

MARK TWAIN'S ANGELS

by

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Many of Mark Twain's finest effects derive from his feeling for folklore and myth--for signs, portents, omens, sayings, ghostlore, witchcraft, and demonology. Particularly fascinating is Mark Twain's angelology. His ubiquitous angel appears in several of his works from 1868 to late 1909, just before his death--coincidental with the return after seventy-five years of Halley's Comet. These works do more than allude to someone as an "angel" or suggest, say, the Angel of Death wrestling with Huck Finn's drunken Pap. In several works, Mark Twain's angels function as characters. These figures assume the shape of Mark Twain's purposes.

If today we fail to see God's messengers at work, we still encounter their presences in the republic of letters. But even here their immediacy depends, in large part, on us. Mark Twain drew his early mythology of celestial beings from his mother and from Hannibal's Old Ship of Zion Sunday School.

I want to be an angel!
And with the angels stand,
A crown upon my forehead,
A harp within my hand.

John Calvin asserted in his Institutes: "The angels are the dispensers and administrators of the Divine beneficence toward us; they regard our safety, undertake our defense, direct our ways, and exercise a constant solicitude that no evil befall us."

Unlike Emanuel Swedenborg, Mark Twain never claimed to converse with angels "man to man." In the early 1880's, at least, Samuel Clemens declared, "I believe in God the Almighty," and then he added, clipping the angels' wings, "I do not believe He has ever sent a message to man by anybody, or delivered one to him by word of mouth in any place." Freedom to think his own thoughts inspired Mark Twain to dream up his own angels. The differences between the picaresque Extract From Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven (conceived and written by and large in the late 1860's but published in 1868) and the angry Letters from the Earth (written near the end of Mark Twain's life) are conspicuous. Theme, structure, style, characterization--all are in bold contrast. As all students know, Mark Twain's free-association genius was intellectually inconsistent and contradictory. His work displays impulses toward religion and idealism, democracy and aristocracy, agnosticism and Calvinism, satire and sentimentality, laughter and torment, worry and fatalism, gullibility and skepticism, blasphemy and decorum--and at the center always

incertitude. Mark Twain was a model of homo duplex. As a pilot on the treacherous Mississippi he steered between snags and sandbars, danger to the left and danger to the right. His dualism is documented: Samuel Clemens and Mark Twain (twain itself meaning two), Those Extraordinary Twins, The Prince and the Pauper, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, The Waking person and the Dream person, Little Satan and Big Satan.

As we move through Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven, "Letter from the Recording Angel," The Mysterious Stranger, and Letters From the Earth, we detect increasing estrangement between angel and man. The once-human angels in Stormfield's inconceivably vast heaven retain spiritual equivalents of their earthly bodies, but have mathematic intuition and the ability to wish-travel. (Much better than chugging along at 186,000 miles per second--or 200,000 miles per second if you strain.) The ancients knew all about angelic wish-power--the sudden appearance of an angel causing more surprise than alarm!

Dixon Wecter writes: "To describe heaven and the voyage thither through the eyes of a simple old sailor with a flair for Biblical exegesis struck [Mark Twain] from the start as a good idea." Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven combines elements of Christian symbolism and comic realism. Here one looks in vain for the awesome Old Testament angel of the Lord. "I was dying," says the salty old seadog in the wonderful opening. Though Stormfield's actions--as his name suggests--often are blustery, the promptings of his heart are unaffected. His nature is companionable, chatty. He is a fine carrier of human values, particularly his capacity to realize a truth during his trip to heaven and then immediately do the contrary.

Eventually separating from the other heaven-bound spirits, Stormfield travels celestially for thirty years. Naturally he learns much about the heavens--nearly as much as the underlinings and notations in Samuel Clemens' books on astronomy in the Mark Twain Library at Berkeley. But more to Stormfield's liking is companionship. He misses his friends--many by now no doubt in hell. He even grows tired of racing comets--so like those splendid steamboat races in Life on the Mississippi. He finally arrives in heaven, but not without complication. Slightly off course, he arrives at the wrong pearly gate.

This, the best scene in the book, is full of frontier theatricality. "I begin to see," he tells the head clerk, "that a man's got to be in his own heaven to be happy." The underclerk tells Stormfield to stand on the red carpet, hold his breath, and wish himself in his proper part of heaven. He does so and immediately hears a voice--"A harp and a hymn book, pair of wings and a halo, size 13, for Cap'n Eli Stormfield, of San Francisco! Make him out a clean bill of health, and let him in." It's the voice of a Pi Ute Injun he used

to know back in Tulare County and so he knows he's in the right kind of heaven at last.

As in the flight to heaven, so in heaven itself, like attracts like. And the old captain sees the good in it. In a suppressed fragment of Stormfield's Visit--"Journey to the Asterisk"--the simple sailor feels separate and superior, his practical sense of proportion prevents him from regarding the Lilliputians as equals. In the printed portion of the Extract, the once-human angels clamber for identification with the monumental patriarchs. In Mark Twain's all-inclusive heaven we detect rumblings of malcontent.

This dissonance deepens nineteen years later in Mark Twain's sketch "Letter from the Recording Angel," dated 1887, but not published until February, 1946--fifty-nine years later--in Harper's Magazine. In the tradition of Washoe humor, which influenced Mark Twain as a frontier journalist, this burlesque report attacks the orthodox Christian hypocrite. The tone and phraseology of the heavenly balance sheet contribute to a high order of parody. As Stormfield's conception of heaven differed from the truth of heaven, so the Recording Angel's letter points up the difference between traditional human assumptions and blessed actuality. Heaven alone can gauge the relative agony of individual self-sacrifice. Thus because he painfully gave fifteen dollars of his wealth to his impoverished cousin, the meanest white man ever lived will one day go to heaven!

In the late 1890's Mark Twain again resorted to the figure of the angel. This time he created neither humanistic angels in heaven nor angelic despatches to earth. He created an angel who materializes on earth, participates in human activities, and reveals his celestial intelligence and power. This angelic intelligence and action accentuate human inadequacy. Although the Greek word angelos means messenger sent from God to carry out his will, Little Satan (Big Satan's nephew) is a freewheeler who takes liberties--more like Hermes than a New Testament angel.

In reading four versions of The Mysterious Stranger who finds innumerable gratuitous miracles in the manuscript known as the C Version of Hannibal Version. The setting is Hannibal, Missouri, rather than Eseldorf (Assville), Austria. In Version A the setting is St. Petersburg, with Tom Sawyer and Gang. The drafts suggest not only Mark Twain's self-conscious craftsmanship but his growing despair and his difficulties in executing his literary design. His pessimism, we know, was a consequence of a series of personal catastrophes, which began around 1893.

Originally Little Satan's mission is to rid humans of their degenerate moral sense. In the Hannibal Version the angel's name is 44--Mark Twain's duality at work. In order to realize what he took to be Mark Twain's intentions, biographer Thomas Bigelow Paine

bowdlerized the posthumous printed version. Twain characterizes Little Satan as an indifferent scoffer of mankind. The gap between angel and human has widened. Mark Twain's condemnation of the moral sense, say some, is a result of his guilt. Perhaps he also realized that in terms of naturalistic evolution, humans were locked into an imperfect, an undeveloped, moral sense. Thus the original mission of his supernatural visitant must naturally end in failure.

Even so, Little Satan's solipsistic revelation at the end of the final version annihilates his own miracles and reduces everything to a vision. "Nothing exists but you. And you are but a Thought--a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!" Indeed, some dreams spoke to Mark Twain with as much authority as a waking vision. If he could not wake up from his nightmare of disaster, then perhaps he could see his disasters truly as a dream.

At any rate, when Mark Twain began to write the D Version or Print Shop Version he saw--at least in the beginning of his 530 manuscript pages--how he could execute his theme without mechanically piling miracle on miracle for more than sixty pages. In the printed version there is no suspense surrounding the identity of the mysterious stranger. Like the strange man who corrupts Hadleyburg or like Hank Morgan in The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, Little Satan is a transcendent figure. He sees man as dull, ignorant, trivial, conceited, diseased, shabby, poor, and generally worthless. Where Stormfield poked fun at the race of Lilliputians, Little unfallen Satan crushes the little people of his own creation. We are reminded of Gloucester's cry in King Lear: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods. They kill us for their sport."

What particularly distinguishes 44 from Little Satan is innocence of mankind. On his first visit to earth 44 is awkward, but Little Satan (who has witnessed the creation and some of mankind's pseudo-progress) is Faustian. His experience and power endow him with authority. Compared to 44, Little Satan is far less humanized. He reserves his elevated rhetoric for self-adulation. Unlike 44, he cannot love mortals. Mark Twain creates an ever-expanding distance between heaven and earth, angel and man. Pronounced is Little Satan's Swiftian attitude toward animals higher than man. When Theodor Fischer, for instance, comments on the brutality of inserting splinters under a man's fingernails, Little Satan defends the brutes--"No, it was a human thing...the monopoly of those with the Moral Sense."

In Letters from the Earth Mark Twain plunged into writing without plan, not unusual. He achieves detachment by casting his heroic mouthpiece, Voltairean-tongued Satan, in the role of a disinterested playgoer, banished for insinuations against God, but watching the human farce, and writing letters to his friends in heaven,

Michael and Gabriel. But while Old Satan sweepingly condemns the human race, he still troubles himself, in passing, to champion the underdog--as did Mark Twain in his facetious travel letters about points East and West.

Although Old Satan's condemnation implies the failure of responsibility on the part of the condemned, Mark Twain still holds to his doctrine of mankind's absolute impotence in the clutch of universal mechanical forces. Mark Twain, champion of the underdog, even champions Old Satan: "I have no special regard for Satan; but I can at least claim that I have no prejudice against him. It may even be that I lean a little his way, on account of his not having a fair show." Man, not Satan, is responsible for the world's wrongs. Thus we have Mark acting as Big Satan's guardian angel--as did his mother when young Sam cursed the Devil too vigorously.

The true subject of this epistolary grab-bag of sarcasms about mankind is: What does it feel like to pretend that you are a supernatural, superintelligent observer? "Clemens," writes biographer Paine, "allowed his exuberant fancy free rein, being under no restrictions as to the probability of print or public offense." These letters contain no mid-Victorian decorum--but fifty years was perhaps too long to wait for their eventual publication, as required by the terms of Clemens' will.

By foregoing decorum, Twain foregoes that "toning down" which can result in the subtle and richly humorous instead of the extravagant and merely ludicrous. The earlier intimacy between man and angel is gone. In the beginning Mark Twain granted heaven to everyone--now he grants it to no one. Big Satan affirms that all nature is mad, in which case why not let a machine control it? The space between man and angel stretches.

Man, Satan says, "has imagined a heaven, and has left entirely out of it the supremest of all his delights, the one ecstasy that stands foremost in the heart of every individual of his race--and of ours--sexual intercourse!" Before Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain's revisionist biographer, collected and arranged Letters from the Earth he wrote: "The verbal humor of copulation and other physical functions is eternal and is the least diluted form of folk art...but the improprieties of his time kept [Mark Twain] from writing this kind of humor." In a letter to a friend, Mark Twain acknowledged: "This book will never be published--in fact it couldn't be because it would be a felony."

Thus we discern how the attitudes of Mark Twain's angels grow increasingly bitter towards humans--first towards individuals and groups, and then gradually towards all mankind. Even the angels grow further from heaven. The human Stormfield becomes an angel and goes to heaven. The angels 44 and Little Satan commingle in

varying degrees with humans. But Big Satan can only observe the trivial outrages of mankind.

Only a few close friends--Mark Twain's own Michaels and Gabriels--read the "Letters from the Earth" while he is alive. But the end is near. Mark Twain discerns the approach of Halley's Comet. He is a philosopher perplexed. Calvinism, Deism, Free Masonry, Mushnellian Meliorism, Evolutionism, Determinism, Romantic Illusion, and Humanitarianism swim in his head. Incertitude reigns. One may wear disguises of antic disposition--but there is no escape. He pretends to live outside the human context, the human medium, and pretends that he can understand.

To many people old Mark Twain in Redding, Connecticut, in his famous white suit, resembled a ghost as he wandered forlornly through the halls of his mansion, Stormfield. Let us instead imagine Mark Twain playing the role of fallen archangel--a little the worse for wear, but at times still terrible--as Milton's "thunder-scared" angel is terrible--as all angels, says Rilke, are terrible. Late in 1909 Samuel Clemens wrote: "How poor I am, who was once so rich." Mark Twain knew how to create in himself the atmosphere for visions. Did the recurring figure of the angel answer a need in him for an intermediary between himself and the unknown force in the universe, after all? Wise to the ways of dualism, the writer created his own intermediary. He longed for contact with the spiritual world. Could angelic visitation be, after all, the Image or idea that startles?

In the winter of his discontent, Mark Twain devoted himself to neighborly bands of sweet, fragile, innocent, gracious little girls--he called them "angel-fishes." He gave them tea parties and permitted them to come close to his throne and look at his face "close up." His halo of white hair, his shining immaculate garments, the golden trumpet of his big pipe, the terrible beauty of his face in smoky clouds of glory--the archangel Mark Lucifer/Sam Satan suspended between two worlds.

Finally forced to his knees by the Greater Force with whom--with which--he wrestled and pretended to understand, this terrible clown yet agonized over human barbarity. Flashes of the terrible Old Testament flame--even on his deathbed. In the end, we see him in the perihelion of Halley's Comet--that messenger from out of space. Perhaps some of us even see him floundering in his sea of unfinished manuscripts and fragments--see him as Arnold saw Shelley--

...a beautiful and ineffectual angel,
Beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.