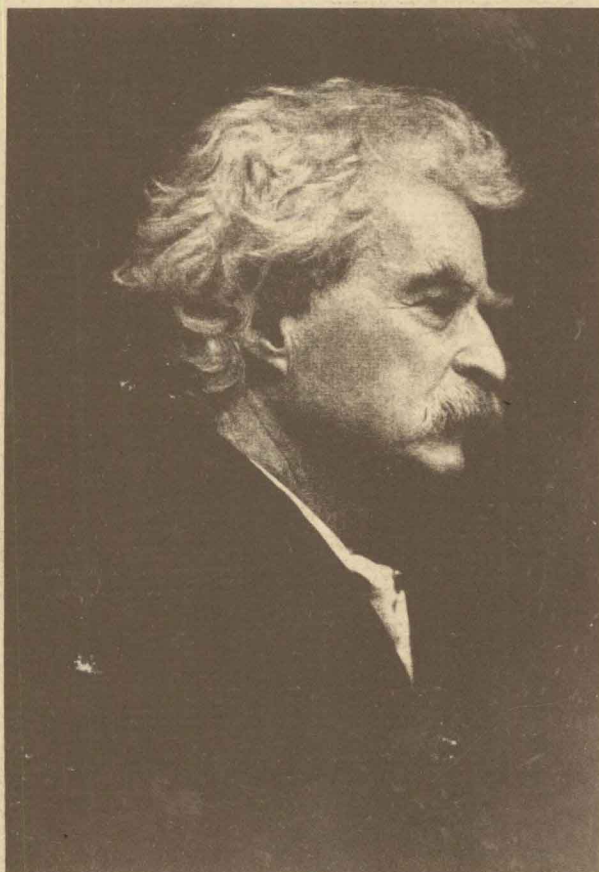


Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger

A Study of the Manuscript Texts



Sholom J. Kahn

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MYSTERIOUS STRANGER
A Study of the Manuscript Texts**

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Preface

One of the temples of American scholarship has been destroyed, and it must be rebuilt. *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916) was a pillar of classic Mark Twain criticism, especially after Van Wyck Brooks's *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920) made it the crux of many discussions. Essays were written about the tale, and elaborate theories about Mark Twain's literary character and entire career were constructed in which the tale played a central role.¹ But with publication of the long-awaited *Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*,² the general reader now can get to know what William M. Gibson has referred to as the various "Mysterious Strangers" (in the plural), which were formerly only available to research scholars. He must get used to thinking of the hitherto familiar text as "cut, cobbled-together, partially falsified" (34) and start looking at what Mark Twain actually wrote.

So many have felt the power of the "Paine-Duneka" text, as it should henceforth be properly labeled, that this will not be easy. And the newly edited manuscripts themselves, though vintage Clemens and much better than we have been led to believe, are not without difficulties. But thanks to the scholarship of John S. Tuckey, W. M. Gibson, and their associates, Mark Twain's last major fictional achievement is now open to exploration and criticism. This essay is designed, as a beginning, to show some of the delights the manuscripts offer, to facilitate understanding, and to highlight their fascinating problems.

1. See *Critics*, which includes a bibliography of "Selected Criticism" (see list of short references p. xiii).

2. A paperback edition, without the "Textual Apparatus," is titled simply: *The Mysterious Stranger* (1970). Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in this edition.

My book assumes a reader who wants to take a close look and has at hand the *Stranger Manuscripts* (the paperback edition will do). Its purpose is to lead such a reader gently through a jungle of biographical facts and into the texts themselves and also to advance a bit toward the critical goals of revealing their structure and rationale. The University of California edition does not yet seem to have been widely read, and the bad text mistitled *The Mysterious Stranger* is still available in many reprints and generally accepted as a Mark Twain classic. Thus, I have had to write an essay, not only of explication and criticism, but also of correction.

Three strategies have been adopted. First, I analyze in detail and quote copiously, especially from the newly published materials, in order to draw attention to passages I have found significant or rewarding. We know now that Samuel Clemens of Hannibal became a great virtuoso of American style and are gradually becoming aware that this mastery did not desert him in his last years.

Second, I make frequent reference to Mark Twain's other writings, early and late, in order to emphasize the fact that these writings of his last decade are far from eccentric and morbid, as was suggested by Bernard DeVoto's "symbols of despair" thesis; they are rather a ripe product of ideas long entertained and are central to an understanding of Mark Twain's entire oeuvre. Although the biographical issues are profound, they are only touched on lightly here and should be treated in depth elsewhere.

Third, in order to help clarify an exceedingly complex picture, I have placed at the end a group of appendixes and a section of supplementary notes. These materials, while important, may be of interest primarily to the advanced student; if included in the text they might prevent the general reader from seeing the forest for the trees. The presence of each supplementary note is indicated by a number in boldface type within brackets in the text; and in order to preserve the continuity of exposition, essential information from the notes is briefly repeated in the more critical and less technical body of text. Also in the notes, I shall occasionally be filling out gaps and obscurities in quotations from the manuscripts in order to facilitate exposition; all abbreviations and ampersands from the manuscripts are spelled out in full. The exact contents of

most of Mark Twain's surviving manuscript fragments are painstakingly reproduced in the Mark Twain Papers editions.

I have included in *Other Works Cited* a fairly complete listing of the articles and reviews I have published during some dozen years spent studying various aspects of Mark Twain's final phase (the two decades following completion of *A Connecticut Yankee*); *Deo volonte*, other related books may yet follow. It is a peculiarly satisfying task now to look back and thank the many individuals and institutions who have helped make this work possible and pleasant.

When I first sent to Henry Nash Smith (then recently retired as Literary Editor of the Mark Twain Papers) my thoughts on *The Mysterious Stranger* and the problem of its ending, he encouraged me to pursue what turned out to be an exceedingly complex set of problems. His suggestions that the story of Mark Twain's sojourn in Vienna (1897-1899), an important transitional moment in his career as a writer, could best be researched in that city led me to make four happy visits there; two of these (1967, 1973) were spent, with the financial support of the American Philosophical Society (Penrose Fund), digging up documents and other materials relating to the backgrounds of "Young Satan." Like so many others, I am indebted and grateful to Professor Smith, who has stimulated so much Mark Twain scholarship and criticism in our generation.

More specifically, however, my own work could not have begun until John S. Tuckey published his pioneering monograph, *Mark Twain and Little Satan: The Writing of "The Mysterious Stranger"* (1963). This established the foundations on which all subsequent scholarship on "The Mysterious Stranger" has been built. During the years when I was working in faraway Jerusalem, Professor Tuckey's unfailing interest, sound counsel, pertinent questions, and warm humanity helped keep me going. Though I of course exonerate him from all my errors, I am proud to count myself among his "students" and happy to express my thanks by dedicating this book to him.

Intensive work in the Mark Twain Papers and on the various drafts of the manuscript was made possible by three sabbatical leaves from The Hebrew University, where I am a member of the departments of English and American Studies. These leaves were spent teaching at the San Fernando Valley

State College (Northridge, California, 1966–1967), the University of California at Davis (1973), and Simon Fraser University (Burnaby, British Columbia, 1976–1977). I am grateful to the many colleagues, librarians, students, and friends at these institutions who helped in myriad ways; once again, my experience has proved the old proposition that the best way to learn is to try and teach. I was a grateful user of facilities at the Huntington Library and the New York Public Library (the Berg Collection). And I am grateful to my home university for the leaves, support, and help with funds for typists and to Valley State College (now California State University at Northridge) and Simon Fraser University for help with the typing of manuscripts.

Mark Twain scholars are a particularly fortunate lot, not only because of the genius of S. L. Clemens, but also because of the intelligent and cooperative administration of his papers by Frederick Anderson, who has mastered the art of combining efficiency with courtesy. One despairs of remembering all the help received while in the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, but I should single out from a potentially long list Hamlin Hill and Alan Gribben. William M. Gibson (formerly at New York University) at various stages gave generously of his materials, suggestions, and criticisms. The critics of Mark Twain are legion, but I should like to place on record my special debts to the work of Van Wyck Brooks, Howard Mumford Jones, Walter Blair, Roger Asselineau, Coleman O. Parsons, Paul Baender, and Sidney Berger.

My debts to people in Vienna are recorded in annual reports of the American Philosophical Society; but to those mentioned there I must add the name of Dr. Georg Weis, a loving resident of the city, without whose help my progress would have been much slower. And I was particularly inspired during the summer of 1967 by visits to the Mark Twain House in Hartford, Connecticut, then in the gracious charge of Mrs. Serie L. Larson. Knowing the charms of that house made more vivid my realization of the "exile" brought on by Clemens's bankruptcy, the death of Susy and illness of Livy, and long years of residence abroad.

Finally, to family and friends—who began to wince after awhile whenever I mentioned "Mark Twain"—I offer apologies and gratitude for their long-suffering patience. But like

Pudd'nhead Wilson, I must reverse an old maxim: Once bit by the Mark Twain mania, never shy again. There will be more need for patience.

S.J.K.

The Hebrew University

Jerusalem, Israel

July 1977

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Part One: Introduction

Toward Rehabilitation

The damage caused by the bad scholarship and partial criticism of the 1916 *Stranger* must be understood if it is to be undone. Both sets of related mistakes can be explained, though not justified, and they are not without parallels in literary history that touch some of the greatest writers. Elementary justice requires that we attempt to place ourselves in the position of Mark Twain's first literary executor, Albert Bigelow Paine, and his editor at Harper and Brothers, Frederick A. Duneka, when they were confronted with an accumulation of manuscript materials so large that it would take half a century to sort them out. But despite the importance of Paine's pioneering role as official biographer, we cannot help but agree with the editor of the *Stranger Manuscripts* that "the indictment of Paine as editor of *The Mysterious Stranger*" is a formidable one. In the words of William M. Gibson: "He secretly tried to fill Mark Twain's shoes, and he tampered with the faith of Mark Twain's readers" (3). Since Mark Twain's shoes are really unfillable by anyone else, dead or living, his faithful readers have no choice but to go back to the original texts.

Though Gibson used words as strong as *fraud* and *misrepresentational editorial work*, he also stated the case for Paine and Duneka, who represented the publishing practices and taste of their day and "thought they were acting to sustain and add to Mark Twain's reputation" (1-4). Their criteria were less scholarly than commercial, and their motives were certainly honorable—not entirely unlike those of the editors of the Shakespeare Folio. But one cannot help wishing that they had emulated instead the humility and honesty displayed later by Max Brod, who noted in the first edition of *The Castle* (1926), "Kafka never wrote the concluding chapter," and by the editors of the definitive edition of that novel (1951), in

which the additional materials were clearly discriminated in the text and an appendix. By way of contrast, Paine's arrogant procedure, however sincere, muddled the waters of Mark Twain scholarship for two generations.

Unfortunately, criticism based on poorly edited texts is not a novelty; and "the sense of an ending," which has played so central a role in discussions of the *Stranger*, is properly an important element in reader response. Back of the Paine-Duneka liberties was a mistaken notion, which prevailed for about a generation, of Mark Twain as a spontaneous folk artist, relatively unsophisticated and wild, in need of the trimming and advice so generously lavished on him by his wife, by William Dean Howells, and by other "editors." Van Wyck Brooks, who was so close to that generation in time, still provides the best available formulation of the issues in *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*.¹ From the literary point of view, Brooks saw Mark Twain as a potentially great satirist who became a mere humorist because "he was prohibited, on pain of social extinction, from expressing himself directly regarding the life about him" (pp. 202-3).

The issue is sharply drawn in the chapter entitled "Let Somebody Else Begin":

What is a satirist? A satirist, if I am not mistaken, is one who holds up to the measure of some more or less permanently admirable ideal the inadequacies and the deformities of the society in which he lives. It is Rabelais holding up to the measure of healthy-mindedness the obscurantism of the Middle Ages; it is Molière holding up to the measure of an excellent sociality everything that is eccentric, inelastic, intemperate; it is Voltaire holding up to the measure of the intelligence the forces of darkness and superstition. Satire is a criticism of the spirit of one's age, and of the facts in so far as the spirit is embodied in them, dictated by some powerful, personal and supremely conscious reaction of that spirit. If this is true, Mark Twain cannot be called a satirist. (pp. 214-15)

This seems to me an excellent formulation, but it leads to a false conclusion in the last sentence. There are two generali-

1. Van Wyck Brooks, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*. References hereafter will be to the revised edition of 1955 and will be cited in parentheses in the text.

ties here that need specification: neither "the spirit of one's age" nor the writings of Mark Twain were adequately treated in Brooks's pioneering study. In the sequel, it becomes clear that he was attacking especially "the puritanical commercialism of the Gilded Age" and "the petty aspects of the tribal morality of America" (p. 216). But this dates, and limits, Brooks's discussion to certain intense but time-bound concerns of the early 1920s, such as the "flappers" and anti-Babbitry of the Jazz Age.

Not that Brooks was wrong, as far as he went, but he was partial and unfair, since he was using Mark Twain as a whipping boy, as an example radically distorted to serve the purposes of his rather splendid sermon. As Malcolm Cowley put it in his introduction to the 1955 edition of Brooks's work, "He is emphasizing Twain's mistakes and failures so that others can profit by them" (p. 9), while the critic's proper task should be "to see the object as in itself it really is." This was especially true of Brooks's cavalier treatment of the "multitude of discarded manuscripts" that he had learned about from Paine's *Biography* and that he had dismissed as "hit-or-miss" without ever really examining them. Again:

"I have imagined," he [Mark Twain] said once, "a man three hundred thousand miles high picking up a ball like the earth and looking at it and holding it in his hand. It would be about like a billiard-ball to him, and he would turn it over in his hand and rub it with his thumb, and where he rubbed over the mountain ranges he might say, 'There seems to be some slight roughness here, but I can't detect it with my eye; it seems perfectly smooth to look at!'" There we have the Swiftian, the Rabelaisian note, the Rabelaisian frame for the picture that fails to emerge. The fancy exists in his mind, but he is able to do nothing with it: all he can do is to express a simple contempt, to rule human life as it were out of court. Mark Twain never completed these fancies precisely, one can only suppose, because they invariably led into this *cul-de-sac*. If life is really futile, then writing is futile also. The true satirist, however futile he may make life seem, never really believes it futile: his interest in its futility is itself a desperate registration of some instinctive belief that it might be, that it could be, full of significance, that, in fact, it is full of significance. . . . That

sense Mark Twain had never attained: in consequence, his satirical gestures remained mere passes in the air. (p. 236)

This is another example of the same non sequitur; and the phrase "one can only suppose" gives away the fact that Brooks, like subsequent generations of critics equally ignorant of many of the primary sources, had (or should have had) a bad conscience about Mark Twain. One should not arrive at sweeping generalizations like "he is able to do nothing with it" without having examined all the evidence. But now that we have the essential facts—that is the texts—criticism can build on the stronger foundations of objective scholarship.

I

The critical issues are by no means simple, but the example of Kafka illustrates the fact that the problem of the ending should appear less central to us than it did to critics of the previous generation. Gibson has speculated "that a writer or editor who is more sympathetic to Twain's divided mind and creative dilemma in his late life" might, "in the future, produce a better version than that pieced together by Paine and Duneka" (34). But why add yet a fifth to the four distinct texts now available? Surely we have had enough synthetic concoctions by writers trying to fill Mark Twain's shoes. Of course, this is constantly being done with Mark Twain's writings and is probably one mark of his vitality as a "folk" creator: Hal Holbrook has, in fact, successfully filled his shoes as a lecturer, and Tom and Huck live on in radio and television serials and movies. But the *Stranger Manuscripts*, as Gibson says, have "their own value and interest," and any such future synthesizer will be expected to acknowledge "openly when he selects or modifies or creates or concludes."²

2. Something remotely like this was done by John Seelye in his remarkable tour de force, *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He was not a synthesizer, however, but a creative "rewriter" who produced his own novel, based on Mark Twain's and in response to a generation of criticism. As he writes in the introduction entitled "De ole true Huck": "Most of the parts was good ones, and I could use them. But Mark Twain's book is for children and such, whilst this one here is for crickits [*sic*]. And now that they've got *their* book, maybe they'll leave the other one alone" (p. xii).