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C.S. Lewis and Mark Twain: Iconoclasts of a Feather?

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IV

A Collection of Essays Presented at
The Fourth

FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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**C.S. Lewis and Mark Twain:
Iconclasts of a Feather?**

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C.S. Lewis and Mark Twain: Iconoclasts of a Feather?

Rick Hill

Arguing a strong connection between C.S. Lewis and Mark Twain seems like a tall order for a literary essay, something on the order of comparing, say, Richard Nixon and Michael Moore. We'll have to leave Nixon and Moore for other critics, but the closer we examine the lives and work of Lewis and Twain, the more their philosophies and personalities intersect.

We certainly don't have to look far for biographical similarities between them. Psychoanalytical critics will wish to note that both had loving mothers and distant fathers; astrologically-minded literary critics may be interested to learn that they were born in late November: Lewis on the 29th and Twain on the 30th. Both authors were raised in nominal Christian homes only to fall away in adolescence and struggle with return to the church in their early thirties. Both had dreamy, ineffectual older brothers; both were crusty bachelors turned devoted family men, and both outlived their adored wives. Both were precocious and voracious readers who became Oxford degree holders, and only fifteen years apart—though Twain's degree was honorary. Their tastes don't always dovetail in literature, but both were certainly George MacDonald admirers. Twain carried on an actual correspondence with the MacDonald, while Lewis had to settle for an imaginary conversation in *The Great Divorce*.

I could go on with interesting similarities, right down to smoking habits, , but first let me assure the reader that I don't intend to ignore the supposed literary *differences* between the rough-hewn western humorist and the cultured Oxford Don—and most especially the glaring, elephant-in-the-living-room spiritual difference: that Lewis is famous as a Christian apologist and Twain even more famous as a Christian antagonist. To find out how far apart they actually were on spiritual matters, we need to look beyond popular simplifications of Twain as a curmudgeon atheist and Lewis as a stuffy fundamentalist.

Serious Twain readers know that he was never a materialist, even at his most disgruntled and vitriolic. He was perhaps more comfortable in the company of preachers than Lewis was, and unlike Lewis, he even liked to sing spirituals. But beyond these superficialities, he avowed in all seriousness that every story he published was a sermon, and he always he preached his deep commitment to the golden rule, which he called "Christianity's exhibit A."

Here we begin to see important connections with

C.S. Lewis. In *Abolition of Man*, Lewis referred to the universal values to which the Golden Rule belongs as the Tao, postulating that undergirding all faiths and philosophies is a solid set of core values that is God given, non-subjective, and non-negotiable. Lewis uses the novel *That Hideous Strength*, to illustrate the philosophy of *Abolition of Man*. In the story, Mark Studdock, the novel's passive protagonist and representative of modern sensibilities, is recruited by the forces of evil. But he is saved because, even though he has been trained in an intellectual milieu that rejects objective values, he is unable to reject the Tao.

We find in *Huckleberry Finn* Twain's most famous illustration of this same conflict and resolution. Huck, the novel's generally passive representative of slave society and its value system, declares, "All right then, I'll go to Hell" and refuses to betray his slave companion Jim. Thus the deeper morality of the Tao triumphs over the anti-abolitionist training that has been drummed into Huck all his life.

A fascinating illustration of Twain's agreement that, however irksome the moral sense is, it is God given (or, to use Twain's term, "implanted by the authorities") is provided by the 1876 short story, "The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut." On the surface, the story seems to be another Twain rant against vexing moral strictures; he personifies the conscience as a sort of Lewisian Wormwood character who delights in nagging and fault-finding. The narrator is convinced that he would be a much happier person if he could get rid of his moldy dwarf of a conscience. But when he finally does destroy his enemy, he does not go on to live a life of enlightened humanism. On the contrary, bereft of the moral sense, he becomes a monstrous sociopath:

I settled all my old outstanding scores and began the world anew. I killed thirty-eight persons during the first two weeks . . . I burned a dwelling that interrupted my view. I swindled a widow and some orphans out of their last cow, which is a very good one, though not thoroughbred, I believe.

Formerly guilt-ridden by his callous treatment of homeless men, the narrator goes on to note that he now murders tramps in wholesale lots and will sell their corpses to medical colleges "either by the gross, by cord

measurement or per ton.” The grimly humorous message is clear: we may chafe at the Tao, and we may, by exercising our free will, reduce our moral sense to dwarf proportions. But without the values implanted by “the authorities” we are at the mercy of what Lewis characters in the Ransom trilogy call our “bent” nature, and liable to do (and rationalize doing) the unspeakable.

Another not-often-discussed area in which Lewis and Twain are in accord is in the rejection of Phariseism and over-literal interpretations of the Bible. While perfectly able to make brilliant book-length arguments for the supernaturalism that Twain always found suspect, Lewis has no problem with evolution as a tool of creation, is adamantly opposed to theocracy, and writes “I do not hold that every sentence of the Old Testament has historic or scientific truth.” (ROS 11:2)

In *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, the assumption that “Malcolm” (a composite of Lewis’s educated Christian friends) was familiar with a certain passage in *Huckleberry Finn* shows clearly that the book was a well-thumbed and respected text in Lewis’s scholarly circle. The passage noted is a scene between Huck and the Widow Douglas wherein Twain lampoons the childish belief that “Ask and ye shall receive” in Mark 11:24 applies to material advancement. While making the distinction that it is some readers, not the Bible, who are simple, Lewis agrees with Twain that in general, childish Bible interpretation does more harm than good for faith since “Huck tried the experiment of [praying for fishhooks] and then, [when it didn’t work, he] not unnaturally, never gave Christianity a second thought” (LM 11:10).

But what of their disagreements—what of Twain’s often cited “Pen warmed up in Hell,” period, his sometimes vicious quarrels (mostly published after his death) with the Old and New Testaments—can we really dismiss all that as more heat than light, as Lewis dismissed the entire Renaissance age? I think the answer, again in light of Twain’s complete life and work, is yes, though those writings do mark a spiritual turning point of sorts between the two authors.

Twain’s trademark irreverence can be traced to his earliest writings, but with few and mostly unpublished exceptions, he took aim not at religion per se, but at hypocritical or unexamined religion. Thus, before launching a scathing if poorly researched 1890 critique of the Church as promoter of slavery, he troubles to write, “The Christian Bible is a drug store . . . [T]he stock in the store was made up of about equal portions of baleful and debilitating poisons, and healing and comforting medicines.”

Twain never quite jettisoned those “healing medicines” and never became the post-modern, politically correct anti-Christian that some critics would style him. He even made a vigorous attempt to become

a Christian during the courtship of his wife. Modern scholars have asserted that his interest in Christianity was but a lover’s stratagem, but the expressions of doubt and struggle that accompany the prayers and scripture quotation in those early love letters show that Twain was more a man honestly striving than a suitor feeding a gullible girl what she wanted to hear. To demonstrate his sincerity, he even gave up drinking and swearing (though he politely hedged on the smoking), and prayed regularly, for several months at least.

Lewis readers may note that Twain’s love letters and other writings of this period show how much his attempt at becoming a Christian parallels the new-convert career of the unnamed “patient” in Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*. Both young men are striving, but are also beset with intellectual pride and a penchant for seeing the worst in fellow Christians. Both, too, are subject to every excuse for backsliding and every temptation to forget the whole thing. But the strongest impediment to Twain’s conversion, was, ironically, that he was supplied with temporal blessing that he might have been inclined to pray for in that month or so: an adoring wife, loving children, worldly success and worldwide fame. As Screwtape says, the surest road to hell “is the gentle slope, without signposts or turnings.” All ran so smoothly in Twain’s middle years that he increasingly saw God as someone doing a marginal job at best, a job that he—Twain—could most probably do better. When tragedy later robbed him of his blessings, he had long removed himself from active spiritual contact and could only rail against the seeming capriciousness of Omnipotence. When his daughter Susie passed away, he wrote Livy his grieving wife, a bitterly ironic consolation note saying that their child was out of her misery and soon they would be, too. And when Livy died, he could only perceive God as a cruel torturer.

Lewis was tempted to take the same negative view when Joy, his own beloved wife, died. In *A Grief Observed*, he echoes Twain’s notion of an indifferent God or worse, a “cosmic sadist.” But after reflection, Lewis concludes that a Cosmic Sadist could not “create or govern anything” and could not be responsible for the love that obviously exists in the world. He finally determines that his railings against God were “yells, not thoughts.” He asks

Why do I make room in my mind for such . . . nonsense? Do I hope that if feeling disguises itself as thought I shall feel less? . . . All that stuff about the Cosmic Sadist was not so much an expression of thought as of hatred. I was getting from it the only pleasure a man in anguish can get; the pleasure of hitting back.

Thus Lewis’s years of prayer and devotion

provided the foundation for working through rebellion and self-pity to a less self-centered view of God and a desire to comfort rather than rage. Reading this passage in *Grief Observed* after reading much of Twain's anguished writing after his wife's death, one can't help feeling that Twain, with his love for straight-from-the-shoulder philosophy and honesty, might have been comforted by the book if it had been available fifty years earlier.

"Nonsense!" says my atheist friend who claims Twain as co-nonreligionist. "Pure speculation!" And in the way of evidence that Twain was a committed atheist, intrepid critics have exhumed various manuscripts in which Twain rages bitterly against Christianity. Subjectively assigning grave import to these late writings, scholars propose dark motives of publishers, family members, biographers and the Hypocritical Victorian Age In General, for their "suppression" during the author's lifetime. But throughout his career, Twain wrote more than he published; the Twain papers are stuffed with unissued material. If suppression of Twain's writing was underway, then perhaps someone also "suppressed" publication of his extant lists of how many Paige typesetters would be needed by major U.S. cities and how much money he would make by supplying them, likewise his lists of American food that he missed when he was overseas—great long lists that included mince pie, mashed potatoes, and peach cobbler, "southern style." Twain left so much unpublished that there's no wonder he finally developed rheumatism and had to teach himself to write with his left hand!

But perhaps a more common sense answer to why much of Twain's anti-Christian writings weren't published is that even Twain recognized them as the "yells rather than thoughts" that Lewis spoke of in *A Grief Observed*. Most of these "yells" were straw-men arguments built on half-remembered texts and/or out of context conjecture. Though interesting as posthumous curiosities, they are just not up to Twain's own high standards of intellectual honesty, which probably accounts for his abandoning them. And an even more prosaic answer to why we shouldn't put too much weight on Twain's late writings has more to do with the grim realities of aging than the more interesting psychological and political theories offered by some scholars. Even without great tragedies, many people tend to get more pessimistic in their later years, as infirmities of age, poor digestion, and a natural diminution of creative powers take their toll. Twain's most bitter writings were from his late sixties and seventies, when most writers are dead or beyond writing for the reasons mentioned above.

Lewis too had his dark pieces, late ephemera exhumed by Walter Hooper from notebooks or obscure journals and published after Lewis's death. In

"Christmas and Xmas" "Delinquents in the Snow" and others, Lewis rails, Twain fashion, at aspects of society that aggravate him, from advertising to government encroachment. And he is always irritated by teetotalers, vegetarians, and other perceived purveyors of modernity. Reading late Twain and Lewis, one can almost feel the same headaches heartaches, indigestion, and rheumatism that guide aging authors' pens in uninspired moments.

So when we consider Lewis and Twain's strong commitment to the Tao and put their late writings in perspective, the gulf between the spiritual sensibilities of the two authors seems not so wide, and readers who say our favorite authors are Lewis and Twain should not be so rare in literary circles. Nonetheless, we are still left with a fair-size elephant in the living room: at the beginning of their writing careers, both authors were spiritual searchers with serious intentions of becoming Christians. After various struggles, Lewis did decide to become a professing Christian and Twain did not.

What effect this decision had on their lives and work is an interesting question. Certainly the personalities of the mature men they became would not have been easy to predict by looking at their formative years. If young Sam Clemens was a prototype Tom Sawyer in industry, integrity, and charm, then young Jack Lewis was a Sid Sawyer, or worse. Lewis described his youthful self as a lout and a prig, the sort of unpleasant lad that someone is always admonishing to "wipe that smirk off your face!" As a young man he dabbled in the occult and was bedeviled by sexual perversions. In a deception that lasted years, he concealed (from his father who was paying his expenses) a questionable relationship with an older woman. In comparison, Twain was a boy scout of honesty, self-reliance, and chastity, his years in Carson City and San Francisco notwithstanding.

Twain also seemed the more promising Christian of the two, professing an enthusiasm that contrasted sharply with Lewis's philosophical foot-dragging. When he finally admitted that God was God, he said he was "the most dejected and reluctant convert in England." But Lewis somehow persevered where Mark Twain did not, and he became the most respected Christian apologist of the twentieth century, leading many imperfect souls like himself to a loving God and a new life in faith.

The reasons for Twain's eventual rejection of Christianity seem complex, but probably boil down to his sometimes-serious, sometimes seemingly tongue-in-cheek, but always immature conception of God—the sort of limited personification that J.B. Phillips, a protégé of Lewis's, discusses at length in *Your God is Too Small*. Beset with grief and disappointment, Twain's spiritual outlook devolved into the sort of petulant unbelief that Lewis finally abandoned: that of

the atheist who is ready to prosecute God for not existing, or at least for not existing and behaving in a way the plaintiff feels a reasonable god *should* behave. Trapped in self-will, young Sam Clemens, the natural moralist whose iconoclasm brought a breath of fresh air to literature, finally became a crank, desperate to tell God and the world how to conduct themselves and viciously contemptuous of anyone's ability to reform.

In contrast, Lewis the smirking iconoclast and blasé immoralist did first gingerly, then with increasing confidence, embrace a loving savior and let his faith guide and transform his life. Genuine change of heart is hard to document, but we can see hard evidence of Lewis's progress. To cite some well-known examples: naturally averse to the company of children, he wrote children's books that didn't patronize, answered all his young readers' fan mail, and raised two stepsons; naturally parsimonious, he gave away most of his money to charity; naturally jealous of encroachments on his time, he gave his time unceasingly to others.

So we come to an interesting question: if the two authors' personalities remained the same while their life placements were reversed, could Lewis have been the crusty satirist, embracing atheism and railing against the hypocrisy of the nineteenth-century church, and could Twain have been a twentieth century "bonnie fighter" for Christianity as Lewis was known in his Socratic Club days? In light of what we know about their eras and personalities, such a situation seems at least possible. First, while both Twain and Lewis were natural iconoclasts, but their eras provided different icons to reject: Twain's icon was the self-righteous fundamentalism he chafed at in his childhood; Lewis's icon was the proto-relativism and philosophical materialism that he saw spreading like an intellectual cancer from Oxford.

But before he was exposed to those icons, we see a very Twainian cast to Lewis's writings. Letters from the nineteen-teens by young atheist Lewis to his Christian friend Arthur Greeves show that Lewis enjoyed shocking believers as much as the aging Twain had enjoyed it a decade earlier. Further, poetry Lewis wrote in his pre-Christian days is a cultured version of the Promethean Satan theme in Twain's *Mysterious Stranger*. If we study Lewis's early life, it seems certainly possible that had he grown up in the nineteenth century, when intellectual iconoclasm was still synonymous with anti-church, he might have taken Twain's path of least resistance and become an even more bitter misanthrope than Twain.

And it seems as likely that a later-born Twain could have turned his iconoclasm and penchant for scathing satire on the materialist philistines of the modern age, as Lewis did. He certainly would have been as outraged by the hypocrisy of the Soviets as was George Orwell; *Animal Farm* seems even more Twainian than

Orwellian, and a Twain nudged into Christianity by the smugness of twentieth century materialism would be the only author besides Lewis capable of writing anything so exquisitely serio-comic as *The Screwtape Letters*.

As long as we are engaged in speculation, had Twain been born in the twentieth century, might his distrust of the intellectual status quo have attracted him to Lewis's arguments, as Lewis the young atheist was attracted to Chesterton's iconoclastic orthodoxy? Much tougher atheists of our scientific era—hedonist materialists who made Twain look like a country parson in comparison, have been converted to Christianity by Lewis's pithy arguments: might Twain have been won also if he had had a chance to read them?

One scholar who heard an earlier version of this paper countered with, "But why wasn't Twain converted by George MacDonald's writings, then?" I think the answer is the same for Twain as it is for many readers, including many of Lewis's friends, who find MacDonald fascinating, but don't find the same sort of "common sense" connection with MacDonald that they are able to make with Lewis.

As an example of how evangelism could be transmitted through Lewisian common sense, Lewis's pool table analogy in *Miracles* certainly seems tailor-made for billiard expert Twain. In it, Lewis counters the arguments made by Twain and others that miracles like the virgin birth are impossible in a universe where material objects must obey natural laws. Lewis points out that natural laws are God made, just as billiard "laws" are man made. A pool player may follow the rules and use his cue to shoot a ball from point A on the table to a particular pocket. But he, like God above the world, is "above the game" in the sense that he is perfectly able to toss the cue aside, pick the ball up with his hand and put it in the pocket if he chooses to do so. One can picture Twain's delight in the down-home audaciousness of such an analogy.

Anthony Burgess said of Lewis, "[He] is the ideal persuader for the half-convinced, for the good man who would like to be a Christian but finds his intellect getting in the way." This description nicely fits Twain at the crucial stage in his life when he was in love and struggling with faith. Imagine him one night during that crucial stage, up late in a hotel after a one of his comic lectures. He has just poured out his heart in a letter to Livy his betrothed, avowing that he is trying hard to be a Christian, but is having vexing doubts. He seals the letter, and, to read himself to sleep, turns to a book called *Mere Christianity* that he bought this evening at a railroad newsstand . . .

But enough audacious speculations. I'll close with a short homily based on an odd musical juxtaposition. An old rhythm and blues song by the J. Giels band proclaims, "It ain't what you been through, but how you been through it." Reflecting on what we know of the

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decisions Twain and Lewis made about God and how these decisions affected their lives and dispositions should give even the most blasé twenty-first century reader food for thought.