The Reverend Mark Twain

Fulton, Joe B.

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I was made in His image, but have never been mistaken for Him.
—MARK TWAIN (unpublished notebook 48, 22)

Mr. Howells does not repeat his forms, and does not need to; he can invent fresh ones without limit. It is mainly the repetition over and over again, by the third-rates, of worn and commonplace and juiceless forms that makes their novels such a weariness and vexation to us, I think.
—MARK TWAIN (William Dean Howells 729)

THEOLOGIAN, Missionary, Priest, Preacher, Prophet, Saint, Brother Twain, Holy Samuel, Bishop of New Jersey, and of course the Reverend Mark Twain: these ecclesiastical personae must be understood primarily as burlesques of religious literary genres, for in each case their adoption was associated with “the one right form” Twain adopted for his narratives. The writer’s poses are antigenres in the sense that Twain employs them to contextualize his criticism of church and society within the very genres by which church and society contextualize themselves.1

In a speech introducing Winston Churchill at the Waldorf-Astoria, for example, Twain introduces himself as a “missionary” and refers to “my missionary efforts” on England’s behalf, but then uses the authority of this burlesque persona to chastise England: “England sinned in getting into a war in South Africa . . . just as I think we have sinned in crowding ourselves into a war in the Philippines on the same terms” (455). Twain’s strategy is a typical one for him. Just as he adopted other ecclesiastical personae to use the immediately recognizable and instantly authoritative theological forms, in this introduction he appears before
the group as a missionary. The speech of a missionary before an assembly back in the states is itself a rhetorical subgenre, and one with which the audience was doubtless familiar. Twain exploits the genre's authority to do what missionaries do: report on the state of the world's soul. Twain's introduction thus becomes a missionary's sermon where his world travels and "missionary efforts" allow him to claim that England and America are "kin in sin" (455).

The Reverend Twain's theological dialogue, then, tells us much about his opinion of society, but does not necessarily reveal the state of his own soul. This study has employed an organic approach, unifying attention to form and content and drawing on biographical sources only when the interpretation of the aesthetic object warranted. One can say this: Calvinism is the order "left standing" in Twain's literary life, and he responds on the level of form and content to the ideas found in that stern inheritance. As a writer, Twain frequently adopts the literary forms of traditional Judeo-Christian religion and creates parodies, burlesques, and creative revisions of those forms. Twain never follows these genres religiously, instead reinvigorating what he deems "juiceless forms." Throughout his career, Twain experimented with every form he adopted; he even tried to break the mold of autobiography when writing his own, suggesting to Henry H. Rogers that "the form of this book is one of the most memorable literary inventions of the ages" (MTHHR 611).

In re-creating these genres, however, Twain does not, indeed cannot, destroy or supplant their original forms. To do so would destroy his own work, whose genetic code derives from those eternal genres of his disaffection. Indeed, Twain's writings exist in constant dialogue with his literary models and their immanent ideologies; he found inspiration, and literary structures, in the traditional genres associated with religious belief.

Conclusion

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