

How to Teach an Unauthored Text:

Reviving *The Mysterious Stranger* in the Classroom

Until 1963, when John S. Tuckey revealed it to be a corrupted and fraudulent text perpetrated by Mark Twain's literary executor and a Harper & Bros. editor, the novella published in 1916 under the title *The Mysterious Stranger* and under the name Mark Twain was regarded as that author's most significant twentieth-century work of fiction. Since Tuckey's discovery, the 1916 *Mysterious Stranger* has almost entirely been ignored by critics, although it remains in print in numerous paperback editions of Twain's fiction that fail to account for its troubled editorial provenance. Thus, many student and casual readers of Twain (as well as, presumably, teachers of American literature) are encountering *The Mysterious Stranger* in the absence of information about the alterations made to it by Twain's editors after his death. Meanwhile, most scholars continue to ignore the work, either favoring the uncompleted and inferior (but authentically Twain's) publication titled *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* or avoiding all versions of an interesting, revealing, and unique narrative with which the author was preoccupied for a number of years.

The situation of *The Mysterious Stranger*—in which students and casual readers, on the one hand, and scholars, on the other, not only approach a literary work differently but actually approach different versions of a work—points to an unfortunate divide that is larger and more significant than critical debates about a single, now-obscure text. In approaching, or ignoring, *The Mysterious Stranger*

as we do, scholars and readers unconsciously enact a division between two acts, literary criticism and reading, that—if not actually identical—ought to work in concert. This division is reinforced by supposedly outmoded ideas about authorship that, in practice, continue to inflect both casual and scholarly approaches to texts. Most centrally, it points to a conflict faced by teachers of literature, who by definition find themselves in a mediating position between scholarship and “just reading”—between their own scholar and reader selves—and who are thus in the best position to overcome, or short of that, understand, the division. One step toward doing so is reconsidering *The Mysterious Stranger*, a reconsideration that will best be undertaken in the college literature classroom.

To read *The Mysterious Stranger* adeptly requires one, first, to understand its textual history. In 1916, seven years after his friend Mark Twain’s death, Albert Bigelow Paine, collaborating with Frances Duneka of Harper & Bros., published what they claimed to be a final Twain novel serially in *Harper’s*, followed that year by its publication as a separate volume. The story follows the exploits of three boys in medieval Vienna (one of whom, Theodor, narrates the novel) whose lives are upended by their encounters with another boy, apparently of their age, who claims to be Satan (named for his fallen uncle), and whose ability to reveal—and to manipulate—the future alters their understanding of human existence. *The Mysterious Stranger, a Romance*, Paine later explained, was the product of years of struggle and several drafts by the great American author, who in his late years worked through various manuscripts that seem to

reveal an almost complete cynicism. It appears to argue, as young Satan asserts, that the human race “dupe[s] itself from cradle to grave with shams and delusions which it mist[akes] for realities” (MS 69¹)—although how completely the novel or its author endorses Satan’s conclusions is open to interpretation.

According to Paine, Twain’s literary executor and biographer, before his death Twain had expressed fondness for *The Mysterious Stranger*, and once mused that “I could finish it, I suppose, any time” (qtd. in Paine ix). Some years after his friend’s death, Paine explained, he came across a concluding chapter to the best, and most nearly complete, of several attempted versions of the novel:

I found among a confusion of papers that tremendous final chapter, which must have been written about the time of our conversation. It may even have been written prior to that time, laid aside, and forgotten, for his memory was very treacherous during those later days. The penmanship, however, closely identifies it with that period.

Happily, it was the ending of the story in its first form. Two others, though not without fine writing, were lacking in interest, being mainly wanderings in those fantastic fields into which Mark Twain was prone to be tempted.” (x)

Paine was dissembling. As Tuckey demonstrated some forty years later, what Paine had found was an ending to a later version of Twain’s story which the author had titled “No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger,” one of the “wanderings” that Paine had regarded as inferior. Despite having composed an anticipated ending

to “No. 44,” the manuscript was left in a relatively chaotic state and seemed far from completion, so Paine chose to overlook the clear evidence before him and rework Twain’s fragmentary attempts into a coherent novel. By altering characters’ names (from “No. 44” and “August” to “Satan” and “Theodor”), Paine, with Duneka’s help, had made the chapter seem like an ending to what he regarded as the best version of the narrative, one Twain had titled “The Chronicles of Young Satan,” which had only a loose thematic connection to “No. 44.” As Tuckey revealed, the 1916 publication of a posthumous Twain novel titled *The Mysterious Stranger* was the result of significant unauthorized, unspoken tampering by Paine and Duneka, who had not only added a concluding chapter meant for a different work but had condensed and altered the narrative. Especially audaciously, they introduced an entirely new character, “The Astrologer” (loosely based on a magician character in “No. 44”), who replaced a Catholic priest as the novel’s primary villain.

The result, from Paine’s perspective, was that instead of being left with a mishmash of unfinished and unpublishable texts by Twain, the public was granted a final, significant and valuable novel by the beloved author, one that represents a possible culmination of ideas and anxieties that had preoccupied the author in his late years. That Paine and Duneka had betrayed his readers’ trust, allowing them to accept a conclusion that was based on a deception, serves only to complicate one’s approach to the novel today. As teachers and scholars, what do we *do* with a text like this? My argument is as follows: despite what Tuckey immediately recognized to be “pitfalls for literary critics” (“Mark

Twain's Texts" 88), the benefits of studying and teaching the 1916 *Mysterious Stranger* are greater than the costs. In fact, in *The Mysterious Stranger* we have an unusual opportunity, given the critical neglect the work has faced despite its availability in print, to include undergraduate students in the remaking of a very compelling literary work.

Both Tuckey, whose investigation into Twain's archives of unpublished manuscripts led to the reassessment of the 1916 *Mysterious Stranger* as a fraud, and Gibson, who published the three incomplete versions Twain actually composed, believed that the dilemmas brought to the surface by *The Mysterious Stranger* would, in Tuckey's words, "challenge the best students and engage the efforts of scholars for a long time to come" (Preface v). Neither of them argued that the 1916 version should disappear from the landscape of literary criticism, as Sholom J. Kahn would argue in the following decade, and neither of them felt certain that the 1916 version was inferior, although Gibson, like Kahn and most critics after him, favored the quite different *No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger*. Tuckey published the 1916 version as part of his collection *Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger and the Critics* (identifying Paine and Duneka's amendments with footnotes), and appended to it student-oriented response questions like the following:

1. How well did Albert Bigelow Paine and Frederick A. Duneka do their editorial work in preparing *The Mysterious Stranger* for posthumous publication? Do you think that their derivations from Mark Twain's text can be justified? If so, on what

grounds? If not, should their edition be rejected? Or must it be regarded as a *fait accompli*? What edition could or should take its place? (221)

Gibson, similarly, regarded Tuckey's findings and his own editing of *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts* as an opening-up, not a closing-off, of avenues of discussion of this late work, which after all had been regarded for half a century as important. For Gibson, questions such as those posed by Tuckey could only be answered tentatively. He was willing to concede, albeit grudgingly, that "[a] case can be made for Paine" (Introduction 3)—it was not a case he found particularly convincing—and he remained unsure, even in publishing the texts that were incontrovertibly Twain's, which version of *The Mysterious Stranger* would remain interesting to critics. Gibson went so far as to imagine that a wiser editor or writer might successfully do what, in his view, Paine and Duneka had unsuccessfully attempted in re-editing the manuscript, possibly even "impos[ing] a new, wholly satisfying ending to 'The Chronicle of Young Satan'" (Introduction 34).

Neither Tuckey nor Gibson seems to have anticipated the outcome of their revelations, which was the quick and bloodless transformation of *The Mysterious Stranger* from a seminal text from Twain's late career into a literary non-entity that is largely ignored by critics. Actually, the contemporary critical status of *The Mysterious Stranger* is more properly described as bifurcated, given that the discredited 1916 version continues to be available in numerous inexpensive paperback collections of Twain's short fiction, none of which explain the

problematic editing situation by means of any editorial apparatus. (These tend to be reprints of collections originally assembled in the 1980s or earlier, before the alternate version titled *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* was made available; more recent collections of Twain's short fiction such as the 2004 Modern Library edition omit any version of *The Mysterious Stranger*.) The alternatives available—Gibson's *Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts* and the University of California Press reprint of one of the Gibson-edited manuscripts as *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*—seem useful primarily to Twain scholars. One does no injustice to Gibson, who provided a considerable gift in making these texts publicly available, to conclude that few students or casual readers will approach them of their own volition.

As with all works published in the Mark Twain Library series, the 1982 California reprint of *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* was advertised on its cover as "The Only Authentic Version" and as a "CEAA [the Modern Language Association's Center for Editions of American Authors] Approved Text." On its back cover, the publication was trumpeted as part of a series of "popular editions of Mark Twain's best works just as he wanted them to be read"; the back-cover publicity also asserted that "This Mark Twain Library edition frees the novel from such interference [as Paine and Duneka perpetrated] and presents it for the first time as the author would have published it had he lived to do so." These claims were removed from a 2004 reprint of *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* (in which it is described simply as "The Authoritative Text from the Mark Twain Project"), perhaps in implicit acknowledgement that they were disingenuous. We cannot

know how Twain “wanted [his writings] to be read,” as his struggles with various versions of “The Mysterious Stranger” make particularly clear, and it is ludicrous to assert that any publication of a version of this narrative is “as the author would have published it had he lived to do so,” inasmuch as Twain had ample opportunity, between the production of this version in 1908 and his death two years later, to publish his work, and he was not one to stifle a book of lower quality if he had taken it as far as he wished to go with it.

So the present situation seems to be as follows: the person interested in reading *The Mysterious Stranger* may select from numerous paperback reprints of the version published in 1916 (now out of copyright) or may instead select *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, which seems useful primarily for scholars. In short, the uncovering of the fraud behind *The Mysterious Stranger* had consequences that neither Tuckey nor Gibson anticipated: it has ended the status of *The Mysterious Stranger* (any version) as a significant work in Twain’s oeuvre, and it has led to an especially visible gap between the scholar and the student or casual reader, right down to the textual variant that each is likely to approach. More than that, it has made visible the divergence, in contemporary practice, between the *acts* of scholarly criticism and reading, a distinction that I think is unfortunately wide. Kahn, in a study of the various *Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, argues that the 1916 version ought to “perish”—“[p]robably from the general reader’s library, after the other versions have grown familiar; certainly from the purview of the serious student of Mark Twain’s art” (12). The “general reader,” Kahn believes, will likely conclude that the 1916 version is less

enjoyable than *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* (an argument that leads him, I believe, into a contorted and unpersuasive reading of *No. 44*), whereas the “serious student” or scholar will reject out of hand a version that resulted from editorial fraud. The former will be swayed by the enjoyment the text offers; the latter by objective, scholarly considerations.

Yet this mapping of the *Mysterious Stranger* situation begs an important question. Is literary criticism something apart from the type of reading done by the “general reader” for pleasure; or is criticism itself an accounting of one’s reading self at its most engaged, thoughtful, and articulate? Is criticism something *other than* reading, or is it an attempt to account as lucidly and clearly as possible for the process (and the pleasures) of reading?

It may be that defensiveness about the seriousness of literary criticism as an intellectual pursuit has prompted critics to distinguish what they do from “just reading”; yet, as Gerald Graff argues, the perceived divide between reading as a pleasurable activity and criticism as a serious intellectual endeavor—like the corresponding divide between “reading” and “theory”—is neither necessary nor desirable. Students may complain that the rigorous form of reading demanded in the college classroom robs the reading experience of its joy, but Graff maintains that “exposure to critical debates” is what makes reading attractive as an intellectual pursuit (66), and that “[i]f students are to learn to read and write better, then instead of shielding them from [the scholarly] conversation, we have to start making it more available to them” (85). From Graff’s perspective, engaged reading breeds debate, and debate breeds better literary theory. Once

critics “discover they hold conflicting assumptions [about literary works], they have no choice but to have a dispute about theoretical questions” (53). What’s most lamentable about the virtual disappearance of *The Mysterious Stranger* from the critical landscape (or, for that matter, about the likelihood that teachers are still assigning the 1916 version without informing students of its problematic editorial history) is the missed opportunity to bring some important critical debates to the fore. These debates cover possibly arcane but nonetheless significant issues concerning textual editing and the niceties of publishing posthumous writing, but also foundational questions that get to the heart of what we believe ourselves to be doing in practicing literary criticism. What do we mean in referring to an “author”? In what ways does the idea of canonicity affect not only which texts are read but also how they are read and taught? And what do accepted practices of textual editing reveal about our assumptions concerning the authenticity of literary narratives—and, more than that, concerning the very nature and purpose of reading literature?

It goes without saying, I think, that these are questions with which critics and our students ought always to be engaged. The history of publication and scholarship surrounding *The Mysterious Stranger* is both interesting and revealing of unacknowledged currents in literary criticism, and teaching it—of course, with the contested origins of the text made clear from the start—is a way of responding to the need to account more clearly for our critical practices and their underlying assumptions. These conclusions, it seems to me, are reason enough to revisit the controversy about this unusual text, and to bring the

originally published version of that text—and the attendant controversy—back into the college literature classroom.

Among the useful dilemmas that *The Mysterious Stranger* can bring into the classroom are these:

1. Should such a text be read in the first place?

Perhaps, given its troubling editorial history and lack of credibility as an authentic Twain text, Paine and Duneka's version of *The Mysterious Stranger* ought to be forgotten about. Exposing undergraduate students to the text "without an appropriate textual note setting forth the elementary facts of how it came into existence," Kahn writes, is "scandalous," and until the practice ceases "Clemens will continue to sleep restlessly in his grave, indignant at the persistent violation of his clear intentions" (12). While I fully agree with Kahn that the first responsibility of a teacher who assigns *The Mysterious Stranger* is full disclosure, I am less convinced than he is that such disclosure will doom the text to irrelevance. Rather, students and other readers of *The Mysterious Stranger*, once they become acquainted with its editorial history (and the editing difficulties that led Paine and Duneka to commit their indiscretions), will find a text whose meaning is intriguingly wide open.

I have taught the 1916 *Mysterious Stranger*, in the context of an upper-division course in nineteenth-century American literature, having first informed the students of the textual problem presented by this work. Students' attitudes were mixed; some found both the narrative and the surrounding theoretical questions compelling and instructive, while others lamented the time spent on a

work that seemed to them not connected to their pursuit of an understanding of American literary history. After all, the 1916 work is not clearly attributable to Twain or any other significant American author, and it has been exiled from the canon since Tuckey's revelation. The discussion itself, despite some students' discomfiture, provided a way into a larger critical controversy: in approaching a work labeled as "Mark Twain's," what is our purpose? Are we investigating the product of a "great mind" of American letters (in which case Paine and Duneka's version is justly dismissed)? If so, by what means can we discern what Twain meant to say, even in a text that is indisputably the product of his mind? Isn't that discernment always, unavoidably, a process of interpretation?

If I were to use *The Mysterious Stranger* in a classroom again, I would do at least a couple of things differently. I would attempt to provide to students more thorough editorial notes, such as those provided by Tuckey in his 1968 reprint of the novella in *Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger and the Critics* (though issues of copyright might become trickier to handle, and one of the advantages of using the work—its availability—could be diminished). And I'd consider assigning the novella in a course in literary theory rather than one covering a specific period of literary history. In that way, some students' concerns might be alleviated in that the immediate connection of the text to the course goals would be more clearly evident, since the best reason for assigning *The Mysterious Stranger* is its provocation of certain theoretical questions with which undergraduate students need to become proficient. At any rate, talking about *The Mysterious Stranger* in the classroom offers students an opportunity to

become involved in a conversation they normally are left out of—the issue of what ought to be taught. Even those students who conclude that the novel does not belong in the literature classroom are afforded an opportunity to question the class reading list with, potentially, more than usual persuasive force, and that in itself may be valuable.

2. What right does anyone have to alter the work of a deceased author?

This question will be answered differently by different people, and the various possible answers speak to differing assumptions about the cultural role of authors and the purpose of reading literature. It is also a useful way of bringing the issue of textual editing, usual a marginal concern in the undergraduate classroom, to the surface. Is the Paine-Duneka version of *The Mysterious Stranger* best seen as a literary curiosity, comparable to Greg Matthews's trivial sequel *The Further Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or John Wallace's principled but misguided *The Adventures of Huck Finn Adapted*, works that unsuccessfully take up Twain's mantle? To the initially published versions of Emily Dickinson's poetry, which seem outrageous examples of editorial hubris today but had the benefit, at least, of establishing her reputation so that better versions were later made available? To Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, whose original, author-approved version (depending on which critic you ask) may or may not have been superseded by a 1981 edition that reinstated material Dreiser had self-censored?

One way of answering such questions is by appealing to the authority of the author, in which case Dreiser's original *Sister Carrie*, arguably only

Dickinson's handwritten fascicles reproduced in Ralph W. Franklin's holograph edition, and perhaps none of Twain's versions of *The Mysterious Stranger* (which he never authorized for publication in any form) may be called authoritative. Despite some advantages, this approach should leave us with serious reservations. In overestimating the primacy of the author's voice—especially when, as with Dreiser, Dickinson, and Twain, he or she had qualms about the form in which to publish these works, or whether to publish them at all—we deprive ourselves, in the name of a certain, narrow notion of coherence, of interesting and illustrative variants. Perhaps historical validity is a more proper basis: which version of the text did readers first appreciate? The initially published versions of *Sister Carrie* and *The Mysterious Stranger* then gain primacy as works which reveal, perhaps, more about the audience that first appreciated them than about any individual genius's mind. Those works are then joined by Dickinson's poems and Melville's *Billy Budd* as representative of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, much as *A Confederacy of Dunces* is a work of the 1980s and not the 1960s. Yet does such an approach satisfactorily describe how or why we read literature? What does one do, then, with works like *Walden* or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, rehabilitated in a period far removed from their original publication? These works became valued despite contemporaries' disinterest in them, and it seems likely that what we find valuable in them lies deeper than a passing cultural fancy.

Perhaps, then, what is really valuable about works of literature is something harder to define precisely. The 1981 version of *Sister Carrie* strikes

me as superior to the 1900 version in the degree to which it challenges me; it more strongly troubles certain ideas about the world that seem most comforting. The versions of Dickinson's poems published in the 1950s are more challenging than their 1890s correspondents; they also are much closer to what Dickinson actually wrote, because she was more willing to challenge herself and her readers than her initial editors were. John Wallace's revision of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in which the word "nigger" is omitted throughout, strikes me as inferior not because it is inauthentic, nor because that word is somehow an essential component of Twain's genius, but because in excising that word Wallace has attempted to remove the book from a critical conversation that is valuable, valuable precisely *because* it exposes the blind spots of its author and previous readers—a conversation that is useful because, and only because, it is ongoing. And, finally, Paine and Duneka's *Mysterious Stranger* is, for me, the best version of the story because, the further away Twain moved from the initial vision it contains, the more compromised it became.

3. What does it mean to be an author?

Perhaps the most interesting of the questions raised by *The Mysterious Stranger* is the matter of authorship, an issue that, through a fortunate accident, pertains both to the editorial circumstances surrounding the posthumous publication of *The Mysterious Stranger* and to the content of the novel (especially the Paine-Duneka edited version) itself. *The Mysterious Stranger* could appropriately be read along with Michel Foucault's influential 1969 essay "What Is an Author?" Responding to two 1968 essays, Roland Barthes' "Death of the

Author” and Hannah Arendt’s “What Is Authority?,” Foucault argues that what he calls the “author function,” the principle of a text’s integrity as the product of a single author’s mind, carries such force over acts of interpretation that it prevents texts from achieving their full range of meaning. The concept of authorship, Foucault states, “serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts: there must be—at a certain level of his thought or desire, of his consciousness or unconscious—a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction” (111). The “author function,” then, requires readers not only to assign proprietorship over a text (or group of texts) to a single, coherent consciousness, it demands that they ignore or discount anything that seems to betray the presumption of coherence. Explains Foucault, “[t]he author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning,” and thus is deemed necessary in modern Western thought, in which such proliferation is always regarded as “dangerous” (118).

Coherence, it follows, is always collaborative—a conspiratorial effort shared by author and reader. Twain’s increasingly uncontrolled attempts to work through an idea, to express part of what was in his head, seem rooted in his conviction, suggested in various late works such as *What Is Man?*, that coherence is overvalued; that our collective, intense desire for it causes us to engage in willful illusion, to avoid seeing the world as it truly is. Ironically, then, the efforts by Paine and Duneka to restore *The Mysterious Stranger* to a state of coherence, once uncovered, had the opposite effect: they complicated a matter

that had previously seemed simple, and the only way of reinstating coherence to this work, or indeed to Twain's late career, was essentially to pretend it did not exist (or to profess embarrassment at its existence). In light of this, it is not surprising that—despite what Tuckey and Gibson considered a significant opening-up of important critical questions—the consequence of their research has been the exiling of *The Mysterious Stranger* from scholarship, from both the canon of works authored by Twain and the literary canon in general. Yet Paine and Duneka's version of *The Mysterious Stranger* is perhaps most useful in light of Tuckey and Gibson's subsequent exposure of their fraudulent editing: the element of controlled chaos that their version achieves seems plausibly to represent what Twain unsuccessfully was aiming for, and Tuckey's revelation, rightly understood, clarifies just how successful they were.

4. What does *The Mysterious Stranger* say to us, anyway?

In addition to being an interesting artifact of literary history due to its controversial editorial history, *The Mysterious Stranger* is rich in stimulating ideas. What fuels all of Twain's attempts at a "Mysterious Stranger" narrative is suggested also in his monograph titled *What Is Man?* Written primarily in 1898, just as he was beginning the earliest attempts at *The Mysterious Stranger*, *What Is Man?* was self-published in 1906, anonymously in a limited run of 250 copies. In this 140-page Socratic dialogue, a speaker described only as an "Old Man" cajoles his idealistic counterpart, "Young Man," into acknowledging that humans are not moral agents but, essentially, "machines" who deserve neither praise for their virtues nor condemnation for their failings. It is a deterministic view toward

which Twain seemed to become increasingly swayed (or willing to put into words) as he aged. Although, as Linda Wagner-Martin has pointed out, the dialogic nature of the text reveals a certain ambivalence about this apparently deterministic viewpoint (6), it seems safe to say that, at least, Twain felt convinced that people needed to face up to the philosophical and scientific realities of a post-Darwin age. The evasion of these realities—the assumption, for example, that human actions are blessed by God—is, he suggests, a serious problem. On the other hand, he wonders, what good can come of revealing to people something that they are not ready to learn? Is it true, as “Young Man” remarks, that “it is wrong to *expose* a fact when harm can come of it” (135)?

“The Chronicles of Young Satan,” the early version of *The Mysterious Stranger* that Paine and Duneka took up as their primary source text, deals with the philosophical issues raised in *What Is Man?* using fiction, rather than philosophical dialogue, as its forum, possibly due to Twain’s hope that his ideas would be more palatable in this form. It also deals with the question, raised in *What Is Man?*, of the *harm* that truth can do when its audience is unready for it. It concludes, however, that while the truth can damage people, our willful blindness to it harms us more. Science and technology, young Satan’s message tells us, has given the average American the promise of becoming a sort of god, able to know and have nearly anything the mind can wish for. Yet the narrative questions the efficacy of such knowledge: what does it allow us to *do* that makes life better, or renders anyone more compassionate or capable of helping others? “Not a sparrow falls to the ground without [God’s] seeing it,” remarks one

character piously, but, as young Satan points out, “it falls, just the same. What good is seeing it fall?” (MS 21). A century later, in a world where cable news allows us to watch missiles fall on Middle Eastern countries in real time, young Satan’s question remains deeply relevant. It bears noting, then, that Twain was capable of posing this question in the 1890s; he was noticing the signals of cultural anxiety about the fruits of technology and its companion, knowledge. While perceptive, he was not unique in this regard; *The Mysterious Stranger* contributes to, but does not exist outside of, a cultural understanding of this phenomena: Twain erred in assuming that his contemporaries could not abide what he himself could see, and it is this error, more than any other, that Paine and Duneka corrected. If we pull Twain and his text outside of history, then we understand neither him nor history adequately.

As he continued reworking the basic narrative, Twain not only changed the stranger’s name from “young Satan” to “No. 44,” he also buried under layers and layers of bizarre dream-imagery the commentary on knowledge and technology that fuels the early version, and which also is one of Twain’s most straightforward discussions of his own anxieties about authorship. Frustratingly, though in some ways appropriately, the themes of the book are in the later versions disguised to the point of unintelligibility. It does not seem at all clear that Twain had revised his belief that humans can do little that is useful with the knowledge they attain. Instead, he seems to have concluded that treating his observations in fiction would not be sufficient protection.

Here, for the sake of illustration, is a key passage from the Paine-Duneka *Mysterious Stranger* (taken, in turn, from Twain's abandoned "Chronicles of Young Satan"), which describes young Satan's vision of the future:

He showed us slaughters more terrible in their destruction of life, more devastating in their engines of war than any we had ever seen.

"You perceive," he said, "that you have made continual progress. Cain did his murder with a club; the Hebrews did their murders with javelins and swords; the Greeks and Romans added protective armor and the fine arts of military organization and generalship; the Christian has added guns and gunpowder; a few centuries from now he will have so greatly improved the deadly effectiveness of his weapons of slaughter that all men will confess that without Christian civilization war must have remained a poor and trifling thing to the end of time." (MS 57)

As a footnote in Tuckey's reprint of *The Mysterious Stranger* states, at this point Paine and Duneka omitted "references to the Boer War, to Jameson's Raid, and to the Boxer Rebellion and the occupation of China" (MS 57 n. 15) from Twain's manuscript "The Chronicles of Young Satan." That Twain meant to connect his commentary about war and human progress to specific events of his day is useful to know, and an informed teacher (directed by Tuckey's footnote to the original "Chronicles of Young Satan" and to historical resources about these conflicts) can supplement students' reading by introducing these and other

relevant historical contexts. (Or seeking information about the contemporary events to which Twain referred could be constructed as a research assignment for students.) But the critical point is that such contextual information does not *resolve* the novel's meaning; it *opens it up* in particularly useful ways. For example, students could be asked: do events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries tend to confirm young Satan's views on human progress? Such a line of inquiry begins to get at the ways in which literature, even when written in the seemingly distant past, continues to speak to us. A strong classroom approach to *The Mysterious Stranger* (or, for that matter, to other texts) will not neglect to root the text deeply in history; nor will it confine the text's interrogation of the world to the particular moment in which it was first produced.

No comparable passage is to be found in Twain's subsequent versions of the manuscript; rather than looking to the future, the "mysterious stranger" of the later versions reveals to his companions the past. Nearly all of the most devastating commentary has been lost; the scathing quality of the earlier version is largely absent, although Twain manages a few indirect gibes at contemporary culture in passages like the following satire of creationism in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*:

The skeletons of Adam's predecessors outnumbered the later representatives of our race by myriads, and they rode upon un-dreamt-of monsters of the most extraordinary bulk and aspect. They marched ten thousand abreast, ...and the earth was packed with them as far as the eye could reach. Among them was the

Missing Link. That is what 44 called him. He was an undersized skeleton, and he was perched on the back of a long-tailed and long-necked creature ninety feet long and thirty-three feet high; a creature that had been dead eight million years, 44 said. (185)

In its way, this passage punctures doctrine; yet it does not challenge most readers in the way that the 1916 publication challenges them. The doctrine shaken by the latter work is a more fundamental one: that increasing knowledge will inevitably bring progress, that knowledge (in short) is a positive virtue.

One hundred years after Twain set *The Mysterious Stranger* aside, we live in a world that resembles young Satan's vision of the future perhaps more closely than it is comfortable to acknowledge. We are recipients of instantaneous information from all over the world: like Satan's young protégées, we can observe atrocities from half a world away. We can and do know, as Theodor and his companions learn from Satan, that sweatshop workers across the world receive "only enough to keep them dropping dead with hunger" (MS 26). Yet, like Theodor and his young companions in *The Mysterious Stranger*, we might justly wonder: does all this information allow us to do anything? Or does the awareness of our own incapacity to alter circumstances render our actions even more completely futile? Twain was self-consciously writing as part of another kind of information age—the age of literary realism, in which writers promised self-consciously to tell the truth, even as the advent of technology and what Alan Trachtenberg describes as the "incorporation of America" (3-4) threatened to dehumanize society—yet the significance of *The Mysterious Stranger* is not

limited to its status as an exhibit of literary history. It resonates deeply, in ways that this essay can only begin to explore.

Mark Twain, of course, did not foresee CNN (or the Internet) as such, but the evidence of *The Mysterious Stranger* suggests that, in some way, he was wrestling with concerns that remain ours a century later. In withholding his dark vision, he trusted his contemporaries too little; in deleting it from the critical landscape, we risk making the same mistake. The book is worth continued attention for just that reason, regardless of who wrote it.

NOTE

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to *The Mysterious Stranger* in this essay are to the 1916 publication *The Mysterious Stranger: A Romance*, as reprinted in Tuckey's *Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger and the Critics*, and are designated with the initials MS.

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