wants a thing he just takes it” (346).

It took those people nearly two minutes to work off their stormy admiration of that great sentiment; and meanwhile the inspired prophet who had discharged it—from his liver or his intestines or his esophagus or wherever he had bred it—stood there glowing and beaming and smiling and issuing rays of happiness from every pore, rays that were so intense that they were visible and made him look like the old-time picture in the Almanac of the man who stands discharging signs of the zodiac in every direction, and so absorbed in happiness, so steeped in happiness, that he smiles and smiles and has plainly forgotten that he is painfully and dangerously ruptured and exposed amidships and needs sewing up right away. (346)

Twain casts the entire passage as a jeremiad, from the apocalyptic setting at the “Ends of the Earth Club,” to the description of the speaker as an “inspired prophet,” to the extended simile comparing the speaker to the picture in the almanac. Here, Twain reverses the prophetic structure, deriding the man’s prophesies as gas emanating from some orifice of the body. The parody is itself a jeremiad, and is a form of prophecy. Twain prophesies that such jingoistic imperialism will find its comeuppance. The comparison of the speaker to the almanac man, describing him as “dangerously ruptured and exposed amidships” is a carnival combination of the visual graphic of an “Almanac Man,” truss advertisements often found in such almanacs, and language suggesting danger to the military, specifically the navy. As a human figure, too, the “Almanac Man” suggests the sparagmos or dissolution of the body in a quasiritualistic manner. Unlike the folk-prophetic almanac that Twain derides, his derisive jeremiad recalls Rabbi Abraham Heschel’s assertion that prophecy engages in “exhortation, not mere prediction” (12). Twain exploits the prophetic form to criticize American and British imperialism, just as he did in many other works later in his life.

Other examples of prophetic jeremiad of this final period in Twain’s life include “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” (1901), an antiimperialist piece that Twain patterns after Isaiah 42:1, 7. (See also Matthew 4:36
and Micah 7:8.) Twain casts himself again in the role of prophet, building his jeremiad around the two verses, “I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles” and “To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.” Similar prophetic structures appear in works such as “Battle Hymn of the Republic (Brought Down to Date)” (circa 1901), a parody of Julia Ward Howe’s prophetic hymn, with all its imagery from Revelation. Twain pointedly does not bring the hymn “up” to date, but “down” to date, to fit this depraved world that sings, “As Christ died to make men holy, let men die to make us rich” (475). Another work of the period, “The War Prayer” (1905), features a stranger and prophet figure who strides into a church where the congregation has just prayed for victory in war. The prophet informs the congregants, “I am commissioned of God to put into words the other part of it—that part which the pastor—and also you in your hearts—fervently prayed silently” (654). The silent half of the prayer, of course, is the concomitant loss suffered by their opponents, a loss the prophet details with gruesome specificity. The church setting is crucial, for Twain sends the prophet into the church to deliver this jeremiad, again throwing stones at the church windows from within, just as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel did. Twain crafts “The War Prayer” very closely after a work of prophecy, and the purpose is the same as any book of prophecy: call the people back to the right way, threaten them with the visions of the present and future, and compel them to be better.

“LIFE ITSELF IS ONLY A VISION, A DREAM”

Bernard DeVoto sees Twain writing a “general apocalypse” in his later works (24), and by the time Twain began working on the Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts, his interest in the prophetic form was at the highest pitch of his career. Still, one should recall what the point of prophecy is, for the jeremiad as a form seeks to condemn and regenerate. It is interesting to note that one feature of prophetic form is the relationship of the author of the text to the Author of everything. Jeffrey notes that the biblical prophet was “so subordinate in authority to his own ultimate Author, that for practical purposes he might more accurately be perceived as a ‘non-author’” (21). Twain distanced himself from his last major works. Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc was published with the conceit of having been authored by “The Sieur Louis De Conte” and
translated by Jean François Alden. The cover page for “3,000 Years among the Microbes” states that the work was “Translated from the Original Microbic by MARK TWAIN” (433). Twain published *What Is Man?* anonymously and asserted he would never publish his efforts with the *Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, from which he also comically distanced himself with the subtitle, “A Tale Found in a Jug. Translated Freely From the Jug.” All of these elements bespeak Twain’s fondness for trickery visible in such early works as “The Petrified Man” hoax. Patricia Mandia reads the “translation” reference in “3,000 Years among the Microbes” to suggest that “Twain obviously contrives the form here to emphasize that life, beneath the metaphysical, scientific, and religious systems man contrives, is essentially empty and meaningless” (126–27). Perhaps, however, Twain seeks to connect himself with the authority of the form, for prophetic form is itself preeminently meaningful. In its sacred, as distinct from purely literary, manifestations prophecy presupposes a deity for whom to prophesy. As Avraham Oz observes, “prophecy, operating simultaneously on the imaginary and symbolic levels of human response, serves to reassert the necessity of genuine mystery” (57). Oz contends, too, that “[p]rophecy’s major rule consists in the existence, somewhere, of a core or a kernel” (58). Ironically, the prophecies of No. 44 reassert the mystery at the heart of prophetic narrative, and the mysterious stranger himself embodies the resurrection of prophecy, mystery, and miracle.

The manuscripts that comprise the *Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts* span the years 1897–1908. Criticism of the texts has been complicated both by the fact that Twain did not complete them and by the fact that Albert B. Paine attempted to. In a botch that one can only ascribe to the kind of editorial hubris that Twain detested, Paine placed the various texts into an editorial grinder to produce what he published in 1916 as *The Mysterious Stranger, A Romance*. In Mark Twain and Little Satan, John Tuckey first revealed Paine’s editorial work that conflated three manuscripts that, while involving many of the same issues, were in essence different stories. Writing in the introduction to the California edition of the manuscripts, William Gibson bluntly—and accurately—terms Paine’s work “an editorial fraud” (1). The editorial history of the texts should not prevent us from discussing them the way Twain left them, focusing primarily on No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger*, which was the last and longest of the versions and the only one complete, in some sense of the term. No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger* is also a compelling work because, while it was among the very last projects on which Twain
labored, it was in some respects his first “statement.” Although he was at the same time writing his gospel What Is Man? and would in fact publish it anonymously, Twain still felt he had never told what was truly in his heart. Writing to Howells in May 1899 from Vienna, Twain voiced his desire to “write a book without reserves . . . right out of my heart” (MTHL 2: 698). This book was several books, the manuscripts that form the collective Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts, but was probably specifically the “Schoolhouse Hill” version, which he started in 1898 (Gibson 7). Interestingly, Twain’s stated purpose is to “tell what I think of Man, & how he is constructed, & what a shabby poor ridiculous thing he is” (698–99). As with What Is Man? Twain censures humanity, but here in the form of a prophecy rather than a catechism. Failing to consider the influence of the form itself, Patricia Mandia sees in these manuscripts a “satire that does not attempt to reform” (102) as does Sholom Kahn, who calls the book “a labor of hate” (179). Prophetic rhetoric threatens people to reform them.

The three texts that comprise the Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts indicate Twain’s clear conception that his work would adhere to prophetic genre. Formally, Twain refers to No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger as a “tale,” that is, a sort of story with some element of truth, but without the strict claim of verisimilitude that one sees Twain stressing in such works as “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word Just as I Heard It” (1874) or in his concern with “getting the dialect right” in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Omens, magicians, sorcerers, black cats, and other paraphernalia of folk prophecy abound in No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger. Many such elements surround the character of the sorcerer, Balthasar Hoffman, whose “business suit” consists of a robe “in black velvet starred and mooned and cometed and sun’d with the symbols of his trade in silver, and on his head a conical tower with like symbols glinting from it” (231). At the same time, the work contains repeated references to biblical prophets, visions, and dreams. “Balthasar” even suggests the real name of the prophet Ezekiel, “Belshazzar.” Ezekiel is referred to numerous times in the manuscript, and Twain may be suggesting the two aspects of prophecy one sees in his earlier work, high Christian tradition and the folkloric prophecies of hucksters. As in his earlier work, Twain derides prophecy, describing people discussing “chat, and gossip, and prophecies, and cards” (266). Placing prophecies between such mundane inconsequentials suggests the practice is sadly fallen from former glory (266). The subtitle “A Tale Found in a Jug, Translated Freely from the Jug” again suggests the prophetic tradition.
Keith Thomas records that the prophecies in the medieval period frequently involved the *found* text narrative: “Very frequently medieval descent was claimed for them by reporting that they had been accidentally discovered in the ruins of some old building, preferably a monastery” (391). Ruined castles, abandoned wells, unearthed pots, ancient cairns, any place or object with some connection to the past offered a purchase with which to approach present and future. Twain patterns his own tale after that prophetic paradigm, but also associates his story with drunkenness, as if this “tale from a jug” came from the drunken visions of a latter-day Jim Blaine; Twain did refer to the joy he took in writing the manuscripts as “an intellectual drunk” (MTHL 2: 698).

If with *What Is Man?* Twain wrote a “new gospel,” here he would compose the prophetic books. There is some evidence that Twain was thinking of the *Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts* as a pairing with *What Is Man?* In his working notes for the “School House Hill” incarnation of the stranger motif, he made this notation: “Bible—sermons—dialogues—in *Appendix*” (449). Just as with *What Is Man?* Twain was thinking along theological lines, and in another notation, he wrote “Better get up a Catechism. Yes, 44 will do it. And it is printed: ‘Conscience’ &c” (445). References to catechisms abound, and Twain even envisioned the “*Devil’s Sunday School*” with the “?s & answers of ‘Conscience’” from the catechism (447). Considered as examples of prophetic genre, these manuscripts deliver Twain’s vision of humanity and its shabbiness. As Twain lamented to Howells in the letter quoted above, “Damn these human beings; if I had invented them I would go hide my head in a bag” (MTHL 2:695). Twain adopts no godlike reference point here toward humans, but certainly he elevates himself above them; somewhere in between God and the rabble, he seems the prophet he writes about. With these associated manuscripts, Twain proposes casting away the tyranny of public opinion and having his say, leading Sholom Kahn to assert that “like any original work of art, ‘No. 44’ is sui generis” (11). Nothing is ever truly sui generis, however, and the prophetic genre lends itself to a rejection of public opinion and even formal literary expectations; that is, as a genre, prophecy occupies a set of forms and a body of content that acknowledge and celebrate the prophet’s right to the unexpected and shocking. Those who read *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* expecting to witness a substantive and decisive break from Twain’s earlier work will be disappointed, for the manuscripts are—delightfully—the old-time Twain, as tricky and as devoted to prophetic form as ever. Mark Twain’s
Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts are most often placed worlds apart from traditional Judeo-Christian belief, but these associated texts are actually in their very bones and sinews quite traditional, both in the form Twain employs and the content immanent to that form.

In No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, the first action following the general description of the place is the scene involving Gretel Marx, who has been studying with a Hussite woman who reveals “God’s real message,” which consists in worshipping “only God” (222). A heretic in the eyes of the church, this woman is a prophet figure, claiming she has access to the “real message,” while the established church cannot access that esoteric knowledge. Twain’s use of John Huss, a martyr of the Reformation, suggests a rejection of those such as Father Adolph who are associated with the hierarchy of the established church. The story begins with a symbolic action, a “Hussite woman,” herself a kind of mysterious stranger, coming from outside of the community and claiming privileged knowledge of the creator. Threatened by Father Adolph, who prophesies that the Virgin will punish her, Gretel Marx rejects the Hussite woman in favor of the established church. Just as the priest had predicted, tragedy strikes and Mrs. Marx’s horses die. Upon the priest’s tip, she purchases a lottery ticket and wins a fortune, just as he had further prophesied. The stupidity of Marx and the townspeople is evident in their reliance on prophecy that consists of chance and coincidence. In the small matters, they see the truth of the prophecy, but miss the larger situation. When Mrs. Marx wins the lottery, it is taken as evidence of the Virgin’s favor. Even the narrator, August Feldner, sees in it the lesson that “the Virgin rewards a real repentance,” and watches over Mrs. Marx and the village, pointing out that “for reward the Virgin watched over it and took care of it personally, and made it fortunate and prosperous always” (224). In an irony lost on August, the paragraphs immediately following the Virgin’s blessing of the village chronicle the many funerals, suicides, and visitations of plague suffered by Eseldorf. The facts are unambiguous, but the villagers in Eseldorf (aptly named Assville) cannot interpret the information correctly.

Against this somnolent backdrop, the character 44 flashes forth. Indeed, his appearance is both mundane and miraculous. He has been compared to many biblical figures: an “unfallen angel” (Gervais 24), the fallen angel, Satan (Marotti, Parsons, and many others), Christ (May, Bel-lamy, and others), and a conflation of God and Satan (Male 43). Perhaps the most astonishing is Dwayne Eutsey’s conclusion that “Forty-Four must be God” (48). Donald Malcom, for whom No. 44, The Mysterious
Stranger is a “midrashic work, one that calls into question not only Christian precepts, but the nature of the world itself and its basis for existence,” sees a largely unconscious Twain constructing his story on the myth of the defeat of a lesser God or “evil Demiurge” to allow August Feldner, the “transcendent being” to achieve his true greatness (43, 52). Shorn of its Gnostic content, Malcom’s argument suggests the many analyses of Twain’s tale as a Bildungsroman; Joseph Csicsila, for example, so interprets the novel, viewing it as a story of “August’s desire to educate himself” (58), and Kahn calls the work “a sort of Bildungsroman” (108). These critics note the importance of August as the object of 44’s efforts, but 44’s words are more than pedagogical; they are anagogical and prophetic.

While 44 is most commonly identified as Satan by critics, the identification is by no means clear. In the other texts, “Chronicle of the Young Satan” and “Schoolhouse Hill,” such an identification finds greater support, but in No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, Twain leaves the identification much more equivocal. Indeed, the 44 character makes little sense viewed as Satan, and quite a bit more sense viewed as Christ, at least if considering him as the ultimate prophet and as the fulfillment of prophecy; in his role as “Prophet, King, and Priest,” Christ is both the apex of prophecy and the logical end of the prophetic period (Calvin II: 425–28). If 44 is Christ, it is in his role as prophet, for 44 is the prophet whose presence in the community both enlightens and disturbs. The stranger as prophet has a long history that Twain frequently exploited. Perhaps the most obvious example of the later period is the stranger in “The War Prayer.” The role played by the stranger is nearly always a regenerative one, with the stranger calling a community to account for depravity and sin. The critical tendency to view such figures as satanic has more to do with a misunderstanding of the role played by the biblical prophets than it does with Twain’s use of them. “The prophet is an iconoclast,” observes Rabbi Heschel, “challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. . . . To many a devout believer Jeremiah’s words must have sounded blasphemous” (10). In each case, Twain uses the stranger figure not as Christ per se, and certainly not as Satan, but as prophet, offering autognosis and condemnation to the community. In “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1899), for example, the stranger’s influence changes the town’s motto from “Lead us not into temptation” to “Lead us into temptation.” This is not to embrace sin, but to embrace an awareness of one’s deeply flawed and corrupt nature, the depravity of Calvinist doctrine. That is the work of a prophet. “It is very
possible,” Michelson suggests, “that Forty-Four’s object remains, to the
very end, quite the same—not to instruct, but to astound us, to dizzy
us” (121). This problematic reading emerges from Michelson’s view of
the text as governed by a Deus Ludens, when in fact the informing gen-
res are those of prophecy and parodia sacra. Forty-four’s work might
begin with astonishment, but this burlesque of the prophetic genre ulti-
mately affirms the educational purpose of the biblical prophets: God’s
knowledge is his, not yours; do your own work better and know your
own place. Although many of Nathaniel Hope Preston’s claims are dubi-
ous, his analysis of the influence of Jain Indian philosophy on No. 44,
The Mysterious Stranger is intriguing. The discussion of Indian
“prophets” fits into the discussion of Bildungsroman but also links it—
appropriately—to the prophetic genre (78). Forty-four is the prophet
figure who comes into the community from without, criticizes, disturbs,
enlightens, and then departs.4

As Matheson notes, Twain employs a “plethora of sleep imagery” in
the opening of the work, “suggesting dullness, complacency, and smug,
unused intellects” (6). What follows with the arrival of 44, however, is
in a sense Twain’s “Great Awakening,” the eruption of the Reformation
and Calvinism into the sleepy Age of Faith. The Hussite’s activities sig-
nal the arrival of the historical Reformation, and 44 is its prophet. Fleda
Brown Jackson is absolutely correct in her analysis of the “celestial
imagery” surrounding 44, noting in particular his comparison to comets
and the sun (68). The extensive imagery Jackson notes identifies 44 as
celestial, but one should stress that the imagery associates 44 with Christ
and the biblical prophets. The figure of the stranger noted by Ezekiel in
his prophecies has “a likeness as the appearance of fire: from the appear-
ance of his loins even downward, fire; and from his loins even upward,
as the appearance of brightness, as the colour of amber” (Ezekiel 8:2; see
also 1:27). Similarly, Twain associates 44 with “a great light” and
describes his “great transformation scene” as one in which “all his form
was clothed in that immortal fire, and flashing like the sun” (390–91).
Later, again, “44 stood clothed as with the sun” (399). In addition to
Ezekiel, one thinks of Isaiah’s chariot of fire. The allusions suggest, too,
in the New Testament, the Transfiguration of Christ, with the emphasis
on “whiteness”; the allusion to the verse, “his face did shine as the sun,
and his raiment was white as the light,” suggests 44 as both prophecy
and fulfillment of prophecy (Matthew 17:2; see also Luke 9:29, Mark
7:3). The allusions include the book of Revelation, with its description
of a figure whose “countenance was as the sun shineth” (1:16). Indeed,
at several points in his book *Christian Science* (1907), written during the same period as *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain discusses Mary Baker Eddy’s claim to be the “woman clothed with the sun” in Revelation 12:1 (see *Christian Science*, 236, 239). Many connections between 44 and Eddy exist, but it would be an exaggeration to claim Eddy as the model for 44, although such a claim is tempting. K. Patrick Ober has suggested that in his manuscript, Twain “carried Eddy’s philosophy to its ultimate extreme,” in essence contending that the work endorses her philosophy by extending it (220). If Eddy’s influence is so profound on *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, it is to provoke burlesque. Twain sandwiches discussion of Eddy and the “Christian Silence dialect” between his criticisms of various methods of interpreting prophecy (383). In both *Christian Science* and *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, one sees Twain’s contention that prophecy is part of the past and that those who employ it are charlatans or worse; just as visible, on the other hand, is Twain’s reliance on jeremiad as an effective vehicle for his own social commentary.

Perhaps even more than his appearance, 44’s most notable feature is his name, and not surprisingly, it has been the subject of many attempted explanations of greater or lesser currency. While Nathaniel Hope Preston suggests that “in making an intentional shift from the value-laden ‘Satan’ to the unconventional name ‘44,’ he was also inviting a shift away from Judeo-Christian axiology” (98), the most plausible explanations connect the name “44” to the biblical associations of the character. Lowrey, for example, uses “metaphysical math” to connect 44’s name to Jewish origins; if such a connection exists, however, would it not suggest the Old Testament prophetic genre rather than simply “lyrical form and ironic content”? (101, 110). After all, even the last name “Traum” in earlier versions suggests the “dreams” so common in prophecies. Moreover, the number “4” plays a significant symbolic role in biblical prophecies. Ezekiel 1:5–6, for example, describes the “four living creatures” with the “likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings” (see also 46:22). The book of Revelation, too, features the four beasts with the four aspects: lion, calf, man, and eagle (4:6–7) and predicts that during the end times only “144,000” will be saved (see 7:4, 14:1, and 14:3). Given that good Father Peter is imprisoned and then released, only to be driven insane by 44, it is perhaps significant that A.D. 44 was the year St. Peter was imprisoned. In short, two salient facts about 44 impose themselves. One is the surfeit of biblical allusions suggested by the name 44, rather than the contrary. The other
is that the name 44 is nearly impossible to interpret, and that is its most significant point.

Indeed, 44 complains that humans have “no talent for interpretation,” a criticism that he directs toward August with reference to all humans (385). Forty-four discusses the whole variety of means by which God could convey messages to people, paying special attention to “dream-sprites” that “conveyed messages with perfect verbal accuracy” (382). Twain’s 44 uses the humorous and dismissive language we have seen in other works involving prophecy, comparing the relative values of dreams versus Western Union telegrams: “He instanced the Joseph-dreams, and gave it as his opinion that if they had gone per Western Union, the lean kine would all have starved to death before the telegrams arrived” (382). The absurd comparison “makes strange” the very idea of prophetic interpretation in the age of the telegraph, yet the criticism is not of the medium, but of the interpreter. Because they have “no talent for interpretation,” people are unable to read the prophetic messages. Forty-four’s satirical history of prophecy moves to consider the use of augurs, reducing prophecy to the very basic level of trying to comprehend the enormity of God by examining a bird’s entrails, “that being the way the Roman Gods had invented to communicate with them when dream-transportation went out and Western Union hadn’t come in yet” (385). The subject matter and derisive tone recall Twain’s “As Concerns Interpreting the Deity” (1905), written during the same time period. Twain again voices his belief that people have no business attempting to comprehend the mind of God, particularly with such ridiculous means. August’s query is the same anyone should ask: “what does a chicken know about the future?” The concept makes the idea of prophecy ridiculous, but suggests, too, why people appeal to prophecy—Twain jokes that we are the “chickens”; lacking the guts to face the future, we resort to divination with chicken guts. Twain humorously rejects the folk traditions of prophecy and also the Christian tradition of prophecies with the “Joseph-dreams” that no longer work, not because God sends no message, but because we are unable to read them. In his working notes, Twain refers most notably to the prophet Ezekiel, linking the failure of the Roman augurs to the end of prophecy:

The dreams are all right enough, but the art of interpreting is lost. 1500 yr ago they were getting to do it so badly it was considered better to depend on chicken-guts & other naturally intelligent sources of prophecy,
recognising that when guts can’t prophecy it is no use for Ezekiel to go into the business. Prophecy went out with the chicken guts. (462–63)

Mixing commerce, poultry entrails, and prophetic tradition undermines the seriousness of prophecy as a legitimate theological practice or concern. Like the references to Western Union, the idea of Ezekiel going “into business” establishes a wall between the human world of mundane business affairs and the omnitemporal realm of Deity. Ironically, that is just what prophets do, positioning themselves between the two realms and their distinct time frames.

If, as Calvin asserts, prophecy serves the useful function of keeping the church in “suspense,” that is, locating it in time and reminding the inhabitants of what is to come, Twain asserts that we are better off not knowing the future, agreeing with Thomas X. in “Which Was the Dream” that knowing the future would literally kill us. Forty-four is notable among the inhabitants of Eseldorf as one who can foresee the future. He clearly knows everything, and moves easily among all times, so that there exists no real temporal reference point. From Twain’s point of view, as indicated by his notes for “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” “Satan often draws upon future history” (410). Forty-four, too, is a prophet of a Calvinist God yet knows the secrets of predestination: “that which is not forordained will not happen... What is written must happen” (325–26). Still, as Lurye notes, 44 cannot “save” people from their ultimate destiny “just because he knows the future” (566). In contrast to humans, then, 44 has no need for prophecy, for he experiences all times at once; moreover, he willingly embraces human ignorance of the future when he informs August, “I have shut down the prophecy-works” (386). Because he knows the future as well as he knows the past, 44 occupies a position precisely opposite of humankind: the chickens strain their necks to see into the future, but 44 knows everything and knows no fear. In fact, he comes to Earth precisely to dispense with his prophetic power. “I do so love suprises!” he exclaims, continuing to say that “I will let things go their own way, and act as circumstances suggest. Then there will be surprises” (386).

August reacts to 44 out of a human incapacity to comprehend the divine view of creation. For his part, 44 despairs of his project of “enlightening that kind of a mind” with all of its “mental limitations” (331). Chief among those limitations is the belief in time, and 44 derides August, saying “you cut it up and measure it; to your race there is a past, a present and a future” (331). August’s language reveals his inability to
adopt the divine view when he says that the wonderful banquet of corn-pone, fried chicken, and milk gravy "were non-existent as yet, they were products of the unborn future!" (330). The mixture of tenses renders normative the divine view in which time is not "cut," however incapable humans are to understand it or insufficient human language is to explain it. Forty-four's language is accusative as he criticizes the human mind, saying "it doesn't hold anything; one cannot pour the starred and shoreless expanses of the universe into a jug!" (332). This "tale found in a jug," then, is in part a jeremiad to reveal the desperate inadequacy of humans compared to divine. One recalls Twain's burlesque sermon against those who presume to explain the mysterious workings of Providence in Roughing It. The questions fired at August are intended for every reader: "If—look here: can't you extinguish time? can't you comprehend eternity? can't you conceive of a thing like that—a thing with no beginning—a thing that always was?" (332). Sounding much like God speaking from the whirlwind in the book of Job, 44 here reminds August of his place. The point is not, as Rohman suggests, that "what appears to be so, isn't" (78). Rather, the truth blinds us, dazzles us, so far separated from it are we and unable, in fact, to contain it. J. Kenneth Van Dover's comment on "The Chronicle of Young Satan," an early version of the manuscripts, holds true for the last version: "most of the 'Chronicle' is devoted to Twain's assaults upon man's ethical pretensions rather than upon the metaphysical reality that underlies them" (194).

In contrast, 44 purposely shuts down his ability to see ahead. The other prophetic function—criticism—remains, with 44 still judging the human race; in fact, accepting the lack of "prophecy-works" on Earth as 44 does is really the main point. Derisive of the human efforts to inquire into deity, 44 is perfectly able to comprehend all time, but decides to embrace the limited view of humanity, at least for a time, and he assures us that it is in its way creative and wonderful. Inspiration, touching mouths, controlling speech, and so on have correlatives in many prophetic works because the divine presence places the words in the prophet's mouth—or shuts that mouth. Thus, we find Jeremiah 1:9, Revelation 22:20. Isaiah 6:5–8, and most obviously Ezekiel 3:26–27, "And I will make thy tongue cleave to the roof of thy mouth, that thou shalt be dumb, and shall not be to them a reprover: for they are a rebellious house. But when I speak with thee, I will open thy mouth, and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God" (see also Ezekiel 2:2, 3:24, 33:22). Forty-four frequently puts words into August's mouth, but he just as often prevents him from speaking: "But the words refused to
leave my tongue, and I realized that he had applied that mysterious check which had so often shut off a question which I wanted to ask” (333). This “mysterious check” occurs time and again in No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, and 44’s practice of directing August either to open his mouth, to close his mouth, or to direct him to say something in particular links the relationship to that of deity and prophet, also effectively conveying the point that not infrequently God directs people to keep their mouths shut: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalms 46:10).

Within Twain’s narrative, the last three chapters work toward a prophetic and apocalyptic conclusion, prophesying a rebirth of a culture of dry bones in two scenes patterned after Ezekiel and Revelation. The prophesied new age is the Reformation within the poetic present of the text, and the predictable result of that historical upheaval applies to Twain’s contemporary fin de siècle. No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger is, according to Kahn, “an exploration of the confrontation between a fifteenth-century world of practical work in a print shop and the various forms of mystery and miracle associated with the stranger” (93). Despite the setting, which seems to be the modern world encroaching anachronistically on the medieval, the narrative asserts the ancient erupting into the modern and the modern impinging on the ancient. The printing of the Bibles in the shop is one example of this. At the same time that the modern age seems to intrude on the ancient, the obverse occurs. “The printing of Bibles to be sent to Prague in ‘No. 44’ is instead a tool for the Reformation,” Maria Marotti suggests, “and thus represents the taking over of writing by free thought” (124). Marotti is certainly correct that the printing associates the particular time and place with the beginnings of the Reformation, and “free thought,” at least as understood in a nineteenth-century context, results. Still, just as the modern influences the ancient, the ancient influences the modern, and the printing of the Bibles asserts the primacy of the biblical texts as a master text, not just as one among many.

Indeed, taken as a whole, the Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts create a world in which the prophetic accounts of the past are very much a part of the present. In “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” Twain includes a description of a miraculous tree that bears “fruits of many kinds and colors—oranges, grapes, bananas, peaches, cherries, apricots and so on” (168). Generally, the tree relates the story of how petty and selfish humans can be. Even when this tree has divine origins, the “owner” of the land refuses to share, and so is cursed to water the tree every hour of every night, upon pain of death. The tree resembles the vision of the
tree in the book of Daniel that “grew, and was strong” and produced fruit for all, but that was ordered cut down by “a watcher and an holy one” (4: 11,13). In Daniel’s prophecy, the tree represents Nebuchadnezzar. In Twain’s story, the tree represents human selfishness. The tree has other “roots,” too. Parsons is far too modest in his essay on the background of Twain’s work: “The parent/stock of many of these wondrous trees is perhaps the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem, ‘which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit in every month’ (Revelation, 22:2). A definite source of Twain’s version probably exists, but I have not discovered it” (64–65). In fact, Parsons is indisputably correct in his identification. In his notes for the manuscripts, Twain wrote the words “New Jerusalem” in the midst of his descriptions of the landscape and a list of Austrian politicians (418). Tuckey connects the Jewish and Christian factions in Vienna to the text Twain was writing (20–22), but it is equally true that Twain was thinking along prophetic lines; the fact that he wrote the words “New Jerusalem” in his working notes indicates he was thinking in terms of prophecy and even the ultimate prophecy, the establishment through Christ’s reign of the New Jerusalem.

As No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger moves toward its famous conclusion, Twain builds the narrative around events from the books of Ezekiel and Revelation to create a sense of universal human history filled both with horror and humor, the parodia sacra writ large. The most notable passage is from the book of Ezekiel, which correlates to the “Mister Bones” section of No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger. In Ezekiel, the Lord places the prophet “down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones” (37:1). Told to “Prophesy upon these bones,” the prophet does, “and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to bone” (37:4, 7). As Ezekiel continues to prophesy to the bones, “the sinews and the flesh came upon them” and eventually God breathes from “the four winds” and the “exceeding great army” lives again (37:8–10).

In the “Mr. Bones” section, Twain re-creates the scene from Ezekiel in burlesque, following it immediately with the much more somber “Assembly of the Dead” vision or re-vision of Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones. When Mr. Bones comes onto the scene, he announces himself with “a dry, bony noise, such a kl—lackety klackclack, kl—lackety klackclack! . . . I said to myself, ‘skeletons a-coming, oh, what shall I do!’” (354). When he arrives, Mr. Bones presents August not with a skeleton, but with a spectacle directly from the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century. Clad in a “clownish and outlandish costume,” Mr.
Bones has the exaggerated African features typical of minstrel makeup: “the man’s mouth reached clear across his face and was unnaturally red, and had extraordinarily thick lips, and the teeth showed intensely white between them, and the face was as black as night” (354). Even in the comic depiction, however, one senses the biblical syntax, with the repetition of the word “and” in the series, suggesting any number of lines from Revelation. Twain’s use of the word “smote” likewise sounds biblical, as do, much more obviously, the “fragments of dry bone” played by the figure.

The biblical-comical elements of parodia sacra become less incongruous as Mr. Bones plays for August. Forty-four appears in this guise because August has been depressed, and 44 feels this entertainment would cheer him. Fleda Brown Jackson sees the music in the Mister Bones section as providing “a kind of cathartic musical (creative) salvation” (63). The word “salvation” is rightly chosen. When Mr. Bones sees August and calls out, “Now den, Misto’ Johnsing, how does yo’ corporsosity seem to segashuate!” he is really asking him, “How are you? Are you all right?” (355). The “bastard English” word “corporsosity” makes a joke out of the human fear of becoming a corpse, but as Mr. Bones sings, the language becomes more biblical, and more comforting. August labels his voice “divine” as he sings “Old Folks at Home,” and the words “float away toward heaven” (355). August becomes the perfect audience, empathizing completely with the “vision” offered by Mr. Bones (356). Significantly, like the prophecies of Ezekiel on which it is built, the Mr. Bones section is a welter of emotions: sorrow over the lost past and hope for the future.

Sound plays a significant role in the beginning of the “Assembly of the Dead” section of No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, just as it does in the “Mr. Bones” section. The first notable sound is the “Boom-m-m—boom-m-m—boom-m-m!” of the clock that, under 44’s influence, begins chiming backward (397). Forty-four, August, and even the cat begin talking backward just as time reverses its flight. The scene is one of the most astonishing in Twain’s oeuvre, and the aesthetic representation of what is in essence an ethical point is brilliantly done. As time goes backward, all of the “ages of cruelty and captivity and murder and mystery” of the place disappear—are healed (388). August, like Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones, observes his Duplicate and “watched its skeleton gather form and solidity; watched it put on flesh and clothes, and all that” (399). Similarly, when the dead begin marching, one hears the “faint clicking sound” and then the “dry sharp clacking” (401). Finally, Twain
presents his readers with “the spidery dim forms of thousands of skeletons marching” (401). Twain’s army marches into his book straight from the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel. It is surely no accident that Twain portrays his assembly as an army, and that military leaders play a large role in the “Assembly of the Dead.” Even his title recalls the sounding of “assembly” in the military, conflating it with the idea of assembling the skeletons from their fragments. Both ideas come from Ezekiel, who “prophesied” to the bones, heard their sound, witnessed their assembly, and then finally recorded that “they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army” (37:10).

Forty-four is certainly not one of the “prophets of doom,” as Bercovitch contends (197), nor is this work Twain’s “final capitulation to the Great Dark,” as Jay Martin judges (196). Forty-four prophesies doom within the context of resurrection, just as Ezekiel does. The chapters leading up to the conclusion of the book follow the dictates of the prophetic genre and look toward resurrection. The conclusion similarly adheres to the prophetic genre, concluding with one final prophecy from 44 to August that, like so many examples of biblical prophecy, relies on dreams:

“It is true, that which I have revealed to you: there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but You. And You are but a Thought—a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!”

He vanished, and left me appalled; for I knew, and realized, that all he had said was true. (405)

The form itself remains, both the form of our thinking and the form of the work. During the years he composed the Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts, Twain also worked on The Refuge of the Derelicts, which discusses, among other theological issues, the “minor prophets,” with the character George asserting that “it isn’t so much what a man says that affects us as the way he says it” (193–95). The way 44 speaks is in the manner of a prophet, even his style following the traditional forms of the genre. Forty-four’s words, “It is true, that which I have revealed to you,” sound like a prophet’s words, the style and syntax recalling many passages in the Bible, including “These sayings are faithful and true” (Revelation 22:6). Even 44’s words, “Nothing exists save empty space—and you!” so seemingly nihilistic, are tame in comparison to Ezekiel’s prophe-
cy: “I will make thee a terror, and thou shalt be no more: though thou be sought for, yet shalt thou never be found again, saith the Lord God” (26:21; see also 28:19). In sum, 44’s words are the words of a biblical prophet, and the form reasserts its belief in judgment and regeneration when readers are told to “Dream other dreams, and better!” (404–5). The irony is the irony of the prophets, who routinely tell God’s people the same message: God rejects you because of your iniquity; He has sent me, a prophet, out of his love.

**No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger** was intended to be an unsettling text; building on the prophetic tradition, Twain creates a world in which time stands still, flies backward, and in which forever seems to be now. In an excellent article, Paul Delaney notes the imagery of time in the various manuscripts, claiming that reference to the “‘mental and spiritual clock’ suggests ways—other than chronological—to measure time” (59). Delaney observes that the narratorial perspective in the end may involve “centuries and centuries,” and not just the usual passage of time (59). The temporal shift that accompanies the movement from one type of dream to another is significant, for it is a prophetic vision that emerges, a vision that can take in the whole of time in one experience. Into that world 44 flashes forth to illumine—and disturb—the world. In his analysis of “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” Lloyd Daigrepont correctly asserts that the ‘enlightenment’ or ‘awakening’ has failed to replace the comforting tranquility of medieval society and faith” (40). As one sees in Twain’s fiction so frequently, particularly in his jeremiads, there is little support for equating faith and peace. In fact, Twain used the prophetic form throughout his career specifically because as a genre, prophecy shakes people up—religious folk in particular, witness “The War Prayer” and “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg.”

The ending adheres to the genre. Rabbi Heschel suggests that the prophet “begins with a message of doom; he concludes with a message of hope” (12); so it is with Twain. August is in charge of his own destiny within the context of historical and personal reformation (Reformation), but finds it bittersweet. Free from the bonds of an authoritarian church, he is responsible for making his own way through the world. The prophet Ezekiel and dreams feature so prominently in the manuscripts because Twain delivers a final prophecy, as did Ezekiel when he stated, “Therefore ye shall see no more vanity, nor divine divinations” (13:23). In this context, one must reinterpret 44’s assertion, “Life itself is only a vision, a dream” (404). Indeed, the only “vision” in the world after the Reformation is the personal vision; all the onus is on each individual, as
it is for August, who must now become his own prophet; the only “divine divinations” are the “other dreams, and better” he is instructed to dream—and interpret—for himself. Beginning with a cultural studies approach, Frederick Pratter does not get much beyond Twain’s text as “working out social anxieties in imaginary, hence harmless, forms” (78). To discuss Twain’s writing as “harmless” is to assume, as Pratter does, that literature is inscribed by society, rather than *inscribing* society. In fact, during his own time, many viewed Twain’s writing as harmful, and he himself viewed his writing as harmful, and he himself viewed his writing as a vocation that was hardly innocuous. *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* proposes, as do Twain’s other efforts in the genre of prophecy, to reform society, less politically than in some of his earlier pieces on Reconstruction and lynching, but spiritually. If anything, the ending reveals the wondrous creative possibilities of freedom the Reformation offered and offers, while at the same time deeming it an “appalling” freedom. Twain’s *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* seems a long way from his joking reference to himself as the Prophet Samuel, but like the biblical prophets, Twain called down judgment on his society, offering a qualified hope for the future, for the “SOMETHING BETTER” longed for by the child in “Which Was the Dream?” (50). With the prophetic material in his great, incomplete work of literary prophecy, Twain’s character 44 reminds us, as any biblical prophet would, of our ignorant condition, but he tells us, too, that if the “prophecy-works” have shut down, we can follow his example: “I will let things go their own way, and act as circumstances suggest. Then there will be surprises” (386).