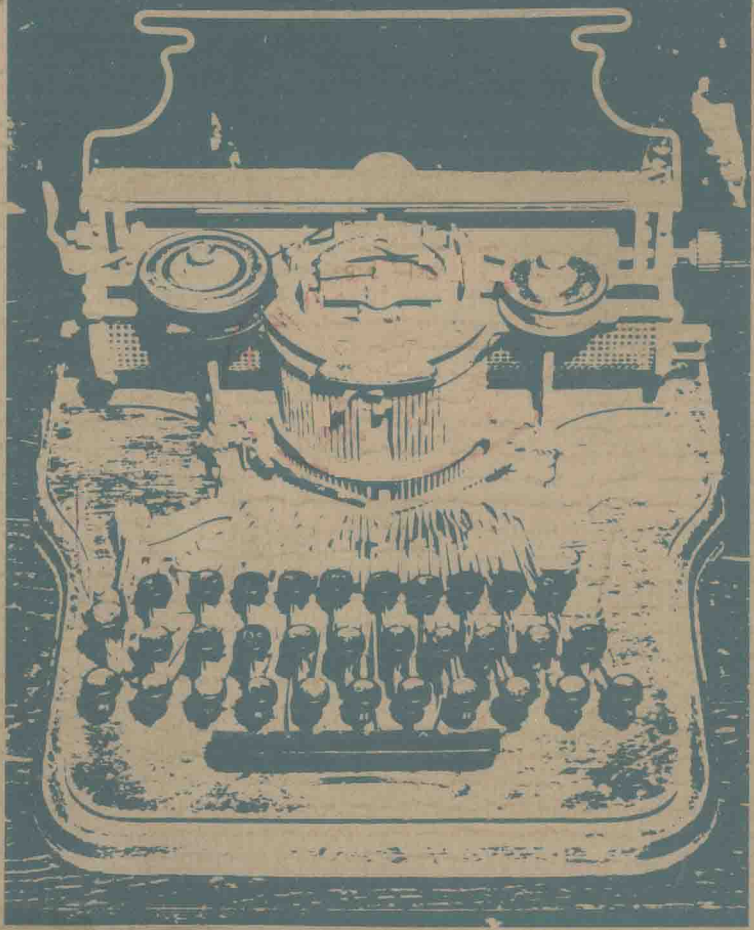
Mark Twain's Last Years As a Writer



William R. Macnaughton

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Introduction

There was a time during the latter part of the 1880s, as he worked with sporadic enthusiasm on *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court,* when Mark Twain felt that he was approaching the end of his writing career. The manuscript, he hoped, would be finished around the same time as the Paige typesetter, an invention in which he had invested heavily. Because the marvelous apparatus would make him a millionare and his publishing house would continue to prosper, he would no longer need to write; he could become Samuel Clemens, businessman.[1] Time proved, however, that his predictive powers were roughly commensurate with those of his Connecticut Yankee, whose dreams of a mechanized and democratized England were obliterated at the Battle of the Sand Belt. As Mark Twain continued to feed money to the omnivorous machine, it gradually became obvious that his predictions would be disastrously wrong. Words continued to pour from his pen: essays; short stories; sketches; longer fiction of inferior quality, like *The American Claimant, Tom Sawyer, Detective, Tom Sawyer Abroad,* and *Joan of Arc;* and one fascinating, flawed novella of generally superior quality called *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson,* which was miraculously extracted from an unfunny farce, "Those Extraordinary Twins." More significantly, rather than becoming affluent, he subsided ingloriously into bankruptcy by the mid-1890s.

Primarily because of the urgings of his wife and of his friend and adviser H. H. Rogers of Standard Oil, the writer decided to pay his creditors one hundred cents on the dollar; then he (along with his wife, Livy, and his second daughter,

1. In his 24 August 1889 letter to Howells, written while he was awaiting the proofs of *Connecticut Yankee,* Mark Twain mentioned his hope that the novel would be his literary "swansong" (MTHL, 2:610–11). For abbreviations used in the footnotes, see "Short References," pp. ix–x.

Clara) began a world speaking tour in 1895, which was completed in the late summer of the next year. Twain then remained in England and, while waiting for the two women to return from America with his other two daughters, contemplated the book that would chronicle his travels. But his eldest daughter, Susy, did not return. She had died of spinal meningitis while her mother and sister were sailing for home. Livy, shattered, recrossed the Atlantic with Clara and her younger daughter, Jean (whose own condition was soon to be diagnosed as epilepsy). For approximately the next year the family secluded itself in London; Mark Twain labored on his travel book and fought with his grief. His career after he completed *Following the Equator* in the summer of 1897 will be the central concern of this study.

The consensus about Mark Twain as a writer during these last approximately thirteen years is that he was a failure—that although literally reports of his demise that circulated before he returned to America may have been greatly exaggerated, figuratively they were not. Critics have pointed to the abundant and pitiful array of manuscripts that he worked on so obsessively and never finished; have claimed that the ones he did complete are no longer worth reading; and have noted that the finished, posthumously published "Mysterious Stranger"—a narrative with a flair worthy of Mark Twain—was not completed by him, but was laundered and pasted together by Albert Bigelow Paine and Frederick A. Duneka. That this is the consensus is suggested primarily by two facts: first, practically all the general interpretative-evaluative works about the author either ignore this period or give it short shrift, typically including an extended discussion only of the Paine-Duneka "Mysterious Stranger" (with perhaps a nod in the direction of political writings such as "To The Person Sitting in Darkness" or short stories such as "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg"); second, despite the recent publication by the Mark Twain Papers of unfinished manuscripts written during these years, such as "Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy," "Which Was It?," and "The Refuge of the Derelicts," there is a dearth of journal articles devoted to the late literature.[2]

2. There has, however, been considerable interest shown in the

This, of course, is not to imply that any scholarly "establishment" conspiracy of silence exists in connection with these writings. My impression is that many admirers of Mark Twain either have not read this material (perhaps because they believe the consensus about it), have not read it recently, or have not read it with sufficient sympathy for the writer's purposes. What well may be the most formidable obstacle impeding an appreciation and understanding of many of the later writings is the continuing influence of the work of Mark Twain's second literary executor, Bernard De Voto. It is difficult, after reading in De Voto's *Mark Twain at Work* his remarkable essay "The Symbols of Despair," not to think of the words *despair* and *frustration* when pondering the

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polemical writing that Mark Twain did during these years, although little of this work is critical, most of it being concerned either with explaining the history of certain political attitudes held by the humorist or with explaining the social context in which his pronouncements were made. My own study touches upon the polemical literature in several chapters and focuses upon it in Chapter 7. On all these occasions, I have attempted to acknowledge my debts to scholars such as Louis Budd and William Gibson, who have done excellent work in this area. My general understanding of Mark Twain's career as a whole has been aided immeasurably by my reading not only of the studies to which I often acknowledge specific indebtedness in these notes, but also of the work of scholars whose findings I have seldom used directly. In this latter category I would include such books as those by Pascal Covici, Jr., James Cox, and Kenneth Lynn on Mark Twain's humor; Roger Salomon's on the writer's attitude toward history; Albert Stone's on his use of childhood in his literature; and Gladys Bellamy's pioneering work on Mark Twain's literary techniques. Since one of my interests throughout my research was to discover whether significant continuities existed between the pre- and post-1897 writings, all of this scholarship and criticism proved valuable to me. On the other hand, with the exception of commentary on the fiction relating to little Satan (usually the Paine/Duneka "Mysterious Stranger"), there is little discussion of the other fiction that Mark Twain worked on during this late period. When I have discovered criticism relating to this fiction I have seized it eagerly, for example, Howard Baetzhold's comments on "The Double-Barreled Detective Story," Stanley Brodwin's discussion of the Adam and Eve material ("The Humor of the Absurd: Mark Twain's Adamic Diaries"); Arthur Pettit's remarks about "Which Was It?," and—most recently—Sholom Kahn's book on the "Mysterious Stranger" manuscripts.

manuscripts Mark Twain worked on after 1896.[3] It is hard not to think of these words even if we remember that, from De Voto's point of view, Mark Twain was able eventually to transcend his problems; and even if we know from John Tuckey's *Mark Twain and Little Satan* that DeVoto's guesses about the periods in which certain manuscripts were written were generally incorrect. If, moreover, one has read Justin Kaplan's *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* or Hamlin Hill's *Mark Twain, God's Fool,* it is difficult not to be impressed with the variations on the word *obsession* that both writers use so effectively in explaining Clemens's activities after he returned to America in October 1900.[4] As well, it is incontrovertible that the writer was afflicted with many savagely bleak moods, that he did circle repeatedly over a few ideas while attempting to give them fictional embodiment, and that several of his manuscripts do provide only "the thinnest kind of disguise for the author's own inner world," as John Gerber has written.[5] It is also true that many of his projects aborted; that much of his finished work is not to the contemporary taste; and that he wrote neither another *Huckleberry Finn,* nor a Menippian satire, nor even an attack on the type of man that his "godfather," H. H. Rogers, is assumed really to have been. These are the works that many of the writer's admirers—not only Van Wyck Brooks in *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*—would have had him create.[6]

Despite these facts, the words *despair* and *obsession* will be conscientiously avoided in this study, not only because they have serious theological and psychological implications, but also—and most significantly—because such abstractions are misleading when used to explain complex states of mind. It is the complexity of the problem—the reasons for Mark

3. *MTW,* pp. 105–30.

4. I will, of course, have more to say about both books later in this study.

5. John Gerber, "Mark Twain," in *American Literary Scholarship, 1967,* ed. James Woodress (Durham: Duke University Press, 1969), p. 58.

6. Van Wyck Brooks, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1920). This work remains, it seems to me, the most provocative book written about Mark Twain. It is filled with oversimplifications, but these have enough truth in them to almost compel that they be confronted.

Twain's inability to finish almost all his major projects—that will be examined in this book. Mark Twain started manuscripts, laid them aside, returned to them, shifted direction, then discarded them, all for a multitude of reasons: some, to the outsider, are picayune—he had a cold, he was moving to a new place of residence—some, from any point of view, are profound and are intimately related to his conception of himself as a man and a writer and to the problems of being a popular author for a large series of audiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When Mark Twain's hiatuses, his changes in direction, and his stops are examined closely, one comes to realize the wisdom of specificity, of focusing on a particular decision at a particular time. The only generalization that will be hazarded at this moment about the causes of his failure to complete several manuscripts is that Mark Twain had an unfortunate fondness for stories spun off from one idea—the idea of a man having a horrible dream of manifold disasters resulted in "The Great Dark," "Which Was the Dream?," and "Which Was It?," the narratives somewhat misleadingly referred to as the "despair group." On the other hand, it will be one of the purposes of this study to explain the reasons he was enamored of this concept.

I will devote a substantial amount of space to examining the writer's life during the approximately four years between Susy's death and his return to America in 1900. Within this period, Clemens and his family wandered through England, Switzerland, Austria, and Sweden for a variety of reasons: surcease; economy; the health of Livy Clemens and of the younger daughter, Jean; the musical aspirations of the older daughter, Clara. The links between the writer's life and his profession are crucial during this period, and not enough useful and revealing words have been written about them.[7] In discussing his last American years, the references to Clemens's

7. In addition to the biographies of Mark Twain by A. B. Paine (volumes 30–33 of *Writings*) and by Justin Kaplan (*Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*), two books that contain useful information about this period are DeLancey Ferguson's *Mark Twain: Man and Legend* and Arthur Scott's *Mark Twain at Large*. Of the published information, the most important may be found in the volumes of correspondence between Clemens and Howells (*MTHL*) and, in particular, between Clemens and H. H. Rogers (*HHR*).

life will be shorter and less frequent, because much of the material is familiar. At times, however, I will suggest interpretations of Clemens's actions that differ from those offered, in particular, by Hamlin Hill in *God's Fool.* I should stress at this point both how much I have learned from Hill's book and also how substantially I disagree with the image that it projects of its subject. Having examined many of the same documents as Hill, I remain unconvinced that, as *God's Fool* suggests, Clemens was so frequently out of control.[8] Nor when I look do I see the unprincipled monster conjured up by some sections of this provocative, but I think sometimes misleading, study.

In addition to its detailed concern for the vicissitudes apparent in the Mark Twain manuscripts, my own work has a polemical purpose: to demonstrate the solid value of much of the literature that he wrote between 1897 and 1910 (in particular, between 1897 and 1906). Although a great deal of the Mark Twain writing was fragmentary, there exist some brilliant, memorable fragments. Moreover, many of the short pieces that he chose to publish during his lifetime were superb, not simply because they supported the right causes, but because they demonstrate great skill, particularly the essays,

8. In aligning myself (however uncomfortably) with the tradition established by Mark Twain's official biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, I realize that I am not alone. In his reviews of *God's Fool,* for example, John Tuckey has indicated essential disagreement with some of its ideas, by saying, for example, "despite the tensions of his last years, he remained appreciably sane as well as creative" (*American Literature* 46 [1974]: 117). Also, in his "The Turn-of-the-Century Mark Twain: A Revisit," Bertram Mott asserts, "Surely there is copious evidence that the pessimism of the-turn-of-the-century Mark Twain, like the premature account of his death, has been somewhat exaggerated" (p. 16). And earlier, Edward Wagenknecht wrote, "Actually the contrast was not as clearcut as that, for Mark Twain knew a good deal of happiness even in his last period" (*Mark Twain: The Man and His Work,* p. 205). Most recently, Sholom Kahn has written a book whose central purpose is to convince readers that the "total effect" of many of Mark Twain's later writings—particularly "No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger"—is "one of mature mastery and control" (*Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger: A Study of the Manuscript Texts,* p. 7).

like "King Leopold's Soliloquy," that are reputedly undisciplined.[9]

Before this introductory chapter is complete, a few idiosyncratic aspects of the following study should be explained—for example, its relative lack of lengthy references to the autobiographical dictations. On occasions, Mark Twain believed that his developing, sprawling, mammoth autobiography would outlive anything he had ever done. There is no doubt, however, that posterity will judge the writer to have been wrong, after difficult and inevitably controversial editorial decisions have been made about the corpus of the work and after responsible, scholarly editions of the autobiography have finally been published. Many of the entries published in the volumes edited by Albert Bigelow Paine and in *Mark Twain in Eruption* are pleasurable and fascinating, it is true. It is also true, however, that the majority of the autobiographical material is trivial, self-indulgent, and—what is most unfortunate coming from Mark Twain—dull. This is particularly true of the dictations that are still unpublished. Moreover, Hamlin Hill's *God's Fool* contains, scattered throughout the text, a number of intelligent comments about the dictations. For these reasons, therefore, I have not felt obliged to discuss the material at length, but only when it has suited my purposes.

Neither have I commented at length about the nonautobiographical pieces that Mark Twain worked on after *What Is Man?* was published in 1906. The scholarship already available seems to me to provide good and sufficient discussion of essentially insignificant (except for "Letters from the Earth") material.[10]

What may also strike the reader as idiosyncratic about the following study is the amount of space devoted in it to cer-

9. In reading Maxwell Geismar's enthusiastic *Mark Twain: An American Prophet*, one sometimes receives the impression that the only reason certain pieces are being praised is because their politics are, from Geismar's point of view, exemplary.

10. See, for example, the relevant sections in the several biographical works that discuss these years; the introductions and textual notes written for volumes such as *F of M* published by the Mark Twain Papers; and Stanley Brodwin's article, "Mark Twain's Masks of Satan: The Final Phase."

tain other works: several pages, for example, to an essay written in 1897 called "Stirring Times in Austria"; only a few pages to "No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger." In each of these instances, my justification is related to this book's primary focus, which is on Samuel Clemens neither as dismal drifting derelict, nor as Lear raging on the heath, nor as American prophet. It is instead on Mark Twain as professional writer. Any piece, therefore, that is particularly revealing about the man in this role will be deferred to.