Enigmatic characters fill the pages of Mark Twain’s later fiction. The heteroglossic voice of Hank Morgan and the question of Pudd’nhead Wilson’s life in Dawson’s Landing both leave the reader with an unsettling sense of the characters’ identities. Is Hank a model liberal democrat or a proto-fascist? And just how much control does Pudd’nhead Wilson have in his investigative hobbies? Is he an astute interpreter of texts, or a mere amateur blessed with dumb luck? In his later works Twain raises to a fine art the vertiginous construction of enigmatic figures, combining child-like play with adult moral posturing, prototypes of Huck and Tom with a frightful modern vision, and a grand progressive rhetoric with dark and fatalistic undertones. These characters are the dialectical representations of the varying moods and conflicting philosophies that vexed Twain in the last decades of his life. Little wonder that they leave the critical reader perpetually frustrated.

Perhaps no character better illustrates this fictional enigma than does the god-like child in Twain’s unfinished Mysterious Stranger manuscripts. No. 44, more than any other of Twain’s creations, remains a mystery to the end.1 Any attempt to wrestle with this mystery must spring from the most general but nonetheless pertinent of questions: What is the nature of No. 44? This question is not as simple as it first appears, for the figure refuses neat critical categorization and eludes the grasp of even the most careful examination. He is simultaneously an impish prankster, a satanic figure, a benevolent fascist, a childlike innocent, a philosophical pragmatist, a social determinist, a showman and performer, dream substance, and, perhaps most important, an artist and creator. In fact, one could well address the text as Karzeyammer does No. 44, “Nobody knows how to take you or what to make of you; every time a person puts his finger on you you’re not there.”2

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1. The number 44 is used to denote Twain’s manuscript in the Mysterious Stranger series.
While many scholars have struggled with the placement of Twain’s “Conclusion of the book,” few have attempted to place their critical finger directly on No. 44.\textsuperscript{3} If we assume that the manuscripts remained unfinished because of Twain’s unresolved intentions behind the figure of 44, then we are compelled to conclude that this character stands as the keystone of the text. To grasp the problematic ending, one must first confront the enigma of No. 44.\textsuperscript{4}

Ever since the publication of John S. Tuckey’s \textit{Mark Twain and Little Satan} in 1963 and William Gibson’s edition of the \textit{Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts} in 1969, most of the criticism on “The Mysterious Stranger” (both the Paine-Duneka version and the No. 44 version) has focused on its structural and solipsistic implications, especially as it sheds light on the psychology and philosophy of Twain’s later years. This criticism usually takes one of two diametrically opposed positions on the manuscript and the author’s world view: either the text reveals a nihilistic stopping point in Twain’s ever-increasing pessimism, or it presents a promising alternative to his paralyzing despair.\textsuperscript{5}

What most critics fail to consider, however, is the possibility of both a negation \textit{and} an affirmation in the Mysterious Stranger manuscripts. Much like the paradoxical figure of No. 44, who remains aloof and difficult to pin down, the text itself contains contradictions. There is at work in the unfinished manuscripts a dialogue of differences that, whether Twain was aware of it or not, translated itself into the character of the Mysterious Stranger. After all, these are texts written by a man who could embrace a theoretical socialism and, at the same time, sing the praises of capitalist ventures; who would argue that men are completely determined by their social surroundings while nonetheless holding out for an imperial autonomy of self; who would vigorously condemn the government’s laissez faire economic policies yet personally befriend— and benefit from— such financial giants as Henry Hattleston Rogers and Andrew Carnegie. As his pen name suggests, there is at all times a twinning going on in Twain, a tendency to entertain ideas of inherent contradiction and an ability to keep those ideas suspended in an uneasy state of irresolution. In a sense, this is a display of Keatsian “negative capability,” but a peculiar one in which the author seems to remain an unwitting exponent. Perhaps, more accurately, it is similar to the kind of romantic irony found in works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville.\textsuperscript{6} George Toles aptly describes this curious disposition as a house of isolated chambers:

Twain’s creative imagination is a house with many chambers, but they do not adjoin each other. Situated in one room, his vision successfully accommodates itself to its dimensions, however limited. For the time being, no other room exists. After an indefinite period has elapsed, he awakens, as it were, in another room, and the process repeats itself.\textsuperscript{7}

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Through his various representations of the Mysterious Stranger, Mark Twain finds himself “wide awake” in a number of those disjoined chambers, using a highly personalized creative authority to investigate the realms of imagination and what he believed to be his dwindling powers as a writer. Moments of silent despair rent uneasily alongside eruptions of frenzied inspiration, and the result is an ambiguous series of texts that showcase the sheer power of this indeterminacy. In terms of Toles’s metaphor of the divided house, Twain may have been trapped wandering from one room to the next, but the process of that dialogical journey reveals a keen creative mind that is able to engage with a variety of problematic issues, even if there is no assurance of any way out.

Tuckey does acknowledge a philosophical duality in the Mysterious Stranger stories, but argues that incompatible alternatives underlie the unfinished manuscript: “For Clemens, the question of which would finally prevail, the ‘me’ or the machine, was unresolved—and he was in the last analysis not confirmed in despair, not barred from seeing and representing human life as having value and significance.” Yet this irresolution is anything but stifling; Twain was able to engage in a fruitful and sustaining dialectic that provided him with, if not a way out, then at least a way through. After exploring the possibilities of political authority in A Connecticut Yankee and scientific or rationalistic authority in Pudd’nhead Wilson, Twain turned his gaze upon the source of his own inspiration and considered the possibility of creativity as a source of authority. Just as Hank Morgan авторs a new nation and Wilson authors a highly suspenseful courtroom scene, so does No. 44 author the text of the self. This final passage through the tortured irreconciliabilities of Twain’s heroes turns up in a solipsistic dead end, but one that continues to turn back on and reassess itself, giving the process an ongoing (if nonetheless nihilistic) sense of renewal.

Perhaps the best way to approach Twain’s last major text is through an understanding of the nature of No. 44. In significant ways, the mysterious stranger is part of an ongoing Twainian motif, one that manifests himself vividly in the three unfinished manuscripts, “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” “Schoolhouse Hill,” and “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger.” This is the type of powerful authority figure that seems to dominate much of Twain’s literary imagination. Whether they be moral or tainted, mischievous or innocent, godly or mortal, these characters were plentifully woven into the fabric of his writing. Riverboat captains, gold miners, stage coach drivers, pony express riders, lawyers, judges, robber barons, soldiers, trail blazers, detectives, pirates, poets, confidence men, town elders, statesmen, presidents, and (as in the case of the present study) even the devil himself all found their way into Twain’s unique world. Most of them do not command great fortunes, and most do not possess an epic grasp of themselves within history. What all of
them do display, however, is a mastery of their trade, a respectable amount of power, and the ability to use that power to great effect.

These types of commanding characters evolved along with the author’s philosophical focus and disposition, and a genealogical survey of Twainian authority reveals three primary shifts in the way he handled them. In his earlier works, where the journeying narrator is Twain himself, he approaches the figures from a distance and with a great deal of respect. Despite the boundless mockery of *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain the pilgrim is genuinely impressed by the Russian Emperor. What begins as another exercise in irreverence quickly turns into a display of admiration, as the narrator states:

> I had a sort of vague desire to examine his hands and see if they were of flesh and blood, like other men’s. Here was a man who could [command a vast empire], and yet if I chose I could knock him down. The case was plain, but it seemed preposterous, nevertheless—as preposterous as trying to knock down a mountain or wipe out a continent… If I could have stolen his coat, I would have done it. When I meet a man like that, I want something to remember him by."

In *Roughing It*, one of the most exciting moments for Sam and his brother comes when they catch a quick glimpse of the pony express riders, a legend of the West, and of the stage-driver whom Sam sees as nothing less than “a great and shining dignitary, the world’s favorite son, the envy of the people, the observed of the nations.” Of the stage-driver, the narrator states in a revealing passage that:

> The hostlers and station-keepers treated the really powerful conductor of the coach merely with the best of what was their idea of civility, but the driver was the only being they bowed down to and worshipped. How admiringly they would gaze up at him in his high seat as he gloved himself with lingering deliberation, while some happy hostler held the bunch of reins aloft, and waited patiently for him to take it! And how they would bombard him with glutifying ejaculations as he cracked his long whip and went careering away. (Roughing It, p. 21)

To Sam the young cub-pilot, Horace Bixby, the riverboat pilot in *Life on the Mississippi*, is a near-deity beyond any mortal reproach: “His movements were entirely free; he consulted no one, he received commands from nobody, he promptly resented even the merest suggestions… Here was the novelty of a king without a keeper, an absolute monarch who was absolute in sober truth and not by a fiction of words.” Their occupations may differ, but all of these early figures of authority are of a single type: reserved minor characters displaying little moral ambiguity, sights to be witnessed and possibly emulated, and figures worthy of almost uncritical admiration.
In the two boyhood novels, Twain shifts his focus; instead of seeking authority outside of his protagonists, he attempts to posit it or build it within the figures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Both represent for Twain different yet complementary possibilities of empowerment, elements that continue to arise in one form or another in the characters that follow. Tom, perhaps Twain’s most captivating authority figure, is an impish and romantic adventurer who is just as adept at getting attention as he is at turning a profit. He is a manipulative figure with a flair for the dramatic, a perennial showman who commands an audience by deception and staged effect. He thinks nothing of frightening his community by playing dead, as he does in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, or of prankishly enslaving Jim, actions which contribute to the problematic ending of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Yet, for all of his mischievous manipulation, he is nonetheless a good-spirited boy who functions within the system of his community. As Forrest Robinson has so convincingly demonstrated, Tom’s deceptive games of manipulation are a socially accepted construction that sanctions the community’s contradictions as well as affirms its dynamics of existence.22 Huck, on the other hand, is a highly impressionable observer with little flare for the dramatic, yet one with a strong moral ballast that almost without fail keeps him steadfastly afloat. Despite his numerous flights from responsibility, his “lighting out” for other territories, he demonstrates a character that is more compassionate and more mature than Tom whenever cornered into a moral decision. In his critically defining moment, Huck decides that he’d rather be damned to Hell for helping a runaway slave than abandon his friend Jim to the Phelps’s. What is more, his determination to save Jim remains intact even with the arrival of the more domineering Tom Sawyer. It is significant to note that during Jim’s imprisonment at the Phelps’s, Huck is the one who tempers Tom’s extravagant plans with constant reminders of Jim’s dire predicament. Indeed, Huck himself even manipulates Tom into abandoning some of his revered romantic notions and deference to “the best authorities,” and helps to speed up Jim’s escape, as when he maneuvers Tom into “letting-on” that thirty-seven years can be contained within a few days.23

In his later fiction Twain most fully explores the dynamics of authority and its relationship to the culture of his time. In A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, Pudd’nhead Wilson, and the Mysterious Stranger manuscripts, he wrestles with larger troubling issues in ways that he had not, or could not, in his earlier works, and invests these ongoing dialogues in three of the most dominating characters in his canon. Whereas most of their predecessors were either two-dimensional or exceedingly forthright representations, Hank Morgan, David Wilson, and No. 44 are all problematic and highly enigmatic figures of authority who resist any sense of critical closure. This Twainian power figure is given full, and often disturbing, expression in his completed works, A Connecticut Yankee and Pudd’nhead Wilson. Control
lies at the heart of Hank Morgan’s sojourn at Camelot. He plans from the very beginning to “boss the whole country inside of three months,” and fulfills his desire by erecting a technological nightmare of death and destruction. Pudd’nhead Wilson, although less obviously power-hungry than Hank, nevertheless falls into the same mold. His power is of a more subtle and clandestine nature. Through his hobby of fingerprinting, he holds in his hand the identity of Dawson’s Landing, and reveals this information to great effect in the dramatic courtroom scene. Much like Tom Sawyer and Hank Morgan, Wilson manipulates the dissemination of knowledge in order to give him the edge—and the reputation—in the community. All of these later characters live by the adage “knowledge is power.” However, with Pudd’nhead Wilson there arises an interesting question: what exactly is his game? Although we know his parentage, his birthplace, and his desired trade, he nonetheless remains an enigmatic character aloof from both the town and the reader. There is a dearth of information on the psychology of Wilson. What is to be made of this freethinking young lawyer with a taste for irony, fingerprinting, and palm reading? Just as Hank Morgan is to Camelot, David Wilson is, in his own way, a mysterious stranger to Dawson’s Landing.

What further confounds an unambiguous reading of Hank Morgan and David Wilson is an almost equal amount of benevolence that stands alongside their less attractive sides. If, in their more problematic moments—their desire for control, their need for attention, and their propensity (either intentionally or not) for mischievousness—Hank and Wilson embody the spirit of Tom Sawyer, then their compassionate and selfless side would tend to suggest strains of Huck Finn. Although not necessarily diametrically opposed, Tom and Huck are nonetheless two distinct types whose traits intermingle uncomfortably in many of Twain’s later protagonists. While Hank Morgan does set out to “boss” Camelot through a highly staged and condescending series of manipulations, at the same time he voices his desire for a democratic inclusiveness that will uphold the dignity of even the most disenfranchised individual. Even though David Wilson uses courtroom dramas to establish his reputation and popularity (and in the process ultimately brings about the downfall of Tom Sawyer), he nonmaliciously does so in the name of justice. Depending on your perspective, the two characters are either devilish or angelic, as either a selfish manipulating showman or an innocent pensive ethicist.

The enigmatic stranger returns with full dramatic force in the guise of Young Satan or No. 44. This character is the literary descendant of Twain’s collection of manipulative pranksters and outsiders, embodied previously in the guise of Hank Morgan and David Wilson. All three—Hank, Wilson, and 44—are mysterious outsiders who come into a foreign world and, through a series of manipulative games, profoundly alter the course of events. All are performers—much in the mold of Tom Sawyer—whose feats are a mystery to
their audience, but whose secrets are merely commonplace to their authors. All manipulate their audiences by controlling knowledge and information. All are revealers of truths that expose societal shams, individual hypocrisy, and illegitimate sources of power. All three are able to make life-and-death decisions with relatively little moral effort. All possess a fatal and even apocalyptic power that seems to have fascinated their creator. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, all three embody a series of oppositions that constantly vie for dominance, yet none of whose possibilities ever attain a privileged position within the text.

Yet, the question remains, what is No. 44? Much more than was the case with Hank Morgan and David Wilson, 44's identity seems purposefully clouded in a dreamlike ambiguity. Indeed, it is Twain's own intentional and grand ambiguity, this mystery that rests at the very heart of 44, that dogged him throughout his project and ultimately rendered it unfinished. From 1897 to 1908, Twain worked on four different versions of his mysterious stranger narrative, each one revealing a different angle, and in some cases a profound twist, on the nature of No. 44. An obvious, but nonetheless highly pertinent, example of this is 44's metaphysical origin. Is he an angel or is he a devil? And if he is an uncertain mixture of the two, is he more devil than angel, or is it the other way around? The answers vacillate both between and within the various texts. In "The Chronicle of Young Satan," he seems to be an amalgamation of both possibilities. As Young Satan reveals relatively early in the narrative, any investigations into the motives behind his actions will offer no answers, for his actions are beyond the human scope of the terms "good" and "evil." Those designations, he tells Theodor, are the result of man's degrading "Moral Sense" and are therefore alien to the young stranger. "We cannot do wrong; neither have we any disposition to do it, for we do not know what it is." In one significant passage, the creation of his clay people, Young Satan reveals characteristics that suggest both the devil and Christ. Immediately after telling the boys his name, "Satan" (Twain italicizes the name for emphasis) then "held out a chip and caught a little woman on it who was falling from the scaffolding and put her back where she belonged" ("Chronical," p. 47). Although he possesses his uncle's name, he nonetheless plays the savior figure by snatching the woman from her death. But the possible significance of this action is undermined in Satan's next statement, when he says "she is an idiot to step backward like that and not notice what she is about" (p. 47), and later when he crushes with his fingers two men for fighting. Reproachment and condemnation have taken the place of forgiveness. Certainly, in a Judeo-Christian sense, Young Satan is an unambiguous expression of neither supreme deity.

Other signs in the text are mixed. Young Satan has taken his uncle's name, but he is nonetheless a self-professed angel. "It is a good family-oars;"
Satan tells the boys, “there is not a better. [My uncle] is the only member of it that has ever sinned” (p. 48). This last word is significant because it suggests some type of implied morality, an ethical dimension that Satan had previously strongly denied. Satan, in essence, begins to deconstruct himself. He possesses—in human terms—angelic qualities, such as a propensity for music and poetry, yet cryptically states that “it was from [his] uncle that he drew his support” (p. 68). By the end of the fragment, the reader knows no more about Young Satan than he did at the beginning. He is as insubstantial as a blank screen or transparent film, seemingly nothing more than a collection of each reader’s projections. This characterization of Young Satan as transparent film is not just metaphorical, as Theodor describes it during one of Satan’s more memorable exists:

He thinned away and thinned away until he was a soap-bubble, except that he kept his shape. You could see the bushes through him as clearly as you see the delicate iridescent colors of the bubble... He sprang-touched the grass-bounded—floated along—touched again—and so on, and presently exploded, puff! and in his place was vacancy. (p. 56)

The reader, in a critical act of deciphering Young Satan, can indeed empathize with Theodor’s experience. Not only is the figure elusive, but his construction is precarious enough to where even the most careful of inquiries will—puff!—leave the critic empty-handed.

In “Schoolhouse Hill,” 44’s nature is less problematic. He seems, in the fullest sense, to be angelic. “I am not a devil,” he tells Oliver Hottchkiss.19 Yet, although his father is indeed Satan (a familial holdover from “Young Satan”), he states emphatically, “I don’t admire him” (p. 212). At his own admission, he was raised “partly in heaven, partly in hell” (p. 209), but this seems nothing more than a playful trope employed to convey his fallen parentage, for, just a few pages later, 44 tells Hottchkiss “I was in heaven; I had always lived in heaven, of course” (p. 214).17 In this, a lighter and more humorous version of Twain’s mysterious stranger, No. 44 is not so much an enigma as he is a metaphysical Tom Sawyer. He may be impish, but his heart is in the right place. Similarly, the servant devils that No. 44 summons from hell are not imposing demons, but cute “velvety little red fellows” (p. 211). More important, the “Schoolhouse Hill” 44 is an angel with a mission: “The fundamental change wrought in man’s nature by my father’s conduct must remain—it is permanent; but a part of its burden of evil consequences can be lifted from your race, and I will undertake it. Will you help?” (p. 217).18 There is little difference in tone between 44 asking Hottchkiss to assist in this Promethean task and Tom Sawyer encouraging Jim and Huck to join in on one of his adventures. Furthermore, in “Schoolhouse Hill,” 44 takes on the obvious role of a savior.
figure—quite a departure from the amoral and shadowy figures of the other two manuscripts.

But if Twain casts a fog around the stranger in the “Young Satan” manuscript, he remains almost silent in the last version, “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger.” Indeed, silence thematically permeates the text. Every time August or his duplicate Lintle attempts to raise the question of his origin, No. 44 holds his tongue with “that mysterious check which had so often shut off a question which I wanted to ask” (“No. 44,” p. 333). When August asks No. 44 the question that we all want to ask, “what are you?”, he replies “Ah . . . now we have arrived at a point where words are useless” (p. 318).

More significantly, No. 44's ghostly effects function in a similar manner. On three notable occasions, each accompanying one of 44’s demonstrations, August is stricken by an awful silence. First, when he sees the printing press working by itself, he is shaken by “a soundless emptiness, a ghostly hush” (p. 283):

all the different kinds of work were racing along like Sam Hill—and all in a sepulchral stillness. The way the press was carrying on, you would think it was making noise enough for an insurrection, but in a minute you would find it was only your fancy; it wasn’t producing a sound . . . abundance of movement, you see, plenty of tramping to and fro, yet you couldn’t hear a footfall, there wasn’t a spoken word, there wasn’t a whisper, there wasn’t a sigh—oh, the saddest, uncanniest silence that ever was. (p. 282)

In each of the two other cases, the silence anticipates the ghostly performance. Immediately before the one-man minstrel show, August feels the profound silence of his solitude as he awaits No. 44: “It was awfully still and solemn and midnightly, and this made me feel creepy and shivery and afraid of ghosts” (p. 353). Then when he hears the dry, bony noise of the skeleton creeping upon him in the murky moonlit hall, “it shriveled me up like a spider in a candle-flame” (p. 354). Later, immediately prior to the Assembly of the Dead procession, August feels “the thickest and soldest and blackest darkness” surrounding him, with “a silence which was so still it was as if the world was holding its breath” (p. 401).

These scenes are strikingly similar to the ghostly stillness that Huck experiences at the end of chapter one of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Up in his room, waiting the arrival of Tom Sawyer to provide some relief from his stifling life at the widow’s, Huck notices a series of lonely, mournful sounds that spark his superstitious interests. Along with an owl, a whippoor-will, and crying dog—powerfully forbidding omens to the superstitious—he listens closely as:
the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful ... and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me ... Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood ... Pretty soon a spider went crawling up my shoulder, and I flipped it off and it lit in the candle, and before I could budge it was all shriveled up. (Huck, p. 4)

Similar to the dark stillness that August experiences, the sounds that Huck hears outside his window all arouse dread. Significantly, these are noises that produce little sound. The leaves rustle mournfully, the wind speaks in a whisper that he cannot comprehend, and, most telling of Huck's spooked disposition, a ghost cannot make itself understood. As is the case with August, the distressful portent of it all is encapsulated in the image of a spider in a flame, an indication for the superstitious that trouble is near at hand.

Forrest Robinson argues that such scenes in Huckleberry Finn reveal the fears, death wishes, and superstitious dread of Huck that emerge naturally from the text of the young boy's account; and that, further, these awful feelings spring from two psychological vulnerabilities that plague him throughout the novel: guilt over the safety of Jim and a mortal dread of solitude. Robinson asserts that "Huck Finn is not a very happy person," and that from the superstitious reveries of the first chapter to the false hopes of "the Territory ahead" in the last, Huck's plight is a depressing one:

At no point are we inclined to view Huck's narrative as a humorous riot of naïve superstition; the acceleration of his terror is too immediate and authentic for release into comedy. Rather, we come away impressed with the vague but nearly palpable dread which emerges from Huck's solitude. Left to himself, he is at once fearful that his life will continue, and that it will end. (p. 51)

The silences in Huck's world, and all of the terrors that they betray, are similar to those of August's. The only difference between the two is the source from which these silences spring. In Huck's case, the dread arises because of a neutral silence in the world over which no one has any control. The silence is out there in Huck's world regardless of whether he experiences it, and it is only because of the psychological predisposition that he himself nurtures that he falls prey to his feelings of guilt and loneliness. Indeed, were it not for these psychological influences, Huck's life throughout the novel might resemble the Edenic life he experiences with Tom and Joe on Jackson's Island in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, or the two or three idyllic days and nights he shares with Jim prior to the arrival of the King and the Duke. In fact, the language of this section of Huckleberry Finn bears the point. At the beginning of their self-imposed isolation, Jim and Huck waste their days
away watching “the lonesomeness of the river,” and “listening to the stillness.” These moments of “just solid lonesomeness” do not frighten Huck, nor do they trigger any adverse feelings (Huck, p. 157). This is one of the only sections of the book where the predominance of silence and stillness comingle with feelings of happiness.

In contrast to Huck’s, August’s silences and the mortal dread they produce are not natural to his world, but artificially constructed by the impish No. 44 (and by association, as August learns during No. 44’s final revelation, constructed by himself). In each of the three cases cited above—the scenes at the printing press, the one-man minstrel show, and the Assembly of the Dead—August’s fears spring from this metaphysical influence. It is important to remember that prior to the arrival of No. 44, August’s life resembled the Eden of Jackson’s Island. “Austria was far away from the world,” as he recalls, and the town of Eseldorf “was a paradise for us boys” (“No. 44,” pp. 221, 222). Even with the oppressive fear of the Church and Father Adolf looming in the background, August’s life apparently holds no major difficulty. It is not until No. 44 comes along and “enlightens” August that he begins to set himself off from the others and feel the effects of his silent world.21 This arrival of No. 44 brings about a bittersweet change over August (and Theodor); much like the silence underlying 44’s metaphysical origins, his influence is likewise problematic. In the final chapter that Twain intended for The Mysterious Stranger, 44 is nothing more than a vision, a dream. “I am but a dream,” he tells August, “your dream, creature of your imagination” (p. 404). Therefore, if No. 44 is a dream, the product of thought, then the nature of that dream—August’s creative imagination—is of an unsteady power. It can both enlighten and emancipate as well as bind and manipulate. As the textualized embodiment of August’s own mind, No. 44 bestows upon the child a magnificent creative ability, yet it is this same ability that reveals to him the darker underside of such powers, that of solitude and destruction. Then, August Feldner joins the ranks of the other powerful figures in Twain’s later fiction, Hank Morgan and Pudd’nhead Wilson. The power that August creates—the power that he authors—is as frightening as it is liberating.

Three key passages from the final version of the Mysterious Stranger manuscript illustrate this point, and each one focuses on annihilation and August’s ever-increasing solitude.22 Similar to the passages on silence cited above, the references to solitude and lonesomeness all come at significant points in the narrative and signal to the reader the awesome influence this tragic solitude has on him. As with the silences, all feelings of solitude have as their source the power of No. 44. The first instance of this comes soon after 44 and August witness Johann Brinker’s elderly mother being burnt at the stake for being a witch. When August prays her for being given a cruel entrance to heaven, 44 shocks him by showing him otherwise. No. 44
produces before him the depths of hell, and “Before I could beg him to spare me, the red billows were sweeping by, and she was there among the lost. The next moment the crimson sea was gone, with its evoker, and I was alone” (p. 334, emphasis added). August’s last short and abrupt clause, “and I was alone,” demonstrates the sheer force of this phenomenon.

Another such moment comes immediately after the Assembly of the Dead. Witnessing the almost endless procession of historic personages, “a kind of pathetic spectacle” (p. 402) as he notes, August is stricken by an emptiness similar to that he experienced at the ghostly printing press: “For hours and hours the dead passed by in inextricable masses, and the bone-clacking was so deafening you could hardly hear yourself think. Then, all of a sudden 44 waved his hand and we stood in an empty and soundless world” (p. 403). Although August is left standing with 44, as he learns in the next important passage, he is actually the source of 44, and therefore is entirely alone.

In the third significant passage, the most critically discussed section of any among the unfinished manuscripts, August’s fears of solitude become a solipsistic dream/marriage. This is in the last chapter of the book, where No. 44 reveals to him that “Life itself is only a vision, a dream.” August calls this revelation “electrical,” suggesting that it is as terrifying as it is invigorating: “Nothing exists; all is a dream. God—man—the world—the sun, the moon, the wilderness of stars: a dream, a dream, all a dream, they have no existence. Nothing exists save empty space—and you!” (p. 404). August is once again alone, but this time it is for good and is accompanied by words of redemption. August is definitely delivered at the end, but the question remains, delivered into what? The “optimistic” critics describe 44 as a positive figure, and view his final words as some sort of salvific message. But there is a problem with this approach. “Salvation” is a problematic word, for No. 44’s revelation is as much a nightmare as it is a dream. Even solipsistic hope seems utterly dampened by 44’s last words: “Nothing exists but You. And You are but a Thought—a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!” (p. 405). Earlier, August discovers just how forlorn this empty eternity actually is when he speaks with his duplicate, Emile Schwarz. Emile talks of an almost aimless wandering that echoes that of Hank Morgan’s “plodding sad pilgrimage, this pathetic drift between the eternities” (Yankee, p. 162), and suggests an endless progression between hope and despair. In an extended passage, Emile describes to August the existence of his disembodied self in terms of “general space,” and describes it this way:

that sea of ether which has no shores, and stretches on, and on, and arrives nowhere; which is a waste of black gloom and thick darkness through which you may rush forever at thought-speed, encountering at
weary long intervals spirit-cheering archipelagos of same which rise
sparkling far in front of you in glories of light, apparently measureless
in extent, but you plunge through and in a moment they are far behind.
a twinkling archipelago again, and in another moment they are blotted
out in darkness. ("No. 44," p. 337)

Here we have a key passage, curiously overlooked by many critics, that
sheds much light on the troublesome ending of the novel, and likewise gives
us a solid clue into the enigmatic nature of No. 44. Twain’s “Conclusion of
the book” is neither a condemnation of life—either in the existential or social
sense—nor a salvific escape hatch. The ending does lapse into solipsism, but
nevertheless portrays this solipsism as a nihilistic prison. The creative
imagination, if it is an answer, is much like Emile’s mystifying yet tragically
solitary out-of-body experiences, a Sisyphean journey through endless dark-
ness to transitory twinkling archipelagos.

This final creative expression emanates from a tragic Mark Twain who
is unhappy with the world in which he lives but who is equally depressed by
the more hopeful alternatives he might envision. Perhaps it is too simple to
view what has become known as Twain’s darkening literary vision as a result
of the increasing tragedy that plagued his life. Certainly it is reasonable to
assume that a part of the pessimistic side of the mysterious stranger could be
due to the writer’s series of losses during the early twilight of his life: the
death of Susy, the terminal illness and subsequent death of Livy, financial
worries, and the ever-present fear that his creative powers had dried up. Yet
if this is the case, it nonetheless contributed to an already-present literary
predisposition that was there from his early years as a writer. Instead of
reading Twain’s oeuvre as a linear progression from light-hearted humor to
an ever-increasing pessimism, perhaps it would be more fruitful to see in his
total output a constant negotiation between alternate possibilities, and that
the seeds for his nihilistic No. 44 were sewn from the very beginning. From
his earliest works he had attempted to give voice to the uncomfortable twin
feelings of hope and despair. The jocular attitudes in The Innocents Abroad
often give way to images of destruction and futility. The idyllic boyhood
reveries in Huckleberry Finn are everywhere undermined by the abuse and
helplessness that Huck and Jim encounter. These twin feelings are perhaps
most vividly expressed in Roughing It, where the narrator Sam seeks to
ascend the heights of the Dead Volcano of Haleakala, “which means,
translated, ‘the house of the sun’” (Roughing It, p. 522). Inside the crater of
the dead volcano, Sam soon becomes enveloped by white clouds:

a ghostly procession of wanderers from the flaming hosts without had
drizzled through a chasm in the crater wall and piled round and round, and
gathered and swirled and blended together till the abyss was stored to the
brim with a flaccid fog. . . Thus bunted, motion ceased, and silence
reigned. (Pp. 523-24)
In a passage that foreshadows the powerful light and dark imagery of Emile Schwarz’s journey between twinkling archipelagos, Sam tells us that while standing within this shrouded crater, “I felt like the Last Man, neglected of the judgment, and left pinnacle in mid-heaven, a forgotten relic of a vanished world” (p. 524). Yet immediately after this dark reverie, he notices the bright rays of the rising sun, “the messengers of the coming resurrection.” The power of these two juxtaposed experiences, the door and the redemptive, strikes Sam as “the sublimest spectacle I ever witnessed, and I think the memory of it will remain with me always” (pp. 524–25). Apparently, the two experiences that so struck Sam the narrator left Mark Twain the writer with a poignant dialectic that he was never able to fuse satisfactorily. No. 44 and the creative power of the imagination presented another in a series of ways out. But even through solipsistic playfulness, he could not escape the double-edged nature of No. 44 and his message, for as Emile tells August, every progression from darkness into dazzling light leads invariably back into the still gloom of darkness. The nature of No. 44, read in this way, is neither ominous nor upbeat, but an unstable mixture of both that is representative of many of Twain’s later figures. In this sense, we can read the last words of August as an ambiguous and frustrating admonition of creative realization: “He vanished, and left me appalled; for I knew, and realized, that all he had said was true” (“No. 44,” p. 405). Twain, in an attempt to work through his last major narrative, was left standing on the edge of his own dead volcano, awaiting the dawn of an uncertain possibility.

NOTES

1 Unless specifically discussing “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” I will refer to the mysterious stranger figure throughout the essay as No. 44. This name, as Twain seems to have intended, suggests the enigmatic nature of the stranger in a way that “Satan” and “Young Satan” do not.


3 The much-discussed revelation of 44 to August, the “It is all a Dream” chapter, was designated by Twain as “Conclusion of the book.” As William Gibson points out, it was intended as the ending to the third version of the manuscript. “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger,” although Albert Bigelow Paine incorrectly grafts it onto the first version, “The Chronicle of Young Satan.” Most criticism on the book (both versions) deals almost exclusively with the ending and its structural implications.

4 The name “No. 44” is itself a classic exercise in doubling. Similar to that of Wilson and the twins in Pudd’head Wilson, there is doublets at work here between No. 44 and
August (or Theodore). John Tuckey, in an explanatory note to his edition of Twain’s unfinished text, in No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), highlights the importance of the mysterious stranger’s name. He argues that it is suggestive of the psychological wholeness that August and No. 44 achieve by the end of the text, a wholeness that ultimately brings August’s enlightenment (p. 195). August’s enlightenment, as I will argue, is problematic and does not possess the redemptive quality that Tuckey appears to posit. In this sense, the twinning of “44” suggests a doubling that, however likely the individual possibilities may be, nonetheless resists closure.


6 For an insightful discussion on the tradition of romantic irony in nineteenth-century American literature, see G. R. Thompson, “The Development of Romantic Irony in the United States,” in *Romantic Irony*, ed. Frederick Garber (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1988), pp. 267-89. He does not focus on Twain, but his description of romantic irony, minus any issues of intentionality, could arguably serve as a basis upon which to interpret the disjointed nature of Twain’s fiction: a noticeable and often absurd breaking of dramatic illusion, an interplay between humorous and serious narrative, a blurring of the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and a tendency to simultaneously sustain and undercut various cultural and metaphysical presumptions (p. 267).


17 In an otherwise fascinating essay, Michelson mistakenly asserts that “Forty-Four is straight from Hell, now, not Heaven” (p. 50). It does not, however, diminish the power of his thesis, but it does raise the issue of the thematic consistency of “Schoolhouse Hill.” In addition to the apparently contradicting declarations of home, there is the issue of No. 44’s language. He speaks only French when he first arrives at St. Petersburg, the official language of hell, as Young Satan states (“Young Satan,” p. 69). It should be remembered, however, that all three of the Mysterious Stranger manuscripts were incomplete, and therefore lacked any of Twain’s final polish.

18 Although this “burden of evil consequences” is never made explicit, William Gibson suggests that it concerned man’s “damnable Moral Sense” (Introduction to Mark Twain’s Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts, ed. Gibson [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989], p. 9).


20 See both Michelson and Paul Delaney, “The Dissolving Self: The Narrator of Mark Twain’s Mysterious Stranger Fragments,” Journal of Narrative Technique 6 (1976): 51-65. For their astute observations that under the influence of the mysterious stranger, August and Theodor shift their social focus from immersion in the community to an increasingly reclusive existence, Delaney only hints at the potential danger in this exclusion whereas Michelson takes a more optimistic approach. Although I see the validity in their points, I will nonetheless argue that the solipsistic pull that August and Theodor undergo is a double edge sword.

21 Twain must have intended something of the sort for Young Satan in his first version of the manuscript for he used it as his pseudonym. Twain, the German word for “dream,” but despite this and a number of dream references throughout the text, the imaginary nature of Satan-without the Pense-Denka ending—remains undeveloped in Twain’s first and uncompleted version.

22 I use the final version of the manuscript here, No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, for a couple of reasons. First, it was Twain’s last revision of the text, and the one he intended to use (if the name and the notes of his “Conclusion of the book” are any indication). Second, the dream imagery and references to silence and loneliness are undeveloped in “Young Satan,” and almost nonexistent in “Schoolhouse Hill.”

23 Emily’s last name, German for “black,” suggests two things. First, it suggests the alternative existence or “twitt” of August’s ontology. Further, the designation of “black” to this alternate existence suggests something not altogether hopeful or desirable. It is significant to note that Twain could just as easily have named him “Weiss.”

24 For the best biographical account of Twain’s later years, see Justin Kaplan’s Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain: A Biography (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), especially the chapters “Never quite sane at night” and “White sepulcher.”

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