

Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.

-- Mark Twain

CHAPTER X LATE WRITINGS

In the 1890's and the first decade of the 20th century, Twain suffered a series of personal tragedies; the bankruptcy of his publishing company, the failure of his nine-year struggle to get the Paige typesetter on the market, the death of his most cherished daughter, Susy, in 1896, the death of his wife in 1904 and the knowledge of a second daughter's fatal disease. These incidents even intensified the deepening pessimism in his later works.¹⁹³ During these years, Twain tried unsuccessfully to write. Pudd'nhead Wilson, published in 1894, marks the descent toward final blackness. Joan of Arc, published in 1896, displays his last desperate effort to ward off the blackness. After this attempt he fell completely into the blackness of despair, probably the blackest of any major American writer.

Twain, for predominantly psychological reasons, was never successful in realizing his despair in fiction. He had undergone a despair so intense and a suffering so severe that he became almost a broken man. When he tried to grapple with his torment and convert it into artistic order, its pressure was just too intense. From Twain's last period we have only fragments and various miscellaneous pieces, such as "Little Bessie Would Assist Providence" and "Letters from the Earth," published only after his death.¹⁹⁴

Twain began story after story, only to break off unfinished, his anguish taking paths so tortuous that the stories he started could not be finished.

The Hysterious Stranger is considered the most important of the unfinished manuscripts, since it is the most nearly complete of the fragments and almost the only late piece in which he achieves any detachment. It presents Twain's denial of a meaningful universe and asserts artistically that not only is human freedom an illusion but also existence itself is illusory. The book was published in 1916, six years after Twain's death. Since the manuscript was left unfinished, Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain's literary executor, selected one last chapter among several Twain had written. It was an excellent choice, and he published the book as The Hysterious Stranger.

Twain declared to Howells his intention in writing the book:

What I have been wanting is a chance to write a book without reserves -- a book which should take account of no one's feelings, and no one's prejudices, opinions, beliefs, hopes, illusions, delusions; a book which should say my say, right out of my heart, in the plainest language & without a limitation of any sort... I believe I can make it tell what I think of Han, & how he is constructed, & how mistaken he is in his estimate of his character & powers & qualities & his place among the animals.¹⁹⁵

This passage foretells the total pessimism of the book. In fact, the book is a combination of obsessive themes which by now are quite familiar to us. Similarly to A Connecticut-
Lieut. Yankee and St. Joan, the book has a medieval setting, Austria in 1590. Eseldorf is the last version of Hannibal found in Twain's fiction. It is a paradise for boys with hilly and wooded solitude, a tranquil river and drifting boats. However, Eseldorf is projected in a less lifelike manner than Hannibal, for it is a dream town viewed from the perspective of remote time:

... Austria was far from the world,
and asleep and our village was in
the middle of that sleep....It
droused in peace in the deep
privacy... and...solitude where
new from the world hardly ever
came to disturb its dreams, and
was infinitely content.196

It should also be noted that in German "Eseldorf" means "village of asses." The Happy Valley had been long since left behind.

Again, similarly to Huck Finn, the book is written in the first-person through the mouthpiece of a boy, Theodor Fischer. The world is soon and reported through the eyes of an innocent. But the world he sees now is more terrible than Huck's world since the author's mental balance is changed. In addition, as in Huck Finn, the book deals with the problem of conflicting codes between social convention and natural feeling, the "conscience" and the heart. Both Huck and Theodor face the same dilemma, uncertain to

Choose between what they think is right and what society has taught them is right. Huck retains his goodness, purity and innocence by his decision to "go to hell." Huck's decision to help Jim in his flight for freedom displays his refusal to conform with society. But in the world of Twain's late fiction, Theodor doesn't have a chance. He reacts to the same problem in the opposite way. In the episode in which the villagers of Eseldorf murder a suspected witch, Theodor follows the mob chasing the witch more than half-an-hour. At last she is exhausted and falls down and is hanged from a tree:

They hanged the lady and I threw a stone at her, although in my heart I was sorry for her, but all were throwing stones and each was watching his neighbor, and if I had not done as the others did it would have been noticed and spoken of.

This scene emphasizes the loss of the natural goodness of the innocent and how it is accomplished. The boy is depicted as a helpless victim of public opinion, a slave to the social environment. Unlike Huck, Theodor conforms with society for the sake of safety and comfort in order to maintain his social standing in the community. Deep-down in his heart, Theodor shares the same feeling as Huck; he feels sorry about throwing a stone at the unfortunate woman. Yet he has no strength enough to resist the pressure of society and stand alone. And in Twain's opinion the

strictures and mores of society are heavy with evil.

Twain's self-projection in the novel is Philip Traum, who claims himself to be Satan's nephew. Philip reveals Twain in the greatest extent of his pessimism. He comes to the town as a young, handsome stranger with good-will and ready friendliness to Theodor and his two friends. At first, the boys are enchanted by his persuasive speech and the fatal music of his voice. He makes them forget everything, drunk with the joy of being in his company. Yet gradually through him the boys come to know horrible things about life. Philip's attitude is contemptuous about the stoning. His disdain of human cowardice and the mob is revealed in his long speech to Theodor. The speech is strikingly similar to Colonel Sherburne's speech to the mob gathering in front of his house in Huck Finn twenty-five years earlier:

I know your race. It is made up of sheep. It is governed by minorities, seldom or never by majorities. It suppresses its feelings and its beliefs and follows the handful that makes the most noise. Sometimes the noisy handful is right, sometimes wrong, but no matter, the crowd follows it. The vast majority of the race, whether savage or civilized, are secretly kind-hearted and shrink from inflicting pain, but in the presence of the aggressive and pitiless minority they don't dare to assert themselves.... I knew that ninety-nine out of a hundred of your race were strongly against the killing of witches when that foolishness was

first agitated by a handful of pious lunatics in the long ago.... And yet apparently everybody hates witches and wants them killed. Some day a handful will rise up on the other path and make the most noise...and in a week all the sheep will wheel and follow him....¹⁹⁸

However, Philip Traun's scorn of human cowardice is stronger than that of the Colonel, for he also attacks the whole social structure formed by this human weakness:

Monarchies, aristocracies, and religions are all based upon that large defect in your race -- the individual's distrust of his neighbor, and his desire, for safety's or comfort's sake, to stand well in his neighbor's eye. These institutions will always oppress you, affront you, and degrade you, because you will always be and remain slaves of minorities. There was never a country where the majority of the people were in their secret hearts loyal to any of these institutions.¹⁹⁹

The stoning episode displays the extreme cruelty and inhumanity of man to man. Similarly, in A Connecticut Yankee, Hank and the king, during their trip around the country spy a mob racing after a suspected witch. The poor woman is stoned until she is battered and bloody, and then the mob go to burn her at the stake. In these exactly identical situations, Twain shows the innocent person cruelly murdered by society with weak humans who make up society participating with glee or because they are afraid not to.

In many aspects, The Mysterious Stranger is a superior work to A Connecticut Yankee. The controlled use of the first-person narrative technique gives Twain greater complexity and more detachment. As we have seen, the first-person ^{/narrative technique} in A Connecticut Yankee had collapsed when Twain's rage got the better of him. From the middle of the book Hank Morgan is directly voicing the author's ideas and pessimism. Lacking detachment, the book is destroyed by the violent, uncontrolled anger garnished with sentimentalism. But in The Mysterious Stranger Twain to a large extent succeeds in telling his story through the eyes of Theodor.

Philip Traum, Twain's self-projection, can be interestingly compared with Stephenson, the man who corrupted Hadleyburg. Both come to town in much the same way, both are mysterious strangers who are not part of the community. Philip Traum comes to "save" mankind in a way that shows the utter corruption of man. His function is to help men view the bitter truths of human life. The outsider Stephenson teaches a hard lesson in how easily corruptible men are. But Philip Traum's lessons are even more terrible, baring not only the truth about man's weakness but also the inflexible laws of a deterministic universe that, finally, doesn't even exist. Philip Traum is Stephenson with a metaphysical dimension.

Philip shows Nikolaus and Seppi a history of the progress of the human race by presenting them a vision of Cain murdering Abel, followed by endless series of wars, murders, and massacres

of Hebrews, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. He then ironically adds with a scornful laugh:

It is a remarkable progress. In five or six thousand years five or six high civilizations have risen, flourished, commanded the wonder of the world, then faded out and disappeared ... only the Christian civilization has scored a triumph to be proud of. Two or three centuries from now it will be recognized that all the competent killers are Christians; then the pagan world will go to school to the Christian not to acquire his religion, but his guns.²⁰⁰ ... We saw christianity and Civilization march hand in hand through those ages, leaving famine and death and desolation in their wake.²⁰¹

Philip makes clear to the boys that the result of the endless cycle of slaughter is nothing but "dull nonsense."²⁰² Only the monarchs and nobilities have received any profit from it. Philip emphasizes that the cause of historical evils and human corruption is, in fact, a quality inherited from Adam. Call it "human nature" if you wish, but it can be seen as a version of the original sin of orthodox Calvinism. Thus, mankind is blighted with innate wickedness. However, Philip also points out that human evils are inspired by the Moral Sense -- a version of Huck's "conscience" -- which enables man to distinguish good ^{/from} evil. Because of the Moral Sense, man is marked apart from the animals. Animals live by natural instinct; they have no power to perceive good

and evil. For them good and evil do not exist, and therefore animals do not need to face moral dilemmas. But it is different with man. He possesses a clear knowledge of good and evil. Yet, he has a tendency to choose evil. Thus he is not only more unfortunate than animals but wicked too. To explain this point, Philip shows Theodor a heretic being tortured to death. The spectacle is reported through the boy's eyes:

A young man lay bound, and Satan said he was suspected of being a heretic, and the executioners were about to inquire into it. They asked the man to confess to the charge, and he said he could not, for it was not true. Then they drove splinter after splinter under his nails, and he shrieked with the pain. Satan was not disturbed, but I could not endure it, and had to be whisked out of there. ²⁰³

Philip objects to Theodor's calling such treatment "brutal,"²⁰⁴ since the higher brutes are incapable of such cruelty. Cruelty and brutality are human things only:

No brute ever does a cruel thing -- that is the monopoly of those with the Moral Sense. When a brute inflicts pain he does it innocently; it is not wrong; for him there is no such thing as a wrong. And he does not inflict pain for the pleasure of inflicting it -- only man does that. Inspired by that mongrel Moral Sense of his.... And yet he is such an unreasoning creature that he is not able to perceive

that the Moral Sense degrades him
to the bottom layer of animated 205
beings and is a shameful possession.

Such is Twain's conception of human history. The pessimism is of course total. Only in animals does he now find natural goodness because only animals are innocent. However, the torture of a heretic is still trifling when compared to the factory system of modern times. Theodor is shown a French factory in which the workers are forced to work fourteen hours a day. They have to walk through mud, slush, rain, snow and storm each day to go to the factory. Yet, their employers pay them small wages, only enough just "to keep them from dropping dead with hunger."²⁰⁶ These workers have to suffer for years till they die, whereas the suffering of the heretic is shorter and after his death, he is free from the human race. Philip then concludes that it is the Moral Sense which teaches the factory proprietors the difference between right and wrong and they misuse the Moral Sense and choose the wrong. Thus, the human race is illogical, unreasoning and even foolish. The direct attack on technology involved reveals the author's distrust of scientific advancement. In his last book Twain's distrust of the social dangers of mechanical progress is no longer qualified by his faith in its advances as it was in A Connecticut Yankee. The heretic and the factory workers represent the helpless who are ill-treated by society. They are helpless victims who are cursed to be born into the human race.

Twain's criticism of man ^{and} society is thematically only an

extreme version of the familiar theme of his later works. But it should be pointed out there is some excellent writing in the book. The episode of Philip's creation of little men out of clay and then indifferently crushing the life out of them with his fingers is black symbolism of the futility of human life. Philip brings these tiny creatures to life just for the amusement of the boys. When two of the little men quarrel and begin to fight one another, he effortlessly destroys them and later their weeping wives, as if they were insects:

... then he reached out and took the heavy board seat out of our swing and brought it down and and mashed all these people into the earth just as if they had been flies... we were so shocked and grieved at the wanton murder he had committed... He went right on talking just as if nothing had happened. 207

Philip's destruction of the tiny creatures he has created can stand for the author's attitude toward humanity. He refuses to find any meaning or worth in man and society. To him, life lacks enduring value and goodness and all he can find is futility.

The stoning episode reveals the first level of Twain's pessimism. Society is corrupted since there is evil in mankind and man is endowed with innate weakness and cowardice to conquer evil. Yet as the book goes on, the author is moving toward an even deeper pessimism in the statement of his theory of fatalism and determinism through Philip's speech. Man has no freedom since he is

imprisoned in the chain of events from his childhood. Philip explains to the boys that in fact man is a helpless victim of circumstance and environment. The first act of the child determines the entire fate of his life. One minute's change in the course of the arranged events can change the entire remainder of his life. Seen in this light, moral dilemmas are hardly important. Man has no free-will to choose or to act according to his heart anyway; everything is arranged for him. Man is reduced to simply a machine working according to its mechanical system. The theory shows a sharp contrast to Huck's unique mental freedom. Huck possesses free-will and can react against social convention. To Huck, the moral dilemma is the most necessary and important thing for it assures the existence of human natural goodness and freedom.

Therefore, the stoning episode can be more thoroughly explained. Theodor throws a stone at the suspected heretic for a more comprehensive reason since the act is absolutely predetermined and inevitable. Theodor, as well as his other neighbors, is a helpless victim of fate. He has no free will to act according to his heart. Huck is free to choose what his heart commands. Of course logically speaking, Twain can't have it both ways. If everything is predetermined anyway, Theodor's moral dilemma is cancelled out and absolutely meaningless. And if in addition, as we shall see, life is a dream, then even the fatalism does not matter. How can it be cause for concern that man does not have free will if man and the world don't exist? And yet, for all the profound

logical inconsistencies at its core, the book is satisfying and the blackness is convincing. It is as if Twain's despair were so vast and rich and all-encompassing that it has spilled over into all the varieties of pessimism it could find.

As a whole, Philip does not put blame for human evil on mankind, but he points out that the fault lies in God's creation:

God who could make good children
as easily as bad, yet preferred to make
bad ones; who could have made every one
of them happy, yet never made a single
one; who made them prize their bitter
life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave
his angels eternal happiness unearned, yet
required his other children to earn it; who
gave his angels painless life, yet his other
children with biting miseries and maladies
of mind and body. 208

Thus, God is accused of injustice in his work of creation. Man is always doomed to meet suffering. Philip also shows the boys that in fact long life is nothing but a suffering of misery, hunger and poverty. Only death and madness are the release from this terrible life:

Are you so unobservant as not to
have found out that sanity and
happiness are an impossible com-
bination? No sane man can be
happy, for to him life is sad and
he sees what a fearful thing it
is. Only the mad can be happy....
The few that imagine themselves
kings and gods are happy. 209

Thus, many times Satan helps these poor human beings by killing them or making lunatics out of them. Death is preferable to a long life.

However, even the theory of determinism and the bitter destiny of man do not matter when nothing exists. Twain's proclamation of the nonexistence of God, the universe and reality puts an end to every consideration and problem. This is the final degree of the author's extreme pessimism. Life is a dream. We live from cradle to grave in misery, but even the misery is but part of the total illusion that is life itself. The book ends with a closing paragraph of relentless and alterable despair:

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. ²¹⁰

The passage reveals the author's unconscious desire to escape the shock and disillusionment of life. And the only way to ease his troubled mind is to deny all of creation and existence.

Philip's powerful and persuasive discourses reveal the author's pessimism at its greatest depth. Philip is a character of godlike stature. He has a complete understanding of mankind. He is entirely detached from human experience and sees man from

metaphysical heights:

I am not limited like you.
I am not subject to human
conditions. I can measure and
understand your human weaknesses,
for I have studied them but I
have none of them. My ²¹¹ flesh is not
real....I am a spirit.



With such detachment, he shows his contempt and indifference
towards mankind:

Man is made of dirt -- I saw him
made. I am not made of dirt. Man
is a museum of diseases, a home of
impurities; he comes today and is
gone tomorrow; he begins as dirt
and departs as stench...²¹²

The author's identification with such a figure symbolizes his desire
to retire himself from the human race. The preponderance of images
of filth and disease mirrors the increasing fragility of Twain's
mental balance.

As a whole, the book is successful and has great clarity.
Tone and plot are in good control. The tragedy of human destiny is
presented in a convincing and artistic way and life seems suspended
in an icy stillness. Twain usually manages to maintain his detachment
through the mouthpiece of the boy-narrator. Theodor is the represen-
tative of the human race with its weaknesses and frailties. Yet, as
an innocent and inexperienced boy, he is carried away by Philip's
powerful, persuasive expression. He is ashamed of Satan's revelation

of human weaknesses. At the same time he is horrified at Philip's cruel destruction of the little men he created. Theodor is made uneasy by Philip's proclamation of the nonexistence of the world, God and reality. Philip should be a marvelous genie working wonderful miracles, but all Philip does is bring Theodor great unhappiness. Philip says he comes bringing good, but in the world of Twain's late vision this "good" can only take the form of preventing lives of long suffering by killing some of Theodor's young friends and of driving the Kind Father Peter insane, thus granting him the only complete happiness available in the world. Theodor cannot like Philip, and yet in the end he must agree that his words are true:

He vanished and left me appalled,
for I knew, and realized, that
all he had said was true. ²¹³

That such agreement comes from one of Twain's little boys, one of his repositories of natural goodness, shows the extent of the torment the author underwent.

Twain's doubt of reality and his toying with the idea that life is a dream find full expression in another of his most interesting late fragments, "The Great Dark," written in October, 1898. The various ideas that make up the story troubled Twain almost obsessively for two years. The themes and situations that are put

into this story are the confusion of dream and reality, the brief actual duration of dreams that may seem to last for many years, and the fate of a ship's company lost for years in the storms of Antarctic bergs,--an area of everlasting gales and snowstorms. Before writing this story, Twain began writing two other stories which contain similar elements that he finally put into "The Great Dark." The first one was "An Adventure in Remote Seas," dealing with a sealing ship holding a vast treasure driven far into the Antarctic by long-continuing storms. Another story is "The Enchanted Sea-Wilderness," which relates the story of a sailor who had once been caught in the eternal storms. These two stories were left unfinished. Neither of them was told as a dream. However, he also wrote at the same time a story dealing with the confusion of dream and reality entitled "Which Was the Dream?" This manuscript was also abandoned unfinished.²¹⁴ It is likely that Twain developed "The Great Dark" from these abandoned manuscripts.

The story is the terrible creation of an unhappy man's tortured imagination and it is profected as a worst of imaginable nightmares. The story is about a horrifying sea journey. In the story, Henry Edwards has a brief dream for a few seconds or a few minutes. In the dream, he imagines himself, his belongings and the surroundings reduced to microscopic objects. The passengers and the boat they sail on are so small that even a drop of water becomes the ocean in which his boat sails along. This voyage takes him to a place of everlasting darkness and storm. He completely succumbs

to his dream of the blind voyage ~~stage~~ cruising in a drop of water. Upon waking from it, he comes to doubt the existence of reality and wonders if his dream is perhaps the reality:

So little a time before, I know that
 this voyage was a dream, and nothing
 more; a wee little puff or two of
 doubt had blown against that certainty...
 When I came to consider it, these ten
 days had been such intense realities.
 -- so intense that by comparison the
 life I had lived before them seemed
 distant, indistinct, slipping away and
 fading out in a far perspective...I
 grew steadily more and more nervous and
 uncomfortable -- and a little frightened,
 though I would not quite acknowledge
 this to myself. 215

Even his wife Alice, who has a sharp intuition, comes to lose confidence in her memory. When Henry tries to remind her of the past, their European trip (shades of The Innocents Abroad) she is embarrassed and thinks the past is a dream:

You have put me into your land-
 dreams a thousand times, but
 I didn't always know I was there;
 so how could I remember it? Also
 I have put you into my land-dreams
 a thousand times when you didn't
 know it -- and the natural result
 is that when I name the circumstances
 you don't always recall them....I
 don't know why; ^{it} has surprised me
 and puzzled me. 216

In fact, this blind voyage leads them nowhere. Even the captain of the ship does not know where the ship is and what

the destination of the trip is. It seems like the passengers are in a haunted ship in a stormy sea sailing to nowhere. Of course the trip symbolizes the futility of life. The author can find no meaning in life. To him it is this blind terrible journey.

The second book relates the voyage after the birth of Henry's youngest son, Harry. During these years of dream and seeming reality, they have had many horrible experiences including the pursuit of a treasure-ship, The Two Darlings, which carries off Henry's youngest son Harry and Lucy, daughter of the captain of the ship, and the confrontation of the terrible beasts swarming in the Glace and attacking the ship. Twain's oppressive vision of evil attains terrible new dimensions in the last years of sorrow and mental instability:

... all of a sudden that creature plunged up out of the sea the way a porpoise does, not a hundred yards away -- I saw two hundred and fifty feet of him and his fringes -- and then he turned in the air like a triumphal arch, shedding a Niagara of water, and plunged head first under the sea with an awful smash of sound... about dawn, (a passenger saw) a creature shaped like a wood louse and as big as a turreted monitor, go racing by and tearing up the foam, in chase of a fat animal the size of an elephant and creased like a caterpillar... I was like the most of the crew, helpless with fright; but the captain and the officers kept their wits and courage. The Gatlings on the starboard side could not be used, but the four on the port side were brought to bear, and inside of a minute they had poured more than two thousand bullets... That blinded the creature, and he let go; and by squirting a violent Niagara of water out of his mouth which tore the sea into a tempest of foam he

shot himself back-ward three hundred yards
and the ship forward as far, drowning the
deck with a racing flood which swept many
of the men off their feet and crippled some...²¹⁷

After this dreadful fight, the creatures are driven off. The story ends with the cruel deaths of the members of the family. Harry and Lucy die of starvation aboard The Two Darlings. The crew get drunk and have a quarrel during which some are killed. A stray shot hits Jessie, Henry's oldest child, and she dies. His wife Alice is getting old and failing fast, her hair white and her face old with trouble. Two days later she and her other daughter, Bessie, die. The captain also dies of grief since his daughter Lucy has met a terrible death. Only Henry is left as an old man, bitter and lonesome with his Negro slave George:

... all are dead but George and me,²¹⁸
and we are sitting with our dead.

This sad ending reflects the tragedies in Twain's own family. In his later years, Twain was left as a broken old man with solitude after the death of his wife and two daughters. Such private calamities were too much for Twain to bear. He had a nonrational but intense guilty feeling that he was the cause of the deaths of his family. It is obvious why Twain could not finish the story, since it is hardly a fiction. He had no control over the material. The book was written from the sad unconscious fantasies of despair and bitter disillusionment. The

emotion is too strong to bear.

His narrative self-projection, Henry Edwards, is quite different from his other self-projections, Colonel Sherburne, Hank in the second half of A Connecticut Yankee, Pudd'nhead Wilson, Stephenson and Philip. These characters are all of a kind; they are all of a kind; they are all related and share the same characteristics. They are voices of reason who are distinguished from the community by their intellectual superiority. But Henry is a broken man immersed in doubt, uncertainty and confusion. He is the sad other half of the self-assured detached intellect revealed in the earlier self-projections.

The image of a voyage on water is one of the motifs we have found frequently in the writings of Mark Twain. The Innocents Abroad records the voyage of an energetic young American, hopeful, buoyantly optimistic about life and proud of his country. In the trip down the Mississippi on the raft in Huck Finn, the high point of Twain's literary career, the optimism is tempered by an awareness of the reality of evil. In the book there is a perfect balance between innocence and experience. The evil of man and the corruptness of his society line the banks of the river, but Huck is able to remain true to the promptings of his heart and cope with the various forms of human frailty and depravity he encounters. The nightmare sea-voyage in "The Great Dark" is a journey into despair total and unredeemable. It is odd that we remember this writer as someone who made us laugh.