

# *Soul-Butter and Hogwash: Mark Twain and Frontier Religion*

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When discussing Mark Twain's religious attitudes, his biographers have characteristically focused on the last decades of his life, those final, frustrating years in which Twain said going to church gave him dysentery. Nevertheless, the early years—the western years as it were—are crucial to any real understanding of Twain's attitude toward religion, revealing moments of a remarkable religious experience and providing the backdrop against which those last decades, so full of financial strife and personal tragedy, must be seen. It is of that early period, completed before he was 50 years old, that I wish to speak.

Twain frequently called his religious life "Presbyterianism," the faith of his mother's family, but that label became for him a kind of shoebox repository into which he shoved everything from the faith John Knox espoused to the most nebulous sort of Christian belief. Unlike his friend William Dean Howells, who worried a great deal about the difference between a Unitarian and a Universal, Twain did not have a mind turned to fine theological distinctions. But he did have a soul gripped by the Puritan fathers, a grip which relentlessly affected his moods and his metaphors. He named his house cats, rather apocalyptically,

Famine, Pestilence, Satan, and Sin; he thought the height of confidence was a Christian with four aces; smugness was a friend waiting for a vacancy in the trinity; and so on ad infinitum—or, for him, ad nauseum. Fear, punishment, conscience, duty, the hand of God, death—these were the staples in his moral pantry. A compulsive guilt seeker, he blamed himself for at least the deaths of a brother, a son, and a daughter, and he finally despised the human race because it included men like himself. As his closest minister-friend, Joseph Twitchell, once said, Sam Clemens was too orthodox on the doctrine of total human depravity.

This religious preoccupation and subsequent struggle is brilliantly if unwittingly posed in that earliest boyhood image of the ponderous word of God suffocating an already dying man. Twain wrote in his *Autobiography*:

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*The shooting down of poor Smarr in the Main Street at noonday supplied me with dreams and in them I always saw again the grotesque closing picture—the great family Bible spread open upon the profane old man’s breast by some thoughtful idiot . . . adding the torture of its leaden weight to the dying struggles. We are curiously made. In all that throng of gaping and sympathetic onlookers there was not one with common sense enough to perceive that an anvil would have been in better taste there than the Bible, less open to sarcastic criticism and swifter in its atrocious work. In my nightmares I gasped and struggled for breath under the crush of that vast book for many a night.* [Samuel L. Clemens, *The Writings of Mark Twain* (Definitive Edition) 36:17; hereinafter cited as *Writings*]

For the most part, he gasped and struggled under the crush of it for most of his life.

The first Sunday School Sam attended in Hannibal, Missouri, was held in the then newly finished Methodist church known as “the Old Ship of Zion,” and the teacher of Sam’s class there was a stonemason by the name of Richmond. “He was a very kindly and considerate Sunday School teacher,” Sam recalled more than half a century later, “and he was never hard on me” (*Writings*, 37:214). For the nearly three years he attended the Old Ship of Zion, Sam remained under Mr. Richmond’s spiritual care and out of those few years and fond memories came the seeds of a remarkable literature. As his literary advisor and most perceptive friend later observed, “There are no more vital passages in his fiction than those which embody character as it is affected for good as well as evil by the severity of the local Sunday schooling and church going (William Dean Howells, *My Mark Twain*, p. 172; hereinafter cited as Howells).

It is unlikely that Sam ever attended the Old Ship of Zion after his eighth year, yet perhaps because of the fondness with which he remembered his experiences there it remained

in his imagination as the setting for episodes which took place well into his adolescent years.

In 1848 all the Clemens family but Sam’s father formally joined the Presbyterian Church, much to the delight of his grandmother Casey who always said her favorite doctrine was predestination. It was then that young Sam learned, in Howells’s famous phrase, “to fear God and dread the Sunday School” (Howells, p. 125).

As often as it seemed advisable, the boy would violate the Sabbath by rolling rocks down Holiday Hill or by swimming in the Mississippi River. Of course providential displeasure with this latter sin was serious wrath to incur and it was done at the very peril of one’s soul. Sam said he was nearly drowned nine times as a boy, and he didn’t need any sermons to read the divine warnings in those fateful moments. Twain once recalled a schoolmate who had fallen out of a flatboat in which the boys had been playing. “Being loaded with sin, he went to the bottom like an anvil,” Twain remembered (*Writings* 12:434). That night the deceased was the only boy in the village who slept—the others were awake and repenting, a funeral sermon on special providence fresh in their ears. As if by appointment there was the attendant electrical storm with its vicious window-rattling rain and silence-splitting thunder. The description of this youthful horror is so basic to Twain’s work that it deserves to be quoted here at some length.

*I sat up in bed quaking and shuddering, waiting for the destruction of the world and expecting it. . . . Every time the lightning glared I caught my breath, and judged I was gone. . . .*

*I endured agonies of remorse for sins which I knew I had committed, and for others which I was not certain about, yet was sure that they had been set down against me in a book by an angel who was wiser than I and did not trust such important matters to memory.*

. . . I resolved to turn over a new leaf instantly; I also resolved to connect myself with the church next day, if I survived to see its sun appear. I resolved to cease from sin in all its form, and to lead a high and blameless life forever after. I would be punctual at church and Sunday School; visit the sick; carry baskets of victuals to the poor . . . ; I would instruct other boys in right ways, and take the resulting trouncings meekly; I would subsist entirely on tracts; I would invade the rum shop and warn the drunkard—and finally, if I escaped the fate of those who early became too good to live, I would go for a missionary. [Writings 12:435–37]

This is a boyish view of fierce providence and fearful penitence but it appears one way or another throughout Twain's life and literature. Indeed Twain usually saw life, religious and otherwise, through the eyes of a child; his best books are about them and his wife called him "Youth" all of their married life.

After his father's death in the boy's twelfth year, Sam left school and came even more fully under the supervision of Jane Clemens. He teased and tormented and exasperated his mother all of his life, a devilry she both loved and dreaded. When the neighbors brought Sam to the doorstep to dry out after one more near-drowning she assured them that "people born to be hanged are safe in the water" (Dixon Wecter, *Sam Clemens of Hannibal*, p. 58).

But, indeed, his heart belonged to the river that ran past his Hannibal home. After nearly twenty years of a life that included mining, journalism, travel, and fiction, Sam told the readers of the *Atlantic Monthly*:

*I loved the piloting profession far better than any I have followed since, and I took a measureless pride in it. The reason is plain: a [riverboat] pilot, in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived on the earth . . . [Writings 12:163]*

To a friend he once wrote that all men—kings and serfs alike—are all slaves to other men and circumstances, "save, alone, the pilot—who comes at no man's beck of call, obeys no man's orders and scorns all men's suggestions." Indeed, in later walks of life it would upset him to have to express his wishes in the "weak shape of a request, instead of launching it in the crisp language of an order" (*Writings* 12:120). It seems clear that Mark Twain would never have quarreled with his Presbyterian gods if he only could have been one. On the river he came as close to that as he was able.

With the onset of the Civil War, Sam lost his job on the river and felt he was drifting toward "the ministry or the penitentiary": one or the other had seemed an inevitable destination. But his older brother, Orion Clemens, one of the strangest fellows ever born, saved him from either fate. Orion had been appointed Secretary to the new Territorial Governor of Nevada and when he offered Sam the non-paying position of secretary to the Secretary, "it appeared" said Sam "that the heaven and earth passed away and the firmament was rolled together as a scroll" (*Writings* 3:2). With such providential favor working in his behalf, Sam headed west.

The trip to Carson City actually took nineteen days rather than the usual seventeen, however, because the Clemens boys discovered they could not pass so hastily through that newly famous desert kingdom of Brigham Young, Salt Lake City. From his earliest years Sam Clemens had heard of the Mormons. John Clemens had moved his family into Marion County in eastern Missouri just months after Jackson County on the western side had been declared the New Jerusalem of the Latter-day Saints. The written history of Marion County indicates that Joseph Smith later visited nearby Palmyra, Missouri, considering it as a possible town in which the beleaguered Saints might gather. His interest in a city so named will be obvious to Latter-day Saints. Sam Clemens

would have been too young to be aware of such a visit to his neighborhood, but he was not too young to have heard tales of the Hannibal militia men who were alerted at the height of the Mormon conflict and he may have seen the cannon that was ready to fire on Mormon immigrants if they steamed too near on their way to Nauvoo just forty miles up the river.

Twain's response to his Utah visit, including his encounter with Brigham Young, his opinions about polygamy, and his literary fun with the Book of Mormon are now part of Mormon folklore. We do not have time to review that material from *Roughing It*, but I'm certain that those of you who have read it will assume you already know everything there is to know, and those who haven't read it will be thoroughly ashamed.

His two-day stay in Salt Lake City left Sam generally impressed with what he called "the kingdom," and though he was well fed and happy at the hands of those multitudinous Mormon women, he was not much wiser regarding the "Mormon Question." "I left Great Salt Lake a good deal confused as to what state of things existed there," he admitted, and "sometimes even questioning in my own mind whether a state of things existed there at all or not" (*Writings* 3:121). Tautology notwithstanding, he determined that the Mormon issue could not be settled in forty-eight hours, though, he admitted, some eastern journalists had been doing it regularly in twenty-four. As he started into the desert he wrote:

*Neither hunger, thirst, poverty, grief, hatred, contempt, nor persecution could drive the Mormons from their faith or their allegiance; and even the thirst for gold which gleaned the flower of youth and the strength of many nations was not able to entice them! That was the final test. An experiment that can survive that is an experiment with some*

*substance to it, somewhere.* [*Writings* 2:307, Appendix A]

Sam and Orion made it to Carson City, but after two months in his nonprofit position as observer of affairs of state Sam succumbed to the silver fever that was by then an epidemic in the Washoe country. What with buying into a few holdings with painfully ironic names like "The Golden Fleece," Sam's mining efforts were a disaster by any standard. Most of the time he was destitute financially and depressed emotionally.

In the midst of such anxious moments over his prospects, Sam Clemens's personal and professional life was altered forever. As he became more and more disillusioned with mining, he had begun contributing a few humorous pieces to the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise*. The sketches caught the eye of the paper's editor and he offered Sam a position on the *Enterprise* staff. Reluctant to leave mining but weary of the disappointments, Sam accepted the offer. It was August of 1862 and Sam later recalled that he thus "stumbled into literature without intending it" simply because he had failed in all of his other endeavors. In that month he said "I [was] never so near the ministry in my life" (Bernard De Boto, *Mark Twain in Eruption*, p. 391). Sam later confided in his brother regarding such occupational joys and sorrows, revealing in a recently discovered letter that the two most powerful ambitions in his life had been to be a pilot on the Mississippi River and a Presbyterian minister.

*I accomplished the one and failed in the other, [he said,] because I could not supply myself with the necessary stock in trade—i.e., religion. I have given it up forever. I never had a "call" in that direction anyhow and my aspirations were the very ecstasy [sic] of presumption. But I have had a "call" to literature, of a low order, i.e., humorous. It is nothing to be proud of, but it is my strongest suit, and if I were to listen to that maxim of stern duty which*

*says that to do right you must multiply the one or the two of the three talents which the Almighty entrusts to your keeping, I would long ago have ceased to meddle with things for which I was by nature unfitted and turn my attention to seriously scribbling [sic] to excite the laughter of God's creatures. . . . I wanted to be a pilot or a preacher, and was about as well calculated for either as is poor Emperor Norton for Chief Justice of the United States. [Samuel L. Clemens, *My Dear Bro: A letter from Samuel Clemens to His Brother Orion*, pp. 6-7]*

Let me digress into a lengthy aside. There is in fact considerable evidence that Clemens seriously considered becoming a minister several times in his life, almost always at times when he was out of work and desperate. He joked that this "most earnest ambition" was not prompted so much by his piety as by the fact that it looked like a secure job. "It never occurred to me," he said, "that a preacher could be damned" (Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain, A Biography* 1:84). More privately Clemens was genuinely disappointed that in sixty years Hannibal had not "turned out a solitary preacher" and he was even more dismayed that there had not been at least one minister in the immediate family. Twain himself tried to fill the gap, always running with those he called "the fast nags of the cloth" and admitting he himself was but "a moralist in disguise" (Writings 35:719). Indeed, he frequently felt he did a better job of preaching than did the ordained. At thirteen years of age Susy Clemens wrote in her biography of her father:

*He doesn't like to go to church at all, but why I never understood until just now. He told us the other day that he couldn't bear to hear anyone talk but himself, and that he could listen to himself talk for hours without getting tired, of course he said this is a joke, but I've not dought [sic] it was founded on truth. [Writings 37:83]*

But I return to the time of vocational crisis and decision.

It was in those first difficult months in Nevada that Twain found in territorial Christianity one form of the only real religious stance that would appeal to him for any length of time. Like his river experience, it was unorthodox, informal, free-wheeling, unfettered. To express it, he took the shooting death of Virginia City saloon owner Tom Peaseley and fictionalized it into the immensely popular "Buck Fanshawe" episode in *Roughing It*.

As Twain wrote it, a friend and fellow fireman named Scotty Briggs appointed himself as a committee of one to arrange for funeral services with the local minister, a young man fresh from an eastern theological seminary. The following is a condensation of that verbal encounter between New America and New England.

*(Scotty): Are you the duck that runs the gospel-mill next door?*

*(Minister): Am I the—pardon me, I believe I do not understand.*

*(Scotty): The boys thought maybe you would give us a lift, if we'd tackle you—that is if I've got the rights of it and you are the head clerk of the doxology-works next door.*

*(Minister): I am the shepherd in charge of the flock whose fold is next door.*

*(Scotty): The which?*

*(Minister): The spiritual adviser of the little company of believers whose sanctuary adjoins these premises. . . .*

*(Scotty): Well, you've ruther got the bulge on me. Or maybe we've both got the bulge, somehow. . . . You see, one of the boys has passed in his decks, and*

*we want to give him a good send-off, and so the thing I'm on now is to roust out somebody to jerk a little chin-music for us and waltz him through handsome.*

*(Minister): I seem to grow more and more bewildered. Your observations are wholly incomprehensible to me. Would it not expedite matters if you restricted yourself to categorical statements of fact unencumbered with obstructing accumulations of metaphor and allegory?*

*(Scotty): I'll have to pass, I judge. You've raised me out, pard. Why that last lead of yourn is too many for me. I can't neither trump nor follow suit. What we want is a gospel-sharp. See?*

*(Minister): A what?*

*(Scotty): Gospel-sharp. Parson.*

*(Minister): Oh! Why did you not say so before. I am a clergy-man—a parson.*

*(Scotty): Now you talk! You see my blind and straddle it like a man. Now we're all right, pard. Let's start fresh. You see, one of the boys has gone up the flume—*

*(Minister): Gone where?*

*(Scotty): Up the flume—threw up the sponge—kicked the bucket—*

*(Minister): Ah—has departed to that mysterious country from whose bourne no traveler returns.*

*(Scotty): Return! I reckon not. Why pard, he's dead!*

*(Minister): I understand. . . . Had deceased any religious convictions? That is to say, did he feel a dependence upon, or acknowledge allegiance to a higher power?*

*(Scotty): I reckon you've stumped me again, pard. Could you say it over once more, and say it slow?*

*(Minister): Well, to simplify it somewhat, was he, or rather had he ever been connected with any organization sequestered from secular concerns and devoted to self-sacrifice in the interests of morality?*

*(Scotty): All down but nine—set 'em up on the other alley, pard. When you get in with your left I hunt grass every time. Every time you draw, you fill; but I don't seem to have any luck. Let's have a new deal.*

*(Minister): [What?] Begin again?  
[Writings 4:44–50]*

The distinctiveness of each man's idiom in the dialogue (a dialogue which is, of course, two mutually exclusive monologues) is reinforced by other images in the sketch—Scotty's flaming red flannel shirt against the colorless black of the ministerial cloth, Briggs' brawny paw with the priest's delicate hand, and so on. But the ultimate contrast is language, always the most sensitive index to cultural distinctions.

On the frontier there would seem to be little place for men or organizations "sequestered from secular concerns and devoted to self-sacrifices in the interests of morality." Twain is inviting this "fragile, gentle, spiritual new fledgling . . . as yet unacquainted with the ways of the mines" (Writings 4:44) to come down from the summit of his Sinai and "dive," as Herman Melville would say, into the bedrock of human experience and need.

From Nevada, Twain's nascent newspaper and lecturing career took him on to seances in California, "proselyting work" in the Hawaiian Islands, and ultimately to the midnight missions of New York. In the orthodox East Sam found institutional religion to be very unlike Scotty Briggs's more preferable frontier variety, but it was booming business and, as always, he threw himself into the midst of it. Jamming his way into Henry Ward Beecher's church, Twain sat in the congregation and was

smitten not with Beecher's theology but with his mesmerizing platform performance, a style Twain could only describe with phrases like "rockets of poetry" and "mines of eloquence." As he observed the effect it had on the crowd, Twain nearly suffocated with the desire to clap his hands and see if it would break the spell.

A short time after attending his first sermon at Brooklyn heights Sam presented his letter of introduction to the Reverend Mister Beecher and accepted an invitation to dinner. Perhaps it was from Beecher himself that he learned of the proposed pilgrimage to the Holy Land being sponsored by Plymouth Congregational. Sam agreed to go as a dignitary, no less. Once on board the *Quaker City* Twain found 67 passengers, including three ordained ministers. As the gong sounded that first Saturday evening for the first of an endless succession of prayer meetings, Twain thought he sensed "damaging premonitions of the future"—storm without, pilgrims within, and prayer meetings everywhere. This was obviously going to be pleasuring with a vengeance.

With every mile traveled and every day spent, relationships among the *Quaker City* group degenerated until somewhere on the plains of Syria Twain read aloud from Numbers 22 and announced to them all that then and forever Balaam's ass was to be the patron saint of the entire group. Yet there were private, reflective moments when Sam was touched by what he saw.

*Night is the time to see Galilee. . . . [At night] Galilee is a theatre meet for great events; meet for the birth of a religion able to save the world; and meet for the stately Figure appointed to stand upon its stage and proclaim its high decrees. But in the sunlight one says: is it for the deeds which were done and the words which were spoken in this little acre of rocks and sand 18 centuries gone that the bells are ringing today in the remote islands of the sea and far and wide over continents that clasp the circumference of the huge globe? One can*

*comprehend it only when night has hidden all incongruities and created a theatre proper for so grand a drama. [Writings 2:244–45]*

In a sense this passage is as revealing as any Twain ever wrote about the real contours of his religious imagination. Not unlike Scotty Briggs's language, it was only a fresh, fanciful, imaginative Christianity he would ever be able to entertain. The harshness of life's sunlit immediacy would conspire to forbid any extended periods of such spiritual contemplation. But he did, however briefly, have his moonlight moments.

The return trip from Palestine went from bad to worse. "The pleasure trip was a synagogue, . . . a funeral excursion without a corpse," Twain wrote for the *New York Herald* as soon as they landed (Writings 2:400); but, like the difficulty of the mines, that discouraging trip was to lead to another monumental turning point in his life and again a period of intense religious interest. Through the youngest passenger on board the *Quaker City*, eighteen-year-old Charles Langdon of Elmira, New York, Mark Twain met and fell immediately in love with the boy's older sister, Olivia.

As it turned out, falling in love with Livy Langdon was the closest thing to an orthodox religious conversion Sam Clemens ever experienced. On the first anniversary of their meeting Sam would write,

*I did have such a struggle the first day I saw you . . . to keep from loving you with all my heart. You seemed to my bewildered vision a visiting Spirit from the upper air. A something to worship, reverently and at a distance. [Dixon Wecter, ed., *The Love Letters of Mark Twain*, p. 43 hereinafter cited as *Love Letters*]*

Indeed she came to be his goddess, the only one in which he ever fully believed.

He immediately tried to press his relationship beyond the genteel brother-and-sister

language Livy insisted upon and, grimly earnest, proposed marriage. Stunned by his abruptness, Livy recovered only to say something about his being her brother for as long as he liked. Byronically he fled Elmira and wrote back—"I do not regret that I have loved you, still love you and shall always love you."

Pleadingly he wrote,

*Write me something from time to time—texts from the New Testament if nothing else occurs to you—or dissertations on [the sin of] smoking—or extracts from your book of sermons—anything whatever. [Knowing it is from you] will be sufficient. [Love Letters, pp. 19–20]*

When a reply arrived with a small picture enclosed, Sam rushed off a letter worthy of any nineteenth-century tract.

*You say to me "I shall pray for you daily." Not any words that have ever been spoken to me have touched me like these . . . I beg that you will continue to pray for me—for I have a vague, faraway sort of idea that it may not be wholly in vain. In one respect, at least, it shall not be in vain—for I will so mend my conduct that I shall grow worthier of your prayers and of your goodwill and sisterly solicitude as the days go by. Furthermore, (It has taken me long to make up my mind to say these grave words which once said cannot be recalled). [sic] I will "pray with you" as you ask; and with such faith and such encouragement withall as are in me though feeble and of little worth I feel they must be. It seems strange enough to me—this reverence, this solemnity, this supplication—and yet you must surely have some faith that it will not necessarily be useless else you would not have suggested it. [Love Letters, p. 21]*

Sam rushed to Elmira and arrived almost as soon as his letter. Within twenty-four hours he had again proposed marriage. Again he was refused. A carriage accident as he was leaving the house kept him at the Langdons' for two

more weeks, at the end of which he proposed marriage a third time. A third time the answer was no. Nevertheless, such determination over the following months was finally successful. Ready to leap over church steeples at Livy's acceptance, Sam wrote to a friend:

*I touch no more spirituous liquors after this day (though I have made no promises) I shall do no act that . . . Livy might be pained to hear of and shall seek the society of the good—I shall be a Christian. I shall climb—climb—climb—towards this bright sun that is shining in the heaven of my happiness until all that is gross and unworthy is hidden in the mists of darkness of that lower earth. . . . I shall be worthy—yet. Livy believes in me . . . I believe in myself. . . . I believe in God—and through the breaking clouds I see the star of hope rising in the placid blue beyond. I bow my reverent head. [Love Letters, p. 50]*

Sam began to pray for Livy. Livy, of course, prayed for Sam. It appears, however, that Mr. And Mrs. Langdon prayed for themselves. They were not entirely taken with this young humorist and in fact would not give their permission for the marriage. Mr. Langdon wrote a frank letter to his daughter's suitor, rebuking him for some of his drawing-room indiscretions and asking him to relax the pace of the courtship until some reliable character references could be obtained. Unfortunately there were none to obtain. Shaken, Sam wrote his prospective father-in-law that while his life had not been entirely unblameworthy on the Pacific coast, nevertheless, "Men as lost as I have found a Savior, and why not I?" (*Love Letters*, p. 37). He wrote to Livy and reassured her that he was reading not once but several times the sermons of Henry Ward Beecher contained in the Plymouth pamphlets she regularly sent him. With painful candor he confessed, "You know the child must crawl before it walks—and I must do right for love of you while I am in the infancy of Christianity; but then I can do

right for love of the Savior when I shall have gotten my growth" (*Love Letters*, p. 34)—a growth he never obtained and yet one more way in which he was always a "youth." His earlier zeal was simply not sustaining him in such difficult times and he confessed to her that religion seemed "well nigh unattainable" and he felt like "giving up in despair." Yet at that very moment both of Livy's parents wrote to express their confidence in him. The Millennium itself could not have been more gratefully—and enthusiastically—received. Now less than a month away from formal engagement, Sam wrote a letter which probably indicates the summit of his Christian journey, however modest the mountain. It seems by every standard to be both genuine in its tone and truly religious in its intent.

*Livy—*

*Let us believe that God has destined us for each other. . . . Let us hope and believe that we shall walk hand in hand in love and worship of Him — . . . and so journeying, pass at last the shadowed boundaries of Time and stand redeemed and saved, beyond the threshold and within the light of that land whose Prince is the Lord of rest eternal. God will bless you in it—will bless us both, I fervently believe.*

*I bless you for your religious counsel, Livy—and more and more every day, for with every passing day I understand it better and appreciate it more. I am "dark" yet—I see I am still depending on my own strength to lift myself up, and upon my own sense of what is right to guide me in the Way—but not always, Livy, not always. I see the Savior dimly at times, and at intervals, very near—would that the intervals were not so sad a length apart! Sometimes it is a pleasure to me to pray, night and morning, in cars and everywhere, twenty times a day—and then again the whole spirit of religion is motionless within me from the rising clear to the setting of the sun. . . . But I have hope — . . . I fear I would distrust a religious faith that came upon me suddenly—that came upon me otherwise than deliberately, and prove, step by step as it came.*

*You will blame me for this, Livy—but be lenient with me, for you know I grope blindly as yet. [Love Letters, pp. 44–45]*

As a matter of fact, Twain would never again have intervals "so very near," nor would he ever again grope less blindly.

Primarily to please Livy, Sam faithfully rented a pew for the two of them at Joseph Twitchell's Hartford church, which he always called the Church of the Holy Speculators. Sam never formally joined the congregation, however, although Joe Twitchell did become perhaps the closest personal friend he had in life. Through his period Sam was still maintaining some semblance of an orthodox religious life—continuing to say grace at meals, for example, but even that ritual was becoming so *mal apropos* that houseguest Thomas Wentworth Higginson equated it to asking a blessing over European minstrels.

With Livy threatening to miscarry, Sam got them away from Hartford in the spring and summer of 1873. It was a refreshing stay in Elmira and a happy, productive time. He began a manuscript on which he averaged fifty pages a day. The book was to be titled *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and in the mind of the author was, at least in the early stages of the manuscript, a kind of religious reverie, the first act in a proposed *Divinia Tragoedia* set in a celestial St. Petersburg but concluding in hellish Calvinistic reality.

The book had been initially prompted by a visit from an old Hannibal Sunday School superintendent whose voice had brought back trooping phantoms of the past. A church service Twain attended while on the lecture circuit a short time later had then reinforced those haunting images. He wrote with evangelical fervor, frequently never moving from his desk for hours. When the book was finished he considered it "a sermon, . . . a hymn put into prose form to give it a worldly air" (*Writings* 35:477). But *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was in several

ways a flawed work and Twain sensed that, though he was never a good judge of his own effort. He had not plumbed the real depths of his religious concerns.

In the meantime, his life, particularly his business life, was becoming unbearable, and after trying to find relief up and down the eastern seaboard and on to Bermuda, and finally in Europe, Twain got away from it all by returning to Hannibal to write a book about his river. He enjoyed much of the venture, but for the most part he was deeply disappointed. He wrote to his wife,

*That world which I knew in its blossoming youth is old and bowed and melancholy now. Its soft cheeks are leathery and wrinkled; the fire is gone out of its eyes and the spring from its step. It will be dust and ashes when I come again. I have been clasping hands with the moribund—and usually they say “It is for the last time.” [Writings 36:418]*

The Clemenses had already lost their only son, Langdon, and more recently Livy and the girls were suffering everything from scarlet fever to diphtheria. Sam, drained economically and emotionally, struggled with the bite of an annual \$100,000 in expenses and knew less real peace than he had ever felt in his life. Largely disenchanted with the river book and the scenes he put into it, he immediately began what he had wanted to do in the first place: to make a purely *imaginative* return to his Hannibal home; to get a truer, if less factual, account of a boy’s life on the river. Researching *Life on the Mississippi* had triggered a number of ideas and by midsummer of that year, 1883, he was back at work on the epic that had been on his mind through (and had informed parts of) *Tom Sawyer*, “The Recent Carnival of Crime,” *A Tramp Abroad*, “What is Happiness,” and *Life on the Mississippi*. Twain now hoped to pull together these piecemeal statements he had been making for over a decade; his view of man, religion, and civilization were coming

into clearer, if nevertheless darker, focus. Thus at the height of his creative powers (and farther away than ever from any kind of orthodox religious sympathy) Mark Twain settled down to write *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He worked more feverishly than at any other time in his life. In August of 1883 he wrote to Howells,

*I’ve done two season’s work in one. I’ve written eight or nine-hundred manuscript pages in such a brief space of time that I mustn’t name the number of days; I shouldn’t believe it myself and of course I couldn’t expect you to. [Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson, eds., *Mark Twain—Howells Letters: The Correspondence of Samuel L. Clemens and William Dean Howells, 1872–1910* 1:438; hereinafter cited as *Smith*]*

A month earlier he had written to his mother, “I haven’t had such booming work days for many years. I’m piling up manuscripts in a really astonishing way” (*Smith* 1:440).

From the beginning Twain clearly conceived Huck’s quest as an escape from the fetters of Protestant American civilization. In *Tom Sawyer* Huck had painted in somber tones the orthodox life he was subjected to at Widow Douglas’s home. As he explained to Tom,

*I got to go to church and sweat and sweat—I hate them ornry sermons! I can’t catch a fly in there, I can’t chew, I got to wear shoes all Sunday . . . the widder won’t let me smoke; she [won’t] let me yell, she [won’t] let me gape or stretch, nor scratch before folks—and dad fetch it, she [prays] all the time. I never see such a woman. I had to shove, Tom. I just had to. [Writings 8:288–89]*

So in his own book Huck moves away from “the bars and shackles of civilization: and toward the river, that stream of freedom which Twain said symbolized “the heaven pictured by priest and prophet.”

Once on the river, Huck tries to work out his own salvation, moving in an Adamic peacefulness back to a state before sin and civilization. "We was always naked, day and night," Huck said, "whenever the mosquitoes would let us" (*Writings* 8:65). From this mosquito-blemished Eden, Huck would occasionally venture into The World but the men he found there were fallen indeed. The Grangerfords could read their *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Presbyterian Observer*, listen to Sunday sermons fit for printing in either, and still continue a senseless feud that would take the life of their handsome young son. In what is still the most chilling and understated description of death I know, Huck describes the horror of seeing his helpless friend shot down like a duck on a pond. In addition to being "mighty good" to Huck, Buck Grangerford was a civilized alter-ego for him; same age, nearly same size, nearly same name. Buck's death was a brutal, vicarious reminder of life in that "civilized" world. "I wish I hadn't ever come ashore that night to see such things," Huck confessed. "I ain't never going to get shut of them. Lots of times I dream about them [still]" (*Writings* 8:160). Less personal but still repugnant reminders of traditional evangelical Protestantism are portrayed in the camp meeting and in the string of charades performed by the Duke and the Dauphin. The moral apex of the book is, of course, on the raft between Huck's sound heart and deformed conscience, a battle in which Huck determines to resist the sins of society even if it will mean going to hell. Huck simply cannot take Jim back into civilization, for he himself has suffered bondage there and he cannot wish that on anyone in good—that is, bad—conscience. In their flight Huck and Jim are quite literal soul brothers.

But the brackets of civilization which encase this story inexorably begin to close in when Huck is socially born again into the society of the Phelps farm (Huck becomes Tom, Tom becomes Sid, etc.). The much-discussed

conclusion of this book is, it seems to me, infinitely stronger than most critics have understood. It does, among other things, remind Huck and the reader how cruel, or at the very least, how capricious Miss Watson's Presbyterian providence really is. After making a black-faced fool out of Jim, Tom/Sid smugly reveals that Miss Watson had already set him free. It was precisely this kind of unaccountable and unaccounting God Sam Clemens was never able to understand. With that reminder of such Calvinistic victimization reawaiting him, Huck heads out "for the territory" of religious and cultural unorthodoxy. Life would be much more attractive, certainly freer and safer, out beyond the demarcated boundaries of civilization where pale theology students from the East had very little to teach fellows like Scotty Briggs and Huckleberry Finn.

With the publication of that book and Huck's intended, though undoubtedly never realized, return to the frontier, Mark Twain passed over a threshold as decisively as a double-minded man was able. When he put down his pen at the close of that manuscript, he was just three months away from his forty-eighth birthday. A half-dozen years before his death he jotted in his notebook, "The man who is a pessimist before he's 48 knows too much; the man who is an optimist after he is 48 knows too little" (Albert Bigelow Paine, ed., *Mark Twain's Notebook*, p. 380).

Paul Tillich has suggested in his examination of history that the substance of culture is religion, and the form of religion is culture. With only a modest shift of Tillich's meaning, that proposition was axiomatic for Mark Twain. Wearing shoes and going to church meant the same thing to Huck Finn, and this child who was father to the man struggled to be rid of both. The man succeeded, or, perhaps more accurately, acceded, only a few times—in the cabin of a riverboat, around the mining camps on the western frontier, under the moonlight of Galilee, with the love of a wife

and children, and, finally, full circle, on a raft floating down that first powerful river. In spite of that genuinely bitter pessimism ahead, that is somehow where Sam Clemens ultimately remained—on the river, on the line, in between, divided and dividing. He could not live with traditional American Protestantism, but he could not live without feelings of innate religious hunger either. East or west, so much was, in Huck's phrase, simply "hogwash," but occasionally there was that genuine soul-butter, too, and an almost desperate need for it. As Huck said about this lifelong anxiety that seemed always to be marking Twain:

*Sometimes the widow would take me to one side and talk about providence in a way to make a body's mouth water; but maybe the next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see that there was two providences, and a chap would stand considerable show with the widow's providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there wasn't no help for him anymore. I thought it all out, and reckoned I would belong to the widow's if he wanted me, thought I couldn't make out how he was a going to be any better off than what he was before, seeing I was ignorant, and so kind of low down and awnry. [Writings 8:16]*

Sitting one evening in the darkened Hartford home of their friends, the Charles Dudley

Warners, Sam and Livy Clemens watched a beautiful full moon rise outside the large bay window. The faithful Clemens housekeeper Katy Leary later reported:

*Suddenly Mr. Clemens got right up without any warnin' and began singin' one of them Negro spirituals. A lady that was there told me he just stood up with both his eyes shut and began to sing kind of soft like—a faint sound, just as if there was a wind in the trees, she said: and he kept right on singin' kind of low and sweet, and it was beautiful and made your heart ache. And he kept on singin' and singin' and became kind of lost in it, and he was all lit up—his face was. 'Twas somethin' from another world, she said, and when he got through, he put his hands up to his head, just as though all the sorrow of them Negroes was upon 'im; and then he began to sing, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I Got, Nobody Knows but Jesus". . . . When he came to the end, to the glory hallelujah, he gave a great shout—just like them Negroes do—he shouted out the "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah." They said it was wonderful and none of them would forget it as long as they lived. [Katy Leary (with Mary Lawton), *A Lifetime with Mark Twain*, p. 213]*

And the world and American literature will never forget him.