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"AND IN ITS WAKE WE FOLLOWED"
The Political Wisdom of Mark Twain

CATHERINE AND MICHAEL ZUCKERT

I

Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is an obviously political book in which the Yankee—the knight of progress and democracy—challenges the superstitions and cruel injustices of feudal England. Since this encounter is, at least initially, as obviously humorous as it is political, questions are apt to arise when critics begin to treat this novel seriously. Nevertheless, *A Connecticut Yankee* has become the focus of serious Twain criticism in recent years, because according to these critics, *A Connecticut Yankee* is the first major work in which Twain's humor gives way to his final despair and, thus, this novel reveals the final inadequacy of Twain's art and/or understanding.¹ *A Connecticut Yankee*, the critics assert, is an essentially flawed work because the initial lighthearted humor of the first part gives way to the horror of the second. We, on the contrary, wish to show that this shift from humor to horror is by no means an accidental product of Twain's confusion or despair but is central to Twain's meaning and that once the reader comes to

¹ Cf. Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1964); James M. Cox, "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court: The Machinery of Self-Preservation," reprinted in H. N. Smith, *Mark Twain: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 117-129; Robert A. Wiggins, *Mark Twain Jackleg Novelist* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), pp. 77-82; Henry Seidel Canby, *Turn West, Turn East* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951), pp. 161-173; Gladys Carmen Bellamy, *Mark Twain as Literary Artist* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), pp. 311-316; Thomas Blues, *Mark Twain and the Community* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970). Ever since Van Wyck Brooks' watershed study of the *Ordeal of Mark Twain*, critics have tended to view Twain in light of his "defects," so that current interpretations of *Connecticut Yankee* represent, essentially, mere "variations on a theme." Twain was a "character"—everyone knew that "Mark Twain" was in fact Samuel Clemens—and that character was a distinctively American phenomenon. It is precisely this fact that gave such impetus to the Brooks school of criticism—Twain seemed so obviously a cultural phenomenon that a purely literary study seemed inappropriate. We suggest, however, that Brooks reversed the proper relation when he proceeded to study Mark Twain merely as a reflection of the American cultural situation. Twain's tremendous success indicates that he had identified something distinctively American; at least he knew how to appeal to Americans. We hope to show that he also sought to improve them. That is, Twain not merely reflected the American character but intentionally sought to form it.

understand why the humorous becomes horrible, he will have acquired some insight into the character and problems of modern politics.

Despite the near universal condemnation of Twain's "confusion," the novel has a clearly defined structure: a preface by the author, a "frame" in which Twain receives the manuscript from the Yankee, and the Yankee's tale itself, which comprises the greatest part of the novel. That tale is, further, divided into five major parts: the Yankee's first visit at Camelot (chapters 1-10), his first journey with Sandy (chapters 11-20), his sojourn at the Holy Fountain (chapters 21-26), his second journey with Arthur (chapters 27-38), and his return to Camelot (chapters 39-44).² As this general outline suggests, there are distinct parallels between the first half of the Yankee's tale and the second. For example, the central incident in the Yankee's initial stay at Camelot is his "saving of the sun," through which he comes to power and commences his Enlightenment civilization, whereas the turning point in the Yankee's fortune during his final stay at Camelot comes with the Church's interdict that shuts off the electric lights and with them the Yankee's civilization; where the Yankee learns to don armor, King Arthur dons a commoner's pack; where the Yankee tells the freemen of the evils of monarchy, the woman in the small-pox hut documents the misery of common life in Arthurdom; where the Yankee and Sandy visit Morgan, Hank Morgan and Arthur visit Marco; where the Yankee saves the "noble ladies," who are in fact pigs, by purchasing them, the knights on bicycles rescue the king and Boss, who were but a moment before slaves condemned to die. And so on. The parallels are indeed numerous, because Twain wrote a tightly constructed novel. In each parallel, moreover, what is funny in the first version is most often horrible in the second. A final example: Where the Yankee subdues knights, who mistake him for a dragon as a result of his puffing smoke from his pipe through his visor on his first journey, he blows to bits with a bomb the first knights he and Arthur encounter during his second journey and so foreshadows the conclusion of the novel.

In order to understand this repeated shift from the comic to the horrible, it may be helpful to consider the Yankee's initial and repeated metaphor: the circus. When Sir Kay first accosts him, the Yankee concludes that Sir Kay must be from a circus, if not a lunatic asylum. But the Yankee quickly discovers that it is he and not the knight who is, so to speak, the freak in Arthurdom. The Arthurians, he states, wondered at him as people do at an elephant in a zoo. Now the particular character of a freak is that he is both funny (or at least curious) and horrible; he is funny because of the exaggerated proportions, yet horrible because unnatural. And that is precisely the character of the shift in the tone of the

² Each of these five parts, in turn, divides roughly in two: at Camelot, before and after the eclipse through which the Yankee comes to power; on his first journey, before and after he visits Morgan; at the Holy Fountain, before and after Arthur joins him; during the second journey, before and after Marco; and during his final visit, before and after his journey to France.

book. The comedy of the first half often consists in exaggeration because it arises from an implicit contrast of pretension with nature; and because it deals primarily with pretensions, the humor deals primarily with illusions or unrealities. The Yankee does not really save the sun, he is not really a knight or a dragon, the ladies are not ladies but pigs, and so on. By means of the parallels between incidents in the first and in the second half of the tale, Twain shows the often harsh reality underlying the humor. Thus he reveals in the structure the character of his humor in general: The jokes are jokes and most often very funny, but at the same time these jokes point to a not-so-funny reality beneath the humor. In the second half of this novel we see the misery inflicted upon the common people by the nobles' pretensions, which the Yankee so often ridicules in the first half. Yet, at the same time, we are forced to recognize the true nobility and excellence of Arthur and Lancelot. Contrary to the Yankee's initial assertions, the nobles possess a factual superiority on which to base their claim to rule. While Twain partially rehabilitates the legitimacy of aristocratic rule, he also reveals the Yankee's own very crude pretensions. More fundamentally, he exposes the true requirements for the realization of the Yankee's nobler dream—institution of a republic within his own lifetime—in the total war at the end. Exaggeration is the appropriate form of humor for the Yankee, we finally see, because the Yankee is characterized by his lack of restraint, that is, his immoderation.

Is the Yankee's dream of a republican manliness then merely that—a dream? Is the destruction of humanity by its own technological power an inexorable process once begun? That is the conclusion represented by the Yankee, who on his deathbed appeals to his Arthurian wife Sandy to save him from those horrible dreams—including not only the culmination of sixth-century revolution but his modern life as a whole. But are we justified in identifying Twain and his narrator? It is precisely this identification that has led the critics to conclude that *A Connecticut Yankee* finally represents a confused product of Twain's semiconscious despair, because the Yankee is somewhat confused and does not completely understand the grounds and/or implications of his democratic theory and revolutionary project.

Identification of Twain and his Yankee narrator is possible only by ignoring the introduction and "frame"³ in which Twain speaks to the reader in his own voice; it is, therefore, to a careful examination of these two sections that we now turn. Once one ceases simply to identify Twain and his Yankee narrator, one is able to see the Yankee as the vehicle of Twain's strenuous, if deeply sympathetic, critique of America.

In the Preface Twain appears as the author of all that is to follow. He begins with a statement that seems to shed light on the intention of

³ By "frame" we mean "A Word of Explanation" and "Final Post Script by Mark Twain," Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York: Modern Library, 1917), pp. 1-9, 448.

the novel: "The ungentle laws and customs touched upon in this tale are historical."⁴ There is a certain ambiguity since the "laws and customs touched upon in this tale" include those not only of Arthur's sixth-century England but also those of the Yankee's nineteenth-century America. Twain seems to clarify the ambiguity in the sequel, however:

It is not pretended that these laws and customs existed in England in the sixth century; no, it is only pretended that inasmuch as they existed in the English and other civilizations of far later times it is safe to consider that it is no libel upon the sixth century to suppose them to have been in practice in that day, also. One is quite justified in inferring that whatever one of these laws or customs was lacking in that remote time, its place was competently filled by a worse one.⁵

The implication seems clear: The ungentle or even bad laws and customs are those of the sixth century. We may infer this from the principle Twain states that he used in writing his tale—a more distant past is worse than a more recent past. History is progressive. Twain, in other words, seems to agree with the Yankee of his story.⁶

Twain continues, however: "The question as to whether there is such a thing as divine right of kings is not settled in this book"⁷—a question most strange to be raised in light of the preceding affirmation of progress and with it of the nineteenth century. Moreover, though not settled in this book, Twain claims that "it ought to be settled"; that is, it remains a question of importance.⁸ Therefore, we cannot conclude Twain is committed to progress and shares the Yankee's view of political things. This is corroborated by the Yankee himself who asserts that the Roman Catholic Church "invented 'divine right of things'"; that is, the Yankee believes the question is easily settled in the negative.⁹ Not only does Twain raise the issue of divine right, he presents an argument for it which, he claims tentatively, makes it an "unavoidable deduction." That argument provides the key to understanding his curious procedure in the Preface. Twain supports the divine right of kings with an argument for divine providence, an argument with the following features: (a) An assertion that man knows the good, but (b) is unable to effectuate it. However, (c) what ought to be is, and (d) therefore God (the effectively ruling principle of the whole) guarantees or effectuates this conjunction of the "is" and the

⁴ *Ibid.*, n.p.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁷ *Ibid.*, n.p.

⁸ *Ibid.* Twain says he will "go into training and settle the question in another book." Since he does return to it in his massive *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* [(29 vols.; Author's National Edition; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), I, 166] where he has Joan tell the Dauphin that he is king appointed by God, we might be less inclined to dismiss the whole business as a mere joke between Twain and his enlightened readers.

⁹ *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 65.

“ought.” This argument differs both from the traditional arguments for divine right of kings¹⁰ and from the traditional conceptions of providence. Twain’s argument differs from the traditional conceptions of providence in that it affirms a scrutable God and therefore of necessity falls to evidence of an imperfect world—for example, “the Pompadour, Lady Castlemaine, and other executive heads of that kind.”¹¹ It is not merely a strange argument then, but a patently ineffective and inappropriate one. At this point, Twain apparently retreats to the more traditional conception of providence in holding the question open, unsettled.¹²

Twain indicates his intention here by claiming “to take the other tack” on divine right in this book, that is, to make the assumption that the argument from divine right or providence is not of itself sufficient to uphold the claims of the Arthurian regime. By extension, the same holds for progress also. Thus he lays the foundation for the political comparison between Arthurdom and Yankeedom, a comparison that is only possible on political grounds if assumptions of progress and providence are, at least at the outset, put aside.

Twain’s raising the issue of divine right is not a merely arbitrary way to signal his readers about his relation to his Yankee. Twain is led almost necessarily from the affirmation of progress to the consideration of providence as the peculiar form of the argument indicates. Twain is led to providence in search of the grounds for that progress he affirms. Progress, too, entails the necessary conjunction, in this case over time, of the “is” and the “ought,” that is, the effective realization of the good.¹³ But whence comes the necessity? The consideration of that problem is what makes Twain not only take up, but be favorably disposed toward, the argument for providence. Ironically, it thus leads him to undercut his commitment to progress itself.

Twain’s irony suggests that his Yankee and his audience perhaps, in their easy commitment to progress, make a deep-going assumption, even an act of great faith in the beneficent ordering of the whole, an assumption of faith they are not only not quite aware of, but even opposed to, or disposed to ridicule—after all, the argument for divine right is a joke. In the order of his considerations in the Preface, Twain simply raises to self-consciousness in a comic way what remains implicit in the opinions of the Yankee and his audience. In the final analysis, it is this duality

¹⁰ Cf. John Neville Figgis, *Divine Right of Kings* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1965).

¹¹ *Connecticut Yankee*, n.p.

¹² The fact that Twain leaves the question open means, of course, that Twain’s complete teaching is not contained in this book. This is merely explicitly to recognize what should be obvious; this essay does not deal with the totality of Twain’s thought and must be supplemented by analyses of his other works. The eminently political character of this work makes it a good place to begin, however.

¹³ That is, progress as a principle legitimizing a particular political regime.

of progress and providence, and their underlying affinities, that lies beneath Twain's presentation of the conflicting regimes.

Twain's indication in the Preface that he is not an unabashed partisan of the present is strengthened by his "Word of Explanation" in which he presents himself as a character, the person who acquires the manuscript that constitutes the main part of the novel, rather than as the author of the novel itself. Twain here appears to be an unabashed lover of the past. He and the Yankee meet during a guided tour through an old English castle. After the Yankee leaves him, Twain goes to his room at Warwick Arms (probably a hotel in the medieval style to match the castle). In his room, he sits "steeped in a dream of the olden time. . . . From time to time [he] dip[s] into old Sir Thomas Malory's enchanting book, and [feeds] at its rich feast of prodigies and adventures, breathe[s] in the fragrance of its obsolete names, and dream[s] again."¹⁴ We meet, in fact, two Mark Twains: the Twain of the Preface who is most familiar to us as a humorist and skeptic, and the Twain of the "frame" who is a reader and a dreamer.

Just as we encounter two Twains, we also meet two Yankees in "A Word of Explanation." The Yankee Twain meets appears also to be a lover of the past. Though an American, he never returns to America after his adventure in Arthur's kingdom; he remains in England where he, too, can be near relics of the past. He tours the old castles and looks at the old armor. He appears to hunger for the opportunity to tell of what he has done, but at the same time he is reluctant and ashamed, or too terrified of reliving his experience in speech, to do so. He comes close to telling Twain in the castle when the cicerone points out the bullet hole in the armor: "'Wit ye well, *I saw it done.*' Then, after a pause, added: 'I did it myself.'¹⁵ The order of his speech is telling; so is the pause. And so is the Yankee's disappearance after his admission of the deed. The Yankee's desire to confess is great, however; so great that he troubles to find Twain's room and finally, after midnight, brings himself to call on Twain. Twain knows the power of whiskey to loosen men's tongues, and after four drinks the Yankee tells his tale. He begins, but is interrupted by sleepiness. He is relaxed, his soul is relieved. He can complete his confession by letting Twain read the rest of the story.¹⁶ The sources of his anguish now seem to have been dreams:

It was awful—awfuller than you can imagine. . . . Don't let me go out of my mind again; death is nothing, let it come, but not with those dreams, not with the torture of those hideous dreams—I cannot endure *that* again.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Connecticut Yankee*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁶ We should note that the Yankee has probably spent much time mulling over his own experience. He is able to recite the first part of his narrative from memory, so it appears that he has read it, perhaps "worked on it," often.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

The Yankee has been released, and with that release he commits himself totally to that past he has left; even his origin in modern times seems part of his awful dreams.¹⁸

Although the story the Yankee tells hardly appears "dreamlike," Twain clearly suggests in "A Word of Explanation" that the story, too, represents at least a twofold dream: What the Yankee sees as the result of a stiff blow to the head, Twain envisions as a result of his reading of Malory.¹⁹ Twain, it seems, even dreams in manuscript form. In any case, the utter unreality of a twofold dream is clearly in line with the historical inaccuracy Twain warned his readers about in his Preface. Only by suggesting that the Yankee's tale is a dream can he make the juxtaposition of historical details from different periods plausible.

Certainly, the effect of the Yankee's story goes well beyond that to be expected of a "mere dream." As a result of his experience, the Yankee undergoes a complete change of character. From the hardheaded entrepreneur who seeks to introduce nineteenth-century "civilization" into Arthur's realm, he becomes the nostalgic wanderer we meet in the "frame" who is driven by his bad dream to seek comfort by surrounding himself with relics of his beloved past. Upon hearing (reading) the Yankee's tale, Twain, on the other hand, awakens from his romantic slumber to become the skeptical author of this volume, whom we meet in the Preface. The two transformations are related, because the Yankee's initial stance as an

¹⁸ This is reflected even in his manner of speaking. At one point, he said to Twain: "Wit ye well"; later he says, "Give you good den, fair sir." (*Ibid.*, pp. 2, 8.) He speaks as a Malory Arthurian. This acquires special significance in the light of a comment the Yankee once made to Sandy about her narrative technique: "Sir Marhaus, the King's Son of Ireland talks like all the rest; you ought to give him a brogue, or at least a characteristic expletive; by this means one would recognize him as soon as he spoke, without his ever being named. It is a common literary device with great authors." (*Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.) The Yankee believes that a man's way of speaking is an indication of his identity. Thus the Yankee's adoption of Arthurian speech is an indication that he now identifies himself with the past.

¹⁹ He suggests even that the Yankee's midnight visit is a dream; and he reminds us later in the story of its dreamlike character by occasionally reproducing whole sections from Malory. The most important case is perhaps "Sandy's tale," during which the Yankee dreams as well. Further, the story as a whole follows the tale Twain quotes in his "Word." Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 2-5, 10, 34, 47, 60, 115, 408, 417, 430, 449. See also Arthur's dream in Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, I, xix.

The overall structure of *A Connecticut Yankee* reminds one very much of another classic of which Twain was a known admirer. [Cf. Delancey Ferguson, *Mark Twain: Man and Legend* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1942), p. 26.] *Don Quixote* also depicts a series of both harsh and humorous adventures produced by a combination of reading and dreaming and conveys a caustic critique of the chivalry of the romances through its ridicule. In *Connecticut Yankee* the characters are reversed; it is Twain who reads the romances, not his Yankee knight. The first object of Twain's burlesque is the knight, that is, the Yankee, not King Arthur's court.

entrepreneur and his later romantic nostalgia are essentially related phenomena. As an entrepreneur the Yankee looks away from present deprivations to a future of plenty when technology will have enabled men to overcome physical restrictions, whereas the romantic, doubting first that technology can overcome all physical limitations on men (in the most important case, death) and second that all deprivations are physical in essence, looks back from the Yankee's present to a past stripped of all its harshness because stripped of all immediacy. Both constitute attempts to escape the present, when what is needed is a critical look at the present in order to identify the character and source of its defects. Thus both the modernistic prejudices of the present and the romanticism that was its most common alternative become targets of Twain's humor. It is appropriate that the book is a fantasy—one cannot openly and seriously challenge all the opinions of one's readers—as it is appropriate that the story is a manifold of dreams, for our dreams make manifest the truths hidden by our opinions.

The Yankee's tale induces Twain to attempt to play an active role in determining future history. In the very conception of the Yankee's tale, we see Twain at least threaten to alter the course of history, first in fiction by juxtaposing factual details from different periods in a comic and fantastic manner but second and ultimately in fact by reforming his Yankee audience's conception of history—both the reality of the past and the direction of the future.²⁰ He can do this, however, only in the context set by his Preface, because the precondition for man's taking an active role in determining history is that there is no necessary course of history, either of progress or providence. And Twain at least comically asserts this possibility at the very beginning of his novel.

II. The Yankee

The Yankee begins his tale by introducing himself:

I am an American. I was born and reared in Hartford, in the state of Connecticut—anyway, just over the river in the country. So I am a Yankee of the Yankees—and practical; yes, and nearly barren of sentiment, I suppose—or poetry, in other words.²¹

The Yankee stands for modern America; he is a type. So little is he an individual that he fails to tell us his name until much later, and in fact he goes unnamed throughout most of the book. Only once is his full name even mentioned.²² The fact that the Yankee is a type is responsible for much of the humor of the story, as well as the source of its importance as a reflection upon the American character.

The Yankee proclaims himself an American, practical and unsen-

²⁰ Malory, too, put something of his present with a rather different immediate intent into his tale.

²¹ *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 5.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 383.

timental. His chief and only concern as he first appears to us is his occupation—making “anything a body wanted.”²³ The only thing that he tells us about his family concerns their occupations, and he does this in a context that suggests that he holds them in something like contempt. He draws our attention to the fact that he has risen from the positions of his father and uncle and thus implies that he is superior to his parents. His career is, in fact, the ideal American career: The Yankee is the American self-made man. He has transcended his lowly family origins to become the head superintendent of the arms factory. He embodies the highest ideals of America, the successive rise of each generation over the previous one, and in so doing indicates that America is founded on impiety.²⁴ The preservation of ancestral ways, of the old, the traditional, and the revered, is explicitly rejected by the Yankee and his America. This would seem of a piece with his rejection of the sentimental and the poetic. The Yankee’s highest concern is his own personal, social, and economic rise.

It is striking, in fact, how lacking in explicitly political subject matter this most political book is for the first eight chapters. After an initial period of disbelief and despondency, the Yankee reaches a conclusion about his future course of action:

I made up my mind to two things: if it was still the nineteenth century and I was among lunatics and couldn’t get away, I would presently boss that asylum or know the reason why; and if, on the other hand, it was really the sixth century, I would boss the whole country inside of three months; for I judged I would have the start on the best educated in the kingdom by a matter of thirteen hundred years and upwards.²⁵

He sees his present position as merely an extension of, and a far greater opportunity than, his previous job as head superintendent of the arms factory.

For a time, I used to wake up, mornings, and smile at my “dream,” and listen for the Colt’s factory whistle; but that sort of thing played itself out gradually, and at last I was fully able to realize that I was actually living in the sixth century. . . . After that, I was just as much at home in that century as I could have been in any other, and as for preference, I wouldn’t have traded it for the twentieth. Look at the opportunities here for a man of knowledge, brains, pluck and enterprise to sail in and grow up with the country. The grandest field there ever was and all my own; not a competitor; . . . whereas, what would I amount to in the twentieth century? I should be a foreman in a factory, that is about all. . . .²⁶

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁴ Eric Goldman, for example, characterizes “the day’s credo” as follows: “In worn-out, king-ridden Europe, men must stay where they are born. But in America a man is accounted a failure and certainly ought to be, who has not risen above his father’s station in life.” *Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Vintage, 1955), p. 8.

²⁵ *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

His aims have not the broad significant political interests they later acquire. He does not want to rule the country, but to "boss" it; and the title he finally takes in Arthur's realm is "The Boss." At this point the Yankee does not question the legitimacy of the present regime; nor does he concern himself with the public good that might accrue should he gain power. He shows no concern for justice.²⁷ When the Yankee gains power during the eclipse, he indicates the character of his venture as he sees it: He is concerned with the rise in revenue he could produce and the rise in his own income that would result.²⁸

The Yankee appears first as the preeminently private man; yet he appears to be singularly unable to participate in the satisfactions of a private life. In his initial speech, where he recounts those things he considers most important about himself, he fails to mention a fiancée, Puss Flannigan, he left back in the nineteenth century. Later he informs us that this Miss Flannigan is fifteen years old. All the evidence—that initial omission, the young lady's name, her age, and what the Yankee says of her—indicates that this was no romance of the flesh, nor for that matter of the soul. The Yankee is, in fact, downright prudish.²⁹ Nor does the Yankee find satisfaction in the pleasures of the soul that a private man might enjoy. He tells us explicitly that he lacks poetry: and his comments on art are a further confirmation of his lack of love for the beautiful.³⁰ Other possible grounds for the primacy of the private life—philosophy, family, religion—are most conspicuous by their absence. One aspect of the Yankee's politicization has to do with his bankruptcy as a private man.

The claims for the private life have usually been cast in terms of the primacy of pleasure and the freedom the private gives for the pursuit of pleasure. But the Yankee is not primarily interested in pleasure per se. Rather, the Yankee seeks to avoid pain. Early in his tale he comments

²⁷ The first words said to the Yankee, by Sir Kay, on his arrival in Arthur's realm were: "Fair sir, will ye just?" (*Ibid.*, p. 6.) The Yankee does not understand the question. Perhaps the play on joust-just here makes that misunderstanding more important than it immediately seems.

²⁸ See also his remark prior to the eclipse: "Besides in a business way I knew it would be the making of me." (*Ibid.*, p. 43.)

²⁹ The Yankee is offended by all dinner conversation except that at Marco's. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 32, 69, 88, 100, 138, 183, 192-198.

³⁰ "There was not a chromo. I had been used to chromos for years, and I saw that without my suspecting it a passion for art had got worked into the fabric of my being. . . . It made me homesick to look around over this proud and gaudy but heartless barrenness and remember that in our house in East Hartford, all unpretending as it was, you couldn't go into a room but you would find an insurance chromo, or at least a three-color God-Bless-Our-Home over the door. . . . But here, even in my grand room of state, there wasn't anything in the nature of a picture except a thing the size of a bedquilt, which was either woven or knitted (it had darned places in it), and nothing in it was the right color or the right shape. . . ." (*Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.)

on life at Camelot: “As for conveniences, properly speaking, there weren’t any. I mean *little* conveniences, it is the little conveniences that make the real comfort of life.”³¹ The comfort the Yankee seeks is not so much positive pleasure as it is freedom from inconveniences.

Yet the man who seeks comfort must exert and so inconvenience himself; he must keep himself busy working for change in an environment in which comfort is lacking. Ending his catalog of missing conveniences, the Yankee concludes:

I saw that I was just another Robinson Crusoe cast away on an uninhabited island, with no society but some more or less tame animals, and if I wanted to make life bearable I must do as he did—invent, contrive, create, reorganize things; set brain and hand to work, and keep them busy.³²

The Yankee’s comfort seeking itself cuts very far in the direction of change or reform and thus accounts in part for the Yankee’s politicization.³³ But comfort doet not in itself constitute a satisfactory end of political reform. First, comfort forever eludes attainment by its seekers; its pursuit forces the pursuer to deny himself the very thing he seeks. Second, comfort is not so much a positive pleasure as an absence of pain or inconvenience; that is, its attractiveness in and of itself is weak.

The Yankee’s politicization occurs in a chapter that begins with his reflections on the summit of power he has reached:

I was no shadow of a king; I was the substance; the king himself was the shadow. My power was colossal; and it was not a mere name, as such things generally have been, it was the genuine article.³⁴

He finds his position totally unique in the annals of world history. He compares himself with others who have wielded such great powers and finds them all inferior to him in some respect.³⁵ Yet the Yankee is

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³³ The Yankee here displays the essence of bourgeois psychology. Cf. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, 21-22, for the emergence of avoidance of pain as the primary motive force, and the whole of Locke’s works for the origin of the bourgeois order.

³⁴ *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 61.

³⁵ “There was nothing back of me that could approach it, unless it might be Joseph’s case and Joseph’s only approached it, it didn’t equal it quite. For it stands to reason that as Joseph’s splendid financial ingenuities advantaged nobody but the king, the general public must have regarded him with a good deal of disfavor, whereas I had done my entire public a kindness in sparing the sun, and was popular by reason of it.” (*Ibid.*) The Yankee strains to establish the importance and satisfactoriness of his position. His understanding of Joseph’s activities, and the popularity that accrued to Joseph, is at the least distorted. Joseph did not, in fact, benefit nobody but the king, but through his prudent provision of store for the present famine and future ones as well, he benefited all. The explicit testimony of the

not quite so satisfied with his own position as he would have us believe. The explicit piercing of his reveries comes immediately:

Yes, in power I was equal to the king. At the same time there was another power that was a trifle stronger than both of us put together. That was the Church. I do not wish to disguise that fact, I couldn't, if I wanted to.³⁶

Moreover, the Yankee admits:

... those people had inherited the idea that all men without title and a long pedigree, whether they had great natural gifts and acquirements or hadn't, were creatures of no more consideration than so many animals, bugs. . . . The way I was looked upon was odd, but it was natural. You know how the keeper and the public regard the elephant in the menagerie. . . . They speak with pride of the fact that he can do a hundred marvels which are far and away beyond their own powers. . . . But does that make him one of *them*? No; the raggedest tramps would smile at the idea. . . . Well, to the king, the nobles, and all the nation, down to the very idea. . . . Well, to the king, the nobles, and all the nation, down to the very admired, also feared; but it was as an animal is admired and feared. The animal is not revered, neither was I; I was not even respected. I had no pedigree, no inherited title; so in the king's and nobles' eyes I was mere dirt; the people regarded me with wonder and awe, but there was no reverence mixed with it. . . .³⁷

From having power that he told us was "enormous" and "colossal," the Yankee now admits that there is one power equal to his and another more than twice as great. Not only is his power circumscribed, but he also does not receive the respect and reverence he wants.

Initially, the Yankee wanted "to boss" the country in order to make money; but it now appears that he wanted to make money because "where he comes from" money differentiated men; that is, money was the source of respect. This is not true in Arthurian England; and when the Yankee discovers this, he becomes dissatisfied with his position. Lacking any inward aims or activities by which to define himself, the Yankee must look to his job (foreman) or position (boss); he is an externally defined

Bible (*Genesis* 48 : 25, 50 : 20, 26) confirms Joseph's popularity also, whereas the Yankee's proves questionable. The Yankee bases his conception of his greatness, moreover, on a deed he knows was a fraud—his "saving" of the sun. Likewise, the other adventurers the Yankee cites—De Montfort, Gaveston, Mortimer, Villiers, and unnamed others (p. 61)—are not especially apt for his purpose. All did in truth rise to heights of power through their close relations with their kings, but all maintained their power only a short time; and all suffered rather untimely deaths at the hands of political rivals. The Yankee's choice of examples is a foreshadowing of his own fate. He shares a certain irreverence and imprudence with one. Gaveston, an "upstart" and "foreigner" had no prudence, for he gave nicknames to the leading barons. In return he lost his life. [George Macaulay Trevelyan, *A Shortened History of England* (Hamondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1959), p. 158.] The Yankee calls Sir Gareth, "Garry," and Sir Sagamor le Desirous, "Sir Sag," although never to either knight's face. (*Connecticut Yankee*, pp. 72, 384.)

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

man whose self-esteem depends very largely on what other men think of him. That means in Arthurian England that the Yankee becomes merely an elephant.³⁸ In order to become a man, he must overthrow the regime. He is forced to examine the nature and grounds of the present regime, because something about that regime prevents him from finding the respect and reverence he desires. In questioning the present regime, he is forced to consider all regimes. By raising the specifically political questions, the Yankee makes possible the contrast and comparison of laws and customs. In this sense, the Yankee's politicization represents a new beginning for the novel. One might even call it *the* beginning, for it is with the question of regime that political thought begins.³⁹

After his politicization the Yankee hardly again speaks openly of his own rule for his own sake. That does not mean that his ambitions disappear. Late in the book he announces his long-range plans:

I had two schemes in my head which were the vastest of all my projects. The one was to overthrow the Catholic Church and set up the Protestant faith on its ruins—not as an Established Church, but a go-as-you-please one; and the other project was to get a decree issued by and by, commanding that upon Arthur's death unlimited suffrage should be introduced. . . . Arthur was good for thirty years yet, he being about my own age . . . and I believed that in that time I could easily have the active part of the population of that day ready and eager for an event which should be the first of its kind in the history of the world—a rounded and complete governmental revolution without bloodshed. The result to be a republic. Well, I may as well confess, though I do feel ashamed when I think of it: I was beginning to have a base hankering to be its first president myself.⁴⁰

The Yankee's reluctance here to admit personal ambition stands in marked contrast to the unabashed frankness with which he expressed his ambitions earlier. That most casual readers are not taken aback by this contrast is testimony to the extent to which the Yankee's personal ambition has been submerged. Yet in seeming most open, the Yankee is, in fact, dishonest with both his readers and himself. If he and Arthur are the same age, any change taking effect after Arthur's death would be unlikely to allow the Yankee to become president. Either the Yankee must give up his ambition or the revolution must be a bloody one. There is no time for a gradual transition.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the Yankee's ambition and his public program are thoroughly incompatible. The Yankee does not

³⁸ Cf. Mark Twain, "A Fable" in *The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain* (New York: Bantam, 1958), pp. 600-602.

³⁹ The title of Chapter 8 points to a new beginning. The title, "The Boss," refers to the incident in which the Yankee acquires a new name in Arthur's realm. It was a title "which fell casually from the lips of a blacksmith, one day." (*Connecticut Yankee*, p. 67.) The Yankee is renamed by a blacksmith as he was originally named by his blacksmith father.

⁴⁰ *Connecticut Yankee*, pp. 399-400.

want merely to rule or to have a recognized position in the kingdom; he receives such a position from the king following the eclipse, but he will accept a title only from the people. He wants to be loved, respected, revered by the people—the more, the better. If that love and reverence are to mean anything to him, they must come from beings whose respect he can value, and he could not value the honor of a “race of rabbits.” In order to satisfy his desire for love and honor, he has to raise the people to be his equals, and thus transform the regime.⁴¹ Thus the Yankee speaks upon occasion of the manliness of classical republicanism. Yet, if the people truly become the Yankee’s equals, there will no longer be reason for them to honor him. (They might be grateful to their teacher and political founder, but the democratic and revolutionary character of their education makes this unlikely.) This irreconcilable contradiction in the Yankee’s goal, which makes the satisfaction of his desire impossible, produces his dishonesty and a severe problem in his political project.⁴²

The Yankee comes to power by “saving the sun.” Through his historical and scientific knowledge, he is able to predict an eclipse and then to bargain, not merely for his life, but for half the political power in the kingdom during the relatively brief period of darkness.⁴³ In other words, he uses his knowledge to play upon the superstitions of the Arthurian people in order to gain power. Twain implicitly questions, not only the Yankee’s use of his knowledge, but the accuracy of that knowledge. The exact timing of the eclipse is crucial; but it is precisely the question of time that becomes most vexed at this point in the novel.⁴⁴ If, as the

⁴¹ Thus the Yankee shows why all demagoguery is essentially egalitarian in doctrine; it is not merely a matter of flattering the masses or breaking down distinctions.

⁴² On the Yankee’s unwillingness to “face facts,” see *ibid.*, p. 171.

⁴³ This may be a metaphor for the commencement of the “Dark Ages” in the sixth century.

⁴⁴ The whole incident of the eclipse is confusing and difficult to understand. There are at least the following curiosities: (a) How is it that the Yankee “just by luck” knew about the “only total eclipse of the sun in the sixth century,” especially when total eclipses are visible only at certain places? (b) What is the point of the great definiteness on the time of the eclipse, June 21, 528, when it is known that there were, in fact, three eclipses in England in the sixth century, in 528, 540, and 594? (c) A curiosity more internal to the story concerns the timing of the eclipse within the novel. The Yankee is informed by Clarence on his day of sentencing in Arthur’s court that it is June 19, 528 (p. 15). At that time Arthur sets the Yankee’s execution for June 21 (p. 31). The next morning, according to Clarence June 20, the Yankee and Clarence talk of the execution coming the day after. But then by noon of that second day, the Yankee on the basis of Clarence’s “lie” to Arthur, is taken to his execution on what appears to all, including Arthur, to be one day early. When the eclipse does, in fact, occur, the Yankee discovers from a monk that it is really June 21 after all and that Clarence had been in error as to the dates. But this does not dispel the problem of Arthur’s setting the date of the execution for June 21 and then executing the Yankee on what turns out to

confusion in the time seems to suggest, the Yankee did not in fact predict the eclipse accurately, he both saved his life and came to power essentially by chance; and that means that the foundation of both the Yankee's claims to the respect and reverence—even the love and gratitude—of the people and his right to rule are shaky indeed. The dubious aspects of the Yankee's behavior tend to become lost, however, in the larger question of regimes—democracy versus aristocracy—that the Yankee's ascent to power introduces and in which Twain's readers naturally tend to sympathize with the Yankee.

The Yankee does not claim the right to rule in his own name. Rather he claims the right to rule in the name of the people on the basis of the principle of equality; and on that ground he attacks the justice of rule by the king and nobility. But the Arthurian people believe that the rule of the titled nobility is both natural and just. The Church, that power twice as great as Arthur and the Yankee combined, is responsible, according to the Yankee, for this opinion:

Before the day of the Church's supremacy in the world, men were men, and held their heads up, and had a man's pride, and spirit and independence; and what of greatness and position a person got, he got mainly by achievement, not by birth. But then the Church came to the front . . . and she was wise, subtle, and knew more than one way to skin a cat—or a nation; she invented “divine right of things” and propped it up . . . with the Beatitudes—wrenching them from their good purpose to make them fortify an evil one; she preached (to the commoner) humility, obedience to superiors, the beauty of self-sacrifice . . . and she introduced heritable ranks and aristocracies and taught all the Christian populations of the earth to bow down to them and worship them.⁴⁵

The Yankee is not explicitly anti-Christian; he only opposes a united Church, which he understands in purely political terms:

I was afraid of a united Church; it makes a mighty power, the mightiest conceivable, and then when it by and by gets into selfish hands, as it is always bound to do, it means death to human liberty and paralysis to human thought.⁴⁶

be June 21 but is still thought by Arthur to be one day earlier than scheduled. In every respect there is something wrong with the times involved in the eclipse incident, and this adds to the dreamlike quality of the whole. One cannot just accept the explanation that Twain erred in writing this section—the whole question of the timing of the eclipse is so central to the plot here that even a much less careful writer than Twain would be unlikely to commit such errors unintentionally. Also consider: “Twain most probably knew about the very popular *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) which got further publicity from an argument over whether an eclipse that its heroes exploited the way Hank did was astronomically on time.” [Louis Budd, *Mark Twain: Social Philosopher* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana, 1962), p. 134.]

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

If the Yankee is to free the people from their bondage to the nobility and found a republic, he must educate them. Thus for the Yankee the "beginnings of civilization" consist in the beginnings of enlightenment. After establishing a patent office, the Yankee founds his industries, schools, and communications systems in secret.

I stood with my hand on the cock, so to speak, ready to turn it on and flood the midnight world with light at any moment. But I was not going to do the thing in that sudden way . . . The people could not have stood it; and, moreover, I should have had the Established Roman Catholic Church on my back in a minute.⁴⁷

Again the Yankee brags of his power only to retract. He has laid the foundations but only that. He must temporize in order to let his civilization "sink in" before he comes out into the open. So he accedes to court pressure and embarks upon a journey of knight-errantry in the company of Demoiselle Alisande la Carteloise. The Yankee's first trip in search of adventures provides the occasion for the most happy and open humor of the novel. Nevertheless, this "frivolous" trip gives rise to the second much more serious "fact-finding" tour with the king, because incidents on the first trip force the Yankee to question some of the assumptions upon which his projected reform rests.

His breakfast with the "freemen" challenges his ability to persuade the people of the, to him, obvious superiority of a republic to the present monarchy; and this demonstrated inability to persuade has two consequences. For the first time the Yankee admits the need for violence and terror; the nobles will not relinquish their power voluntarily. (The Yankee's deepest secret was his military academy.) Second and more important, the Yankee is forced to account for the resistance of the people to his "popular" teaching. Up to this point, he had looked at the Arthurians as less than men, as "white Indians," "rabbits," or "worms,"—in a word, as stupid. They are "stupid," because they lack the thirteen hundred years of education the Yankee possesses, but they are not incapable of learning. Thus if he presents them with the modern understanding of things, they will, of course, immediately see its advantages. They are men and will listen to reason. This proves not to be the case—at least over the short run. At the castle of Morgan le Fay the Yankee learns, moreover, that an obviously degenerate member of the nobility can be extremely attractive, can even evoke his compassion. Morgan is beautiful and chatters gaily along. She evokes the Yankee's admiration, especially after she flatters him. As a result he attempts to explain her resistance to his "sense" and thus far to excuse her depravity:

Training—training is everything; training is all there is to a person. We speak of nature, it is folly; there is no such thing as nature; what we call by that misleading name is merely heredity and training.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Thus the Yankee moves from the politics of the Enlightenment to the romantic, revolutionary politics originating in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau. (The Yankee states his intention to hang Morgan anyway two paragraphs later.) Reason is not natural. On the contrary, men are completely malleable, which means, however, that they are equal potentially and can, therefore, be made equal again. His task is much more difficult than he first imagined, since it requires eradicating "inherited opinions" and habits. Once achieved, his feat (and so his renown) will be so much greater, for he will have changed not merely men's opinions but the men themselves.

As a result of his first journey, the Yankee decides that he must see the country for himself, so he and Sandy join a group of pilgrims. In this manner we are introduced to the group of chapters concerning the Yankee's activities in the Valley of Holiness, which form the center of the novel. Here he gives his second great performance as a magician.⁴⁹ The Yankee again uses his practical knowledge of the principles of nature to fix the well (he had used a lightning rod to detonate the explosion of Merlin's domicile); but he "dresses up" his performance by means of his knowledge of the art (technology) of war with flares and explosions to make the natural look supernatural.⁵⁰ Again he competes with and vanquishes Merlin. This renewed competition would seem to be a product of petty spite on the part of the Yankee did we not see his power almost immediately challenged by another, unnamed magician, whose word is preferred to that of the Yankee by the monks and others, despite the Yankee's so recent demonstration of power. Neither he nor his power can make a lasting impression on the Arthurians, so the Yankee has to prove himself again and again.

Incidents in the Holy Valley thus point back to the problem the Yankee posed in Chapter 8. In repairing the fountain, the Yankee demonstrates both superior force and superior knowledge, but he cannot maintain his preeminence; and as a result, he cannot maintain himself in power. The impression the Yankee's power makes on the people is so fleeting because they cannot understand it. For the Arthurians, power has either a good or an evil source; that is, there is no power that is "morally neutral." Thus the abbot warns the Yankee: "And see thou do it with enchantments that be holy, for the Church will not endure that work in her cause be done

⁴⁹ If one disregards the eclipse over which the Yankee had no control, the first test of his power was blowing up Merlin's tower in response to Merlin's spreading of rumors casting doubt upon the enduring character of the Yankee's magical abilities.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 212-213: "When you are going to do a miracle for an ignorant race, you want to get in every detail that will count; you want to make all the properties impressive to the public eye . . . and play your effects for all they are worth. I know the value of these things, for I know human nature. You can't throw too much style into a miracle."

by devil's magic."⁵¹ The Yankee agrees to work only with God's creations, but he proceeds to use techniques of war and destruction as well as to pronounce the name of the ineffable. To the Yankee, all power is natural and thus morally neutral.

Arthur awakens reverence where the Yankee does not. The Yankee explains the people's worship of the king and nobility as a product of the machinations of the Church, which invented "divine right of things" in order to support the rule of a hereditary aristocracy. To the Yankee, the Church merely constitutes a "political machine."⁵² Although the Yankee desires "reverence," he does not understand it or its source: he has never truly revered anything himself.⁵³ To him religious belief consists of mere superstition. But he sees in Arthur's realm, for example in the "king's evil," that this belief has very real effects. As a result of his experience with the "superstitions" of the Arthurians, he comes increasingly to believe that it is necessary in politics to deceive, to "dress up." It is the only way, the Yankee surmises, that the Arthurian people will understand him; but, of course, they do not really understand his work when they understand it as magic. Thus the Yankee moves decisively away from the "Enlightenment" position with which he explicitly began.

The move is, nevertheless, somewhat natural. Early in his narrative, the Yankee refers to the "circus side" of his nature, which stands in tension with his calculating "sense" and urges a different kind of politics:

The thing that would have best suited the circus side of my nature would have been to resign the Boss-ship and get up an insurrection and turn it into a revolution; but I knew that the Jack Cade or the Wat Tyler who tries such a thing without first educating his materials up to revolution grade is almost absolutely certain to get left.⁵⁴

What the Yankee calls the "circus side of his nature" is connected in his mind with the Arthurian regime; he supposes Sir Kay to be a fellow from the circus at their first encounter; and the longer the Yankee remains in King Arthur's court, the stronger this side of his nature becomes. We see him endure the cruelty and harshness of slavery months longer than necessary for the sake of making a "picturesque" escape, and then

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁵² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 149: "Concentration of power in a political machine is bad; and an Established Church is only a political machine; it was invented for that; it is nursed, cradled, preserved for that. . . ."

⁵³ The Yankee's frame of mind has been well expressed in a recent study: "The invasion of technique desacralizes the world in which man is called upon to live. For technique nothing is sacred, there is no mystery, no taboo. . . . Technique worships nothing, respects nothing. It has a single role: to strip off externals, to bring everything to light, and by rational use to transform everything into means. . . . Technique denies mystery *a priori*. The mysterious is merely that which has not yet been technized." [Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1964), p. 142.]

⁵⁴ *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 108.

recaptured because he chose a “picturesque” way of evading the officer rather than a simple one. “[I]t is the crying defect of my character.”⁵⁵

If reason is not natural and if men are therefore completely products of their training, the Yankee as that product of thirteen hundred years more education is certainly superior to all the Arthurians and so definitely entitled to rule them. After his performance at the Holy Fountain, he concludes:

When I started to the chapel, the populace uncovered and fell back reverently to make a wide way for me, as if I had been some kind of superior being—and I was. I was aware of that.⁵⁶

The Yankee comes to regard the Arthurians less and less as men like himself; and his inhuman view of them very largely determines his later inhumane treatment of them.

III. King Arthur’s Court

I... expose to the world only my trimmed and perfumed and carefully barbered public opinions and conceal carefully, cautiously, wisely my private ones.⁵⁷

A Connecticut Yankee reminds one of nothing so much as Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. The parallels between the two works are numerous and deep; they range from the general themes of each—the comparison of democratic and aristocratic political orders—to the formats of the books. In the one an aristocrat visits the democratic country par excellence, seeking there “the image of democracy itself”; in the other the American democrat visits the feudal aristocracy par excellence. One mirrors the other even to such details as an opening invocation, more or less ironical, to progress or providence. More particularly to our immediate point, the two books use an identical technique in revealing their respective, though differing, evaluation of aristocracy. According to a recent study of the French thinker:

Tocqueville’s judgment of aristocracy is only gradually disclosed in the *Democracy*. In the introduction he observes that “the nobles, placed high as they were above the people, could take that calm and benevolent interest in their fate which the

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 376. This “circus side” seems to be not merely a peculiarity of the Yankee but seems to belong to his world, as we see in Tom Sawyer. There is a great deal of truth in James M. Cox’s suggestion that the Yankee is Tom Sawyer grown up (*op. cit.*, pp. 137, 220). Tom, too, assimilates the feudal past and the circus, the showy; and the Yankee’s “picturesque escape” calls to mind the concluding sequence in *Huckleberry Finn* where Tom devises an elaborate scheme to free the already free Jim.

⁵⁶ *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 218.

⁵⁷ Samuel Clemens, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, Charles Nieder, ed. (New York: Washington Square Press), pp. 386-387.

shepherd feels toward his flock . . ." This highly favorable judgment is qualified later:

"When an aristocracy governs, those who conduct the affairs of state are exempted, by their very station in society, from any want; content with their lot, power and renown are the *only* objects for which they strive; placed far above the obscure crowd, they do not always clearly perceive how the well-being of the mass of the people will redound to their own grandeur. They are not, indeed, callous to the sufferings of the poor; but they cannot feel those miseries as acutely as if they were themselves partakers of them.

"Provided that the people appear to submit to their lot," the nobles take no further interest in improving their subjects' condition. Democracies tend to promote the interests of the people, but aristocracies have a "natural defect", a "capital fault", of tending to "work for themselves and not for the people." With this judgment Tocqueville actually reverses his initial assessment; now, aristocratic shepherds are simply indifferent toward their charges, and incapable of perceiving the true condition of the people: "The men who compose [an aristocratic caste] do not resemble the mass of their fellow citizens; they do not think or feel in the same manner, and they scarcely believe that they belong to the same race. They cannot, therefore, thoroughly understand what others feel nor judge of others by themselves. . . . Feudal institutions awakened a lively sympathy for the sufferings of certain men, but none at all for the miseries of mankind."⁵⁸

Tocqueville's presentation is germane to Twain's in a dual sense—both as to the method of revealing his judgment on the aristocracy and as to the substance of his argument. Twain's reversal is, of course, the contrary of Tocqueville's. Whereas Tocqueville primarily addresses a nation with strong aristocratic traditions, Twain speaks to "the image of democracy itself." Each opposes the deep prejudices of his audience only after a great deal of preparation—and even then with reluctance and some obliqueness.

The most obvious reason, however, for the difficulty of extracting a complete teaching on the aristocracy consists in the fact that King Arthur's court is presented to us only through the Yankee's tale, and the Yankee is neither a sympathetic nor perhaps a fully understanding commentator. Nor is he without motives of his own in his reporting.⁵⁹ Arthurian Britain

⁵⁸ Marvin Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and The Problem of Democracy* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1967), pp. 24-25.

⁵⁹ One example of the Yankee's selective reporting and how it colors the presentation of the regimes: In Morgan's dungeon, the Yankee came upon a priest who was anxious to report the overzealousness of the torturer. "Something of this disagreeable sort was turning up every now and then. I mean, episodes that showed that not all priests were frauds and self-seekers, but that many, even the great majority, of those that were down on the ground among the common people, were sincere and right-hearted, and devoted to the alleviation of human troubles and suffering. Well, it was a thing which could not be helped, so I seldom fretted about it, and never many minutes at a time. . . . But I did not like it, for it was just the sort of thing to keep people reconciled to an Established Church" (*ibid.*, p. 148).

itself has no direct spokesman, nor could it, for the Arthurians are characterized by a very low level of self-consciousness. The Yankee reflects the Enlightenment, that is, the injection of philosophy into political life in contrast to the more "natural" untheoretical political understanding of the Arthurians. This difference accounts for one of the major artistic difficulties of the book. By using the Yankee as narrator, Twain was able to achieve unity in the novel and at the same time to exploit the prejudices of his readers. The Yankee as narrator thus presented great gains but it also created great difficulties for the proper completion of the comparison through a non-Yankee presentation of Arthur's court. To achieve this non-Yankee presentation, insofar as it is achieved, Twain had to rely heavily on action and had to leave much to the reader. Yet the asymmetry of the book is consistent with Twain's ultimate aims, to say nothing of his prudence, for those aims do not call for the same completeness in presentation of the Arthurians as is necessary of the Yankee.

On the one occasion when Arthur is moved to speak to the nature of his regime, he proves himself a theoretical ignoramus. "All places of honor and profit do belong," claims the king, "by natural right, to them that be of noble blood."⁶⁰ Arthur, at least, accepts the condition set by Twain in the Preface of "taking the other tack," that is, abstracting from the claims of the divine. But the absurdity of his response, if not of his whole position, is manifest from the context. The Yankee has provoked Arthur's defense by challenging a "rule requiring four generations of nobility, or else the candidate is not eligible."⁶¹ The rule recognizes something for which Arthur's claim does not provide. "Them that be of noble birth" are not naturally so. Noble lines fail somewhere. How then do those who are not of noble blood become noble? The examiner's next question supplies the obvious answer:

By what illustrious achievement for the honor of the throne and state did the founder of your great line lift himself to the sacred dignity of the British nobility?⁶²

For service to throne and state, men are ennobled by the king whom they have served. Arthur's original claim of natural right by blood ac-

Likewise, the Yankee, *apparently innocently*, suppresses evidence of Arthur's moral excellence. For example, recounting the effects of the slave master's efforts to make Arthur more slavish and therefore more salable, the Yankee says: "to undertake to reduce the king's style to a slave's style—and by force—go to! it was a stately contract. Never mind the details—it will save me trouble to let you imagine them" (pp. 274-275).

To omit the "details" will perhaps "save the Yankee trouble" in more ways than one.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 245.

tually points in two directions—the power of Arthur on the one hand, and the practice of the regime on the other. The claims of the nobles rest on the power of the king to elevate men above their fellows. The question of the origin of the nobility is ultimately the question of the king's origin. But there must also be a first king whose father was not a king.⁶³ Since the king's and the aristocracy's explicit claim to rule rests on their ancestry, and since this ancestry must eventually fail them, the king and aristocrats must keep their origins unknown. At best the origins can be traced back to a race of gods, divine heroes, or in a Christian regime, to an appointment, direct or indirect, by God.⁶⁴ Given natural assumptions, the truth about the origins is destructive to rule based on heredity. The first kings generally came into power by means of force and perpetuate their rule through religion, that is, given naturalistic assumptions, fraud.⁶⁵ The first kings may be superior in a sense and so perhaps entitled to rule by nature, but they are not legitimate.⁶⁶ Thus the Yankee, otherwise much less interested than the aristocrats in the past and tradition, recurrently calls our attention to the origins of the aristocracy.⁶⁷ Arthur cannot account for his origins. As his beginning is defective, so is he a defective origin—we are reminded at the end of the novel that he has no legitimate heir. Despite the defective foundation of Arthur's regime, the king is, nevertheless, able to arouse and maintain the loyalty and respect of his people in a way the Yankee cannot. There is some wisdom and/or power in tradition. Arthur and his knights recognize the importance and need for a legitimate use of force, where the Yankee does not. For Arthur and his knights, the Yankee's competitive examination for entry into the army replaces an eminently practical test of their skills, the tournament.⁶⁸ The

⁶³ Twain does not explicitly refer to Arthur's origins in *A Connecticut Yankee* except implicitly to incorporate Malory's account through Merlin's tales and predictions; and in Malory, Arthur's legitimacy in several senses is questioned.

⁶⁴ Given Twain's abstraction from the divine, the argument raised by, for example, Robert Filmer, *Patriarch*, ed. Peter Laslett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1949), on the basis of *Genesis* is not available here to Arthur.

⁶⁵ Cf. Machiavelli's account of Romulus and Numa, *Discorsi* I:10-15; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Liberal Arts, 1949), p. 21.

⁶⁶ Thus for the Yankee, kings and nobles are no more than frauds and thieves; but precisely for that reason, they exert an attraction similar to that of a circus side show. (Frauds might be considered exceedingly clever businessmen.) The comic equivalent of this is to be seen in the Duke and the Dauphin of *Huck Finn*. The Yankee admits that Americans are particularly attracted by titles (*Connecticut Yankee*, pp. 65-66).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 103, 237.

⁶⁸ Here again, by abstracting from the divine or pious element in the Arthurian regime, Twain makes that regime even harsher: God was supposed to guarantee that justice triumphed in trials by battle. The Yankee's desire to substitute competence in military science, that is, a strictly rationalized criterion, for Arthur's concern for individual merit as shown in the tournaments and other war games, reflects not only an irrational application of an irrelevant technique on the part

rules of the tournament, moreover, put conventional limitations upon competition for honor and prestige in addition to the restrictions placed by the Christian faith upon its knights. The difference in the modes of competition points to a more general difference between Arthur and the Yankee politically. Where Arthur looks to the four-generation rule, a tradition, as a source of consent and legitimacy, the Yankee looks to nature, in particular the natural right and ability of each man to rule himself.

The Yankee undertakes his second journey to show Arthur the true situation of his subjects, to extend Arthur's sentiments and sympathies, and thus to further the democratic revolution, perhaps to foster a "revolution from above." Arthur indeed is touched—at least momentarily. Yet the chief lesson of the trip concerns Arthur's greatness. On the grounds of natural equality, slavery constitutes the worst abuse of the Arthurian regime. A king who becomes a slave—what better way to show the merely conventional character of slavery and nobility. The Yankee summarizes the results of the test:

I had found it a sufficiently difficult job to reduce the king's style to a peasant's style, even when he was a willing and anxious pupil; now then, to undertake to reduce the king's style to a slave's style—and by force—go to! it was a stately contract. Never mind the details—it will save me trouble to let you imagine them. I will only remark that at the end of a week there was plenty of evidence that lash and club had done their work well; the king's body was a sight to see—and to weep over; but his spirit?—why, it wasn't even phased.⁶⁹

At the smallpox hut the Yankee and Arthur confront the harsh reality of the life of the commoners that the Yankee criticized in his breakfast conversation with the freemen. Yet the same incident proves Arthur's true nobility. Hank, who has had smallpox and thus has nothing to fear, urges Arthur, who has not, to leave. Arthur refuses: "[I]t were shame that a king should know fear, and shame that belted knight should withhold his hand where there be such as need succor. Peace, I will not go."⁷⁰ The Yankee's admiration reaches a peak:

Here was heroism at its last and loftiest possibility, its utmost summit; this was challenging death in the open field unarmed, with all the odds against the challenger, no reward set upon the contest, and no admiring world in silks and cloth-of-gold to gaze and applaud; and yet the king's bearing was as serenely

of the Yankee, but also introduces a whole other understanding of the nature and meaning of war and fighting. That feudalism did not use rationalized military methods is not so much a product of stupidity or backwardness as of a very different concept of the purpose of war.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 282. In contrast, the Yankee seems to feel shame only about things relating to sex. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 32, 69, 88, 100, 138, 183, 197-198.

brave as it had always been in those cheaper contests where knight meets knight in equal fight and clothed in protecting steel. He was great now, sublimely great.⁷¹

Just as incidents on the second journey reveal Arthur's true nobility, so they prove the inadequacy of the Yankee's political understanding. The three chapters depicting the Yankee's visit with Marco parallel those describing his encounter with Morgan. Again there is a meal followed by conversation. Where the Yankee (or Sandy for him) first impressed and then subdued Morgan with his name (his reputation) and subsequently that of Arthur, here he uses only money. Unlike a name, money is neither personal nor intimately related to individual behavior. Since it is alienable and the right to its possession is often unclear, it easily becomes a source of envy and resentment. It does not give its possessor inherent superiority or authority over otherwise equal men. When the Yankee fails to convince the small company of the superiority of his economy with reason, he resorts to force and fraud in the form of a threat. The threat backfires. The Yankee can claim to have authority on the basis of his superior knowledge, a possession of the few, but when the confrontation becomes a matter of force, he and the king must eventually cede to the power of the many. Traveling incognito, the Yankee and king deprive themselves of both name and position in society. They are strangers, and when the Yankee attacks the existing order, they, as a result, come into a state of nature vis-à-vis that society, which hunts them down as dangerous threats to its existence and sells them as slaves in exchange for sparing their lives.⁷²

Twain shows here that the Yankee and the Arthurian commoners are, in fact, very much alike in both their character and their concerns. The Yankee has difficulty persuading them of his position not so much because of their "training" as the fact that men do not always and immediately listen to reason; and one reason that they do not is that they are not only accustomed to but also take pride in their own way of doing things. The Yankee misunderstands the lesson of his encounter with Morgan, because he overestimates the power of reason, and as a result he does not recognize the role of either law or force in political society. He does not understand the role of law and/or tradition because of his theoretical position, which, as expressed in the Connecticut *Constitution*, for example, appeals to nature against convention. But the appeal to nature that Twain indicates in the Marco scenes constitutes an appeal to the force

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 284. Cf. A. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), and Tocqueville, *op. cit.* II., p. 245. In understanding and evaluating both Arthur's courage and the Yankee's admiration of it, it is important to note the irrational aspects of Arthur's act. He endangers his own life—that of the king—and thus the stability of the regime completely unnecessarily. The Yankee could have brought the sick men down without endangering anyone.

Cf. Aristotle, *Ethics* III, where "courage" is presented as the lowest of the virtues and its place as, in a sense, "threshold of the virtues" elucidated.

⁷² John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, IV.

of the multitude standing behind the consent. (In order to retain their privileges, we learn, the Arthurian nobles have forbidden the commoners to bear arms.) The Yankee's unwillingness to recognize the violence in human nature and the need, therefore, to restrain men with force at times is related, obviously, to his easy conclusion (particularly in the case of Morgan) about the malleability of nature. But there are deeper grounds for the Yankee's lack of any substantive understanding of what human nature might be. If one can speak of a substantively defined human nature, it becomes very difficult to believe in continual progress or, for that matter, to maintain the absolute degeneracy of the past with respect to the present. And if one questions progress, one must question the legitimacy and viability of the Yankee's project, especially in light of his own faulty understanding of the grounds and revolutionary implications of that project. To be sure, the Yankee does receive support for his conclusion about the importance of heredity (heredity here understood in an almost Lamarckian sense of inherited opinions and place in society) and training during his second journey in the person of Arthur, who proves his nobility as a slave. There is, however, a decisive difference between recognizing the importance of education and concluding that education is everything. After the knights rescue Arthur and the Yankee from the hangman's noose and the commoners go down on their knees before the ragged king they had hooted and jeered but a moment before, even the Yankee thinks to himself that "there *is* something peculiarly grand about the gait and bearing of a king, after all."⁷³ Arthur's performance as a slave thus finally forces the Yankee to retract his earlier endorsement of a commoner's statement:

He said he believed that men were about all alike, and one man as good as another, barring clothes. He said he believed that if you were to strip the nation naked and send a stranger through the crowd, he couldn't tell the king from a quack doctor, nor a duke from a hotel clerk.⁷⁴

The Yankee's growing awareness of the superiority of Arthur is paralleled by a growing awareness of the inferiority of the commoners. "Arthur's people were of course poor material for a republic."⁷⁵ But he finds this condition to be neither necessary nor by accident; they are poor material, "because they have been debased so long by monarchy."⁷⁶

⁷³ *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 382.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* The Yankee expands on this theme while trying to teach Arthur to bear himself like a peasant. "Your soldierly stride, your lordly port—these will not do. You stand too straight, your looks are too high, too confident. The cares of a kingdom do not stoop the shoulders, they do not droop the chin, they do not depress the high level of the eye-glance, they do not put doubt and fear in the heart and hang out the signs of them in slouching body and unsure step. It is the sordid cares

The commoners are as they are (and they are factually inferior), not by nature, but because they have been trained, by the circumstances of their lives if nothing else, to be so.

Above all else, the Yankee's reforms aim at instilling this missing manliness; in his factories the Yankee intends to turn "groping and grubbing automata into *men*."⁷⁷ All the other education of a more technical sort is subordinated to this aim. There is the following difficulty, however. The Yankee himself and those he has trained in his Man-Factory have in fact been raised just as the Yankee wished. Neither he nor they have the manliness of the aristocracy.⁷⁸ The Yankee praises Arthur most highly for his courage—because the Yankee-narrator lacks precisely that virtue. Like the commoners of Arthur's realm, the Yankee builds his life on the ground of comfort seeking, and thus fundamentally on the fear of death. The Yankee admires Arthur because Arthur is free from that burden that rules the Yankee's life. Manliness requires the overcoming of the fear of death. What more it may require, and how courage is related to other virtues, is not, or only imperfectly, presented in the novel, for the Yankee cannot help but be dazzled by the courage of the Arthurian nobles and thus sees little further.

The Yankee is never able to understand the Arthurians' virtue, and most especially he is never able to understand the relation between their "manliness" or "heroism" and their political regime. He wishes to institute a regime that might be called a universal aristocracy on the foundation of the rights of man and equality, rather than on the basis of the rigid class system of Arthurdom. The Yankee's failure points to the need to raise the question of why the aristocratic regime is necessary to produce aristocratic virtue—another way of raising the question of the limits of politics. As with the nature of nobility, the Yankee both sees the question

of the lowly born that do these things. You must learn the trick: you must imitate the trademarks of poverty, misery, oppression, insults, and the other several and common inhumanities that sap the manliness out of a man and make him a loyal and proper and approved subject and a satisfaction to his masters" (*ibid.*, pp. 274-275).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147. There is a delightful irony in the fact that the Yankee makes this statement with respect to Hugo, who has just braved not only the rack but eternal damnation in order to spare his wife and child.

⁷⁸ For instance, the Yankee, unlike Arthur, had no difficulty carrying himself like a peasant, or a proper slave. Both in word and deed the Yankee shows that he is more like the commoners than the nobility. His difficulties with his armor, for example, led him to distinguish himself from the knights in an important respect: "but as for me, give me comfort first, and style afterward."

Even more explicitly, at Marco's the Yankee states: "The King got his cargo aboard, and then, the talk not turning upon battle, conquest, or iron-clad duel, he dulled down to drowsiness and went off to take a nap. . . . And the rest of us soon drifted into matters near and dear to the hearts of our sort—business and wages, of course" (*ibid.*, p. 323).

—and its answer—and he doesn’t. The Yankee is certainly not blind to certain ethical, that is, character, correlates of the political regime. For example, he easily relates the nobility’s cruelty, insensitivity, and “blunted feelings” toward the commoners to the political order.

One need but to hear an aristocrat speak of the classes that are below him to recognize . . . the very air and tone of the actual slaveholder; and behind these are the slaveholder’s spirit, the slaveholder’s blunted feeling. They are the result of the same cause in both cases: the possessor’s *old and inbred custom of regarding himself as a superior being*.⁷⁹

The Yankee does not see how that “old and inbred custom of regarding themselves as superior beings” produces the nobles’ virtue as well as their cruelty. Aristocrats require a class beneath them embodying a baseness to which they cannot stoop. Thus Arthur, in his most eloquent self-revelation, said, “It were shame for belted knight to show fear. . . .” What especially, or at least initially, must differentiate the exceptional from the common is the negation of the strongest drive of the many, the overcoming of comfort seeking and the fear of death.

Training can, Twain shows, achieve a great deal; but training does not extinguish human nature. That contempt for mere human life necessary to produce the nobles’ courage also produces their cruelty. They treat the commoners as “swine” because they do not perceive that the commoners are men like themselves. Aristocrats think they are superior by nature when they are, in fact, superior as a result of an essentially conventional class structure. Insofar as the aristocrats’ manliness rests upon this class structure, the Yankee’s dream of creating a universal aristocracy is illusory. But insofar as this class distinction rests on convention rather than nature, it is fundamentally unjust. Twain is no romantic. Arthurian class differentiation comes to sight first and most massively as cruelty through a contraction of the natural source of compassion. One advantage of the rigid class system lies in the limitations it puts upon political expectations; that is, such an order will not generate a “politics of hope” that seeks to raise all men. But the effect of the Yankee’s recognition of the real virtue of the Arthurian knights upon his political ambition is precisely the reverse. It frees him from the only remaining restraint upon his ambitions, the moderating, if low caution imposed by his calculating and somewhat fearful reason.

The Yankee seeks to replace what he sees to be arbitrary distinctions

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 234. Emphasis added. The Yankee here echoes Tocqueville’s final account of the aristocracy: “The men who compose [an aristocratic caste] do not resemble the mass of their fellow citizens; they do not think or feel in the same manner and they scarcely believe that they belong to the same race. They cannot, therefore, thoroughly understand what others feel, nor judge of others by themselves” (Alexis de Tocqueville, *op. cit.* II, pp. 172-173).

among men with the general principle of human compassion. But in the scene at Morgan le Fay's, where the theme of compassion is most evident, Twain indicates the difficulties with compassion as a principle of political society. To relieve suffering, the Yankee freed from the queen's dungeons at least one guilty man and many others whose guilt was quite possible. When Sandy reveals the Yankee's identity in order to save the old grandmother of the slain page boy, the Yankee observes that:

... the poor queen was so scared and humbled that she was even afraid to hang the composer without first consulting me. *I was very sorry for her—indeed, anyone would have been, for she was really suffering;* so I was willing to do anything that was reasonable; and had no desire to carry things to wanton extremities. I therefore considered the matter thoughtfully, and ended by having the musicians ordered into our presence to play that Sweet Bye and Bye again, which they did. Then I saw that she was right, and gave her permission to hang the whole band.⁸⁰

Dedicated to the relief of suffering as suffering, compassion does not distinguish among the sources of that suffering. The Yankee's compassion depends as much upon his own identification with one group of men as against another as does the injustice he attributes to Arthur. For example, the Yankee leaves one prisoner locked in Morgan's dungeons—a nobleman. At the beginning of his tale he attempts to explain away the ability of the Arthurian nobles to bear extreme pain stoically by calling them "White Indians."⁸¹ Finally, he can justify his slaughter of the entire Arthurian nobility only by denying them membership in the British nation. The Yankee's compassion is, moreover, very much related to his comfort seeking. He frees Hugo from the rack, not because Hugo is innocent—he is not—but because the Yankee admits that he, the Yankee, cannot stand to *hear* Hugo's groans and so even vicariously bear *the pain* of torture. The Yankee's compassion, and by extension the compassion inspiring a great deal of modern politics, Twain indicates, is the product not of the strength but of the weakness of modern man.⁸² Ultimately the Yankee's attempt to replace justice with compassion depends on a commitment to the possibility of overcoming pain and so his technology.

The most extreme instance of cruelty we see in the entire novel is nothing imposed on the people by the Arthurian characters. Rather it is the horrible war the Yankee wages at the end of the novel. Using the most modern and scientific weapons, the Yankee kills the whole of the feudal nobility. In a war professedly waged against barbarism and inhumanity, the Yankee leads us to wonder whether even a political cause that takes its bearings specifically against cruelty can avoid being cruel, whether cruelty can ever be exorcised from political life. The Yankee and his pupil Clarence commit an even graver crime against humanity in the

⁸⁰ *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 140.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸² Cf. Mark Twain, *What is Man?* in *Complete Works of Mark Twain* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1917), pp. 14-15.

spirit in which they undertake the final battle. They contemplate mass killing with such matter-of-factness that they discuss the subject primarily in terms of the technical efficiencies of their particular arrangement while at the same time they exult in the fact that this killing can be done in such an efficient manner.⁸³ This technique enables the Yankee to avoid facing the consequences of his deeds; it thus feeds his moral and physical cowardice. His "detached" attitude toward mass murder is a product, moreover, of his adoption of equality as the only political principle, that is, an abstraction from substantive distinctions. Where he once attributed absolute value to men, he now attributes none whatsoever. While he initially stated, "I stood with my hand on the cock, so to speak, ready to turn it on and flood the midnight world with light at any moment," he finally "touched a button and set fifty electric suns aflame on the top of one precipice" as a prelude to flooding his now artificially lit world first with water and then with corpses.⁸⁴ So the dream becomes nightmare.

IV. Mark Twain

Through the conclusion of the novel, Twain forces his readers to question the very possibility of progress.⁸⁵ Upon his return to the nineteenth century, the Yankee renounces his whole attempt, not merely the timing of it. His forces are destroyed not by their feudal enemies but by the rotting carnage they and their weapons had created; they were killed (as he, too, would have been) by their own wastes. The Yankee's enterprise does not fail as a step on the road to a better life. His project simply fails; his new order is not a viable political condition.

⁸³ The ending of *Connecticut Yankee* foreshadows not only nuclear weapons and their potential for destruction but even more strikingly the technological frame of mind as found in the Nazi "final solution." Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Vintage, 1964), and Jacques Ellul, *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 443.

⁸⁵ Miss Gladys Carmen Bellamy, *op. cit.*, the one critic who has tried to view the ending as an integral part of the novel, finds that "the outcome of the book shows that so-called 'progress' has no real chance against superstition; but, beyond that, it shows that if real progress is to be made, another sort of advancement must keep pace with technical advancement" (p. 314). She continues: "Instead of the popular interpretation as solely a celebration of American progress, the book may conceivably be viewed as a fictional working out of the idea that a too-quick civilization breeds disaster." Miss Bellamy is properly impressed with the ending of the book. She sees, as most other critics do not, that in writing a conclusion in which the Yankee and his whole enterprise fail, Twain meant that ending to bear some relation to the Yankee and his scheme for reform. But she refuses to go one step further and recognize that the book speaks not only of the "rate of progress" but questions the very possibility of progress itself. The Yankee is not destroyed by mindless superstition or "too-quick civilization" but only by the wastes created by his own technology.

The collapse of the Yankee's project at the end by no means leaves Arthur's intact. Twain incorporated, by directly quoting, the tale of the concluding battles from Malory. Arthurian England collapses as a result of its own defects without the direct interference of the Yankee. Arthur's rule can easily be compared to that of a family; the nobles rule on the basis of their "blood." The Arthurian regime would seem, therefore, to be in a certain sense "natural." But if Arthur's rule is paternal, the mother is absent except in the form of the "Mother Church," which is, by definition, a super-, if not un-natural spouse; and if, on the contrary, Arthur's relation to his nation is, as the Yankee states, like that of a mother to her own children and others, the father is in heaven, if not absent from earth altogether. Both aristocratic households that the Yankee visits are out of order: In Camelot there is the affair between Guinevere and Lancelot, and in his sister's abode, the wife Morgan rules King Uriens. Arthur himself is of questionable legitimacy and his only "heir" is the illegitimate product of incest. Beginning with the separation of the slave girl and child from the father, we view a series of mothers and babes bereft of paternal care as a result of a combination of superstition and law. In the regime built upon the family structure, the family is disordered. Knights must leave their families to go in search of adventure, and the purest of them, Galahad, is chaste. This "natural" regime stands on a supernatural or unnatural foundation. Behind its reflection in the knight stands the monk.⁸⁶

Generative nature does not provide a sufficient foundation for political rule. King Arthur rules not as the father of the family but as the representative of the divine Father. Arthur's is the government about which the Yankee reflects:

Unlimited power *is* the ideal thing when it is in safe hands. The despotism of heaven is the one absolutely perfect government. An earthly despotism would be the absolutely perfect earthly government, if the conditions were the same, namely, the despot the perfectest individual of the human race, and his lease of life perpetual. But as a perishable perfect man must die, and leave his despotism in the hands of an imperfect successor, an earthly despotism is not merely a bad form of government, it is the worst form that is possible.⁸⁷

Arthur's regime is modeled on the divine. Arthur's rule is perhaps the rule of the "perfectest individual" and so just; but Arthur is still a man, hence perishable. Nature does not guarantee that good men have good sons; it does not guarantee that they have sons at all. Because kings do not necessarily have acceptable heirs, the succession comes into question, and war is the almost inevitable result.

Things may occur according to divine dispensation, but the human

⁸⁶ Cf. *Matthew* 10 : 34-40; *Mark* 3 : 31; *Luke* 14 : 26-27; also cf. *supra* with regard to the general tendency of aristocracies or aristocrats both ancient and modern to seek to transcend human political limitations in imitation of the divine.

⁸⁷ *Connecticut Yankee*, p. 78.

beings involved cannot know the intention of their Father and cannot, therefore, act accordingly. Given a belief in providence, success becomes the only criterion of political right. That is, in human terms the foundation of Arthurdom becomes mere force; and the injustice in the origins (or the tension between divine perfection and imperfect human nature) produces a necessary corruption at the heart of the regime. This corruption emerges first through a necessary confusion between the prerequisite of virtue and virtue itself. The Arthurians claim an excellence by nature that is, in fact, an excellence resulting from a certain kind of training; but that very training depends paradoxically upon the erroneous belief that aristocrats are better by nature. Yet the belief that aristocrats are simply better by nature tends to destroy their striving to live up to any of the extrinsic standards of virtue and hence to undermine the justice of their claim to rule. When the superiority of the nobles is no longer evident, the Arthurian regime must finally posit the rule of providence as a guarantee for the conflation of the natural aristocracy and the conventional aristocracy, of the given and the perfected—a rule of providence that in fact comes closer to the crude doctrine of providence ridiculed in Twain's Preface than to the more sophisticated doctrines of theology. The Arthurian regime ignores the defective character of nature and thus, like the Yankee, depreciates the role of politics.

When the Yankee compares the justice of Arthur's rule to that of a mother distributing milk to children *in time of famine*, he points, moreover, to a second kind of defect in the "natural" regime.⁸⁸ The natural condition is one of scarcity. If one distributes the nation's wealth evenly and equally in conditions of scarcity, all will be depressed economically, and as a result all will try to seize goods from others by force or fraud, whereas if one sternly imposes order and regulates economic production, a few men can live well and through their magnificence relieve the harsh bleakness of the general human condition. The cruelty and injustice of inequality arise partially from conditions of scarcity; a mother would, the Yankee suggests, distribute milk equally in times of plenty. The Yankee's democracy depends, therefore, upon alleviating conditions of scarcity.⁸⁹

As scarcity accounts for some of the harshest aspects of the Arthurian regime, so technology provides the necessary condition for the worst abuses

⁸⁸ "The king's judgments wrought frequent injustices, but it was merely the fault of his training, his natural and unalterable sympathies. He was as unfitted for a judgeship as would be the average mother for the position of milk-distributor to starving children in famine-time; her own children would fare a shade better than the rest" (*ibid.*, p. 234).

⁸⁹ We should note in this respect the Yankee's first action after gaining power: "the very first official thing I did, in my administration—and it was on the first day of it, too—was to start a patent office, for I know that a country without a patent office and good patent law is just a crab, and couldn't travel any way but sideways or backways" (*ibid.*, p. 68).

of the Yankee's rule—his tyrannical use of both his physical and political power. The Yankee does not explicitly model his rule on that of God, but he does believe that he can overcome nature with his science and that this science makes him a "superior being." There is, in fact, a tension at the core of the Yankee's political project between the natural rights and equality of men he hopes to institute and his "supranatural" technological power to transform nature (and the ambition to which that power gives rise) similar to that between the divine and natural foundations of Arthurism. If nature can be completely transformed by technology, the natural equality of men would no longer seem to provide a source of a moral standard for or restraint upon the Yankee's action. (When the Yankee finally declares the republic, it is, in the context, merely a declaration of war.)

Technology (both his "magic" and arts of war) seems to become the primary ground for the Yankee's action. But technology is only a means for the Yankee. He remains champion of reason to the very end:

I was a champion, it was true, but not the champion of the frivolous black arts. I was the champion of hard unsentimental common sense and reason. I was entering the lists to either destroy knight-errantry or be its victim.⁹⁰

Force is necessary because, the Yankee thinks he has learned, men believe what they are taught from birth; and these opinions are politically determined by the regime in power. The Arthurians as firmly believe that men are unequal as the Yankee believes they are equal. Conflict between the two regimes becomes inevitable; and thus Clarence tells the Yankee:

Well, if there hadn't been any Queen Guenevere, it wouldn't have come so early, but it would have come anyway. It would have come on your own account by and by; *by luck*, it happened to come on the Queen's.⁹¹

Because the Yankee still believes in the fundamental equality of men and their potential reasonableness, he cannot use force against them with a good conscience. He knows, as the Arthurians do not, that his "superiority" consists in technical knowledge in principle available to all men. Thus, toward the end of the novel, when his public project seems nearest completion, he seems to draw back. For example, he never admits any intention of unseating Arthur, even to himself, although that is required in order to fulfill his own ambition to become president of the republic. Although prepared for war, he wages it only when forced to defend his "civilization" from the interdict of the Church. Despite his statements about the malleability of nature and "inherited opinions," he is surprised when all but fifty-two boys desert him at the end. Clarence asks his boss:

"Did you think you had educated the superstition out of these people?"
"I certainly did think it."

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

"Well, then, you may unthink it . . . [they] were born in an atmosphere of superstition and reared in it. . . . We imagined we had educated it out of them; they thought so too; the Interdict woke them up. . . ."⁹²

To the very end, the Yankee overestimates the "reasonableness" of human nature as well as his own abilities of persuasion.

Just as his public project seems nearest success, moreover, the Yankee discovers for the first time a private life that might satisfy him. He becomes a devoted husband and father and, as a result, virtually retires temporarily from public life into the confines of domesticity. Yet this retreat could be held responsible for the failure—at least the particular form of failure—of the Yankee's public project.⁹³ The Yankee's new-found domesticity represents in part a response to his lessons about Arthurian nobility as well as the discovery of a dimension of life he had heretofore totally missed. Fundamentally, it reveals his bad conscience. Technology is only a means, and when the means destroys the very end it is to serve—humanity—it has to be abandoned.

Unlike both the Yankee and the Arthurians, Twain recognizes the limits of human nature. Both the Yankee and the Arthurians favor their own view of things, naturally, since they have no other, but neither set of opinions, Twain reveals, is simply true or rational. Both parties compete for status, whether defined in terms of money or honor—the terms are set by the opinions. The conjunction of this natural drive for precedence with the faulty understanding of most men makes political life necessary and yet limited in its possibilities. Most satisfaction for most men must be private. Twain affirms the goodness of family life both through his Yankee and in his critique of the Arthurian regime, which destroys the family by attempting to make it the foundation for political rule. Only in the family does the Yankee satisfy the desire for love and respect that initially propelled him into politics. Yet, as Twain shows in his critical presentation of the Arthurian regime, the family is not in itself sufficient. Because men are not perfect, they cannot simply love each other. The necessary underlay of force cannot be overcome by any regime, though both regimes presented here strive to do so. The danger is more serious with the modern regime, however, both because its political aspirations are more likely to lead it to desperate ventures and because its technological powers make those ventures destructive without precedent.

Twain is thus less concerned with an adjudication of the regimes than with using his understanding of political life to improve the regime within which he lives by reminding his readers of the limits human nature

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 420-422.

⁹³ The illness of Hello-Central and the trip to France for the child's health are the climactic events in the Yankee's withdrawal of attention from political affairs in favor of domestic ones. His inattention and absence pave the way for his undoing.

ought to set on their political aspirations. Indeed, the oft-decried conjunction of humor and horror so characteristic of the novel comes from Twain's contrasting the claims of both regimes with the facts of human nature. The comical arises in the case of the Arthurian regime, because the nobles claim to be what they are not—superior by nature. In this respect, they are pretentious and deserving of the ridicule the Yankee and Twain heap upon them. The horrible arises because that injustice that makes the nobles what they are also makes the peasants what they are. Conversely, the Yankee is a source of comedy insofar as he, too, is pretentious. His pretentiousness is precisely his leveling or denial of excellence, and thus, much of what appears to be burlesque reflecting on the knights in fact reflects upon the Yankee and reflects comically precisely because the Yankee believes that he is deflating other pomposities and is thus superior. Similarly, the horrible side of the Yankee, in particular the ending of his tale, has its source in his denial of nature, which leads him to believe that anything is possible.

Yet, Twain indicates, a great deal is possible. The Yankee is conquered only by his own deadly power, but he is conquered. He is saved only by Merlin, the magician of words, who puts him to sleep and sends him back to the nineteenth century. Merlin, through his art, does the same thing that Twain does through his art in structuring this novel—he overcomes the limits of both space and time. In words and only in words is there, perhaps, hope. If the words of Malory and other romancers can make Twain and his Yankee dream, the words of Twain can perhaps awaken real Yankees by showing them where their civilization leads and thus giving them cause to reflect critically upon their enterprise, and by reminding them of the nature and conditions of human excellence. Technology has provided modern men with more power and more freedom to use it than ever contemplated earlier; they can now exercise their passions, particularly that for precedence, virtually without restraint (except the force of others). This is the problem: Those things—faith, honor (word and/or reputation), and scarce natural conditions—that formerly restrained men no longer operate effectively; and the modern substitute, law, does not serve, because to a man such as the Yankee, the law is always questionable. Compassion is too arbitrary and indistinct a criterion for politics. The only hope for self-control seems then to lie in self-criticism, which Twain may have furthered by presenting this gross image of the American Yankee.

But here we confront the heart of Twain's problem. How can a novelist reach such a man and shake him out of his self-satisfaction? In his Preface, Twain states explicitly that he abstracts from the question of the divine governance of the world. There is, however, another force abstracted from the tale as presented by the Yankee: This is the force of poetry or fiction. At the very beginning the Yankee announces that he is a man "without sentiment, i.e., poetry." There is little in the Yankee to which a poet may appeal with much hope of success if we, like the Yankee, identify poetry with romantic poetry. But where romantic poetry has no appeal

to the Yankee, humor does. His extreme reaction to the old joke of Sir Dinadan forces him to meet the challenge of Sir Sagramor; and his first act of tyrannical power following his victory in the tournament is to hang Sir Dinadan for publishing the same joke. Humor appeals to the Yankee through its novelty; like his own "practicality" and technology, it requires ever new devices to maintain its effect. It appeals also to his democratic instincts, not only because of its novelty, but because humor debunks. If humor is to debunk pretensions, is not one of the greatest pretensions of modern man the very view that he can or does live without pretensions? Twain also ridicules the Yankee, and thereby perhaps moderates him. Twain's sentiments on the importance of humor as a debunker and soberer are well-known and often cited. We suggest, however, that this is not a sufficiently deep understanding of Twain's humor. Humor, especially Twain's humor, depends on contrast, in particular contrast between the high and the low. Rather than being a debunking humor, Twain's humor is meant to restore the restraints on human passion by reminding men of their nature—both its heights and its depths. Whether Twain, despite his popularity, succeeded at this is a question indeed.