The Reverend Mark Twain

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Chapter 1

1. To belabor the point, Twain’s Calvinism exerts a shaping influence on his writing, both in terms of content and form. The continued influence of Calvinism must therefore be a productive one. Far too many critics are far too dismissive of the influence. For Sherwood Cummings, this “dreadful Calvinism” had no positive influence in Twain’s work, and it was Paine’s The Age of Reason that “converted him” (21). John Frederick describes Twain’s Calvinism as “religious baggage” that he lost on his journey (150). Van Wyck Brooks is correct in his thesis only in that Presbyterianism continued to influence Twain, not in his view that Twain “wishes to take vengeance upon the Jehovah of the Presbyterians,” a view that has blinded too many critics to the creative role Calvinism plays in Twain’s work (233). Brooks and others have made the extent to which Twain rejected Calvinism the mark of aesthetic success. In contrast, critics like William Phipps who see the importance of religion and theology scour his literary works in the attempt to render biographical judgments on what Twain’s beliefs may have been. Twain’s appropriation of religious form and his use of it for aesthetic ends ought to be the primary scholarly concern.

2. Philip Fanning’s Mark Twain and Orion Clemens: Brothers, Partners, Strangers is the best biographical analysis of the complex and creative relationship between the two brothers. Chapter 16, “Orion’s Excommunication,” is especially valuable. See especially Henry Sweets, The Hannibal, Missouri Presbyterian Church: A Sesquicentennial History, for an illuminating discussion of the environment both Orion and Sam grew up in (3–5).

3. Eric Eliason’s essay, “Curious Gentiles and Representational Authority in the City of the Saints,” is highly misleading on the subject of Twain’s depictions of Mormonism. Eliason sees a “reluctance to believe stories of Mormon atrocities” in Roughing It, citing Twain’s depiction of Rockwell, the “destroying angel” (172). Twain makes the point

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very clearly that this person is more destroyer than angel, but does not suggest that the stories of his cruelty are without substance. Eliason also writes that Twain “adds an appendix detailing late-breaking information that (correctly) established Mormon participation in the Mountain Meadows Massacre,” seeming to imply that Twain attached, but did not write, the appendix and perhaps did not even believe the claims set forth in it (172).

4. See Fulton’s discussion of Robinson and others in the first chapter of *Mark Twain in the Margins.*

Chapter 2

1. Ultimately, Twain obtained his conceptions of the grotesque from reality itself, but he was also influenced by Poe, whose work he refers to in chapter 76 of *Roughing It,* by Southwestern humor, and probably also by Rabelais himself, whose work Twain was familiar with at least by the mid-1870s, if not before. In many respects, Twain was the American Rabelais, and when an editor lamented, “O that we had a Rabelais,” Twain retorted, “I judged I could furnish him one” (MTNJ 2: 303). Milton Rickels places Twain and Jim Blaine’s story firmly in the tradition of grotesque realism of Southwestern humor, which “balances for a moment fear, horror, and disgust at dismemberment and disability against human vitality, inventiveness, and persistent sociability” (160). Similarly, Kenneth Lynn notes that Southwestern humor frequently “began in whimsicality and ended in blasphemy . . . because it was a way of beating the wilderness at its own game, of converting terror into *joie de vivre* and helplessness into an exhilarating sense of power” (27–28). Henry Nash Smith identifies the grotesque elements in Twain’s work, yet seems to view their presence as primarily for comic purpose: “Miss Wagner’s trouble with the glass eye and the carnivorous carpet machine are not so much brutal as grotesque. Yet it is not easy to share Mark Twain’s fondness for this kind of material, which has retained only a minimum comic force” (67).

2. Most scholars believe Twain was referring to chapter 53 in this letter. See the University of California edition, 863.

3. Twain’s “Old Times on the Mississippi” features a similar character, Mr. J—, who “could not forget anything” (380). Beginning a “vastly funny anecdote about a dog,” he would, like Blaine, pile up the details but “the original first mention would be all you had learned about that dog” (381). “A Touching Story of George Washington’s Boyhood” (1864) has Twain himself “writing such a long and elaborate introductory” that he neglects to tell “the story itself” (99).

4. Twain’s everyday use of providential language during the composition of *Roughing It* is striking. Writing to Orion about selling their “Tennessee Land,” Twain urged him to sell. “I wouldn’t fool away any time about it. Providence will not deliver another lunatic into our hands if we slight this present evidence of his beneficent care for us” (MTL 4:114). See also his letter to James Redpath, (MTL 4: 435). Throughout his life, Twain subjected Providence to grotesque interpretations. In his *Autobiography,* he again reminds us of the violent reality Providence is used to explain. In 1906, recalling his dismissal from the *San Francisco Morning Call,* Twain invoked Providence: “By my Presbyterian training I knew that the Morning Call had brought disaster upon
itself. I knew the ways of Providence and I knew that this offense would have to be answered for” (AMT 122). And the offense was answered for when the San Francisco earthquake destroyed the Call building, forty years later.

Chapter 3

1. Numerous scholars have traced the literary influences on the book’s structure. Richard Gray notes the work’s debt to love stories, Sunday School books, and dime novel westerns (84). Lawrence Howe states that “the form of Tom Sawyer is, like ‘Old Times,’ a kind of bildungsroman-epic hybrid” (73). Franklin Rogers notes the influence of Sunday-school books, but argues that “to conclude that the basic structure of the book comes from model-boy literature is inaccurate” (Burlesque Patterns 106). Albert Stone, too, comments that “[a]lthough Tom Sawyer originated in Twain’s imagination as a burlesque aimed chiefly at bemused adults, the novel develops, after the opening chapters, into something far more ambitious than a lampoon of Good Boys and Bad Boys. Tom himself as a person, the village of St. Petersburg and the values by which it lives, the interaction of boy and adults—these considerations speedily engross the novelist’s attention. The result is a movement away from farce toward the classic concerns of the novel, namely the relation of individual to the community, to social class, and to money” (64).

This is not to imply that all critics view the work as crafted well. Bernard DeVoto suggests that the book becomes great only by transcending its own artistry, for he questions if “this literature shall or shall not be called art” and concedes that “by some canon of abstract form, the book lacks a perfect adjustment of part to part” (307). Roger Asselineau questioned the “logic and order” of the book, again invoking the conception of Twain as a slipshod writer (58). Henry Nash Smith suggests that the “structural problems of the novel, like those of Mark Twain’s earlier books, reflect the instability of his attitudes toward his material” (82). Twain is neither as radical nor as conservative as some would like, so his “attitudes” are labeled unstable; the novel, as distinct from Twain, proposes a synthesis between formal and natural forms of worship.

2. See for example Virginia Wexman, who argues that the “structural pattern” of the work is the bifurcation of the plot into “two clearly separate worlds,” one light and one dark, one comic and one tragic (1). Harold Aspiz, too, views the work as “constructed on a loose framework whose major elements include games of death and games of resurrection” (141). Hamlin Hill argues through impressive analysis that the book is both “a ragbag of memories” and yet “not structureless” (“Structure” 392).

3. Clark Griffith actually cites the opening of chapter 4 as the reason a murder was necessary: “And one sees readily enough why Mark Twain requires the scene. During the long Friday-to-Monday weekend set forth in the eight preceding chapters, St. Petersburg had turned entirely too much into a ‘tranquil world’ where, without a cloud anywhere, the ‘sun beamed down like a benediction’” (124). This reading overlooks the fact that the seriousness of the narrative is inherent to this particular passage and that it is not at all tranquil—only man is vile in this idyllic landscape!

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Chapter 4


2. See the discussion of Twain’s use of the incarnational aesthetic as a structural element for many of his longer works in Fulton, Mark Twain’s Ethical Realism, 18–26.

3. There is some doubt about the dating of the manuscript. The editors of the California edition suggest 1881 as the probable date, citing the last line of the work: “Thus ended the Second Advent, A.D. 1881” (68), but Paine had written “Probably in 1871” on the manuscript (See Tuckey’s note to the California edition, 52). Both dates are circumstantial, the former relying on a date in a fictional work, the other relying on an unsupported judgment, probably based on Twain references within the text to his dispute with Reverend Talmage in 1871, as discussed later in this chapter. As for Paine’s suggestion, Twain’s memory was long, and the piece could have been written any time after his dispute with Talmage. As for the California date, one should note that in some speculative works, Twain used a future date for satirical purpose. One obvious example is his piece satirizing the Szczepanik affair in Austria. Twain wrote the article in 1898, but titled it “From the ‘London Times’ of 1904,” even providing an imaginative byline to clue people in to the spoof, “Chicago, April 1, 1904” (272). As “The Second Advent” is essentially a kind of apocrypha, one cannot assume that 1881 was the date of composition any more than Twain’s essay was written in 1904 or that Orwell wrote his novel 1984 in 1984. For decades, Twain toyed with burlesques of Christ’s life, making a judgment very difficult to render. Some of his comments embodied in letters illustrate his delight in such burlesque. In a letter to Howells in 1900, Twain wrote, “For England must not fall: it would mean an inundation of Russian & German political degradations which would envelop the globe & steep it in a sort of Middle-Age night & slavery which would last till Christ comes again—which I hope he will not do; he made trouble enough before” (MTHL 2: 716). Similarly, he wrote Howells in 1909, “A stranger came, half an hour ago. I do not quite make out what strangers are for. It would have been so much better for us all if this one had been caught by mistake 19 centuries ago & crucified. Then the other one would have gone free, & that would have had pleasant results for everybody” (MTHL 2: 849).

4. See also Twain’s burlesque of Eddy’s “The Lord’s Prayer—Amended” in Christian Science, 316.

Chapter 5

1. Twain continued to have concerns about Catholic temporal dominion. Years later, as he read The Memoirs of the Duke of Saint-Simon, Twain made this marginal comment: “The Catholics are moving steadily and surely toward dominion” (Baender 10). Similarly, in his book Christian Science (1906), which ostensibly addressed his fears of Mary Baker Eddy, Twain wondered if Christian Science would secretly insinuate itself into power: “Just as Protestantism has smiled and nodded this long time (while the alert and diligent Catholic was slipping in and capturing the public schools), and is now beginning to hunt around for the key when it is too late?” (262). Twain concluded that “after a generation or two,” Christian Scientism would “probably divide Chris-
tendom with the Catholic Church” (252). The fear and loathing of Catholicism of Twain’s early years remained with him until the end.

2. Twain obviously relied on folktales throughout his career, from the early “Ghost Life on the Mississippi” (1861) to the myriad of folk elements in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876), Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), and many other works. The structure influenced many works besides Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc, and Propp notes that Twain’s Prince and the Pauper (1881) “is told as a folktale” (Theory 8). In 1883, Twain wrote a promising burlesque “1,002 Arabian Night,” replete with Sultan, remarkable births, and a wicked witch (101). Most interesting is Twain’s experimentation with the form, for the Sultan repeatedly orders Scherezade to omit the typical elements such as lists, speeches, and so on. In essence, the work burlesques the situation of the Sultan trying to hasten the story while the teller protracts it, and at the same time highlighting the form such stories take. Twain experimented with the related form of the fable, finding it a hospitable means of social criticism. “Some Learned Fables, for Good Old Boys and Girls” (1875) criticizes the use of science to aggrandize human worth, as do the “Goose Fable” (1899–1900) and “The Fable of the Yellow Terror” (1904–1905). “In the Animal’s Court” (1905) discusses the idea that, temperamentally, the human mind is “a machine,” an idea Twain also explores during the same period in What Is Man? (1906). “A Fable” (1909) offers some good advice for Twain scholars with its concluding moral: “you can find in a text whatever you bring” (879).

It is interesting to note that many fairy tale elements appear in Twain’s works throughout the 1890s and beyond. One may reasonably suspect that Twain reread fairy tales during this period as research for the “right form” he found for Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc. Evidence for such research includes references to Hans Christian Andersen in “Is He Living or Is He Dead?” (109–10). His “Two Little Tales” (1901) is particularly reminiscent of Andersen. Twain’s “Five Boons of Life” is literally a fairy tale and features “the good fairy” carrying a basket with “boons” that a person may choose (524).

Chapter 6

1. Alan Gribben’s Mark Twain’s Library: A Reconstruction is the most important resource for documenting the literary voices contributing to Twain’s writing. See also Fulton’s Mark Twain in the Margins.

2. What is a dialogue? The dividing line between dialogue and narrative is not always clear. Formal attributes such as the printing of the speakers’ names before their comments certainly create the sense that what one is reading is a dialogue. In a dialogue, too, the absence of plot as such, even when narrative is present, contributes to the dialogue form. Some larger works such as “3,000 Years among the Microbes” contain long philosophical dialogues within a larger narrative, such as the cholera germ’s discussion with the yellow fever germ named “Benjamin Franklin” or the clergyman germ who begins the dialogue of chapter 14 by a kind of catechism: “You are a Christian?” (495). This study follows Bakhtin in including catechism and parodies of catechisms as special examples of the dialogue form.
NOTES TO CHAPTER 7


5. See the discussion in Fulton, Mark Twain’s Ethical Realism: The Aesthetics of Race, Class, and Gender, 30–31.

Chapter 7


2. E. S. Fussell views Twain’s “interests in mental telepathy, spiritualism and dreams” as connected to a “solipsistic position” (96). John E. Becker provides an interesting discussion of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as prophecy, but treats it as an example of prophecy “woven through the narrative” (139). Becker’s analysis is ultimately unsatisfying, for he views prophecy in literature as “the result of habits of reflection taught us ultimately by the traditions of biblical prophecy” (131). Doubtless, this is true, but then one may see prophecy everywhere; it is much more legitimate to track an author’s use of prophetic elements by the traces we find along the way and to cite such evidence as providing warrant for a deeper analysis. Jon Powell’s analysis of Twain’s use of the book of Jeremiah in “A True Story” and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is much more substantive. Vivienne Perkins likewise has a very useful study, but again issues of genre are largely unexamined. Perkins believes the story “founders artistically” because Twain experiences “two contradictory impulses,” that of “love” and “scorn” for humanity (42). These impulses are hardly “mutually exclusive,” as she suggests, and are united in the jeremiad of the prophet (43). Geismar’s Mark Twain: An American Prophet deals very generally with Twain as a “prophet,” and considers the formal implications of such an identification not at all. The small volume False Prophets by James Martin Gillis contains a chapter on Mark Twain, but the content is so dismissive of Twain as a man concerned about religious issues that we should be forgiven for being dismissive of the book and its slight content. Veneta Nielsen’s discussion of Twain as a “savage prophet” is oddly compelling, but ultimately written in so obscure and arcane a fashion (mirroring, one imagines, Sibylline prophecy) that it remains a useless oddity. Much more satisfying is Ernest Tuveson’s discussion of Twain in Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role. Tuveson discusses Connecticut Yankee as an example of an apocalyptic and millennial narrative, casting light on many issues in that novel, particularly the ending (215–31). Finally, in Mark Twain and the Bible, Allison Ensor states that “the writings of the Old Testament prophets, he seems to have neglected almost entirely” (99). As this chapter demonstrates, Twain’s knowledge of the prophetic works was impressive.

3. While it is true that in his re-vision of the Apostle’s Creed (1880s), Twain immediately follows his affirmative statement, “I believe in God Almighty” with the qualification, “I do not believe He has ever sent a message to man by anybody, or delivered one to him by word of mouth, or made Himself visible to mortal eyes at any time or in any place,” it is equally true that he knew a great deal about the prophets and
their prophecies, and wrote about them a great deal for a person who supposedly dis-
counted them (56).

4. Specific sources for the various Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts are many and are ably discussed by Carroll Laverty, who traces in particular the influence of Jane Taylor’s story “The Mysterious Stranger,” which was included as a selection in the McGuffey Readers. Laverty points out that Twain’s work “might be considered a satirical expansion of Jane Taylor’s moral little tale” (18). Coleman Parsons also chronicles many other sources very usefully in “The Background of The Mysterious Stranger.”

5. The translation from Lurye is my own.

6. A close genetic connection exists between The Refuge of the Derelicts and the Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts, in terms of research, subject matter, and genre. Satan features in both sets of texts, as do discussions of prophets and certain historical information like Medieval folklore about priests tricking the devil into building bridges (cf. The Refuge of the Derelicts, 194; “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” 39–40; and No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, 225–27).

Conclusion

1. To sort these personae out for the interested reader, this list is appended. Twain called himself a theologian in “Was the World Made for Man?” (101); a missionary in “Introducing Winston S. Churchill” (454–55); a preacher in, among other places, his Autobiography (273); prophet in “Wit-Inspirations of the Two-Year-Olds” (405), and in many other venues; saint in his correspondence with Andrew Carnegie; Brother in “Further of Mr. Mark Twain’s Important Correspondence” (160); “Holy Samuel” was the nickname given him by Susan Crane, his sister-in-law, whom he called “Saint Sue” (MFMT 59–60); Priest and Bishop of New Jersey in “The Secret History of Eddypus, the World-Empire” (318–19); and the Reverend Mark Twain in the Alta California letters (MTMB 113–15).