

GREAT DARKNESSES,
MYSTERIOUS STRANGERS,
INFERNAL PERSONAE: MARK
TWAIN'S OTHERWORLDLY
PERSPECTIVES

By

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Shelley Fisher Fishkin, in "The Challenge of Teaching *Huck Finn*," notices the curious juxtaposition in the initial American edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, preceding any text, of two pictures on facing pages. One, an E. W. Kemble drawing, features a smiling Huck holding a gun in one hand and a rabbit (presumably shot with the gun) in the other. The opposing page presents a marble bust, in profile, of a serious-looking Mark Twain—the work of sculptor Karl Gerhardt. "Why," Fishkin asks, "did Twain choose to juxtapose these two images before we read a single word?" (185). Her answer: he wanted to be

sure the reader didn't forget that standing behind the often ungrammatical and often confused (about implications of what's been seen and heard) narrative—purportedly composed by the young and uneducated Huck—stood an author of sufficient gravity to be memorialized in marble. This understanding, Fishkin suggests, appreciates the pervasive irony of the text (185–86). But we can also see, in the concern over narrative authority, a trace of Sam Clemens' fascination with broader problems of credibility, objectivity, *Authority* (with a capital A)—interestingly reflected in a tendency to outwardly distance himself from his narratives; and this persuasively holds not just for narratives employing first-person narrators, but in Clemens' pervasive use of pen name and persona, Mark Twain. Yet, as we will see, his drive to "establish the facts," especially in the realms of personal and human identity—and more clearly as time goes on, to seriously "track the mystery" and difficulty of one's identity and of the human condition—increasingly (and ironically) inscribes his own "mark" on his texts.

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain not only doubles the distance between himself and his text by installing Huck as narrator but also, in the story's justifiably famous first paragraph, has Huck identify himself as definitively *not* "Mr. Mark Twain"—the "mainly," but not always, truthful author of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Sam Clemens, as he was gaining momentum in the push to finish the novel that had languished in his hands for so long, wrote in a letter of July 22, 1883 to his mother, his brother Orion, and Orion's wife

Mollie, "This summer it is no more trouble to me to write than it is to lie" (Paine 434). But against this apparent valorization of lying, often reprised in Huck's narrative, we should note the "Explanatory," which, like the frontispieces, precedes the text. Here Twain points out that, "In this book a number of dialects are used. ... The shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guess-work; but pains-takingly, and with trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech." Like Huck, triumphantly displaying the rabbit in the frontispiece drawing, Twain *proclaims* that he has expertly and honestly hit his target.

The text of *Huckleberry Finn* itself brims with instances of "truth" triumphantly, or sometimes disturbingly, breaking through the fictitious account that has masked it. In chapter 3, for example, Huck, responding to Miss Watson's contention that prayer will bring him what he wants, remarks, "She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it." In chapter 4, with respect to the mistaken report that Pap's drowned body has been found floating in the river, Huck, already suspicious of the claim, encounters uncannily specific ocular proof in a footprint Pap has left in the snow: "There was a cross in the left boot-heel made with big nails, to keep off the devil." And in chapter 11 Judith Loftus turns the tables on Huck's attempt at deception, penetrating beyond his ineptly enacted fictitious female identities by testing him to see whether he throws and catches like a girl. Stylistically and thematically, these operate as prelude to Jim's revelation, near the end of the

novel, that in fact Pap is *now* dead, and Tom's vital revelation that Jim is now free. Such disclosures in Twain's most famous novel coalesce around the value of epistemologically separating wheat from chaff—creating "signature" moments for "Mark Twain" the realist. Noting the twin-ness, as the pen-name suggests, of appearances and realities, Twain the realist exhibits an understandable obsession with making the latter show through with the indelible clarity of direct vision.

But in *Huck Finn*, along the way, there are more convoluted truth-versus-fantasy relations, most notably visible in "superstitions" Huck and Jim (and Pap) rely on—in some cases, possibly scientifically sound; or, possibly bearing some supernatural efficacy; or, as the reader may sometimes be encouraged comically to suspect, comprising worthless, or even destructive, fantasies. What clear vision can we have, after all, of those apparently forceful non-material force fields? Other than the ethical/psychological, these are not the province of the realist—that hardheaded (perhaps even, hardhearted) breed of chroniclers of the ordinary and the near-at-hand. As the realist he surely was at this point, Twain seemed content to be preoccupied with tracking the more *straightforwardly* ethical and psychological, leaving the more profoundly puzzling out of reach.

But by the publication of *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*, roughly a decade after *Huck Finn*, we can see those more perplexing problematics becoming directly and thematically intrusive—not displacing the realism, but increasingly foregrounding as ostensible object. Here the

desire for definitive proof (for "documentation") is showcased with respect to questions of identity—first for Roxy, who to all appearances "was as white as anybody, but the one-sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen" (ch. 2). The equivocal "outvoted" could mean that the fraction that's genetically black determines who she most essentially is. Or it could have the conflicting meaning that because she is known to be partly black, however minutely, and though she looks entirely white, the "drop of black blood," as Wilson terms it to himself (ch. 4), simply "colors" her in the eyes of the world and in her own as well. The Realist is perturbed. Is she *really* black, or is her "blackness" a matter of social convention?

The problematic compounds still more profoundly for the identity of her own biological son Chambers, switched at birth with the "white" child, Tom. Chambers/Tom's one thirty-second portion of "black blood" has remained thoroughly hidden, and therefore would seem to be able to play no role in his life. But is this so? Who is he *really*? Within the limits of forensic verification, Tom categorizes as Chambers, the one-thirty-second black son of Roxy; for Pudd'nhead, the proof is in the fingerprints—a detective's device new to Twain's era.¹ This plot device also captures the fingerprints of Mark Twain himself. This is the ultimate realist turn: the visible evidence definitively

¹ Note after "era" page 4; Germany 1788 recognized as unique; System developed by 1879/published, 1880; used in New York for first murder case, 1902

revealing the truth, thoroughly resolving one aspect of the identity issue—though the more difficult aspect lingers.

As Pudd'nhead Wilson's nickname implies, Dawson's Landing has mostly taken him for a fool. In chapter 11, "Tom," specifically, scoffs at Wilson's obsession with fingerprints, associating it with fortunetelling and mockingly calling him "a great scientist running to seed here in this village, a prophet with the kind of honor that prophets generally get at home." But Pudd'nhead's fingerprinting turns out to be a formidable force; and, technique in hand, Pudd'nhead himself turns out to be capable of divinations that the citizens of Dawson's Landing have never imagined. Using fingerprints coincidentally collected years before with, apparently, no clear purpose in mind, he demonstrates that "Tom" is Chambers—and the murderer of Judge Driscoll (his guardian). In realist terms, who could ask for more? Mystery solved; the guilty separated from the innocent; true identities, as commonly understood, established. But, of course, the greater mystery remains: why have Chambers/Tom and his opposite number, Tom/Chambers, become the people they are—most unsettlingly, in the case of the supposed Tom, why a wastrel and a murderer?

Pudd'nhead Wilson, alleged buffoon but actually canny observer, emerges as a semi-omniscient figure, additionally bolstered by the quasi-authorial standing granted for his running commentary called *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar*. Notice his profile: the outsider whose true nature no one understands, omnisciently observing the foibles of the population at large—much like Hank Morgan

in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, except that, whereas Hank's impressiveness generally relies on sham effects and he takes little interest in really understanding the populace he has joined, Wilson, with his identity-fixing fingerprinting, in a sense manages to be the real thing. That is, he's the distant authorial voice who, when he chooses, can reveal to the people of Dawson's Landing the *real truth*—albeit one of a strictly material nature. With respect to the fundamental question of nature-versus-nurture as decisively formative (of Tom, Chambers, and everyone else), he has little to say—unless we count satirical remarks like "Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education" (ch. 5).

It's somewhat ironic that Wilson's extra-ordinary means of precise identification should rely on fingerprinting—the replication of the twists and turns of the ending pads of the fingers, those appendages so distantly related to the core of our physiological being (and whose activities, not the least among them writing, also remind us of the limitations of purely material classifications). One's blood, on the other hand, seems much more intimately entwined with the heart of one's being. The word "blood," or some form of it, appears eighteen times in *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*. (I can tell you this *precisely* thanks to the wizardry of electronic searching—a step beyond even that of fingerprinting.) But what's amazing about the usage of the term "blood" in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is the unmistakable consistency of its *pattern of meaning*. Leaving out two largely metaphorical uses ("Wilson's blood warmed a

little" [ch. 15] and "the blood sank suddenly out of his face" [ch. 20]), each of the first eight of the remaining sixteen usages of the word "blood" refers to genetic, or more significantly, cultural, inheritance ("black blood" [ch. 4], "southern blood" [ch. 11], "old blood" [ch. 12], "best blood" [ch. 12], etc.)—the standard by which an aristocratic society or a slave society (and Dawson's Landing is both) determines one's worth and status. The other eight uses of the word, occurring consecutively in the *latter* part of the novel, with no overlapping from the previous pattern, refer to the actual fluid that runs through our veins—not "black" or "blue," but the same red color for everyone. Twain's usage moves us, in other words, from a societal view, reliant on appearances and infused with prejudice, to a scientifically objective, and more universal, perspective.

Pudd'nhead, as the author of the "whimsical almanac" (ch. 5)—his *Calendar*—prefigures Twain's increasing interest (or increasingly openly serious interest, perhaps verging on obsession) in such broadly "objective" perspectives (especially concerning matters of identity) in his later writings. In "The Great Dark" and "Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes," for instance, Twain uses microscopic characters to give the sense of a macroscopic perspective on the stories' events and participants. "The Great Dark," which Twain left unfinished, features a family transported, through the intervention of "the Superintendent of Dreams," into a water drop whose great darkness results from the drop's being contained in the darkened portion of a microscope slide. While the narrative (and thus the reader) sees the

action from a godlike distance, the participants themselves are trapped in an incomprehensible and endless "black-out." In this strangely scientific, strangely fantastical story, Twain's self-distancing mechanisms would seem to be taken to an extreme. Yet here, we find precisely *not* the author's mere *metaphorical* fingerprint imprinted on the shadowy business of the problematic of genuine identity; Twain's identity-issues now seem to be hitting "closer to home." As Kent Rasmussen points out, the narrative is "[f]illed with allusions to details of Clemens's own life" and "may reflect his struggle to cope with the disasters that his family experienced in the 1890s, when his publishing firm failed, his investments in the Paige compositor evaporated, his daughter Susy died, and his daughter Jean suffered from epilepsy" (166). In the likewise unfinished "Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes," the main character is "accidentally transformed into a microbe by a magician" (Rasmussen 471). The narrative, again including numerous submerged references to Twain's own life and problems, at first grants the man-become-microbe a memory of his true identity; but that memory progressively fades, leaving him in his own kind of darkness—and the narrative and reader with, once again, a macroscopic perspective on man-versus-microbe, not greatly to the advantage of the former. And in the very late sketch *Little Bessie*, Twain offers a not yet fully socialized, and therefore not fully indoctrinated, child's perspective on the beliefs that the adults around her profess. The narrative specifies the title character as "nearly three years old ... a good child, and not shallow, not frivolous, but meditative

and thoughtful, and much given to thinking out the reasons for things and trying to make them harmonise with results" (3). Consequently, Bessie, in her innocence—that is, her non-programmed perspective—escapes the microscopic view that diminishes the adults, and asks the obvious questions they have never seriously asked—such as why, in "His wisdom and mercy," God chooses to afflict human beings with "so much pain and sorrow and suffering" (3). And most notably, in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain uses, as the narrative's principal focus, the otherworldly character who identifies himself as "No. 44, New Series 864,962" (238)—an ID noteworthy for its hyper-specificity, which nonetheless remains entirely incomprehensible. Supposedly, it precisely documents the "mysterious stranger's" place within what must be a supremely logically ordered schema, yet the number-as-name yields no understanding for the story's narrator, August Feldner, or for Twain's all-too-human readers.

Perhaps the high point (or is it the low point?) of Sam Clemens' mania for documenting the facts (real or so-called) occurs in what has come to be known as the "Ashcroft-Lyon Manuscript," a 429-page document framed as a letter (or letters) to William Dean Howells which, fortunately for Howells, was never sent to him—and was perhaps never intended to be sent. The "Manuscript," written in 1909, during the last year before Clemens' death, is a remarkably sustained, if not totally rational, attack which details what Clemens considered to be the misconduct of his former secretary, Isabel Lyon, and former business adviser, Ralph Ashcroft. Hamlin Hill, in

Mark Twain: God's Fool, describes the document as "429 pages of diatribe against Miss Lyon and Ashcroft, supplemented by pages of newspaper clippings, miscellaneous letters, statements of account, and similar 'exhibits'" (230). And whatever our judgment—whether we agree with Karen Lystra's acceptance, in *Dangerous Intimacy: The Untold Story of Mark Twain's Final Years*, of Twain's excoriation of what she terms "Lyon's guile" and "Ashcroft's wiles" (219), and with Clemens' daughter Clara's description of the document as "a full description of their entire story of dishonesty" (quoted in Hill 229), or we endorse the more widely held view that the manuscript is, as Alan Gribben puts it in his essay "Autobiography as Property," a "self-justifying" and "malicious" (54) account in which Lyon plays, as Laura Skandera Trombley says, in her book *Mark Twain in the Company of Women*, "the unwitting lamb sacrificed to assuage Clemens's overwhelming sense of guilt about neglecting his daughters" (177)—we must in any case acknowledge Trombley's accuracy in labeling the enterprise and its result as "odd," "petty," and "consistently contradictory" (178). Hill reads the "Ashcroft-Lyon Manuscript" as, most pertinently, "simply an installment of the autobiography in a new form which Mark Twain devised for his memoirs in April of 1909" (229). In so far as Hill is right in this assessment, we can see the degree to which Sam Clemens, to the end, used his Mark Twain persona and his related rage for objective documentation in distancing himself from his own life—from his own suffering—by turning everything into literature. But we can also understand this

compilation of documentation as inevitably enmeshed in Clemens' own real life and sense of self—and, equally, as a compilation that attempts to "nail down" the identities (to prove his case) of both Lyon and Ashcroft.

And there is an even later autobiographical writing in which we can recognize the beginning of a final emergence—through the "distance"—of Sam Clemens himself as caught-up in struggles involving his own identity and humanity's. Clemens' daughter Jean died suddenly, shockingly, on the morning of Christmas Eve, 1909—to which he immediately responded, in his characteristic way, by writing about it, producing an essay titled "The Death of Jean," which would be published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1911, after Clemens' own death. As Michael Kiskis says in his introduction to "The Death of Jean," re-published in Kiskis' book *Mark Twain's Own Autobiography*, "The essay presents a final example of just how important the act of writing, of composition, was to Clemens" (245). But this time it seems that all visible traces of Mark Twain, except his extraordinary ability for articulation, were banished. The phrase "Jean is dead" occurs five times in the essay, providing a drumbeat of grief that emphasizes direct confrontation with the fact without evasion. Immediately following one of those five occurrences, Twain offers a simple yet overpowering analogy: "Possibly I now know what the soldier feels when a bullet crashes through his heart" (246)—a comparison whose literariness poignantly recalls the killing of the "stranger" near the end of "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed," but whose personal immediacy

aims at unflinching engagement with the reality to which the analogy applies.

The "stranger" in "A Private History" is, indeed, a "mysterious stranger" in that nothing definitive is known about his identity or the mission that's brought him along this road. Twain says about the "stranger's" death, "Once my imagination persuaded me that the dying man gave me a reproachful look out of the shadow of his eyes, and it seemed to me that I could rather that he had stabbed me than he had done that." He tries to persuade himself that he's not actually responsible for the man's death, but despite this effort, "Against a diseased imagination, demonstration goes for nothing." In "The Death of Jean," the stranger has become a loved one—in fact, in a sense, all of Sam Clemens' departed loved ones. Treating not only Jean's death, but also Susy's and Livy's, and perhaps by implication the deaths of his younger brother Henry, his infant son Langdon, and even the stranger in "A Private History" (all the deaths for which the aged Clemens felt responsibility)—and mentioning as well the recent departure of Clara to live in Europe—Clemens seems determined to finally experience all the bullets he may have succeeded in dodging as Mark Twain.

In his essay "When I Read This Book As a Child ... The Ugliness Was Pushed Aside': Adult Students Read and Respond to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," Kiskis quotes a student's response to "The Death of Jean":

The poignant documentary found in the descriptions of the emotional bankruptcy at the death of his daughter is one of the saddest, most moving pieces

of literature I have ever read. He spoke to me as a parent; a heartbroken man unable to muster any anger or frustration, capable only of expressing the utter desolation of a parent faced with the impossible task of burying a child. I felt like an intruder; his grief was so overwhelming and his sadness so compelling that I wanted to stop reading but all I could do was continue, and cry. (304)

Clemens himself said about the "The Death of Jean," "I am setting it down ... everything. It is a relief to me to write it. It furnishes me an excuse for thinking" (MTB 1549)—as if he needed, in fact, an excuse for being himself (or for searching for himself), for trying to face the all-too-real problems burdening his emotional life, but also for distancing himself from those problems by means of the perspective that writing demands. Kiskis remarks about "The Death of Jean," that "Clemens considered that it completed his autobiography" (MTOA, 262 n. 31). The autobiography was, itself, we could say, a way of distancing himself from the pain of his own life. "The Death of Jean," as its conclusion, served that purpose one last time. In doing so, it was, it seems, the last, and perhaps most eloquent, reach of Mark Twain, the searcher after documentation—even if, in the end, it opened up (rather than closing the door on) impossible difficulties and gaping mysteries. The death of Sam Clemens followed four months later.

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