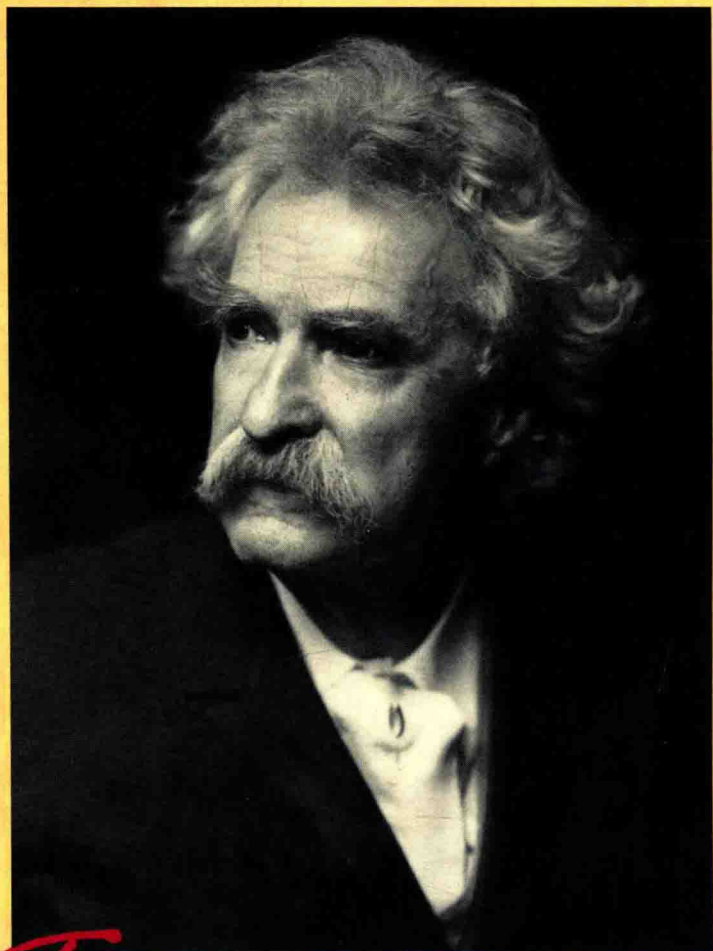

MODERN • NOVELISTS

Mark



Twain

PETER • MESSENT

MACMILLAN MODERN NOVELISTS

MARK TWAIN

Peter Messent



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Nottingham
February 1996

PETER MESSENT

General Editor's Preface

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

In the generations immediately preceding and following 1914, the novel underwent a radical redefinition of its nature and possibilities. The present series of monographs is devoted to the novelists who created the modern novel and to those who, in their turn, either continued and extended, or reacted against and rejected, the traditions established during that period of intense exploration and experiment. It includes a number of those who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century but whose innovative contribution to the art of fiction makes it impossible to ignore them in any account of the modern novel; it also includes the so-called 'modernists' and those who in the mid- and late twentieth century have emerged as outstanding practitioners of this genre. The scope is, inevitably, international; not only, in the migratory and exile-haunted world of our century, do writers refuse to heed national boundaries – 'English' literature lays claim to Conrad the Pole, Henry James the American, and Joyce the Irishman – but geniuses such as Flaubert,

Dostoevsky and Kafka have had an influence on the fiction of many nations.

Each volume in the series is intended to provide an introduction to the fiction of the writer concerned, both for those approaching him or her for the first time and for those who are already familiar with some parts of the achievement in question and now wish to place it in the context of the total *oeuvre*. Although essential information relating to the writer's life and times is given, usually in an opening chapter, the approach is primarily critical and the emphasis is not upon 'background' or generalisations but upon close examination of important texts. Where an author is notably prolific, major texts have been made to convey, more summarily, a sense of the nature and quality of the author's work as a whole. Those who want to read further will find suggestions in the select bibliography included in each volume. Many novelists are, of course, not only novelists but also poets, essayists, biographers, dramatists, travel writers and so forth; many have practised shorter forms of fiction; and many have written letters or kept diaries that constitute a significant part of their literary output. A brief study cannot hope to deal with all of these in detail, but where the shorter fiction and non-fictional writings, private and public, have an important relationship to the novels, some space has been devoted to them.

NORMAN PAGE

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1

Keeping Both Eyes Open: 'The Stolen White Elephant'

When detectives called for a drink, the would-be facetious bar-keeper resurrected an obsolete form of expression, and said, 'Will you have an eye-opener?' All the air was thick with sarcasms.

(‘The Stolen White Elephant’)¹

I

In this opening chapter, I look closely at one of Twain’s most puzzling short stories, ‘The Stolen White Elephant’, to identify how, in this specific case, the narrative works, and where its comic effects lie. Although my general approach in this book will be chronological, I begin with a text written in 1878, two years after the publication of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876).² It might seem perverse to disrupt my main organising principle so early. I do so because ‘The Stolen White Elephant’ provides a particularly appropriate introduction to my analysis of Twain’s work as a whole, and the problems involved in such a task.

The sheer size of an elephant, and its incongruity in an American setting, would make it unmissable. Yet, in Twain’s story, it has been stolen; has disappeared from view. The detective looks for clues to find the elephant, but it is barging chaotically around the landscape

as he does so. The relationship here between the obvious and the hidden is peculiarly unstable. I would argue that the stress in this text on such instability, incongruity, and shifting perspective, provides a paradigm for Twain's work as a whole. 'The Stolen White Elephant', despite its undoubted celebrity, has had comparatively little written about it; a result, perhaps, of its enigmatic quality. I start my book by giving it, to adapt a phrase from 'Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog', my own little critical punch behind.³ Then, in the final section of the chapter, I widen my scope to suggest the relevance of this analysis to my larger argument.

'The Stolen White Elephant' is a narrative that appears to be 'pointedly pointless'.⁴ Though the specific comic techniques Twain uses can be identified, the story as a whole, like so much of Twain's work, seems not quite to add up. The reader is left with a peculiar sense of not having got the joke. This sense of puzzlement, the struggle to interpret satisfactorily a problematic text, is (self-reflexively) signalled as a subject of narrative concern when Inspector Blunt, the chief of the detectives employed to recover the stolen goods, places an advertisement in the morning papers to open negotiations with the thief. His message remains a form of gibberish for both the narrator and the reader (though their response to it implicitly differs). Shared codes break down as both are left on the outside, as it were; the point of the communication completely blunted. The detective's cryptogram is impenetrable: 'A.—xwblv. 242 N. Tjnd—fz328wmlg. Ozpo,—; 2 m ! ogw. Mum.' (p. 25).

The reader has a similar feeling of being left stranded at the conclusion of Twain's story. The enigmatic nature of the text as a whole, however, takes a different form than that of Blunt's brief message. The language of 'The Stolen White Elephant' is straightforward enough. Its cryptic element does not lie in any inability to understand the individual phrase or sentence. Rather, it is the overall humorous intent which remains obscure and causes the sense of frustrated expectation⁵ already noted.

I would suggest, however, that it is in this very sense of readerly frustration and disorientation that the comic ends of the narrative (uncomfortably) lie. The story's apparent pointlessness *is* its point. A type of double effect operates here, for it is only as our initial sense of puzzlement is explored, or so I would contend,⁶ that another level of humour becomes apparent. We then discover a

comedy of estrangement that speaks to the very condition of the modern – a form of humour that operates at an epistemological level. The story, as I see it, finally operates as a form of anti-narrative 'programmed to go nowhere'⁷ and it is here that its deeper 'joke' is to be found.

It is at this point that I need to add a note of hesitation and qualification concerning the nature of my own critical activity. An indication of Twain's mastery of the comic form is that to try to interpret or explain his humour is to risk falling, figuratively, flat on one's face. When I do so, I always have the sinking feeling I may be missing the point entirely, may be ending up as the victim of Twain's joke. (The gap, in 'The Stolen White Elephant', between the myopic logic of the detectives and the elephant's random force is the main incongruity round which the story pivots.) The former are burlesqued for their 'pompous assumption of infallibility and ridiculous inappropriate procedures'.⁸ As I do my own critical detective work, here and in the rest of the book, trying to pin down and explain the incongruities and shifting effects in Twain's work, I hope at least to avoid a similar fate.

II

On first reading 'The Stolen White Elephant', clear parallels emerge with Twain's other humorous sketches, particularly in the use of narrative frames and of a central deadpan narrator. The title of the story is followed by a footnote attributed to the author (M.T.). This note both gives the provenance of the sketch and immediately foregrounds the potentially problematic relationship of the real to the fictitious: 'Left out of *A Tramp Abroad*, because it was feared that some of the particulars had been exaggerated, and that others were not true. Before these suspicions had been proven groundless, the book had gone to press'. A first narrator (presumably the same M.T.) then briefly introduces the teller of the main tale as 'a chance railway acquaintance . . . a gentleman more than seventy years of age . . . [whose] good and gentle face and earnest and sincere manner imprinted the unmistakable stamp of truth upon every statement which fell from his lips' (p. 1). The latter's tale is then told, in the first-person voice, with no return made to the initial

narrator. The immediate sense of possible contradiction, as the reference to suspected exaggeration gives way, first to its dismissal, and then to the deep earnestness of the central narrative voice, strongly indicates to any Twain reader that the story will work as a hoax: the literary form with which he was identified from the early *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* days onward.

Susan Gillman sees Twain's use of such a form as 'responding to an insatiable appetite, both on popular and literary levels of culture, for the hoax and the stunt, often in the form of the sensational . . . "true crime" report'. She links Twain, in this use, to the figure of P. T. Barnum⁹ whose career 'exploited the national appetite for fraud'.¹⁰ Barnum himself figures in Twain's tale, cutting a deal with Blunt, as a telegram reports, for 'exclusive privilege of using elephant as travelling advertising medium from now till detectives find him. Wants to paste circus-posters on him' (p. 18). Barnum's presence, and the comic rupture in narrative expectation and logic which has the elephant then 'plastered over with circus-bills' (p. 20) just three hours after Barnum's original despatch, while large numbers of detectives continue unsuccessfully in its pursuit, all confirm – if it needs to be confirmed – the nature of the literary form Twain is using.

Any of Twain's contemporaries reading with even one metaphorical eye open would probably have made the connection between the subject of Twain's story and the frontier expression 'seeing the Elephant'. Forrest G. Robinson speaks of Twain's own 'predisposition during his years in the Far West (described in *Roughing It*) to 'fall lock, stock and barrel for the practical joke that the mining frontier amounted to'. To see the Elephant, in this mining context, was to be aware of this joke, to see through the hoax. For behind western illusions of wealth and success lay mainly 'the Elephant of gross self-deception and inevitable failure'. Robinson comments further on the way Twain's art relates to the hoax that the frontier turned out to be, when he writes that 'having seen the Elephant, [Twain] would plant a whole herd'.¹¹ In the title and subject matter of this sketch is the clear acknowledgement of one such (individual) literary planting.

When Marcel Gutwirth describes comic surprise in terms of 'the good laugh at [one's] own expense' that follows 'the joyous sense of having been had – in no very material sense, however – and having got over it',¹² he might have had the hoax in mind. Twain

was a master of the deadpan and his earlier famous sketch, 'Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog', foregrounds the difficulty of penetrating narrative imposture: 'because Simon Wheeler never breaks his own deadpan presentation, we never know exactly who is the duper and who is the duped'.¹³ The question of the identity of the hoaxer is also a central one in 'The Stolen White Elephant'. Its main narrator, the aged gentleman, is unflinchingly deadpan throughout the story, but there is little evidence of any hoax being played on his part. His deadpan appears not to conceal anything. It would seem, rather, to be a way of representing both his naivety and gullibility. For the narrative ends with an affirmation of his 'undimmed . . . admiration' for Inspector Blunt as 'the greatest detective the world has ever produced' (p. 28), despite all the evidence both of the detective's ineptitude and of the narrator's own duping.

It is the first narrator (M.T.?) whose deadpan in this story seems to conceal the hoax.¹⁴ He is the one who vouches for the truth of a story which contains so many patent absurdities, and who speaks of the possibility of exaggeration only to deny it. If the hoax is being perpetrated on the reader as he or she follows the plot of a detective story to its (generically) unsatisfactory ending, it is none the less of an odd kind. For two different aspects of the narrative work against each other here, and any attempt to foreground either one at the expense of the (overlooked) other cannot succeed. As I proceed, this will become a recurrent motif in my analysis of Twain's work.

Here, the comic incongruities in 'The Stolen White Elephant' make it clear that the detective story genre is being undermined. They also alert us to the fact that a 'swindle' is occurring: that the whole story is a comic fabrication. Indeed, such incongruities put us in the position of detector rather than victim of this swindle. At the same time though, as readers, we are caught up in the detective plot, and *cannot help* but follow it to its strange and elliptic conclusion. Blunt places his coded advertisement, the meaning of which remains obscure. He then leaves his client (who is also the main narrator) supposedly to meet with the criminals at midnight. Both client and reader are left ignorant of what then occurs and are left to puzzle over a series of unanswered questions. *Are there any criminals actually involved? Does a meeting take place? Is the detective duping his client? Finally Blunt literally stumbles over the rotting corpse of the stolen elephant – if it ever was stolen – with no*

further detail given of the clues or information which led him there. The detective is then celebrated as a hero for recovering the elephant, the death of which renders that act of recovery pointless. These joint strands of the narrative ending operate in antithetical relationship to that logical clarity with which detective stories, and their closures, are conventionally associated.

Twain's comedy might be explained as operating precisely in the gap between his story's two narrative strands. The reader is aware of all the incongruities of the tale which render its status as a detective story absurd. Yet, he or she is none the less involuntarily caught within the fictional system which has been engaged; is made to follow that detective story through to its frustrating – as far as the conventions of the genre are concerned – conclusion. This may be where at least one element of the hoax lies: on a reader who has been caught between variant ways of reading and responding to a text; who is led to read a story in two ways, and ends up stalled between them. 'That is what a joke is', according to Max Eastman, 'getting somebody going and then leaving him up in the air.'¹⁵ Twain makes us aware of having been trapped between two narrative positions. The hoax occurs in catching us mentally off guard. We realise that our minds have been 'briefly taken in'¹⁶ as, having placed ourselves in a superior position to the main narrator, and aware (unlike him) that everything in this story tells us not to take it seriously, we nonetheless fall into the trap of puzzlement or frustration at the detective story's unsatisfactory end. We end up looking for readerly satisfaction in a form of narrative that has already been subjected to parody and which we have been thus warned not to take seriously.¹⁷ These two readerly responses cannot be squared, and recognising that we have been left up in the air, all we can do is acknowledge our awareness that we have been taken in by this narrative joke.

III

I retrace my steps here to explore the ways in which we come to know that this narrative is a comic fabrication as we read it, and not a detective story to be taken seriously. If humour can be associated with 'the playful character of contradictory signals that come at

[consciousness] simultaneously',¹⁸ then 'The Stolen White Elephant' complies with comic expectation from the first. A gift from the King of Siam to the Queen of England, the white elephant of the title is stolen from the main narrator, a member of the Indian civil service who is responsible for conveying the present from the one country to the other. This theft occurs in Jersey City. Although there is an explanation given for the presence of the elephant in that last location – the journey has been broken in New York and the animal is in need of recuperation – some sense of (potentially playful) disconnection and of the anomalous has already entered the narrative. This occurs in different ways: in the range of geographical locations introduced; and in the presence of an exotic beast, a 'transcendentally royal . . . token of gratitude', of specifically 'Oriental' nature (p. 2), in a modernised and urban, western and republican, setting. It comes, most of all, in the mental and visual play that is released with the idea of an elephant, the epitome of loud enormity,¹⁹ now become the proverbial needle in the haystack, the hidden object which must be found. The problematic quality of the relationship between what is obvious and what is not is placed right at the centre of the text.

The process of detection itself is parodied as Blunt proceeds to ascertain the facts of the case. The humorous nature of the narrative becomes overt as he first asks a set of routine questions which apply to missing persons, and then responds to the elephant's disappearance in the manner routine to burglary cases. From the fact that the two reactions are mutually inconsistent, and that neither is appropriate to this stolen animal, comes something of the sense of comic contradiction which now plays through the text:

'Now – name of the elephant?'

'Hassan Ben Ali Ben Selim Abdullah Mohammed Moise Alhammal Jamsetjeebhoy Dhuleep Sultan Ebu Bhudpoor.'

'Very Well. Given Name?'

'Jumbo.'²⁰ . . .

'Parents Living?'

'No – dead.' . . .

'Very well. . . . Now please describe the elephant, and leave out no particular, however insignificant' . . .

[Blunt takes down this description and reads it back to the narrator]