Mark Twain Biography: Entering a New Phase

Robert Bray

AN IMPORTANT new book on Mark Twain has appeared—one so frankly revealing that it should alter the course of Mark Twain studies for years to come. *Mark Twain: God's Fool,* by Hamlin Hill, is a biography of the last ten years in the life of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, based on a wealth of new material in the Mark Twain Papers at Berkeley. This last decade has been—for three generations of critics—crucial to the interpretation of Mark Twain's life and works. Over the years, the period 1900-1910 has been variously interpreted as either Twain's final triumph or tragedy, and the question of his integrity, both as an artist and as a man, has preoccupied Mark Twain critics and scholars ever since the appearance in 1912 of the "official" biography by Albert Bigelow Paine (*Mark Twain: A Biography*). Paine, of course, gave us a heroically positivistic reading of his subject and established a public image of Mark Twain that has yet to be dislodged. When Paine's work has been accepted as authoritative (and that is most of the time, by most of the people) the primary reason given has centered around the biographer's "intimacy" with Mark Twain: from January 1906 until Twain's death Paine concerned himself almost exclusively with the affairs of Samuel Clemens, past and present, begining as "authorized" biographer and becoming eventually Mark Twain's confidant, companion and de facto editor. Under these circumstances who could question Paine's authority, especially in the matters of the last ten years?

Yet critics have, for more than half a century, often challenged Paine: from Van Wyck Brooks onward there have been those who have doubted Paine's objectivity and the comprehensiveness of the life he created. Until now, however, no critic or scholar has been in a position to substantiate his challenge with new documentation. For the past several years, Hamlin Hill has diligently worked the seam of hitherto closed materials in the Mark Twain Papers. The result is *Mark Twain: God's Fool,* a book which vigorously and effectively attacks Paine on Paine's own reserved ground: the last ten years. Because of the definitive objectivity of Professor Hill's biography, Twain critics may now find themselves once again on the trail of Mark Twain the failed literary artist.

It is more than fifty years since Van Wyck Brooks wrote *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920) and generated one of the most celebrated critical and biographical controversies in American literary studies. Scarcely eight years after Paine's biography appeared, Brooks was writing—with a supreme confidence imparted by his "scientific" psychoanalytic tools—of a certain "deep malady of the soul" that had afflicted Mark Twain throughout his creative life, but especially near the end, when his famous pessimism became at least more public if not more intense. Brooks suggested that Mark Twain was *the* paradigm case of artistic "arrested development" in America, the prototype of the artist whose creative life had somehow miscarried. Was it the fault of America's institutions, so structured as to offer her artists no support, or at best support of the wrong sort? Such was the Brooks viewpoint in its most general formulation. Moreover, his Freudian scheme led Brooks to assert that in Twain's case the specter of the unfulfilled artist eventually turned against the man himself, dessicated him, forced him ultimately into that hackneyed, reductive philosophical determinism that was Mark Twain's sad trademark in the last years. Brooks argued

that Twain created a "damned human race" sans ethical accountability precisely in order to minister to his own debilitating guilt—a guilt engendered by a lifetime of hiding the very talents which were "death to hide" (*Ordeal,* pp. 10-14).

The shocking thesis that this "Lincoln of our literature," as William Dean Howells called him, was an *unrealized* artist and a tormented man predictably provoked a number of responses, some of them outraged. Of those who undertook to answer Brooks and rehabilitate Mark Twain, Bernard DeVoto was by far the most successful. DeVoto "refuted" Brooks in a pair of books which are by now taken to be mandatory catechisms for critics who wax too enthusiastic over *The Ordeal of Mark Twain. Mark Twain's America* (1932) attempts to show that America's institutions, so far from arresting the artistic development of Twain and others, in fact provided the necessary cultural underpinnings for a vital native literary tradition. Because DeVoto tried to interpret Mark Twain in terms of the frontier culture which reared him, *Mark Twain's America* might almost be called the first American studies biography. DeVoto was quick to point out that Brooks—an Easterner and a Harvard product who could not quite manage to hide his gentility—read only the "accepted canon" of American literature (a charge Brooks would later admit as truth). His "description of America" was "derived from the logical necessities of theory." And, further, "in his analysis of Mark Twain, the eidolon 'Frontier' has a primary importance; yet Mr. Brooks fails to consider Fredrick Jackson Turner's study of the frontier, the basis of realism in any discussion (*Mark Twain's America,* p. 225)." This expansive book, really a biography more of the national character than of Mark Twain, seemed to answer Brooks on the question of America's ability to produce a significant national literature. But a more bothersome problem remained.

In 1938 DeVoto succeeded Albert Bigelow Paine as custodian of the Mark Twain Papers. Paine's proprietary sense of Mark Twain had if anything increased after the publication of *Mark Twain: A Biography,* and throughout his tenure with the papers he had consistently denied scholars, including DeVoto, access to the extensive unpublished material in his charge. When DeVoto assumed the editorship he was at last able to study the prose fiction manuscripts of the last ten or fifteen years. He soon became convinced that in those stories and novellas lay a decisive answer to Brooks' disturbing charge that Mark Twain had been unable, late in life, to produce realized literary art, that he failed even to finish anything imaginative, much less make it great. *Mark Twain at Work* (1942) showed Mark Twain as an assiduous literary craftsman, and one of its essays, "The Symbols of Despair," represented Mark Twain as overcoming immense personal tragedies (especially the deaths of his daughter, Susy, in 1896 and his wife, Olivia, in 1904), and, in an excruciating labor of purgation, transforming his grief and despair into literature. DeVoto saw this as the artistic process of working through a series of abortive beginnings on the book that we know as *The Mysterious Stranger* and culminating in the finished "Eseldorf" version of that curious book. *The Mysterious Stranger* convinced DeVoto precisely because it was *finished,* and not because it was good—another matter entirely. DeVoto ended "The Symbols of Despair" with an assertion that has established itself as interpretive dogma. From it many admirers of Mark Twain have taken a solid measure of comfort. Mark Twain

> . . . saved himself in the end, and came back from the edge of insanity, and found as much peace as any man may find in his last years, and brought his talent into fruition and made it whole again. (*Mark Twain at Work,* p. 130)

Even so recent a book as Justin Kaplan's *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* (1966) affirms a position that is recog-

nizably DeVoto's, though Kaplan does say that he believes Clemens "survived," rather than prevailed, but that "considering what he went through," this was "in itself something of a triumph (*Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*, p. 348)." Kaplan's biography has been one of the most widely read of books on Mark Twain. Yet there are scarcely thirty pages allowed to treat the upheavals of the last ten years. Probably Kaplan accepted Paine's pleasant picture of the old man: justly honored by a grateful country and quietly awaiting the end. But for a long time it has been obvious to Mark Twain scholars that much remained to be said about the decade 1900-1910, for whenever an inkling of new evidence was made available it usually was in conflict with the accounts of *Mark Twain: A Biography* (perhaps the best example is Paine's exclusion of Clemens' private secretary, Isabel Lyon, from the biography—discussed below). Now the long-felt need for a new treatment of the last ten years has been met by *Mark Twain: God's Fool.*

Professor Hill's book uses DeVoto's famous words as an ironic epigraph to its middle section, *"Gotterdammerung"*—ironic because the one thing that emerges with chilling certainty as the book unfolds is that Mark Twain was pitifully unable to "save himself," as an artist and perhaps even as a man. Now that all the evidence has been opened for the first time, it is apparent that Paine knew the truth but chose to fabricate the last third of his biography into an aggrandized portrait of the hero in his apotheosis, then organized himself to protect his property against any infringements. As late as 1926 Paine had written to Harper & Brothers (the Twain publishers) suggesting that

> . . . on general principles it is a mistake to let any one else write about Mark Twain, as long as we can prevent it. . . . As soon as this is begun (writing about him at all, I mean) the Mark Twain that we have "preserved"—the Mark Twain that we knew, the traditional Mark Twain—will begin to fade and

> change, and with that process the Harper Mark Twain property will depreciate. (*God's Fool*, p. 268.)

Had revealing documents like this one been available to scholars in earlier years, surely it would have been difficult for Paine's popular Mark Twain to have survived—almost without revision—for sixty years. Yet this "public" Mark Twain is as vital today as it was immediately after the publication of *Mark Twain: A Biography*. Today we still see, more often than not, the image of a native-grown, self-made, plain-spoken and intuitive genius—a man who captured the very best in our national character in his art, and *lived* this character in his volatile, multifarious existence. And the assumption all along has been that Twain's was a life the truth of which had been amply attested by A. B. Paine, who, after all, had "been there" with him and got the straight story. However "true" Paine's version of the early and middle years of Mark Twain may have been, both the general drama and the particular scenes of the last ten years are now seriously called into question.

For Professor Hill demonstrates that others were "there" as well, and not reporting the same story, nor in the same manner. At the center of the new evidence developed for *Mark Twain: God's Fool* is the remarkable diary of Isabel Lyon, Clemens' private secretary and a member of his household from November 1902 until March 1909. Until now the importance of Isabel Lyon in the affairs of Samuel Clemens has been very imperfectly understood, primarily because of the effective vendetta carried on against her by Paine and Clemens' daughter Clara. In the whole of Paine's massive biography there is ". . . one—only one —reference to Isabel Lyon. . . . She wrote Clemens' letters, managed his house, kept his books, took his dictation, and was, as Clemens himself said, the person, with the exception of his wife, Olivia, he knew most intimately in all the world (p. xvii)." And though she was also the most sincerely devoted of all his satellites, she ultimately

lost out to Paine in the sycophantic competition for the status of most intimate retainer on the Clemens staff. But during her tenure she was undoubtedly the person with the fullest knowledge of the emotional storms that regularly swept through the household in those last seasons, and it is her record of the private behavior of Clemens, his wife, and his daughters, Clara and Jean—supplemented and corroborated by other new documentation—that largely make it possible for *Mark Twain: God's Fool* to challenge directly Paine's credibility.

Throughout the book Professor Hill allows his materials to speak their own piece, and if there is a thesis being argued, or a principle of organization other than the chronological, it deals with Mark Twain's lifelong "fear"—a fear that curiously parallels the "malady of the soul" diagnosed by Brooks in 1920:

> Fear had been the controlling emotion of his life: fear of poverty, fear of offending and alienating his family and friends, fear of being mistaken by his audience. He moved insecurely in all the worlds he inhabited, much like the mysterious stranger in a dream world who obsessed him in his fiction (p. 269).

In the decade of 1900-1910 this fear pervaded the domestic and business lives of Samuel Clemens and was present as well in the declining literary vitality of Mark Twain. At the crucial points in the decade—events like the last visit to Hannibal, the deaths of his wife, Olivia, and his daughter, Jean, and the honorary Oxford degree—Professor Hill forthrightly tells of the debilitating consequences of fear in his old age; Paine, on the other hand, had been circumspect and full of propriety when speaking of the same things. And on the matters which have not hitherto been public record, such as Clemens' blow-up against Isabel Lyon in 1909 and the disturbing excesses of the old man's infatuation with little girls, *God's Fool* reads the evidence without sensationalizing it; *Mark Twain: A Biography* carefully excluded all such material, and one feels very

strongly after comparing the two books that Paine was culpable in the biographical sin of omission.

When Clemens made his last visit to Hannibal in June 1902 (occasioned by the proffering of an honorary degree by the University of Missouri), he swept the town—indeed the whole state—in triumph. In St. Louis he reminisced with Horace Bixby, the pilot who had taught him the Mississippi River almost half a century before. In Hannibal he dined with a childhood sweetheart, spoke at several Sunday schools and passed out the diplomas in the high school commencement. It was five days of sustained, glorious recognition for the native son. But what did it all really mean to Mark Twain? One of the virtues of *God's Fool* is that it goes beneath the nostalgia and the pomp, as Paine never did, to examine the serious artistic and moral questions which naturally arose as the distance increased between the celebrated public figure and the frustrated private artist. After his return from Hannibal,

> He was to try, in a long and frustrating spell of work, to write of the boys' [Huck and Tom] return to St. Petersburg [the fictional version of Hannibal] fifty years after their original adventures and to allow Howells to read part of the manuscript. But the material simply would not flow from his pen; and it is a measure of the finality of his resignation that the abortive "Fifty Years Later" manuscript is one of the very few that, in his entire life, Mark Twain actually may have destroyed. . . . When he left Missouri he left Hannibal forever; he was never again to be able to complete a work on Huck and Tom. (p. 43.)

As the considerable artistic solace of summoning the past—especially his boyhood—and formalizing it in his art was more and more denied to Clemens, he seemed to become absolute in his belief that childhood was all. In a letter of 1900 to the widow of a Hannibal friend Clemens wrote: "I should like to call back Will Bowen & John Garth & the others, & live the life & be as we were, & make holiday until 15, then all drown together (p. 9)." Paine tended to treat Clemens' public outbursts of pessimism and misanthropy

as mere literary trappings of a man who really was in love with life. But letters like this one suggest that there was infinitely more than mannerism involved.

The decade 1900-1910 was saturated with sickness and death for the Clemens family. Olivia Clemens was an invalid for three years before her death, and Jean, the youngest daughter, was an epileptic whose seizures had a devastating effect on her father: "I cannot think why God, in a moment of idle and unintelligent fooling, invented this bastard human race; and why, after inventing it, he chose to make each individual of it a nest of disgusting and unnecessary diseases, a tub of rotten offal (p. 9)." Paine pictured Clemens as stoical and long-suffering under impossible home conditions, but just beyond the edge of this fortitude lay a bitter sense of nihilism. During his wife's lengthy illnesses Clemens was often denied admittance to the sickroom for weeks at a time, and he increasingly absented himself from the family's several residences on contrived business of one sort or another. Apparently his presence aggravated the conditions of both wife and daughter—the politics of the family were not going according to the desires of the embattled paterfamilias. Olivia Clemens died in Florence in June 1904. Her passing brought out the oddest in the Clemens family.

> . . . the survivors all participated in peculiarly ritualistic and macabre behavior during the first few days after Olivia's death. According to the newspaper accounts preserved in the Mark Twain Papers, Clemens spent the night kneeling beside Olivia's coffin. And before the sheets on the deathbed were cold. . . . Clara climbed into the bed in her mother's place. Then Clara went to her room and lay "motionless and wordless" for at least four days, not emerging until June 19. Jean "had an attack—the first in 13 months." (p. 85.)

Clara Clemens later completed her exercise in Victorian gothic by attempting to jump into the grave with her mother's coffin at the burial in Elmira, New York (pp. 88-89).

Paine showed Clemens reacting to his wife's death with exalted sensibility (see *Mark Twain: A Biography*, vol. 3, pp. 1216-1223), and it is true that the grieving husband tried hard to fill such a role—with egregious results. "I was richer than any other person in the world, and now I am that pauper without peer." He went so far as to compare Olivia with a slain Launcelot and himself with a lamenting Sir Ector: "Ah, Launcelot, there thou liest, thou wert the courtliest knight that ever bore a shield; and thou wert the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrode horse; and thou wert the kindest man that ever strake with sword." Professor Hill echoes our own incredulity when he comments, ". . . it is distressing that he declaimed his grief in such platitudinous forms of expression; it is positively ludicrous to contemplate Olivia Clemens as having ever 'strake with sword' (pp. 85-86)." How sad it is that America's undisputed master of plain-speaking should have felt himself forced into such utterly foreign responses to the death of a woman he sincerely loved. The death of Olivia deprived Clemens, perhaps more than he knew, of the one "powerfully effective and positive force" in his life, and did much to still the voice of Mark Twain as well (p. 90).

In the months and years following his wife's death Clemens tried hard to get Mark Twain going again; he wrote recklessly, obsessively, almost without design. Now his trial audience was not Olivia but Isabel Lyon, who bravely praised whatever he read to her. It was not what he needed, for ". . . the humorist was becoming tone-deaf about his own work. . . . If ever in his life he now needed, and lacked, the strict and constructive critical standards which Olivia . . . had provided him. . . . In Isabel Lyon, Clemens had a worshiper rather than a critic. Her raptures at everything he wrote can only have contributed to his inability to evaluate his success and his failure to consign the substandard literary output to his

wastebasket (p. 191)." Gone was the old intuitive assurance that he was indeed reaching his demotic audience—his "submerged clientele," as he called them—gone was the knack of "telling himself" what was right in his artistry, and gone was the controlling influence of his long-time critic. Only in *Letters from the Earth,* written in the autumn of 1909, did the authority of Mark Twain re-assert itself—and then under "safe" stipulations that Satan's epistles would never be read by an audience. Whenever artistic balance faltered, there came that "rage at the obscenity of life" which was the *idée fixe* of Mark Twain's last decade.

Perhaps the most disturbing period in the life of Samuel Clemens is that of the years between the conferral of the Doctor of Letters by Oxford (in June 1907) and his death in April 1910. Paine regarded the Oxford degree as the culmination of the "King's" decade-long apotheosis: "the world had nothing more to give him now." Indeed, it might have been better had Clemens been translated right out of this world after the Oxford ceremonies, but, as such things usually work, he was forced to live in it for almost three years more. And the record of these years is one of a shocking physical and moral decline, starkly in distinction to the hero's end as portrayed by Paine.

As early as 1906 Clemens had manifested a strong interest in young girls. His fascination rapidly increased, however, with the onset of regular vacations to Bermuda in 1908. He would seek out for companions pre-pubescent girls, preferably those just on the verge of physical maturity, and his relentless pursuit would often drive them from him within a few days. Isabel Lyon wrote, "his first interest when he goes to a new place is to find little girls . . . off he goes with a flash when he sees a new pair of slim little legs appear (p. 195)." To the first of these "Angel Fish," Gertrude Natkin, Clemens wrote: "*Sixteen* Ah what has become of my little girl? I am almost afraid

to send a blot [a kiss]. . . . Bless your heart, it comes within an ace of being improper! Now, back you go to 14 —then there's no impropriety (p. 127)." If there was anything at all healthy in this sort of pastime, it eventually degenerated into something quite different: "some story . . . which . . . is something very terrible that happened in Bermuda shortly before M. T.'s death. . . . It is something unprintable"—this from an observer who had seen Clemens' involvement with young Helen Allen during his final vacation in Bermuda. Taken with other evidence, the hint of child molestation is difficult to ignore (p. 261).

In these derelict years also occurred the blow up against Isabel Lyon. For reasons which are still obscure, Clemens turned against his faithful secretary of some seven years, calling her "a liar, a forger, a thief, a hypocrite, a drunkard, a sneak, a humbug, a traitor, a conspirator, a filthy-minded and salacious slut pining for seduction and always getting disappointed, poor child (p. 242)." Professor Hill shows that there was little or no evidence behind any of Clemens' charges, and that it is probably the case that the old man was deceived by his daughter Clara—simply lacking the fortitude to oppose her vendetta once it gathered steam. "Clara . . . with Paine's help, removed every trace of Isabel . . . from her father's biography and records. Every time Miss Lyon's name appeared in the autobiographical dictations it was struck out and replaced with 'my secretary' (p. 242)." The rage against Isabel Lyon (and against her husband, Ralph Ashcroft), because it appears to be mainly a reactionary whim, is bound to cause one to feel a sharp sense of disappointment in the conduct of the "King." To be sure, a good part of the problem must have stemmed from the ill-advised investiture of a "king" in the first place—a role that Samuel Clemens, of all people, was least prepared morally to play, though boyishly eager to play it to the hilt he certainly was. Thus

the court had its domestic tragedy: what had begun as a kind of Camelot ended up with nearly everything rotten in its little principality, and Clemens, Lear-like, stood lonely and confused at the center of the holocaust.

In a recent review of *Mark Twain: God's Fool* Justin Kaplan felt that the book was too "preoccupied with the obvious aspects of aging—escalating narcissism coupled with physical and psychic degeneration. . . . (*Washington Post Book World,* July 29, 1973, p. 3)." Yet it is precisely this aging which is the subject of *Mark Twain: God's Fool,* and if the book brings light after all these years to the problematic aspects of Mark Twain's old age, then critics and scholars should be grateful, however painful the true account may be to those who have invested heavily in the mythical Mark Twain. To call Professor Hill's efforts "moralistic and even hostile," as Kaplan does (p. 3), is an early sign that Twain critics are not prepared to accept the complete truth about his life. Kaplan's remarks also show a lack of understanding of the peculiar problems Professor Hill must have faced in writing his biography. For it is difficult to see how a book which is so thoroughly documented, so much a narrative in the words of the participants can be termed "moralistic and hostile," unless, of course, there is hostility in the words, thoughts and actions of the principals in the drama. And that is what Kaplan misconstrues: it is not a question of judgments on Professor Hill's part, but rather one of a hostile atmosphere in the Clemens household and an obvious degree of moral culpability in the behavior of a disintegrating Mark Twain.

If anything, *God's Fool* carefully refrains from sweeping judgments. The documents speak for themselves, and while they are not always directly articulate, nor always unambiguous, their collective effect is jolting. Professor Hill has consistently refused the temptation to "discharge some venom of sarcasm," as Twain himself loved to do. Such

control is the more admirable when one has read well into *God's Fool* and has begun to realize how easy it would be for any biographer to become exasperated with the universe of neuroses, phantoms and antagonisms that was the Clemens family in the final years. That the author has an abiding affection for his subject cannot be seriously doubted once one has seen the numerous points at which the commentary uses softened irony or outright sympathy, where a writer truly hostile to Mark Twain would have been far harsher.

But in biography affection for the subject can not be allowed to over-ride a need to get at the truth, and it must be stressed that there is a compelling necessity to let these alarming materials have their say. This portrait of Twain in his last years, drawn so superbly in *Mark Twain: God's Fool,* may not be pleasing to many readers, but because it is closer to the truth of Clemen's life it is far better biography than we have had. Despite the fact that the book is a revisionist document, its objectivity is unimpeachable. The publicly accepted and admired version of Mark Twain must now be seen as the deliberate fabrication of Albert Bigelow Paine and Clara Clemens. Surely America's will-to-believe has supported this institution called Mark Twain, and just as surely we will now be called upon to give at least a part of him up. *Mark Twain: God's Fool* is indeed a kind of debunking, but it is of the healthy sort that revises those myths whose positivism has too shaky a foundation. If Mark Twain becomes less like a "King" in the process, probably he would have wanted it that way. For he must have known that his character could not support the mantle of American heroism forced upon him.

William Dean Howells wrote a eulogistic biography soon after the passing of his close friend (*My Mark Twain,* 1910). In it he remembered Clemens as "a youth to the end of his days, the heart of a boy with the head of a sage;

the heart of a good boy, or a bad boy, but always a wilful boy, and wilfulest to show himself out at every time for just the boy he was (p. 5)." To Howells, who was no psychologist, the failure to grow up was the very charm and genius of Mark Twain—it was a sign of the expansiveness of his frontier upbringing, the refusal to accept the shackles of civilization and the irrepressible desire to "light out for the territory ahead of the rest." Who can deny that it was just this that produced *Huckleberry Finn*? And for critics in the tradition of Howells—for Paine and DeVoto and Kaplan—this was, and is, ample justification for an entire life. Yet for others, like Van Wyck Brooks, the admission that Mark Twain lived more than seventy years as a "wilful boy" points to an arrested development of the artist and the man: when the natural time of boyhood *in life* was past, Clemens' inability to move on doomed him to a lifetime of futile struggle for the control of his own existence; and when the materials of boyhood *in art* were inevitably exhausted, his failure to turn to the adult world for inspiration doomed him to some twenty years of artistic dereliction.

Which is the essential Mark Twain? Must we choose from these polar extremes? Admittedly, with the publication of the truth concerning the disastrous final ten years, Brooks appears to have had an incisive intuition about Mark Twain's ultimate pessimism and despair, no matter how wrongly he may have judged the immediate causes of the problem. It may be, however, that the tragedy of Clemens' old age will not materially affect the interpretation of the first sixty-five years. At any rate the record of the last years is now complete, and, as Professor Hill says, "The task is left to interpret what this record means." Thanks to *Mark Twain: God's Fool*, the monumental job of comprehensive interpretation of the *actual* Mark Twain —his total life and all his works—can now begin.

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