"THE INVALID'S STORY": AN EARLY MARK TWAIN COMMENTARY ON INSTITUTIONAL CHRISTIANITY

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On May 16, 1877, Mark Twain and his clergyman friend "Joe" Twichell sailed for Bermuda on a brief vacation, remained there five days and sailed home on May 24. From Hartford, on the 29th, Twain wrote to William Dean Howells, who had been invited to go along, "Confound you, Joe Twichell & I roamed about Bermuda day & night & never ceased to gabble & enjoy. -- About half the talk was -- 'It is a burning shame that Howells isn't here; . . .'"[1] By early June, Twain was preparing a serialized account of the trip for the Atlantic Monthly; and, at the end of June, Howells responded appreciatively to the first three parts, "I've just been reading aloud to my wife your Bermuda papers. That they're delightfully entertaining goes without saying; but we've also found that you give us the only realizing sense of Bermuda that we've ever had. I know that they will be a great success. . . . That joke you put into Twichell's mouth advising you to make the most of a place that was like heaven about killed us."[2] Despite his own first satisfaction with them, Twain had by then reread the account, and passed a more critical judgment on Parts I and II. He invited Howells not to print them if that opinion were shared. At the same time, "Part IV has lain in my pigeon-hole a good while, & when I put it there had a Christian's confidence in 4 aces in it; & you can be sure it will skip toward Conanticut tomorrow before any fatal fresh reading makes me draw my bet."[3] In mid-July again Howells was appreciative: "No. 4 of your Notes of an I. Ex. is glorious. I nearly killed Mrs. Howells with it."[4] That tall and fictionized account of Twain's trip, beginning in the October, 1877, Atlantic Monthly, was published in four parts under the title, "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion."

During the same four months, based upon the Atlantic Monthly proofs, it was published by both The Canadian Monthly (Toronto) and Belgravia (London). Included was a footnote indirectly spoofing Howells, who as editorial guardian of American sensibility had changed a portion of a sentence in the last paragraph of Part IV: Twain's pithy suggestion of what to do with a deserving harbor official, "officer's heart on a fork," had been made to read "officer's ashes on a shovel." Notwithstanding the difference in public temperament, however, Howells' prediction for the article's success was no less true in England than America. In 1878 the piece was

reprinted by Chatto and Windus, An Idle Excursion and Other Papers (London); by Rose-Belford, "An Idle Excursion" (Toronto); and by F. M. Lupton in its Chimney Corner Series (New York).

Never one to let such a commercial opportunity lie fallow, Twain used the excursion again in an 1882 collection, The Stolen White Elephant Etc., and there enlarged it by something under three thousand words.[5] At that part of the excursion when the narrator leaves Bermuda, a paragraph was added in which a fellow passenger is introduced, who, in turn, narrates the history of his physical collapse in a somewhat indelicate farce called "The Invalid's Story."

The germ of this story Twain may have borrowed from Artemus Ward's similar anecdote, James C. Austin has suggested: "And it is quite possible that it was part of the 'Babes in the Wood' lecture that Mark Twain heard in Virginia City, Nevada, in December, 1863." In Mark Twain's America, Bernard DeVoto suggests an earlier possibility, linking the story to J. M. Field's collection of newspaper humor, "The Drama in Pokerville," 1847. The last sketch therein, "A Resurrectionist and His Freight," concerns a Mississippi steamboat traveler whose contrabass contains the corpses of a woman and her two children who have been put too near a stove while in a state of putrefaction. Of the two surmises, Mr. Austin's seems the more tenable, therefore.[6]

A footnote to the 1882 text explained that the story was "Left out of these 'Rambling Notes,' when originally published in the 'Atlantic Monthly,' because it was feared that the story was not true, and at the time there was no way of proving that it was not, -- M. T." The fact of the matter was that in 1879 Twain asked Howells whether "that fragrant account of the Limberger cheese & the coffin-box full of guns" ought to be included in A Tramp Abroad. Its appearance in the 1882 printing of The Stolen White Elephant collection suggests Howells' answer, although the humor of the footnote does not rule out what is, considering Howells' literary taste, another possibility.[7] It seems actually to have been withheld from the original Atlantic Monthly publication, perhaps, like the "officer's heart on a fork," for fear of piercing the reader's sensibility.

According to Frederick Anderson, who consulted the Mark Twain Papers at this writer's behest,

> The manuscript itself, or at least the version of it in the Mark Twain Papers, is on Crystal Lake Mills paper in purple ink. Both this ink and paper are characteristic of SLC's manuscripts in the late 1870's. His "Simon Wheeler" play is on this paper and was clearly written in 1877.[8]

Whatever its exact history prior to 1882, the addition remained a part of the excursion narrative until 1896, when, for the collected Twain edition, Harper's renewed the separation by printing it in a different volume from "Some Rambling Notes." Later editions sometimes made another change.

While "The Invalid's Story" was favored, the most extensive anecdote of the original version was retained, entitled "The Captain's Story," and "Some Rambling Notes," thus truncated, was dropped. Contemporary editors tend to agree with this abridgment, perhaps because the literary merit of the formal story has triumphed over the anecdotal narrative of a ramble: "The Invalid's Story" is usually printed without any indication of its larger context or history.

It is true enough that the story's subject matter seems easily divorced from the narrative, however anecdotal, of a May excursion. The narrator of that story, created by the narrator of the notes, explains that he emerged an invalid from the following situation.

Returning home one blizzardy night he learned that a close friend, Hackett, was dead, leaving him instructions to accompany the body back to Bethlehem, Wisconsin, to be buried there by said friend's father, Deacon Levi Hackett. The storyteller complies, immediately going to the railway station where he identifies a pine box as the coffin, tacks on a card of destination, and sees the remains loaded into a baggage car before hurrying off to buy some cigars and sandwiches. But leaving the eating-room he sees what appears to be the same pine box again on the platform, this time with another person examining it. A quick check of affairs proves, however, that this is some other, and that Hackett's coffin is still in the baggage car. Thus satisfied, he joins the coffin as the train starts, noticing at the same time that a stranger appears, places a small package on the coffin, and exits. At that point in the recounting he narrates what he originally was to learn only at the end of his trip, at expense to his entire physical state: that the small package contained Limberger cheese, and that an exchange had been made between the similar pine boxes so that he was accompanying a shipment of guns to Bethlehem, while Hackett's pine-enclosed corpse was being sent to Peoria, Illinois, mistaken for said guns. And meanwhile, the expressman, one Thompson, thinking to keep the cold out, seals the car's every chink and starts a welcome blaze in the stove. But as the car warms so does the Limberger cheese. A certain penetrating odor soon takes over; the car's two occupants, their appreciation heightened by supposing the corpse at work, try every means to air, to cover, to escape the smell. All is useless in the face of such an exigency, and irreparable mental and physical damage occurs before the journey is over. Even Bermuda can not return his health to him, the storyteller concludes: "neither Bermuda nor any other land can bring it back to me. This is my last trip; I am on my way home to die."

Taken at its story level, then, there may be no particular reason to link "The Invalid's Story" to its larger context, unless, in passing, to explain the otherwise unaccounted for reference to Bermuda in the last two lines. But from another point of view there is a continuity. "The Invalid's Story" appears to contain, or at least give evidence of, a rather closely

worked Christian symbolic level, quite in keeping with Twain's later feeling about institutionalized religion;[9] and in this case allied to the Bermuda-as-heaven metaphor which Howells incidentally had noted in Part III, but which can be more fully traced to show an Easter motif. Beginning the excursion, the narrator and his friend sail from New York and sight Bermuda on the morning of the third day, "Sunday," at which time, "Now came the resurrection hour: the berths gave up their dead." They disembark to find themselves in Hamilton, which, like a pristine new Jerusalem, is built upon "sides and tops of a cluster of small hills. Its outlying borders fringed off and thinned away among the cedar forests . . . ." The town itself is white beyond immediate analogy;[10] whites and blacks are there in equal human proportion; there is no sign of poverty. "I said it was like being in heaven," the narrator declares, and later viewing the white Bermudian chimneys he claims that they are "too pure and white for this world." Awed by the brilliance, the pair spend the day wandering through the town and environs. In the evening "there is just enough of whispering breeze, fragrance of flowers, and sense of repose to raise one's thought heavenward; . . . ." While these few evidences do not suggest anything like a symbolic level, they do emphasize the humorous Bermuda ramble as symbolic of an Easter experience. When the "most lean and lank and forlorn invalid" comes upon the scene in Part IV with his "strange narrative" there consequently is more than incidental significance both to the fact that he has visited Bermuda as a last resort, and that he has found no relief there.

The symbolic comment made in his story bears out that Christian signification, for he is principally concerned with describing a corpse who is very suggestive of Christ, and an expressman who functions like Thomas Aquinas. Within this context, embodying a Christ, ministered by a Tom's son (Thompson), the baggage car is like the Church -- to complete the metaphor which Twain seems to have constructed. In short, if such a definition can be evidenced, the story takes on the form of an unorthodox trope; veiled in a Twainian humor, to be sure, but closely worked.

To begin with the body is identified as a son of Levi, or generically considered, a son of Israel. Bethlehem, Christ's birthplace, is its destination; but unlike Peoria, Illinois, which exists in fact, this is a thoroughly fictional Bethlehem, Wisconsin, in existence -- for whatever reasons -- by Twain's mandate alone.[11] En transit, moreover, that body immediately is the subject of a discussion about resurrection: "Sometimes it's uncertain whether they're really gone or not -- seem gone, you know . . . and so, although you think they're gone, you don't really know. I've had cases in my car. It's perfectly awful, becuz you don't know what minute they'll rise up and look at you!" A "meditative silence" intervenes before Thompson continues with the topic, this time quoting Scripture, "Man that is born of woman is of few days and far between," and emphasizing "they aint' nobody can get around it; all's got to go -- just everybody, as you might say."

Attention is drawn to the italicized concept, and, by inference, to the one body -- subject of the previous paragraph about resurrection -- who is the exception to the rule. A moment later the analogy is complete when Thompson asks, "How long has he ben [sic] dead?" and the answer is, "Two or three days."

Also by this time in the journey, Thompson has given evidence of a symbolic identity as well as of the spoof that Twain has framed. On the first account he does for the baggage car containing the body, what Aquinas did for the Church, metaphorical body of Christ; "slammed his sliding doors to, and bolted them, closed his windows down tight, and then went bustling around, here and there and yonder, setting things to rights, and all the time contentedly humming 'Sweet By and By' . . . stopping up whatever stray cracks he could find, ..." On the teleologic second account he is directly responsible for lighting the fire that so unfortunately warms the cheese set there by chance. Thereafter, he partakes of a "contemplative pause," a "meditative silence," he discusses resurrection, quotes from the Scriptures and plays out the traditional pun on Aquinas by acting, almost to the exclusion of all other metaphors, exactly like the horse of the Church,[12] "stretched his nose out," "came back on a sharp trot," "pawing the air and saying hoarsely," "gimme the road," "pranced in cheerily," "I've carried a many a one of 'em," and at the end is dragged "out by the collar."

Circumstantially put into relationship with this body and this custodian of the car, the storyteller literally suffers the loss of his health, and, thereby, establishes the point of view for the experience, in a retrospect that exaggerates the action and idiomatically heightens the dialogue. Two kinds of reading are consequently possible. As single-level Twain humor that exaggeration easily makes for a tall story, one that seems to require no particular explication. As a particularized symbolic commentary on the Church, a broad farce (by Twain's definition) of what has generally happened as the body of Christ, the Church, progresses through time, details and structure can be expected to be more significant.

Center of the structure, then, is a Christ-like body which is actually no body, but guns and odiferous cheese hidden from sight. Actively supervising this delusion ("that deadly cheese"), warming it, treating it as a resurrection, manipulating it, "maundering, in a desultory and low-spirited way," stopping up whatever stray cracks he can find in the vehicle that temporally transports it, contentedly humming "Sweet By and By," a Thomas-like Thompson is hired custodian, protagonist of the action. But an unnamed Everyman, who is volunteer to the action out of friendship, visitor in the Church-like car, victim of the bungle, is significantly the point of view. Passively a foil to Thompson and his "tremendous fire," he is nevertheless skeptical of what will result: "I was sure the effect would be deleterious

upon my poor departed friend." This proves to be so. The odor is almost unbearable.

Now to counteract this original zeal, Thompson suggests that the pine box be moved. But his strength is not up to his intention: in the effort he slips down with his nose on the cheese. For survival, gasping, they resort to nature's aid, and "Out on the cold platform" the air is anodyne, briefly. "But we couldn't stay out there in that mad storm; we should have frozen to death. So we went in again and shut the door, and began to suffer once more . . . ." And again Thompson suggests a plan: carbolic acid to kill the smell. Yet the palliative fails of its purpose. The two mephitic odors are worse than the one.

Consequently Thompson's third attempt to clear the air is by far the most dramatic: a mock sacrifice is enacted on a makeshift altar. "He had brought a lot of chicken feathers, and dried apples, and leaf tobacco, and rags, and old shoes, and sulphur and assofoetida, and one thing or another; and he piled them on a breadth of sheet iron in the middle of the floor, and set fire to them . . . . All that went before was just simple poetry to that smell -- but mind you, the original smell stood up out of it as sublime as ever -- . . . ." On the platform, Thompson's peroration to this failure takes the form of an italicised pun: "And don't you know, we're pisoned." According to the logic of colloquialism the word is most likely translated as "poisoned"; but actually as spelled it is proper noun, the name of the river in Eden; in this case easily suggestive of "the original smell" which is so evilly upon the air. Twain Calvinistically appears to more fully establish that traditional formula of original sin two sentences later: "Yes, sir, we're elected, just as sure as you're born." That surety seals the narrator's fate. And the next paragraph, which is the last of his account, reveals how irrevocable was that edict: then, realization of the truth "was too late to save me"; and now, in the hereafter of that experience, Bermuda with all its heavenly aspects has proved insufficient balm.

That such a commentary does not markedly differ from Twain's later feeling about doctrinal Christianity, especially Catholic dogma, may easily enough be noticed.[13] Whether it is acceptable as a symbolic statement Twain consciously created while practicing a more obvious humor must remain however, a matter of critical opinion. Yet because parts of his later writing show a comparable degree of symbolic sophistication, punning, close use of Biblical references, structural order, one is tempted to suppose that as early as 1879, and possibly 1877, Twain's more important concepts about institutionalized religion were being set out in a more than simple or colloquial fiction.

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Footnotes:

[1] Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson, Eds., Mark Twain-Howells Letters (Cambridge, 1960), 178. A good part of the history of "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion" can be found in these letters; specifically, 171, 179-188, 190-191, 193, 199-201, 207-209, 251, 702.

[2] Smith and Gibson, 185.

[3] Ibid., 187.

[4] Ibid., 190.

[5] Mark Twain, The Stolen White Elephant Etc. (Boston, 1882), 93-105.

[6] James C. Austin, "Artemus Ward, Mark Twain and the Limburger Cheese," MASJ, IV, 2 (Fall, 1963), 70-73; Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain's America (Boston, 1932), 252-253.

[7] What Howells' attitude toward the story might have been in 1877 is a matter of conjecture, of course. However, in 1899 he did offer a comment: "This morning I woke with an elderly man's earliness, and read your terrible story about the box of rifles in the express car." (Smith and Gibson, 701.) The expression of Howells' sensibility about the officer's heart on a fork is also recorded: "This number of the Bermudas is delicious. But you can't put a health-officer's heart on a fork in The Atlantic Monthly. None of our readers ever heard of such a thing." (Smith and Gibson, 207.)

[8] In a letter, 19 November 1963, Mr. Anderson further reports, "In a letter to Twichell (Paine's ed. of Letters, 350) dated 26 January 1879 Clemens writes that he is "putting in [A Tramp Abroad] the yarn about the Limburger cheese and the box of guns, too -- mighty glad Howells declined it." Our MS of the story is apparently the version dropped out of A Tramp Abroad, since introductory remarks (obviously written later than the text of the story here) contain the following statement: "It was a year & a half or two years ago, when I was coming up from the Bermuda Islands in a steamer . . . ."

[9] For a discussion of how symbolism may have been used by Twain to enrich his commentary on the Catholic Church, see Juliette A. Trainor, "Symbolism in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court," MLN, LVI (June, 1951), 382-385. Also Aurele A. Durocher, "Mark Twain and the Catholic Church," JCMVASA, I, 2 (Fall, 1960), 32-43.

[10] Gladys C. Bellamy, Mark Twain as a Literary Artist (Norman, 1950), has an explanation for this particular passage: "In 'Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion,' he expended several paragraphs in his search for a figure to describe the peculiar white of the Bermuda houses, built of blocks of white coral: 'the whitest white you can conceive of, and the blindingest . . . and, besides, there is a dainty, indefinable something . . . about its look.' He felt immense satisfaction when he discovered that this particular white 'is exactly the white of the icing of a cake, and has the

same unemphasized and scarcely perceptible polish.' But the diligent search for the exact word is simply a manifestation of the artist's love for his tools." This may indeed by so. However, in terms of the thesis here, another explanation may be pertinent as well. The passage reads, "A wonderfully white town; white as snow itself. White as marble; white as flour. Yet looking like none of these, exactly. Never mind, we said; we shall hit upon a figure by and by that will describe this peculiar white." The term "by and by" appears twice after that mention, each time suggestive of heaven: "By and by a soothing, blessed twilight spread its cool balm around" (Stolen White Elephant, 71). The second time the expressman is humming "Sweet By and By." It may be that Twain, punning, meant the color white and the concept "by and by" to be linked.

[11] At the time that Twain wrote the story there is no record of a Bethlehem, Wisconsin, although six states did have a Bethlehem. While this in itself is not proof of symbolic usage, devising a fictional placename is often a sign of symbolic intention. And apart from such geographic emphasis there is the second implication, that Twain had the well known Hebrew meaning of the placename in mind: beth (house) - Elohim ([of] God).

[12] Not to be confused with the mention of Thomas as the ox of the Church, this pun plays upon the name Aquinas and the Latin word equinus (relating to horses).

[13] For a discussion of Twain's sense of fictional structure, and usage of symbolism bordering on allegory, see: E. S. Fussell, "The Structural Problem of 'The Mysterious Stranger,'" Studies in Philology, IL, 1 (January, 1952).