MARK TWAIN, LENNY BRUCE, AND KURT VONNEGUT:  
THE COMEDIAN AS CONFIDENCE MAN  

by  
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A dissertation presented in candidature for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
STATEMENT

This dissertation is the result of the Candidate's own independent investigation and as far as possible his indebtedness to other sources is fully indicated in the text, footnotes, and bibliography.

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DECLARATION

This dissertation has not already been accepted for any degree, and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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SUMMARY

This thesis attempts to establish three American comedians and social critics as confidence men whose artistic manipulations allow them to issue warning and criticism under the guise of humourous entertainment. Without suggesting that all comedy is a game of confidence, I try to show that the demands placed on these comic artists by their society have necessitated that their responses, at least, must be effected through deception; hence their designation as confidence men. I first describe in the introduction the American society as a culture which has historically favoured successful confidence men, artistic and otherwise. I then place the comedian in the context of a confidence game, showing that some of the earliest forms of comedy have effected the unification of pain and pleasure through deception and manipulations of belief, paying special attention to the earliest comedian, the aboriginal Trickster, as well as his descendants in classical theatre and mythology, later European lore, and American comedy up to the time of Mark Twain, with particular reference to Melville. Then follow the individual analyses of three American comedians: the first addresses the manipulations of the alternately willing and unwilling confidence man, Mark Twain, as evidenced in Huckleberry Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson, and the biography of Samuel Clemens; the second deals with the aborted career of Lenny Bruce, who seemingly despaired outright of maintaining a comedic game of confidence; and the third depicts Kurt Vonnegut as a comedian of many deceptions, as revealed especially in Slaughterhouse-Five, Breakfast of Champions, and Jailbird. The conclusion then briefly poses some questions about the society that demands the success of confidence games, and the artists who must perpetrate them.
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This thesis is based upon the premise that, as a creator and manipulator of belief towards a desired end, the comedian can be likened to a confidence man. His desired end is laughter and acceptance, and his confidence game consists in immediately convincing an audience that all is in jest, that he is 'only kidding, folks'. Though the notion of comedy as a conscious game of confidence is not necessarily applicable to all kinds of comedy, it is particularly applicable to the three subjects of this study, for when the comedian is a social critic, as are they, his success depends on the deception that allows him to attack sacred cows, issue painful warning, and vent his rage, despair, or cynicism while engendering laughter and sympathy. When considered as a trio, Mark Twain, Lenny Bruce, and Kurt Vonnegut exemplify various executions of the confidence game necessary for the comedic delivery of social criticism, especially when they are placed in the historical context of a nation that has traditionally put a high premium on the successful manipulation of belief. The social demands placed on these artists have caused them to stretch the terms of their comedic game of confidence, sometimes masterfully, sometimes intolerably.

Thus the introduction, 'Confidence and Comedy', attempts to establish the comedic art as a confidence game particularly suited to the demands of the American confidence culture. The first section, 'The Confidence Game in America', is an historical overview describing the various successes and failures of the confidence man as a popular figure, emphasizing the sense of play and gamesmanship upon which he has often depended. Following a brief description of the ambivalence of confidence as represented in the religious and political foundations of the new nation, the playful audacity of the successful American confidence man is
shown in an analysis of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. There follows a description of successive American diddlers and confidence men, further emphasizing not only their sense of play as described by Poe, but also the souring of their reputations as the Civil War approached. An analysis of Melville's *The Confidence-Man* then depicts the ambivalent nature of the confidence game, with its implications for good and ill extending into the twentieth century.

The second section, 'Comedy and the Game of Confidence', shows how the comic response has traditionally thrived on ambivalence and the unification of pain and pleasure, with the subsection, 'Tricksters', describing the shifty aboriginal, classical, and later European antecedents of those comedians who must playfully affect this union. 'The American Tricksters Before Mark Twain' carries the trickster into an American setting, beginning with the theatrical figures of the Yankee pedlar, the darky minstrel, and a host of minor characters, continuing with an analysis of the backwoodsman figure and Southwestern literary humour, and closing with a look at Melville as the last major literary trickster before Mark Twain. The chapter concludes with a brief analysis of the comedian's confidence game — 'Only Kidding, Folks' — emphasizing that the successful accommodation of the comedic paradox depends on the immediate impression of play.

The second chapter is devoted to Mark Twain, whose artistic game of confidence was subject to the crisis of a dual identity shared by the increasingly cynical Samuel Clemens. A detailed analysis of *Huckleberry Finn* shows how Mark Twain blended comedy and criticism through the fluctuatingly deceptive voice of Huck Finn, though ultimately succumbing to despair over the impotence of comedic and otherwise artistic deceptions in the face of bitter realities. The biography of Clemens further reveals the crisis of confidence in this artist and businessman
of the Gilded Age, variously buoyant and insecure in both roles. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is then shown as both a comic masterpiece and Mark Twain's final retraction of comedy and play as potent means of social improvement; it also reveals his increased frustration with the deceptions inherent in himself and his society, exacerbated by his fear of being considered a 'freak' or a 'buffoon'. His retreat from comedy in his later years defines the brief concluding discussion of *What Is Man?* and *The Mysterious Stranger*.

The third chapter deals with Lenny Bruce, the most notable comedic descendant of Mark Twain to refuse to play by the rules. His game of confidence was undermined by his own artistic integrity, his identification with the outsiders of jazz and the hip underground in the America of the early 60s, his need to criticize overtly, and most tragically, by the legal persecutions he faced for obscenity and drugs. The chapter also describes his outright rejection of the comedic stance for the explicit roles of moralist, Jewish preacher, healer, and self-sacrificing shaman.

The chapter on Kurt Vonnegut depicts a comedian not only resigned to the maintenance of a confidence game, but obliged to compound it desperately, covering his tracks even as he lays down new ones in the effort to keep a voice that is at once critical and blameless. His many public stances and façades seem necessary reactions to an American existence in which reality is cut loose from its moorings, in which the truth can hardly be perceived. He calls attention to the confidence game that sustains his most paradoxical stance, that of the comedian who comforts and the social alarm device who warns — in his own words, the 'canary in the coal mine'. The three books discussed — *Slaughterhouse-Five, Breakfast of Champions,* and *Jailbird* — form a body of work that both embraces the paradox and undermines its own credibility with the
suggestion that salvation and comfort ultimately cannot be found in the realms of illusion and art, comic or otherwise. Thus does Vonnegut dismiss the confidence game through his own continued mastery of it.

Finally, after re-establishing the three comedians in their artistic and historical settings, the conclusion poses some questions about the implications not only for the artist, but also for the society that forces artists with a social conscience to become master confidence men.
'Well, against a joke there's no argument, and so I came to you with the proposal.'

-- Franz Kafka, *The Castle*
CHAPTER I

AN INTRODUCTION TO CONFIDENCE AND COMEDY
The intrinsic nature of confidence in American comedy has its parallels in the history of the national literature and the nation itself. Just as the comedian has traditionally depended on the creation and manipulation of belief, the development of a new literature and a new nation likewise depended on it, with confidence employed as variously in American thought as in the careers of the three comedians herein discussed. The element of confidence is possibly the strongest link between the American artist and his society; comic or otherwise, the American artist has ever been obliged to react to the demands of a culture historically devoted to confidence. However feeble or buoyant, confidence was an inseparable factor in the development of the national psyche. In literature it was represented at its weakest by those authors who failed to transcend the traditions inherited from the classics of Europe, while at its strongest it was shown by those who sought to develop a national literature with new stylizations. The necessity of such confidence was expressed by Noah Webster in 1783, with his declaration that "America must be as independent in literature as she is in politics, as famous for arts as for arms". It was similarly expressed by Charles Brockden Brown, not only confident enough to establish himself as America's first full-time professional writer, but also determined to create "new springs of action" based on social institutions that "differ essentially from Europe" and grow "out of the condition of our country":

'One merit the writer may at least claim [is] that of calling forth the passions and engaging the sympathy of the reader, by means hitherto unemployed by preceding authors. Puerile superstition, and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness are
far more suitable; and, for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology'.

As Fiedler describes, in spite of such declarations, the courage to break with the old was often sadly lacking in America's early literary creators, with many too willing to continue in the inherited gothic and poetic traditions. Yet there were indeed those embued with confidence in the possibilities of a new literature; notable among them was an apparent degree of confidence in the validity of the comic expression. Joel Barlow and the Hartford Wits, Benjamin Franklin, Washington Irving, and, later, Poe and Melville, to name but a few — all considered comedy as a legitimate form of expression, and were instrumental in employing it as a defining quality of the developing national literature.

Such contrasting degrees of confidence are also visibly inseparable from the history of the American nation itself. Just as the earliest authors were variously confident in the creation of a new literature, the founders of the new nation were both anxious and loath to break with the European traditions. Thus the implementation of untried concepts and institutions, dispossession of the natives, the continued push into unknown territory, acts both shameful and praiseworthy, all were undertaken in a spirit of confidence that extended from the timid to the audacious. However varying the degree of confidence, it was a factor not to be denied, as Jimmy Carter saw fit to note during a national depression more psychological than economic:

'The confidence that we have always had as a people is not simply some romantic dream or a proverb in a dusty book that we read just on the Fourth of July. It is the idea which founded our nation and which has guided our development as a people. Confidence in the future has supported everything else — public institutions and private enterprise, our own families and the very Constitution of the United States. Confidence has defined our course and has served as a link between
generations'.
(Gary Lindberg, The Confidence Man in American Literature (New York, 1982), p. 113.)

The prevalence of confidence as a national characteristic is evident not only in outbursts of political rhetoric; it is apparent in the history of a country where all first acts were creative. The making of a new nation depended on the making of new selves whose successes must necessarily be projected into the future; thus while demonstrable skills in the building of new settlements were surely appreciated, everything rested on the sense of promise. In a new country, the potential was more important than the actual, and the acceptance of promise -- the act of confidence -- defined the majority of the New World's social intercourse.

In describing how self-making and re-creation were instrumental in developing the new American country and spirit, Ralph Ellison revealed not only the inherent comic awareness of the new society, but the manner in which the manipulation of confidence took on a peculiarly American nature:

For the ex-colonials, the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of national self-consciousness, it gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind. And perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man's creation, not God's. Americans began their revolt from the English fatherland when they dumped the tea into the Boston Harbor, masked as Indians, and the mobility of the society created in this limitless space has encouraged the use of the mask for good and evil ever since.
(Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (London, 1967), pp. 53-54.)

Ellison sees as a development in the American tradition an awareness that the mask plays upon possibilities in a society full of possibilities; it is an awareness demonstrated by the advertising
industry, which, by using various dramatic masks to gain the authority it cannot gain from tradition, acquires the confidence of the consuming society: 'When American life is most American, it is apt to be most theatrical'.

Some commentators have noted with incredulity the extent to which Americans are prepared to offer their confidence and be taken in by the confidence of others, as evidenced in the genial manner in which they often refer to 'conning'. To fully understand the myth and reality of the American promise, one must recognize a central figure at the heart of the new nation's transactions and hopes: the man of confidence, or confidence man. The history of the successful American is often the history of the confidence man; and in a competitive society it is not difficult to view the ambivalence aroused by the confidence man. While on the one hand the pioneer starting anew in undeveloped territory depended on the offering and receipt of promises, on the other hand there have been countless abusers of confidence whose views of society as a store of unexploited opportunity have far exceeded any grounds for envy or respect. What defines a confidence man is his ability to create and manipulate the confidence of others, regardless of motive. In other words, 'a confidence man makes belief'.

That the creation and manipulation of belief, regardless of morality, pervades all acts of intention, was something noticed and commented upon by Yeats:

'There is a relation between discipline and the theatrical sense. If we cannot assume the second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinct from the passive acceptance of a current code, is the wearing of a mask. It is the condition of an arduous full life'.

(Quoted in Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 53.)
light, the creation of confidence in one's 'second self', have been analyzed by critics and theorists in terms of both American history and literature. Among the works most directly addressing the American way of confidence are Gary Lindberg's *The Confidence Man in American Literature*, Richard B. Hauck's *A Cheerful Nihilism*, Warwick Wadlington's *The Confidence Game in American Literature*, and Daniel G. Hoffman's *Form and Fable in American Fiction*. A heavy debt to these authors must be acknowledged in the present discussion, which places three important social commentators, in the context of their alternate selves as comedians, in their peculiarly American historical settings. The creation and manipulation of confidence is often inherent not only in the transmission of comedy, but as the above-named authors show, in the official and social American ethic. It can be traced historically to the very beginnings of America, preceding the formation of the United States, when the religious motive for maintaining the colonies could be weighed equally with the economic and the political.

* * *

The Puritans of New England had at the outset adopted the mission of establishing the City of God on earth, under the assumption that the gift of faith could counter the damnable chaos of a fallen world. But as they set up the institutions of their City, there developed the problem of not only convincing oneself of faith, but also convincing those elders who would grant or deny admission to the church, upon which one's entire social status depended. The period before the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s was a battleground for the creation and display of confidence, occurring at a time when many influential American thinkers were advocating the visible as a definition of truth. At the centre of Puritanism was the debate of faith versus visible
works, in an attempt to discover who could demonstrate their qualifications for being of the elect — chosen — and thus fit to enter God's body of earthly saints. Cotton Mather was to place his faith in the visible works represented by a man's efforts and wealth, while before him, the Northampton pastor Solomon Stoddard insisted that any visible test, even the mere profession of faith, could not demonstrate anything about the relationship between man and God. With his Half-Way Covenant and further modifications and compromises of the orthodox doctrines, full communion would be granted by 1677 to all who confessed to the articles of faith. It was against this relative liberalism that his grandson, Jonathan Edwards, came to react, for it had by then become possible in New England churches for a man to imitate another thought to be in grace, by following the prescribed steps of communion, while neither knowing nor proving whether he was indeed fit for the elect.7

Not only in religion was such a degree of emphasis placed on the free exchange of confidence; politically it was no less vital. During the Revolution, the trials and uncertainties of warfare caused Thomas Paine to become one of the world's greatest propagandists, exhorting the colonists to continued rebellion through works like Common Sense and The American Crisis, while at Philadelphia delegates employed countless manoeuvrings between opposing ideological and regional factions within Congress, in efforts to secure or prevent the unanimity necessary for the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. After the war, the citizens of the new nation divided into parties, and the antagonism between the Federalists and the Republicans was characterized as a difference between, in Emerson's words, a Party of Memory and a Party of Hope. Those of the former were made suspicious by historical precedent, while those of the latter were confident of human perfectibility and the possibilities of the untried and new.8
The Party of Memory, the Federalists, was dominated by John Adams, to whom the idea of human perfectibility, however appealing, belonged in the realm of mythology. The greatest body of voters, he said, were too willing to be duped, awed by wealth and aristocracy, easily swayed by charm, wit, and an eloquent turn of phrase. Adams saw no reason to place confidence in those so willing to be taken in by it. In a letter to Roger Sherman in 1789, a wary Adams advocated the increase of the Executive's power over Congress, demonstrating his fear that America would suffer through the confidence placed in the electorate:

'Power naturally grows. Why? Because human passions are insatiable. But that power alone can grow which already is too great; that which is unchecked; that which has no equal power to control it. The legislative power, in our constitution, is greater than the executive; it will, therefore, encroach, because both aristocratical and democratical passions are insatiable.'


Opposed to Adams was his friend and ideological rival, Thomas Jefferson, whose Republican party saw confidence as a sign of health, willing to grant to the citizens the ability to control their own affairs. Rather than succumb to an unhealthy skepticism, the Republicans argued, Americans should act with a vigorous faith to accomplish what fear and doubt would prevent from being realized. Jefferson and his adherents were the most notable of the Founding Fathers to place such importance on trust and to base the health of the government and nation on the recognized abilities of the citizens. In an early Cabinet Opinion, Jefferson wrote:

I consider the people who constitute a society or nation as the source of all authority in that nation; as free to transact their common concerns by any agents they think proper; to change these agents individually or the organization of them in form or function whenever they please; that all the acts done by these agents under the authority of the nation are acts of the nation, are
obligatory on them and enure to their use, and can in no wise be annulled or affected by any change in the form of government, or of the persons administering it.

(The Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson, edited by Edward Dumbauld (New York, 1955), p. 79.)

But of all the Founding Fathers, the one who utilized confidence to the utmost, variously justifying both skepticism and belief, was Benjamin Franklin, the definitive booster of the new land and the new American self. No other career so early demonstrated the creation and manipulation of confidence, nor has been so identified with the classic American sense of self-assuredness, as that of Franklin. His Autobiography is, in Lindberg's words, 'one of the major how-to-do-it manuals in American history'. In order to truly understand the double-edged nature of the confidence man, one cannot ignore Franklin, for in the 'model self' of the Autobiography can be seen the most notable composites of the shape-shifting, deceptive American confidence man: the self-made man, the booster, the jack-of-all-trades, the Yankee pedlar, and the gadteeer. Applications of these types have since been put to use for good and ill countless times, in both history and literature, but the first American text book was surely written by Franklin.

* * *

While the Autobiography emphasized the possibilities of success based on the skills and accomplishments of the workman, more than anything it was a manual for the advertising of his merits. It was the outward impression that mattered most, and Franklin freely admitted that his early success as a printer was not so much due to his mastery of the skill as to the impression of industry he created:

I dressed plain, and was seen at no places of idle diversion. I never went out a fishing or shooting; a
book indeed sometimes debauched me from my work; but that was seldom, was private, and gave no scandal; and, to show that I was not above my business, I sometimes brought home the paper I purchased at the stores, through the streets in a wheelbarrow. Thus being esteemed an industrious, thriving young man....


Ever mindful of the possibility that the eyes of custom might be turned on him at any time, Franklin recalled, 'In order to secure my credit and character as a tradesman, I took care not only to be in reality industrious and frugal, but to avoid the appearances to the contrary' (Autobiography, p. 83).

Franklin's mastery of appearance and masquerade, his ability to alter impressions with ease, formed the basis of Melville's not altogether appreciative description of him:

Having carefully weighed the world, Franklin could act any part of it. By nature turned to knowledge, his mind was often grave, but never serious. At times he had seriousness -- extreme seriousness -- for others, but never for himself. Tranquility was to him instead of it. This philosophical levity of tranquility, so to speak, is shown in his easy variety of pursuits. Printer, postmaster, almanac maker, essayist, chemist, orator, tinker, statesman, humorist, philosopher, parlor-man, political economist, professor of housewifery, ambassador, projector, maxim-monger, herb-doctor, wit: Jack of all trades, master of each and mastered by none -- the type and genius of his land. Franklin was everything but a poet.

(Herman Melville, Israel Potter (Evanston, 1982), p. 48.)

Melville was quick to acknowledge an undeniable levity in Franklin's demeanour; any role was one of many to be played -- played well, but played nevertheless. Franklin's sense of levity, of gamesmanship, is elsewhere apparent, as he refers to his various facades as being 'put on' for a time: learning the benefits of the Socratic approach to conversation, he advised his readers to 'imitate Jesus and Socrates', admitting that he sometimes 'put on the humble Enquirer and
Doubter' just as he put himself on a vegetarian diet -- except for when he chose to eat meat. More than being evidence of craftiness or hawk-eyed opportunism, Franklin's postures were means of intense satisfaction and exhilaration, made so less by the expectation of reward than by the immediacy of play acting and the game. 13

He seems to have been thoroughly amused with the manner in which he one day 'conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection' (Autobiography, p. 94). The precepts of his Art of Virtue range from Temperance to Frugality to Tranquillity to Humility (added almost as an afterthought, and he admits less success with it than with Industry: 'I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue, but I had a good deal with regard to the appearance of it' (p. 105)).

Franklin gave step-by-step instructions on the attainment of Virtue, the definitions of which, as Lindberg notes, are highly subject to interpretation and instrumentation:

- Eat not to dulness; drink not to elevation
- Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself ...
- Let all things have their places ...
- Resolve to perform what you ought ...
- be always employed in something useful ...
- Use no hurtful deceit ...
- Wrong none by doing injuries ...
- Avoid extremes ...
  (p. 95.)

Franklin's method for gaining the Virtue of Chastity shows how his rationalism enabled him to sidestep obstacles imposed by moral abstractions: "Rarely use venery but for health or offspring; never
to dulness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation". While one might wonder how to define 'rarely' or 'dulness', especially when considering Franklin's own legendary virility, one would not be amiss in detecting a certain pride in the cleverness of constructing such a method. In recalling D.H. Lawrence's bitter attack on Franklin and his Art of Virtue, Richard Hauck noted that it only proved that Lawrence lacked a sense of humour. One might surmise that he lacked a concomitant sense of gamesmanship as well, while a reference to Franklin's Papers reveals numerous explicit evidences of that sense, as when he devotes considerable attention to the games of chess and checkers. Of the latter game, he says that "the persons playing, if they would play well, ought not much to regard the consequences of the game, for that diverts and withdraws the attention of the mind from the game itself.... If two persons equal in judgement play for a considerable sum, he that loves money most shall lose".

With such emphasis placed on adaptability, appearance, gamesmanship, and confidence, Franklin's Autobiography gives not only the definitive confidence man in the model American self, but the definitive confidence game as well. All this speaks of a certain detachment from the world's confusing moral ambiguities, and while an individual might deem such detachment as hypocritical, evasive, or evil, it must not necessarily be seen thus; in fact, to some, the very openness with which Franklin describes the manoeuvrings of the model self -- the way in which he places the cards of the game on the table -- is the antithesis of hypocrisy. Franklin saw industriousness and cunning as complements, not mutually exclusive alternatives, proposing that what benefitted the individual also benefitted the community at large. In combining the exhilaration of play with the pride of accomplishment, Franklin offered a model of one who might satisfy both
himself and society with a clear conscience -- providing, of course, that society and the individual agreed on their preferences. 17

Yet in viewing Franklin as a representative of his times, one will see a duality of standard reaching forward into the nineteenth century's incompatibilities between the pieties and practices of the shrewdest businessmen, and reaching back to the Puritan ethics dividing the sacred from the secular. While one might remain aghast at the audacity with which the nineteenth century business tycoon Daniel Drew could become the master stock-waterer while simultaneously basking in the reputation of 'a pillar of the Methodist church', one might see that behaviour as an extension of the advice found in such self-help tracts as those written by Franklin. Their function seemed less to guide behaviour than to rationalize it; thus the expressed sentiments of the Autobiography, The Way to Wealth, and Poor Richard's Almanac could soothe the conscience of a reader concerned with both the temporal and the spiritual, the soul and the purse; for the disengagement advised and rationalized in such writings adheres to the Puritan concept of two callings -- the sacred to God, and the secular to occupation. 18

Franklin may have been secure enough in his own ability to create the confidence that transcends the ironies of his own solutions, but as the description of him by Melville shows, by the nineteenth century his methods were well worn and no secret. For while Franklin could metaphorically snap his fingers and adopt any guise or identity, such ease was lacking in the traumatic lives and careers of many Americans in the succeeding generations. An examination of the literary profession alone will reveal the same insecurity as surely existed among lesser known Americans: before turning to writing, Irving and Whitman foundered through school teaching, journalism, and politics; Melville was a teacher, clerk, sailor, beachcomber, author, and customs official; and
Mark Twain was a riverboat pilot, journeyman printer, prospector, journalist, author, lecturer, with the further crisis of sharing an identity with Samuel Clemens as well. As Hauck notes, it is not surprising that Mark Twain's Yankee can show such eerie detachment as to calmly shoot a bullet through the armour and breast of a knight, and admire the neatness of the bullet hole; these and other depictions by Mark Twain of his Yankee's detachment are in a sense exaggerations of that quality in Franklin, who, with the utmost of balance and common sense, could cruelly abandon his wife to die without his awareness of it.19

Franklin's renowned ability to rationalize, boost, and manipulate appearances and impressions had turned quite stale by the time Mark Twain took to punching holes in his confidence game:

He was always proud of telling how he entered Philadelphia for the first time, with nothing in the world but two shillings in his pocket and four rolls of bread under his arm. But really, when you come to examine it critically, it was nothing. Anybody could have done it.

(The Late Benjamin Franklin, The Complete Humorous Sketches and Tales of Mark Twain, edited by Charles Neider (Garden City, 1961), p. 139.)

Earlier in the nineteenth century, however, and with the exception of some notable dissenting commentators, the image of Franklin was appreciated as that of the shrewd Yankee pedlar, hawking his wares from village to village in the promotion of free enterprise and American democracy and patriotism; it was the image of not only self-confidence, but national confidence as well. Thus the first widespread stereotype of the American was as a pedlar of assurance; the Yankee came first to represent the New Englander, then the definitive American himself, embued with the brand of self-confidence that Franklin saw as the Way to Wealth. From the Revolution to the Civil War, the Yankee pedlar was the
most popular national stereotype, boosting the American's image of himself through bombast and tall talk in folk tales and on the stage.20

* * *

The incredulity with which foreigners viewed the Yankee pedlar's audacious pride in himself and his own reputation was made apparent by the visiting Briton, Frances Trollope, in 1832:

I never met a single individual in any part of the Union who did not paint these New Englanders as sly, grinding, selfish, and tricking. The Yankees (as the New Englanders are called) will avow these qualities themselves with a complacent smile, and boast that no people on earth can match them at over-reaching a bargain. I have heard them unblushingly relate stories of their cronies and friends, which, if believed among us, would banish the heroes from the fellowship of honest men forever; and all this is uttered with a simplicity which sometimes led me to doubt if the speakers knew what honour and honesty meant.

(Frances Trollope, Domestic Manners of the Americans, edited by Donald Smalley (New York, 1949), p. 302.)

Elsewhere in the text, Mrs Trollope reveals the ambivalence with which she, like many others, viewed the Yankee confidence man:

I like them extremely well, but I would not wish to have any business transactions with them, if I could avoid it, lest, to use their own phrase, 'they should be too smart for me'.

It is by no means rare to meet elsewhere, in this working-day world of our's, people who push acuteness to the verge of honesty, and sometimes, perhaps, a little bit beyond; but, I believe, the Yankee is the only one who will be found to boast of doing so. It is by no means easy to give a clear and just idea of a Yankee; if you hear his character from a Virginian, you will believe him a devil; if you listen to it from himself, you might fancy him a god -- though a tricky one; Mercury turned righteous and notable.

(Trollope, p. 370.)

As Mrs Trollope noticed, the greatest condemnations of the Yankee came from other Americans; this indicates the ambivalent reputation at home of the pedlar who could invite such protest, yet still maintain his
place as the most beloved figure of contemporary folklore. As Hoffman notes, nobody ever told stories about honest pedlars; thus what established the Yankee pedlars as heroes of folklore and popular culture was the brazen display of those very qualities which the official, academic, and ecclesiastical commentators chose to deplore. One of these was Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College, who in 1821 wrote about his recent Travels Through New-England and New-York. Of the pedlars, he wrote:

'Men, who begin life with bargaining for small wares, will almost invariably become sharpers. The commanding aim of every such man will soon be to make a good bargain: and he will speedily consider every gainful bargain as a good one. The tricks of fraud will assume, in his mind, the same place, which commercial skill and an honourable system of dealing hold in the mind of a merchant. Often employed in disputes, he becomes noisy, pertinacious, and impudent.... I believe this unfortunate employment to have had an unhappy influence on both the morals and the manners, of the people'.

(Quoted in Daniel G. Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York, 1961), pp. 49-50.)

Evidently the popular appeal of the Yankee pedlar was as alien to President Dwight as the modern grasp of the comma. In viewing his place in American folklore, one can see in the pedlar the same quality which allowed Franklin to so audaciously put forward his plan for Moral Perfection with relative impunity: a sense of play, a love of the game. While Dwight accused the pedlars of seeing 'every gainful bargain as a good one', the abundance of anecdotes show the pedlar as having the same regard for the bargain as Franklin had for checkers; more concerned with the game than with profit, the pedlar viewed his haggling and bartering as contests of wit, with the majority of anecdotes celebrating him as an endearing trickster who clearly takes more pleasure in the transaction than in the gain. The widespread circulation of pedlar lore revealed, in Lindberg's words, 'a set of covert cultural values' in the popular
mind, which undercut those officially proclaimed as the bases of American morality. 22

Mindful of the popular admiration for the pedlar's audacity, even candidates for officialdom took up the challenge of baring all in the spirit of the game. An extreme example of such unheard-of confessions came from the mouth of Davy Crockett, frontiersman and two-term congressman from Tennessee in the 1830s. He boasted that "at the age of fifteen, I did not know the first letter in the book," and that, although he could hardly sign his own name even after being appointed a magistrate, he "relied on natural born sense, and not on the law to guide me; for I had never read a page of a law book in all my life". Bribing his constituents with alcohol to soften them up on voting day, telling folksy jokes to distract the voters from the serious issues, Crockett won his way into the hearts of the people because, shamelessly or not, he confirmed the stereotype of the ideal American chance to actually say, "I worked along to rise from a canebrake to my present station in life". 23 After his death he was elevated to the pantheon of legendary American heroes, so that even in the 1950s, with Senator McCarthy self-assuredly 'going ahead' with his infamous blacklisting, television and the comics were creating a Crockett revival in which the near-superhero fired his weekly audience with the famous motto: 'Be sure you're right, then Go Ahead!' As Hoffman notes, if anybody fitted the pattern of the self-glorifying, 'superconfident' American in the 1950s, it was Walt Disney's Davy Crockett. 24

Eighteen years after the death of the real Davy Crockett, the epitome of American confidence was revealed to the public in the case of one William Thompson. Arrested in New York in 1849, he had been found for the previous two months to have been stopping strangers on the street, engaging them in conversation, and asking them to demonstrate
their confidence by leaving their watches with him overnight. The New York Herald publicized the case and the name Thompson earned for his enterprises: he was dubbed 'The Confidence-Man', a coinage which took hold so quickly, and assumed such broad implications, that a week after his arrest the Herald referred to his tactics in an editorial on the stock market, which it called 'The Confidence-Man on a Large Scale'. One month later, in The Literary World, Evert Duyckinck defended the seemingly native American susceptibility to the act of faith, saying, "It is not the worst thing that can be said of a country that it gives birth to a confidence man.... It is a good thing, and speaks well for human nature, that ... men can be swindled".25

Enough people secretly delighted in the exploits of the first Confidence-Man, so that while a dictionary definition will now emphasize the criminal aspect of "a swindler who practices on the confidence or trust of a credulous person", everyday American usage since the coinage of the title has described the successful confidence man with admiration, amusement, and awe. At the time of Thompson's exposure, confidence on a national level had yet to take its first massive downswing; the antics of confidence men could yet be viewed with geniality, for they were thought to reveal the most admirable aspects of American nature: individuality, cunning, and charm on the part of the swindler, and trust on the part of the victim. Thus as both celebrator and abuser of shared faith, and the icon of gamesmanship, the confidence man had caught the notice of a variety of literary commentators, even before the first appearance of Thompson.26

Not the least thorough in his analysis of the con man's art was Edgar Allan Poe. Fourteen years before Melville depicted the confidence man in his novel of that name, Poe defined, delineated, and dissected him in one of his most humorous sketches, 'Diddling: Considered as One
of the Exact Sciences'. The sketch assigns to the con man, or 'diddler', as he was called prior to Thompson's arrest, qualities of a universal standing, with the implication that all mankind must embrace the diddler as one of the family:

What constitutes the essence, the nane, the principle of diddling is, in fact, peculiar to the class of creatures that wear coats and pantaloons. A crow thieves; a fox cheats; a weasel outwits; a man diddles. To diddle is his destiny. 'Man was made to mourn', says the poet. But not so -- he was made to diddle. This is his aim -- his object -- his end....

Diddling, rightly considered, is a compound, of which the ingredients are minuteness, interest, perseverance, ingenuity, audacity, nonchalance, originality, impertinence, and grin.


Poe chose to emphasize this last quality as that which punctuates the confidence man's success, and which allows him to get away with his exploits to the extent of gaining admiration. For, after all

-- Your diddler is impertinent. He swaggers. He sets his arms a-kimbo. He thrusts his hands in his trousers' pocket. He sneers in your face. He treads on your corns. He eats your dinner, he drinks your wine, he borrows your money, he pulls your nose, he kicks your poodle, and he kisses your wife. (p. 495.)

Yet what makes a diddler a diddler, and not just a common swindler, is his grin: 'This is no hypothesis. It is a matter of course. I reason a priori, and a diddle would be no diddle without a grin' (p. 495).

Depending on the geniality and indulgence experienced by Thompson and described by Poe, other famous American confidence men diddled their way across the pre-Civil War scene to the delight and awe of the public. There was P.T. Barnum, who could admit with impunity that there was 'a sucker born every minute'. There were Jay Gould and Cornelius Vanderbilt, joyfully and energetically outmanoeuvring each other for
control of the Erie Railroad. Newspapers exposed to a yet amused public the audacious trickery with which these and other Robber Barons treated the world as one huge fair ground.27 This was during the last full tide of American confidence, before there were felt the rumblings of crisis and division that would close the fair, culminating in the Civil War. The public had yet to tire of the confidence man's exploits; Dan Beard, Mark Twain's illustrator, had yet to employ Jay Gould as the model for his slave driver in A Connecticut Yankee.

Perhaps one of the last prominent Americans to receive admiration for his possession of the confidence man's abilities was Abraham Lincoln. Described by Hawthorne as embued with "'Yankee aptness and not-to-be-caughtness'"' Lincoln was recognized as employing these qualities in his dual role as chief executive and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Hawthorne related in the Atlantic magazine an interview with Lincoln, without neglecting his humourous yarns -- "'certainly the aptest, pithiest, and funniest little things imagineable'"' and emphasizing the deeper cunning of the man himself:

'A great deal of native sense; no bookish cultivation, no refinement; honest at heart, and thoroughly so, and yet in some sort, sly -- at least, endowed with a sort of tact and wisdom that are akin to craft, and would impel him, I think, to take an antagonist in flank, rather than to make a bull-run at him right in front'.

(Quoted in Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction, p. 110.)

But if Lincoln's supporters thought him a confidence man as such, they did so without assigning him the sobriquet, for the crisis of war had perceptibly soured popular opinion and the willingness to share confidence. War profiteers could scarcely disguise their ends through means which were no longer novel; the confidence man was no longer a fascinating individual along the lines of Thompson or Barnum, for the possibilities of wartime had brought a multitude of petty confidence men
into the open. Public applause for the self-made individual facing the wilderness of a new country had turned to protest; for the victims were no longer wolves or other sharpers, but citizens in the midst of privation and bloodshed. Small-time opportunists emulated the Robber Barons, though with noticeably less cunning and more desperation, minus the grin; their sense of play had so abated as to bear out Melville's dire observation that 'where the wolves are killed off, the foxes increase'.

Melville wrote these words from *The Confidence-Man* four years before the election of Lincoln and secession, during the period described by Samuel Eliot Morison as that of 'the Irrepressible Conflict'. The uncertainties of the half-decade preceding the Civil War had struck a blow to America's national confidence, and as the signs pointed to war well in advance of the Fort Sumter attack, few observers failed to question what was obscured by the predominant issue of slavery. The American economy was in a state of disintegration: the end of the Crimean War had closed a prime European market for the farmer; and the industrial North was shaken by the collapse of the western land boom, the failures of the banks, and the cost of an overbuilt railroad system. In October of 1857 came an economic panic, so that, as it was charged by some agrarians and denied by some industrialists, war as a possible solution seemed to merge with the legal and moral ambiguities of the Kansas slave acts and the Dred Scott decisions. The Civil War came to represent a fight for so many causes that debates ensued over whether it was more a war for freedom or for profit -- deliverance or domination.

* * *

It was in the midst of such uncertainty that Melville wrote his
last novel, The Confidence-Man, an examination of which sheds invaluable light on the varying reception of the American confidence man, in both historical and artistic terms. Surely the changing times, as much as Melville's experience of an author's limitations, were instrumental in creating the novel's ambiguity and grim irony. Melville had witnessed not only the scientific and philosophical undermining of Christian certainty, but also the dissolution of confidence in the American psyche. Moreover, he had had his own impressions of artistic freedom coloured by the reception of his earlier books, most notably Typee and Omoo; for although these books had indeed launched his career and reputation, Melville's pride and rejoicing over their popularity was nevertheless tempered with the disturbing knowledge that he could not be as frank as he might have wished. As he wrote to Evert Duyckinck, he had imagined that America would give him the freedom to confide more openly:

—I would to God Shakespeare had lived later, & promenaded in Broadway ... that the muzzle which all men wore on their souls in the Elizabethan day, might not have intercepted Shakesper's full articulations. For I hold it a verity, that even Shakespeare, was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant Universe is or can be? But the Declaration of Independence makes a difference.

(The Letters of Herman Melville, edited by David Gilman (New Haven, 1960), pp. 79-80.)

While the Declaration may have made a difference in a relative political freedom to write what he pleased, Melville concluded in the writing of Mardi that he was nonetheless obliged to work with an artistic mask. In spite of their popularity, Omoo and Typee had been met with such incredulity that Melville felt compelled to write to his publisher, 'Unless you should deem it very desirable do not put me down on the title page as "the author of Typee and Omoo". I wish to separate "Mardi" as much as possible from these books!' (Letters, p. 76).
Melville explained the reasons for his preferred separation in the preface to *Mardi*:

Not long ago, having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity, the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as such; to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity: in some degree the reverse of my previous experience.


During the period in which he produced *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Melville stated as his greatest concern "the great art of telling the truth", seeing confusions of identity and uncertainty as the bases of metaphysical tragedy. In his final novel, *The Confidence-Man*, confusion and ambiguity remain, but it is no longer certain whether their presence constitutes tragedy or not.

First introduced as or by a deaf and dumb stranger pleading for charity aboard the Mississippi steamboat *Fidèle*, the generic Confidence-Man adopts a sequence of disguises, continuing with that of a black cripple and the characters he names to vouch for him:

'Oh yes, oh yes, dar is aboard here a werry nice, good gem'man wid a weed, and a gem'man in a gray coat and white tie, what knows all about me; and a gem'man wid a big book, too; and a yarb-doctor; and a gem'man in a yaller west; and a gem'man wid a brass plate; and a gem'man in a wiolet robe; and a gem'man as is a sodjer; and ever so many good, kind, honest gem'men more abord what knows me and will speak for me, God bress 'em; yes, and what knows me as well as dis poor old darkie knows hisself, God bress him!!


In these various roles, the Confidence-Man works his way through the book engendering and testing confidence, sometimes exploiting it.

*There has been critical disagreement as to whether the deaf-mute is the first avatar of the Confidence-Man. See discussions in Elizabeth Foster's introduction to the Hendricks House edition of *The Confidence-Man* (New York, 1954), and in H. Bruce Franklin's *Wake of the Gods* (Stanford, 1963).*
illicitly with the acuity of a Yankee pedlar; while at other times, especially in his role as the Cosmopolitan, he seems a philanthropist whose sole aim is either to exorcise or instigate the blackness of mistrust. The book's power arises from the fact that the reader can never be sure of what the Confidence-Man's aims are; there are no explanations provided for his changes of motive. As in the pages on either side of the biblical apocrypha, the reader is alternately led towards an initial conclusion that the avatar is either good or evil; but that conclusion is prevented by the duality of his nature; his real standing is in the questionable -- the apocryphal -- wherein he is placed by the inconclusiveness of his being. Melville leads his readers to form hypotheses, only to create, in his own words, 'a rupture of the hypothesis'; thus he who had sought 'the great art of telling the truth' reveals as a verity the near-impossibility of doing so. 31

Among the first hypotheses established is that of the basic goodness of men, who in their trustworthiness and sincere fellowship seem to be easy marks for any man of confident nature who hopes to exploit them. The Confidence-Man sets up further hypotheses about each individual he meets, based on their own impressions of themselves; they are tested in the ability to play the roles they have chosen for themselves. When the Confidence-Man finally undoes them, he does so by tricking his opponents into revealing more of themselves than they would wish. Thus in the world represented aboard the Fidèlè, everyone is a confidence man whose successes are determined by his ability to manipulate confidence while recognizing similar manipulations by others. The danger implied is that of jumping to conclusions too quickly, in Lindberg's words, 'to give unconditional confidence in a conditional world'. 32

The key to the Confidence-Man's success is in his role as a creator
of belief, to reveal the elusive nature of truth in a new and original light. In describing the awesome power of such creativity, and the attraction of the Confidence-Man himself, Melville wrote:

the original character, essentially such, is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it — everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it (mark how it is with Hamlet), so that, in certain minds, there follows upon the adequate conception of such a character, an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things.

(The Confidence-Man, p. 246.)

Originality for the Confidence-Man lies in his ability to touch the hearts of others by the most convincing of means; thus while passengers aboard the ship dogmatically debate on whether he is a 'fool' or a 'knave', they are duped by their failure to see him using the tactics of both, bringing out the fool in others by causing them to undermine the confidence in their own chosen roles.

The Confidence-Man is especially original in his power to create authority, or the impression of it, where there actually is none. The world Melville depicts is one completely lacking in authority; there is no captain, no crew, nor any figure of authority on board; they are only briefly referred to. The people on the Fidèle, then, come to represent existence in a culture without authority, which Matthew Arnold so feared, and which Melville saw as the condition of nineteenth century America. Such impressions were borne out in a matter of years, when the nation came suddenly to have two presidents claiming authority over two governments with two constitutions.

Emphasis on the tentative is further impressed by the omnipresent narrator himself, who sets out to undermine the absolute and withdraw the very authority he ostensibly creates. Aware of the reader's uncertainty, he causes a befuddling of the intelligence, arousing and manipulating what Whitman called "the terrible doubt of
appearances." He makes cunning observations about certain characters and traits, only to undermine himself by saying that they are, after all, only hypotheses. As Lindberg notes, although the narrator lacks the certainty of Jane Austen's chroniclers, he is not totally unreliable, either; he is simply without authority, like the world he describes, and the world it represents. Perhaps the greatest indication of this is the fact that the entire voyage and narrative, with the possible exception of the final scene, takes place on the first of April -- All Fool's Day -- with a willing crowd whom a wary passenger calls "you flock of fools, under this captain of fools, in this ship of fools" (The Confidence-Man, p. 21). But the captain never appears, the Confidence-Man ruptures his own hypotheses, and the narrator refutes his own dominion. The only one left with any authority is the reader, and that authority consists in his coming to his own conclusions -- if he can.

The reader is thus put in the position of becoming a gamesman of sorts, wary of both the challenge and his own necessarily tentative conclusions; for as the ambiguities of character and narrative reflect the real instability of personal appearances, Melville shows the absence of a means by which human nature can be authoritatively explained. He emphasizes the necessity of the gamesman's approach to social intercourse, which is to take seriously 'the surfaces of human experience'.

* * *

'Something further may follow of this Masquerade', concludes the narrator of The Confidence-Man (p. 260). Lindberg notes that the extent of what did follow was visible even a century later, with such socio-psychological studies as Erving Goffman's The Presentation of the Self.
in *Everyday Life* arguing, after Yeats, that the wilful assumption of a 'second self' need not be seen as immoral, that the adoption of a role commits one to the maintenance of that role. The expectation and offer of confidence thus assumes the nature of a mutual promise, as Goffman describes it:

The individual tends to treat the others present on the basis of the impression they give now about the past and the future. It is here that communicative acts are translated into moral ones. The impressions that the others give tend to be treated as claims and promises they have implicitly made, and claims and promises tend to have a moral character.


Yet in spite of the hope that Goffman sees in an inherent human morality, there are others who would argue that the course of American officialdom has exemplified not only the direst conclusions of Melville's *Confidence-Man*, but the extent to which the American public has been subject to those conclusions a century later. While controversy will always remain over whether the appearance of evil is justified by good intentions behind it, at least one notable commentator has affirmed the importance of appearance: Richard Nixon's political staff manual of 1968 emphasizes that "'campaigning is symbolic, i.e. it is not what the candidate does as much as what it appears he does'".38 Both Nixon's supporters and detractors can only have based their judgements on what he appeared to have done, especially in want of a final judicial decision -- and even that would not be taken universally as conclusive. Nixon's tape-recorded remarks to his aides emphasize the subjectivity of all conclusions:

'We'll survive ... despite all the polls and all the rest, I think there's still a hell of a lot of people out there, and from what I've seen they're -- you know, they,
Thus the real problem exists in how convincing one can be in order to create and maintain belief; it was faced no more by Richard Nixon than by officials in the days of Melville and Mark Twain, and was instrumental in souring the geniality with which Americans have variously seen the confidence man. Lindberg emphasizes the difference between the American expression 'confidence game' and the more critical British 'confidence trick'. The difference suggests that in spite of official corruption and various attempts at swindling the public, Americans have nonetheless remained prepared to accept genially the perpetration of confidence games that retain an obviously playful quality. Americans were possibly more outraged by the gullibility seemingly expected of them by the Watergate defendants than by the happening of Watergate itself; yet they remain content to be duped through their own willing gullibility in deceptions that are true to the spirit of the confidence game. Most notable among such deceptions are those that are enjoyed through the sense of humour.

* * *

Herein lies the value of recognizing the nature of the confidence game in a discussion of American comedy, especially when considering the artist in the dual role of comedian and social commentator. The comedian must convince the audience that he is playing a game when he in fact may not be, a task in a sense the opposite to that of the public official, who even if he does not take his responsibility seriously, must convince the public that he does. It is a question of one's playing a role well. Like all confidence men, the comedian finds his success in the creation of beliefs, the most important of which is that they want to believe, that's the point, isn't it?" (Quoted in Lindberg, The Confidence Man in American Literature, p. xi.)
all is in play. Social critics such as Mark Twain, Lenny Bruce, and Kurt Vonnegut have depended on such creations of belief, variously succeeding in maintaining the impression that their primary objective, as comedians, is to engender laughter. Due to the paradox of their roles as comedians and social commentators, these artists have been obliged to perpetrate in the name of warning and entertainment artistic deceptions equal in stature to the manipulations of history's most notorious confidence men.

Their comedic deceptions, which depend on the accommodation and unification of criticism and entertainment, or pain and pleasure, are integral parts of a tradition that can be traced back to the very roots of comic expression. Just as one particular interpretation of American history has suggested the suitability of the comedic response to the demands of a confidence culture, the universal history of comedy reveals that one of the genre's traditional goals has been in entertaining the paradox that pain might indeed be a valid cause for laughter -- a paradox frequently sustained through the most deceptive of means.
Luigi Pirandello recounts an allegorized story written in 1899 by the Italian humourist Cantoni, called 'Humour classico e moderno'. The story depicts an 'attractive, ruddy and jovial old man' as representing classical humour, with modern humour portrayed as a 'wary little man with a mawkish and facetious expression on his face'. The two are standing before a roadside inn, discussing the evolution of comedy, with Classical Humour lamenting to the other, "Because you have repeated so many times that you seem to be all smiles on the outside but that inside you are actually all sorrow ... one cannot tell anymore what you seem to be or what you actually are.... If you could see yourself you would not understand, as I don't, whether you feel more like crying or laughing". The young man, Modern Humour, admits the truth of this statement, while blaming Classical Humour for having "stopped half way", setting the "joys and torments of life" apart from each other, elevating one at the expense of the other. Modern Humour asserts that in his time man had come to recognize, as the classicists did not, that "the tormenting aspects of happiness and the amusing aspects of sorrow" had so merged with each other that telling them apart or even separating them had become impossible. Classical Humour replies:

'I think ... that if you really want to have a double soul, you are right not to do like the famous widower in love ... who wept over his dead wife with his left eye while winking at his new sweetheart with his right eye. On the other hand, you are trying to weep and wink at the same time and with both eyes, which is like saying that we can no longer make any sense of it'.

(Luigi Pirandello, On Humor, translated by Antonio Illiano and Daniel Testa (Chapel Hill, 1974), p. 19.)

Yet in viewing the traditions of Greek and Roman theatre, it is
puzzling that Cantoni's Classical Humour would deny himself the quality of duality, and that Modern Humour would not only agree with him, but would consider his own duality a recent development. Both personifications fail to see that Classical Humour had quite visibly possessed 'a double soul' with the ability to 'weep and wink at the same time'. The unification of pain and pleasure seems to have always been the verity of comedy, as witnessed in the traditions of Classical Humour and its mythological precedents. Moelwyn Merchant might well have been speaking of all the antecedents and descendents of Greek comedy in describing the confidence game inherent in sustaining the duality: 'Greek theatre is usually perfectly happy to mix tragedy with comedy, and with deliberate, contrived, and subtle effects.'

The ambivalence of comedy is noticed in the beginnings of comic rhetoric as it is discussed in the works of Plato. In the Dialogues, he portrays Socrates as holding his discussions in distinctly comic atmospheres, including the incipiently tragic Crito, and describing the comic response as dependent on both pain and pleasure. Plato's most fully detailed account of the Socratic theory of comedy lies in the Philebus, wherein Socrates says that 'pleasure cannot be rightly tested apart from pain ... their natural seat is in the mixed class'. A dialogue between Socrates and Protarchus ensues over the co-existence of pleasure and pain, with Socrates asking:

Why, do we not speak of anger, fear, desire, sorrow, love, emulation, envy, and the like, as pains which belong to the soul only?... And shall we not find them also full of the most wonderful pleasures? Need I remind you of the anger

'Which stirs even a wise man to violence
And is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb'?

(The Dialogues of Plato, translated by B. Jowett, 5 vols (Oxford, 1892), IV, p. 621.)

Socrates notes how 'pleasures mingle with pains in lamentation and
bereavement', and how at tragedies the spectators often 'smile through their tears'.

And are you aware that even at a comedy the soul experiences a mixed feeling of pain and pleasure?... I admit, Protarchus, that there is some difficulty in recognizing this mixture of feeling at a comedy.... And the greater the obscurity of the case the more desirable is the examination of it because the difficulty in detecting other cases of mixed pleasures and pains will be less.

(Dialogues, IV, p. 621.)

In Plato's Symposium, Socrates forces the comedian Aristophanes and the tragedian Agathon to agree that the same man can write tragedy and comedy. He says in the Philebus that opposites of feeling exist in both tragedy and comedy, not only on the stage, "but on the greater stage of human life". Cicero caught this spirit of universality and applied it in his own definition of comedy, "imitation of life, mirror of manners, image of truth" ("imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis"). Both Cicero and Quintilian upheld the belief that the well-rounded speaker should be prepared to instantaneously make an audience weep and laugh.

The Greek and Roman playwrights, both tragedians and comedians, consistently included elements from the two spheres in their creations. The joyful and bawdy Aristophanes, in later life so disgusted with Athenian imperialism and the loss of life at Sicily and other battlegrounds, included such pathos and gravity in Lysistrata that parts of it result in outright lamentation. Similarly, some comedies by Menander contain elements which, if not slipping into the tragic, certainly do much to temper the levity within, as F.H. Sandbach notes:

Sikyonios seems to be almost entirely serious, an exciting drama full of incident and rising at times to a style more elevated than was common in comedy. In Perikeiromene the scene in which the father recognises his long-lost daughter is composed in stichomythia, or
alternate lines, intended ... to be a mark of their emotion.... In neither of these plays is there anything to excite sustained laughter.


Sandbach also notes that in *Misumenos* and *Sikyonios*, expectations of a happy ending for the lovers are thwarted until the termination of the action, and that even then there is nothing in the conclusion to give cause for laughter. 48

The comedies of Plautus are generally noted for their rollicking depictions of humour among the slaves and lower classes of Rome, yet his *Amphitryon* portrays a marked degree of suffering and melancholy in the bearing of his slaves. There are so many serious elements in the scenes, as Plautus causes Mercury to explain in the prologue, that the playwright himself chooses not to call it a comedy:

What's that? Are you disappointed
To find it's a tragedy? Well, I can easily change it.
I'm a god, after all. I can easily make it a comedy,
And never alter a line. Is that what you'd like?...
But I was forgetting -- stupid of me -- of course,
Being a god, I know quite well what you'd like.
I know exactly what's in your minds. Very well.
I'll meet you half-way, and make it a tragi-comedy.


It is noteworthy that here, one of the earliest uses of the theatrical phrase uniting the elements of pain and pleasure is expressed in the magical terms of classical mythology's most tricky and shape-shifting gods, Mercury.

New Greek Comedy had also profited by borrowing numerous motifs from tragedy, as Satyrus noted in his biography of the tragedian Euripides:

'confrontations of husband and wife, father and son, slave and master, unexpected reversals of circumstance,
raping of virgins, supposititious children ... these are, no doubt, the main constituents of the more recent comedy, and it was Euripides who brought them to the highest pitch of development. (Sandbach, p. 58.)

In addition to contributing tragic motifs to the development of comedy, Euripides had borrowed comic elements to include in his tragedies. He is known as one of the boldest examples of Greek playwrights who counterposed tragedy and comedy, freely employing such devices as farce, satire, and dramatic humour for purposes of comic relief. His satyr-play, Cyclops, applies farcical word play to the bitter suffering of the newly blinded Cyclops, in cross-talk with the flippant Chorus. Satyr-comedy is thus brought into close correspondence with mature tragedy, often positioned as the fourth play in a tetralogy of otherwise serious works. Euripides's Helen is also known for its free borrowings from comedy, with non-verbal farce, mistaken identities, and burlesques of recognition scenes. When Aristophanes wrote his parody of Helen two years after its first performance, he borrowed many lines verbatim from Euripides without sacrificing his own comedy.49

Aeschylus and Sophocles also stand as examples of classical playwrights who intermingled comedy and tragedy, joy and sorrow, in their creations, providing what they saw as the necessary unity in the worlds they portrayed.

An awareness similar to that of the classical humourists may be witnessed, if rather sweepingly, in statements made two thousand years later by a pair of their comedic descendants. "It all comes to the same thing anyway", said Ionesco, "comic and tragic are merely two aspects of the same situation, and I have now reached the stage when I find it hard to distinguish one from the other".50 And W.C. Fields was to declare even more bluntly, "I never saw anything funny that wasn't terrible. If it causes pain, it's funny; if it doesn't, it isn't"."51
This awareness can in fact be traced backwards from classical humour as well, to the very dawn of mythology, firmly establishing the modern comedian as confidence man in a direct lineage extending from the beginnings of human creativity; for in his manipulating the totality of joy and suffering to produce a desired end, the comedian reveals himself as a descendant of the mythical Trickster. In order to fully see the ambivalence and trickery of the comic response in its rawest and earliest form, one might examine the Trickster in his aboriginal nakedness.

The Trickster is personified in mythologies the world over, maintaining in them all the dualities of joy and sorrow, as the upholder of the necessary wholeness of the universe. He exists in his most archaic form in Native North American mythology. Ethnologist Paul Radin first described the Trickster for Western readers, saying of him:

Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being....

Laughter, humour, and irony permeate everything Trickster does. The reaction of the audience in aboriginal societies for both him and his exploits is prevalingly one of laughter tempered by awe. There is no reason for believing this is secondary or a late development. Yet it is difficult to say whether the audience is laughing at him, at the tricks he plays on others, or at the implications his behaviour and activities have for them.

(Paul Radin, The Trickster (London, 1956), pp. ix-x.)

Radin believes the Trickster to be possibly the oldest mythological figure on earth, as he is frequently connected with rock and sun, the most ancient natural phenomena in Native American cosmologies. He is
found among such diverse native tribes as the Winnebago, Gros Ventre, Blackfoot, Crow, Assiniboine, Haida, and Tlingit, all of which assign him the duality of a god and a buffoon.52* The Trickster tales are cyclic, an eternal process of death and rebirth to be interpreted anew by each generation. The most archaic Trickster cycle is that of the Winnebago, from which Radin draws his sources. Spanning the continent from South Carolina to Alberta, with the Mississippi as its spiritual centre, the Winnebago was a compound of three distinct elements: the basic culture existed uncorrupted from primeval times until about A.D. 1400, when it became infused with borrowings from the Algonquian tribes; elements of Christianity and white culture were also adopted in the seventeenth century.53

Winnebagos call Trickster 'Wakdjunkaga', which means 'the tricky one'. His cycle is composed of forty-nine tales, beginning with his breaking of tribal taboos and ending with his ascent to heaven. In between are tales equally composed of horror and slapstick, as Trickster and the elements of Nature outwit each other in eternal contest. Desocialized at the outset, Trickster wanders through the earth alone and discredited, gradually adopting a consciousness of the world around him, eventually fertilizing the earth and clearing it of obstacles for

*A passage in Melville's Typee comes to mind, in which the idol gods of the Typees are customarily mocked, upbraided, and physically abused by the worshippers:

this funny little image was the 'crack' god of the island; lording it over all the wooden lubbers who looked so grim and dreadful; its name was Moa Artua.... [Kolory] gives Moa Artua an affectionate hug, then caressingly lays him to his breast, and, finally, whispers something in his ear.... But the baby-god is deaf or dumb.... Kolory speaks a little louder, and soon growing angry, comes boldly out with what he has to say and bawls to him.... Still Moa Artua remains as quiet as ever; and Kolory, seemingly losing his temper, fetches him a box over the head.... As for the luckless idols, they received more hard knocks than supplications. I do not wonder that some of them looked so grim, and stood so bolt upright as if fearful of looking to the right or the left lest they should give any one offence. The fact is, they had to carry themselves 'pretty straight', or suffer the consequences. (Melville, Typee (Evanston, 1968), pp. 175, 177-78.)
the coming of mankind. In each cycle, he gives and takes, luring the
children of the earth to their deaths for food, being duped by animals
and parts of his own body, falling into traps he has set for others,
pacifying, teaching, crying, stealing, fornicating, excreting, and
opening the Mississippi for the spiritual transcendence of man.54

A Winnebago described how Trickster was viewed as late as 1918,
telling how he both contributes to chaos and forces humans to adapt to it:

'The person we call Wakdjunkaga ... was created by
Earthmaker, and he was a genial and good-natured person.
Earthmaker created him in this manner. He was likewise a
chief. He went on innumerable adventures. It is true
that he committed many sins. Some people have, for that
reason, insisted that he really was the devil. Yet,
actually, when you come to think of it, he never
committed any sin at all. Through him it was fulfilled
that the earth was to retain forever its present shape,
to him is due the fact that nothing today interferes with
its proper functioning. True, it is because of him men
die, that because of him men steal, that because of him
men abuse women, that they lie and are lazy and
unreliable. Yes, he is responsible for all this. Yet
one thing he never did; he never went on the warpath.

(Radin, The Trickster, p. 147.)

Among the taboos that Wakdjunkaga breaks are feasting before battle
-- when he should be fasting-- and discarding his'sacred weapons to go
wandering the world. His actions are impulsive, seemingly representing
all that is impulsive in man; war is not among them, although death is,
as well as much tears and laughter.

* * *

Wakdjunkaga's most obvious counterpart in Western culture is the
Greek god Hermes, who also encompasses a duality of nature, yet gets
away with everything by grace of the laughter he elicits. Already
recognized as the archetypal Confidence-Man, he is the god of luck, in
love as well as in financial gain — for both the honest and dishonest. Like Wadjunkaga, Hermes is beyond good and evil; thus the merchant thanks him for the art of sly calculation and deceit, while the lone traveller thanks him for the riches he finds on the road, and the highwayman thanks him for the lone traveller. Hermes commits the most audacious and ruthless pranks against his brother gods — even on the day of his birth, when he steals Apollo's cattle and then talks his way out of trouble before Zeus himself. Robert Graves describes the success of Hermes's first con game, and how he skirted divine retribution with his comic eloquence:

Zeus warned Hermes that henceforth he must respect the rights of property and refrain from telling downright lies; but he could not help being amused. "You seem to be a very ingenious, eloquent, and persuasive godling", he said.

"Then make me your herald, Father", Hermes answered, "and I will be responsible for the safety of all divine property, and never tell lies, though I cannot promise always to tell the whole truth!"

"That would not be expected of you", said Zeus with a smile....


Yet Hermes is in fact the god of perjury, having sworn himself falsely before Apollo for the cattle theft; from him one learns the art of lying with a guileless face. For this reason, Autolycus, as favourite of Hermes, calls himself "pre-eminent over all in the arts of thievery and perjury". It is interesting to note that the characteristic epithets applied to Hermes by the Greeks were usually derived from the verb kleptein, whence comes the English 'cleptomaniac'. The ancient Greek words did not yet mean thievery, but rather 'to remove secretly' and 'to deceive'. Thus the myths of Hermes contain numerous acts which, if not for their comedy, would be purely treacherous. Among the other aspects of Hermes to counter his darker nature are his hand in
composing the alphabet, inventing astronomy and the musical scale, the arts of boxing and gymnastics, weights and measures, and the cultivation of the olive tree -- the symbol of peace. Also, like Wakdjunkaga and, some would say, Melville's Confidence-Man, Hermes summons the dying and escorts them to the beyond. 58

* * *

According to Radin, Trickster myths are found in the cultures of simple and complex aboriginal tribes the world over, as well as among the Chinese, Japanese, and Semites. Humour is a strong element in them all, with its traits appearing in the Western figures of the medieval court jester, Punch and Judy, and the ancient and modern clown. "We are here", says Radin, "in the presence of a figure and a theme or themes which have had special and permanent appeal and unusual attraction for mankind from the very beginnings of civilization". 59 

An original, "raying away from itself all round" like the Confidence-Man, the Trickster is an embodiment of opposites, which Jung notices especially while addressing the comedic qualities of medieval alchemical lore.

A curious combination of typical trickster motifs can be found in the alchemical figure of Mercurius; for instance, his fondness for sly jokes and malicious pranks, his powers as a shape-shifter, his dual nature, half animal, half divine, his exposures to all kinds of tortures, and -- last but not least -- his approximation to the figure of a saviour. These qualities make Mercurius seem like a daemonic being resurrected from primitive times, older even than the Greek Hermes. His rogueries relate him in some measure to various figures met with in folklore and universally known in fairytales: Tom Thumb, Stupid Hans, or the buffoon-like Hanswurst, who is an altogether negative hero and yet manages to achieve through his stupidity what others fail to accomplish with their best efforts.

(C.G. Jung, 'On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure', in Radin's The Trickster, 195-211 (p. 195).)
Jung was especially captivated by those qualities in alchemical lore which correspond to the trickery of Wakdjunkaga, Hermes, the Confidence-Man, and the modern comedian: the uniting of opposites such as pain and pleasure, and the variable admiration gained by the often shifty methods of the outsider. The 'Mercurius' of alchemical writings refers to the slippery chemical element quicksilver, or mercury, as well as the character Hermes, or Mercury; it also denotes the planet Mercury and the secret substance with which alchemists transformed worthless metals into gold. As quicksilver, Mercurius, often called 'dry water', united within itself the opposites of fire and water, puzzling alchemists with qualities 'indefinable, fascinating, irritating, paradoxical, and elusive'. As a magical character, Mercurius was hermaphroditic, versatile, fluid, deceitful, and either a help or an exasperation to alchemists, who gave him the epithet versipellis, meaning 'changing the skin; shifty'. As a united figure, Mercurius was in his totality 'both metallic and liquid, material and spiritual, cold and fiery, poison and healing'.

The nature of Mercurius, as described by the alchemist Arnaldus de Villanova (died 1313), is of an elusive, contrary quality applicable to Hermes, Wakdjunkaga, and Melville's Confidence-Man:

'I am an orphan, alone; nevertheless I am found everywhere. I am one, but opposed to myself. I am youth and old man at one and the same time. I have known neither father nor mother, because I have had to be fetched out of the deep like a fish, or fell like a white stone from heaven. In woods and mountains I roam, but I am hidden in the innermost soul of man. I am mortal for everyone, yet I am not touched by the cycle of eons'.


In his autobiography, Jung tells how he chose to inscribe this passage into a stone beside his tower-home, to represent the incomprehensible ambivalences within himself. He refers to the
inscription as 'Le cri de Merlin', for he sees in Mercurius an embodiment of the lost secret of Merlin, so lost because men can no longer interpret or understand his cries. Jung saw in Merlin an attempt by the medieval unconscious to create a dark brother for the Christian hero Parsifal. By the yearning for a complete union of good and evil, or joy and sorrow, Merlin, the son of the devil, came to represent a necessary entity for the unity of the world; yet when the consciousness of the twelfth century strove to blot out all darkness from God's world of light, there were no premises by which Merlin could any longer be accepted. 'Hence he ended in exile', writes Jung, 'and hence "Le cri de Merlin" which still sounded from the forest after his death. This cry that no one could understand implies that he lives on in unredeemed form. His story is not yet finished, and he still walks abroad. It might be said that the secret of Merlin was carried on by alchemy, primarily in the figure of Mercurius'.

Thus the secret of Merlin, the necessary darkness without which the world cannot exist in balance, was a Western understanding of a concept embodied in the archaic myths of the Trickster; it was clarified by the unconscious minds of peoples throughout the world, as Radin describes, in their interpretations of the myths. The comic elements of the Trickster myths cannot be separated from the darkness inherited as Merlin's secret; therein can be understood the duality of the comic response as revealed in classical humour, as described by Ionesco and W.C. Fields, and as variously upheld through the artistic manipulations of such comedians as Mark Twain, Lenny Bruce, and Kurt Vonnegut.

In archaic societies, the Trickster was conceived to add disorder to order, thus making a whole. By the interpretation and appreciation of his exploits, man was able to experience within permissible bounds aspects of life which were not otherwise permitted. Picaresque
literature and comedy have consciously adopted the function of the Trickster, with all his inherent dichotomies of pain and pleasure. Jung saw a European analogy of the Trickster in medieval church carnivals and later student society fairs, in which it was permissible to reverse the hierarchic order and provide satisfaction of the unconscious need for disorder. Tricksters have been traditional instigators of chaotic and carnivalesque activities: Lords of Misrule, jesters, clowns, devils, or prophets with saint-sinner qualities like Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Thomas Mann's Holy Sinner. The comic justice that Tricksters receive is as ambivalent as their own nature, with triumph and suffering meted out to them seemingly by chance, often together, and contrary to their own expectations. Thus Falstaff, Tartuffe, and all the later kings of slapstick have viably carried out the Trickster's task of both contributing to universal disorder and experiencing it as well.

Thus can be seen in the context of aboriginal, classical, and other Western mythology the degree to which a comedian naturally must incorporate elements of pain and tragedy in an artistic response that is committed to arousing laughter. The European and Native American myths show that such responses have traditionally depended on trickery and the manipulation of appearance and belief.

* * *

In the American setting, comedians have been especially obliged to utilize and react to the painful and tragic elements inherent in their culture. As has already been shown, Americans traditionally have been well exposed to the manipulations of confidence men of all sorts, in political and social history as well as art; and they have been quick to condemn when confidence men have failed to be convincing, as their
varied judgements of certain prominent figures have revealed. Just as other American confidence men have been shown as intrinsically suitable forces operating within the American social and political machinery, the American comedian as confidence man can also be seen in his own peculiarly national light. The history of American comedy reveals the comedian as well suited to the demands of a confidence culture, a home-grown descendant of the Trickster carrying out his deceptions in the ambivalent American way.

The American Tricksters Before Mark Twain

We may recall how Ralph Ellison described the declaration of American identity as 'the assumption of a mask'. Likewise, the declarations of American art have traditionally been made under the demands of various disguises and pretences; this necessity stems back to the days of the Puritans, when the emotional pitfalls of an unsettled wilderness threatened to disrupt the work of God's earthly saints. The traumas of pioneer life had both deepened and suppressed emotion in the hearts of the settlers, as did the imposed austerity of the Puritan faith. The tensions and suffering caused by the suppressions of feelings resulted in periodic explosions and reactions among the people, with punishment or warning by church authorities often following, such as after the May Day revels at Merrymount, Massachusetts. The Puritan austerity, vividly captured by Arthur Miller in The Crucible, demanded few betrayals of levity, just as the exactions of the wilderness demanded that no signs of surprise or dismay be shown. The façade encouraged by the Puritans, from which came the comic stereotype of the dry, deadpan Yankee pedlar, was the unchanging, unaverted countenance
that kept expressions of levity hidden. Governor Bradford himself emphatically demanded the adoption of the façade, warning various celebratory spirits that if they must be 'convivial', they must be so in secret.65

Thus was born the first of a trio of original American comic figures -- the Yankee, the darky minstrel, and the backwoodsman -- as they were to appear along with a host of minor characters after the Revolution. The Yankee, the darky, and the minor urban comic figures found their greatest success on the stage in an America increasingly devoted to the theatrical, while the backwoodsman met his audience primarily through print. All these characters had in common a startling ability to create and control belief in the unreal; they were all master confidence men.

* * *

The Yankee was the lovable Brother Jonathan, a romantic New England rustic whose cracker-barrel apothegms on trust and the kindness of 'Natur' disguised the cunning with which he invariably out-bargained a stingy customer or a rival pedlar.66 He was less frequently the antithesis of benevolence, as in the later humour of the old Southwest, wherein he came to represent the hated image of Northern mercantilism, and a treacherous exploiter of faith.67 But in both characterizations, it was the impression of self-confidence that allowed the Yankee his successes.

So did the beginnings of American humour reflect the mask as it existed in the American grain itself. As Ellison states, it was the disguise adopted by Franklin, who, although a 'practical scientist, skilled statesman, and sophisticated lover, allowed the French to mistake him for Rousseau's Natural Man'. Ellison updates the use of the
mask as it existed in Hemingway's pose as a 'non-literary sportsman', Faulkner's pose as a 'farmer', and the ultimate, Lincoln's pose as a 'simple country lawyer -- until the chips were down'. Noting America as traditionally being 'a land of masking jokers', Ellison states, 'Here the "darky" act makes brothers of us all'.

* * *

The 'darky' of which Ellison speaks was the second member of the triumvirate of the new American comic figures. Like his compatriots, the Yankee and the backwoodsman, his characterization was based on illusion and the creation of belief. While keeping in mind such exceptions as the later Southwestern view of the Yankee, the success of the entire trio can be recognized as having had more to do with the irresistible impressions they created as comic figures than with the fact of their representing a given regional segment of the population. They were artificial creations impersonating myths about the population: Yankee cunning, backwoods bluster, geniality and infantilism in the black who actually revels in his bondage. Like the aboriginal and alchemical tricksters, each of the trio were outsiders, wanderers who had either broken traditional bonds in a state of revolt or might conceivably do so: the Yankee against British subjugation; the backwoodsman against all human society; and potentially the most mysterious and terrifying to the white audiences, the Negro, ever on the verge of incipient revolt for his freedom. As outcasts representing a continuing mood of rebellion, they instituted the beginnings of a popular covert appreciation at odds with the official proclamations of traditional heritage -- except, of course, for the darky, who so pathetically reaffirmed the official slaveholding credo. But as all three demonstrate, even at the very inception of native American comedy,
the comedian represented an outsider who had to wrangle acceptance from an audience.69

* * *

Of the three major comic figures, the one most appreciated on the minstrel show circuit was the darky. Possibly he aroused the most laughter because the white audiences so desperately wanted to believe the impression he created of the harmless, silly black clown; thus the performer whose popularity was 'unmatched by that of any other comedian of his time' was Jim Crow Rice, who in the 1830s gained acclaim for his darky act even as the terror from Denmark Vesey's slave revolt was still fresh. Rice, a white man, created such inconceivable buffoons as the crippled balladeer Jim Crow, the humble, scholarly Zip Coon, and the eternally suffering Old Dan Tucker, always too late to get his supper.70

Ellison gives a penetrating analysis of the true nature of the darky's intentions, realized through the theatrics of his confidence game:

His costume made use of the 'sacred' symbolism of the American flag — with red and white striped pants and coat and with stars set in a field of blue for a collar — but he could appear only with his hands gloved in white and his face blackened with burnt cork or greasepaint.

This mask, this willful stylization and modification of the natural face and hands, was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved. The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing (the 'thing' in more ways than one) and its function was to veil the humanity of the Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask.

(Ellison, Shadow and Act, pp. 48-49.)

Constance Rourke believed that the performer's racial identity was in fact important, that a white masked as a black masked as a harmless
buffoon deepened the satisfaction for white American audiences. A part of a 'highly conscious self-projection', the double mask acted as a mitigating front because it suggested that the entire enslaved race might actually be as harmless as a silly man with burnt cork on his face. Emotion was as absent in this mask as in that of the Yankee pedlar; if it was even hinted at, such as in melancholic choruses or walkarounds, it was a surface emotion produced more for comic effect than anything else. Devoid of anger, love, hatred, or remorse for his condition, the comical darky was created to inspire the laughter that would soothe the white man's fear and conscience.71

* * *

In addition to the Yankee and the darky, there developed a breed of minor urban theatrical figures, the first of which appeared about the 1840s in the character of the 'Bowery b'hoy' Mose, the blustery, arrogant, chauvinistic, Irish volunteer fireman. Afterwards, the stereotyped German was characterized onstage and in the Hans Brietmann ballads; he was usually urban, as was the Jew who followed on his heels. These characters, too, possessed status as outsiders, from humble stock like the native comic trio, representing contentious elements within the expanding mixed culture. They all depicted scorned segments of society, whether scorned by the majority or by each other, just as the Yankee and the backwoodsman were in frequent conflict. Yet the quality of their over-characterizations was so glaring and obvious that they made acceptable those national peculiarities that were so often at the heart of race riots in the early days of urban immigration.

* * *
In the 1830s, the Irish actor Tyrone Power, grandfather of the silent screen star, made a tour of America during which he found the Americans to be a singularly theatrical race. He noted a mimetic gift pervading all aspects of American society, as though the country were an elaborately painted stage set before which the early Americans felt compelled to perform. They seemed acutely self-conscious, a quality perhaps induced by the critical scrutiny with which older nations viewed them. Within their own boundaries, now as in the days of the Puritans, the forces of half-civilized pioneer life demanded an outward expression that must necessarily be manipulated to varied situations. These theatrical tendencies of character of course contributed to the American intimacy with the stage and the success of wandering theatrical troupes. Their productions were usually geared to comedy, almost by popular impulse, since that form of theatrical expression seemed most suited to the suppression or disguise of sentiment. There were relatively few productions of tragical, lyrical, or passionate nature, and those that were staged did not enjoy the overwhelming success of the comedies.73

* * *

If the success of early American theatrical comedy depended on the assumption of a mask, no less so did the literary branch; it was in this genre that the third of the native comic trio, the backwoodsman, gained his ascendancy. Southwestern humour soon became the definitive brand of American literary humour, with its beginnings in countless obscure journals and newspapers, and culminating in the books of Mark Twain, who introduced it to the world.

The first mask adopted in the creations of Southwestern humour was the pseudonym invariably taken by any given author. Down-to-earth realists in an age wherein romance was the literary paragon, hundreds of
as yet unidentified pseudonymous writers published their sketches in such papers as The Spirit, the St Louis Reveille, and the New Orleans Picayune and Delta. Cautious about their professional reputations as doctors, lawyers, politicians, planters, army officers, or merchants, they adopted the pseudonym that prevented accusations of vulgar levity and association with the raw vernacular characters who gave them their material. The pseudonym also allowed them to counter the sentimentalized romances of frontier life with what they often saw as the bitter, ludicrous truth. 74

The second mask these authors adopted was the explicit bearing of the comedian, the funny man. Although their readers were as aware as they of the dangers at the edge of civilization, both reader and writer benefitted from the saving grace of laughter, which made bearable the pervading terror of the wilderness. Many of the authors' professions brought them additional dangers or traumas; not only did the general populace have to impose social order on a hostile frontier, but doctors, lawyers, and soldiers grappled daily with dangerous elements within the limited civilization already established. Humorous creation was a means of coping and relief, dynamically balancing the 'sense of horror' with the 'sense of humour' necessary to survive in an environment constantly threatening extinction. 75

Thus Augustus Baldwin Longstreet -- Yale graduate, lawyer, editor, minister, college president -- wrote the sketches collected in 1835 as Georgia Scenes, in which 'men writhe in agony to the tune of raucous laughter' amid backwoods violence, cruelty, and the 'dog-eat-dog ethics' of the frontier. 76 One of the earliest reviews of Longstreet's book was written by Poe. In describing the various rough-and-tumble scenes, fights, eye gougings, and animal mutilations, Poe says of the author:
To be sure, our Georgian ... is learned in all things pertaining to the biped without feathers. In regard, especially, to that class of southwestern mammalia who come under the generic appellation of 'savagerous wild cats', he is a very Theophrastus in duodecimo.

('Georgia Scenes', Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe, edited by David Galloway (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 386.)

Yet in spite of the raw, often inhuman nature of the material, Poe could admit without hesitation:

Seldom -- perhaps never in our lives -- have we laughed as immoderately over any book as over the one now before us. If these scenes have produced such effect upon our cachinnatory nerves -- upon us who are not 'of the merry mood', and, moreover, have not been used to the perusal of somewhat similar things -- we are at no loss to imagine what a hubbub they would occasion in the uninitiated regions of Cockaigne.

(Poe, Selected Writings, p. 386.)

Another Southwestern humourist, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, attended Wesleyan College before settling in Louisiana to become a painter, politician, and newspaper editor. His best known tale, 'The Big Bear of Arkansas' (1841), depicts the undermining of confidence aboard a Mississippi steamboat, anticipating Melville's use of that setting for The Confidence-Man by sixteen years. Melville's overwhelming description of the varied humanity aboard the Fidèle, swept along the Mississippi 'helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide', expands on but sharply echoes the description by Thorpe:

'Starting from New Orleans in one of these boats, you will find yourself associated with men from every state in the Union, and from every portion of the globe; and a man of observation need not look for amusement or instruction in such a crowd, if he will take the trouble to read the great book of character so favourably opened before him. Here may be seen jostling together the wealthy Southern planter, and the pedlar of tin-ware from New England -- the Northern merchant, and the Southern jockey -- a venerable bishop, and a desperate gambler -- the land speculator, and the honest farmer -- professional men of all creeds and characters -- Wolvereens, Suckers, Hoosiers, Buckeyes, and Corn-
crackers, beside a plentiful sprinkling of the half-horse and half-alligator species of men, who are peculiar to 'old Mississippi', and who appear to gain a livelihood simply by going up and down the river'. (Kenneth S. Lynn, The Comic Tradition in America (London, 1958), p. 123.)

But of all the various characters to come from the pens of the Southwestern humourists, the one who most fully revealed the covert appreciation for the successful con man in the expanding population was Johnson J. Hooper's 'Simon Suggs'. The motto by which he lived his adventures was: "IT IS GOOD TO BE SHIFTY IN A NEW COUNTRY". Rogue, wanderer, shady dealer, and beloved of his audience, Simon Suggs was the most fully described American picaro before Melville's Confidence-Man. His success was notably due to the manner in which his creator took the cunning advice of Franklin's Poor Richard, adapting it to a Southern audience: "Write with the learned, pronounce with the vulgar".

* * *

There was a Northern counterpart to Simon Suggs in the 1830s, whose adventures were collected by his creator, T.C. Haliburton, under the title of The Clockmaker, or the Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick. Sam Slick was a Yankee confidence man in full glory, adopting any identity to suit any situation, equally at home in 'Easterner's broadcloth or Westerner's leggings'. His vulgar nationalism was surpassed only by his confidence, his quickness of tongue, and his relish of the game:

'We Yankees are a tarnation cute race; we make our fortune with our right hand, and lose it with the left.... We Yankees don't do things like you Britishers; we are born in a hurry, educated at full speed, our spirit is at high pressure, and our life resembles a shooting star, till death surprises us like an electric shock.... I am Sam Slick the Yankee peddler -- I can ride on a flash of lightning and catch a thunderbolt in my fist.'

(Constance Rourke, American Humor, p. 66.)
Sam Slick's cunning provided humorous instruction in the art of surviving in a confidence culture and a rapidly booming capitalism, although certainly engrained in the lessons are examples which can easily be seen as deceitful exploitations of confidence, in tales of both the North and South. Sam Slick is willing to swindle a bargain out of the trustworthy as well as the treacherous, in this way justifying the Yale president's diatribe against the type who inspired the caricature; and in the Simon Suggs tales, the confidence game took many a grotesque turn, with the hero's constant mockery of Jacksonian faith in the common people.

Yet the caricatures were well received, in spite of their frank displays of fraud, violence, and distinct lack of inward goodness or morality. The audience held a covert appreciation for the American trickster who, in a world where the powerless were left to their own devices, could still master his little piece of it; as Lindberg says, at least they knew what they were doing. The comic rogues were social outcasts fighting for survival while still maintaining the sense of play. Thus there seems a certain justice on the part of the petty rogue who survives against the overwhelming odds of a confidence culture while always acting in the spirit of the game. These outcasts fighting for their very survival playfully employ what little power they have in asserting themselves against the more officially accepted confidence men, like politicians and financial giants; and it is their sense of play that gains for them regard. In this light there can be seen a direct lineage from Simon Suggs to Huck Finn to Yossarian.

While self-made men like Jay Gould and Randolph Hearst have been accused of playing games with the fortunes and very lives of others for the sake of the power game only, the small-time comic rogues were known to be doing it for survival, whether or not they themselves seemed aware
of it. By making their characters seemingly unaware of the odds working against them, the various authors created a type of 'rogue survivor' who only instinctively seemed to recognize that what he called 'success' was actually staying alive with the sense of humour intact. Thus the pseudonymous humourists implied through their characters the same awareness as Melville's, described as the recognition that 'social relations in a confidence culture are contests in which one wins or loses, that to relate to others at all one must accept the gambit and play the game'.

* * *

Himself an ingenious trickster seriously preoccupied with the universal forces that "'stab us from behind with the thought of annihilation'", Melville addressed the question of confidence and the necessity of the gamesman's approach in other books besides The Confidence-Man. The incompatibility between the forces of 'CHARITY' and 'NO TRUST' represented on signs aboard the Fidèle were brought to an uneasy alliance earlier in Mardi, wherein the execution of a will 'IN TRUST NEVERTHELESS' showed the tenacious but inescapable condition of shared faith. Here, as elsewhere, Melville depicts human relations as gambits and uncertain victories, with the reliance on confidence given as the only available course, for good or ill. It is the necessary alternative to the impotence implied by Yoomy's answer to the question, "'if all things are deceptive, what is truth?'": "'The old interrogatory; did not they ask it when the world began? But ask it no more.... That question is more final than any answer". In Moby-Dick as well, Melville found that his creative response depended a great deal upon the spirit of the game, especially as represented in the comic. As Constance Rourke says in her discussion of
Moby-Dick, 'Melville broke through the mask of comedy to find its ultimate secret... an encounter between gods and men'. Comedy indeed runs in a thread through Moby-Dick, as an intrinsic mask of a statement already allegorically masked as a whaling adventure; and it is brought forth especially in the comedic spirit of Ishmael, who is forced to adapt to the uncertainty of Yoomy's reply. Ishmael maintains the outlook of a gamesman, thereby transforming a moment of terror into a passion for life: "'live in the game and die in it!'" By adopting the spirit of the game, Ishmael survives its outcome; thus does Warwick Wadlington notice so many metaphors of play in Ishmael's narrative:

Like the mate who, amid 'gamesome talk' in the unsteady boat, balances his lance 'like a juggler' before casting it, and like the whale who reveals 'his power in his play' and hurls whaleboats in the air 'as an Indian juggler tosses his balls', Ishmael endeavors to play the cycle of his being with balance, vivacity, and suppleness on the very edge of destruction.

(Warwick Wadlington, The Confidence Game in American Literature (Princeton, 1975), p. 82.)

"'The spirit of godly gamesomeness is not in ye'" says Ishmael to the reader who fails to raise three cheers at the playfulness of the porpoise, whom he designates as of the 'Huzza' breed of whale. Wadlington counts twenty-two references to play and games in Moby-Dick, as Ishmael "'takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke'" which allows him to view the quest and its dangers with a "'free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy'". In a marked contrast to the frantic incapacity of Ahab, Ishmael's outlook allows him to accept his being the butt of the joke. He is forced to make a choice between confidence and despair, necessarily choosing the former with the faith that whatever decision he makes will allow him to play the game as long as it runs. He accommodates himself to a challenge and an uncertain outcome, his adaptability leaving him as the one who escapes alone to tell the
tale.

But if Ishmael's accommodation is a reflection of the author's, it was shorter in coming, for Melville had indeed expressed despair over the necessity of treating weighty matters as games of confidence. He had written Mardi as a fiction because his previous two narratives had been received with incredulity; yet even as fiction, the confiding impulse in Mardi was again subject to the skepticism of the public — people again questioned whether it was fiction or memoir, in spite of its explanatory preface. During the period in which he completed Redburn and White-Jacket, Melville reluctantly came to accept that literary production entailed a confidence game, a tyrannical artistic manipulation of belief. He wrote to Evert Duyckinck, 'What a madness and anguish it is that an author can never -- under no conceivable circumstances -- be at all frank with his readers'. One might think that some of his anguish even crept into the writing of Ishmael's narrative, for he is sensitive and sympathetic enough to credibly reflect the bitterness of Ahab, as though he remembers such feelings in himself.

* * *

Such was the grudging spirit of acceptance in the mind of the last major literary trickster in America before Mark Twain. While Melville came to his recognition relatively late in his writing career, Mark Twain faced the artistic manipulation of confidence at the outset, with the adoption of the tall tale and the assumption of the mask of innocence as primary elements of his craft. Often he felt as secure in his powers as a confidence man as Tom Sawyer before his newly whitewashed fence; but his confidence in his own stance as a con man was indeed to fluctuate during his career, especially when he questioned the
validity of comedy and the spirit of gamesmanship, and when, as Samuel Clemens, he was most jealous of sharing his identity with the fabrication known as Mark Twain.

Mark Twain was the first full-scale example of the American literary comedian as confidence man, with his greatest comic works exemplifying the successful creation of the illusion of play. In accepting the illusion, the comedian secure in his role does not reveal it as 'a madness and anguish' that he cannot be frank with his audience; he recognizes it with the adoption of his role. This recognition was present in Samuel Clemens with the first signing of his humourous pseudonym; and whenever his acceptance of illusion failed, his comedy failed as well.

Kurt Vonnegut names the abilities of the confidence man as the means by which Mark Twain found his greatest success:

This is the secret of good storytelling: to lie, but to keep the arithmetic sound. A storyteller, like any other sort of enthusiastic liar, is on an unpredictable adventure. His initial lie, his premise, will suggest many new lies of its own. The storyteller must choose among them, seeking those which are most believable, which keep the arithmetic sound. Thus does a story generate itself.


Variously successful executions of this confidence game can be seen all through Mark Twain's career, which depended on the mastery of the art of 'misrepresentation'. This is Vonnegut's term, which he applies not only to the image that Mark Twain created of American speech and character, but of the fabricated self-image as well:

He himself was the most enchanting American at the heart of each of his tales. We can forgive this easily, for he managed to imply that the reader was enough like him to be his brother. He did this most strikingly in the personae of the young riverboat pilot and Huckleberry Finn. He did this so well that the newest arrival to these shores, very likely a Vietnamese refugee, can, by
reading him, begin to imagine that he has some of the idiosyncratically American charm of Mark Twain.
This is a miracle. There is a name for such miracles, which is myths.
(Vonnegut, Palm Sunday, p. 171.)

The ability to convince a Vietnamese refugee of American charm might well lie within the magical powers of a master comedian, who may also possess the ability to convince Americans themselves of their own dire shortcomings — and get a laugh for it. The paradox inherent in the simultaneous devotion to laughter and warning is evidenced in the subtitle of Frank Kofsky’s study of Lenny Bruce: ‘The Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralist’. It is also evidenced in Vonnegut’s recognition of certain qualities in Mark Twain, qualities which Mark Twain himself recognized and expressed in his own ‘Burlesque Biography’:

He was as full of fun as he could be, and used to take his old sabre and sharpen it up, and get in a convenient place on a dark night, and stick it through people as they went by, to see them jump. He was a born humorist.


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In their own varied means of entertaining the paradox of the ‘comedian’ and the ‘social critic’ or ‘secular moralist’, Mark Twain and his successors, Lenny Bruce and Kurt Vonnegut, form an American triumvirate as distinct as that of the Yankee, the darky minstrel, and the backwoodsman. For not only do these three comedians reveal themselves as products of the historical traditions thus far described, but when considered as a trio they also provide an effective example of the varying degrees of success and failure experienced in the maintenance of the comedian’s confidence game; Mark Twain periodically refused to accept the paradox inherent in the dual role of the comedian
and social critic, increasingly and ultimately being silenced as a comedian by those refusals in his later years; Lenny Bruce's defiance of the paradox and the deceptions it necessitates was present throughout his career, likewise resulting in its ultimate demise; and in opposition to his predecessors, Kurt Vonnegut not only adapts to the paradox, but does so to the extent that he readily overloads his game with infinite deceptions and manoeuvrings of confidence. All three comedians have adapted variously to the peculiar artistic demands of their culture; as the history of America and American comedy reveal, uppermost of those demands on the comedian is the necessary maintenance of artistic deception. Before considering each comedian individually, it only remains to be seen what is generally entailed in the comedian's artistic deception — his confidence game.

'Only Kidding, Folks': The Comedian's Game of Confidence

A dismayed Charlie Chaplin once commented on the evident playfulness of his younger contemporaries as witnessed on film and in print:

'Modern humor frightens me a little. The Marx Brothers are frightening. Thurber, Stewart, Joe Cook, Benchley — yes, all of them. They say, "All right, this is how we live and we'll live that way". They go in for being crazy. It's a soul-destroying thing. They say, "All right, you're insane, we'll appeal to your insanity". They make insanity the convention. They make humor a premise. Acquiescence in everything disintegrating. Knocking everything down. Annihilating everything. There's no conduct in their humor. They haven't any attitude. It's up-to-date, of course — a part of the chaos. I think it's transitional'.

The antiquity of the Trickster indicates, however, that the madness of the twentieth century comedians was not and is not transitional. What disturbed Chaplin, evidently, was the apparent readiness of modern comedians to so playfully accept the frightening realities around them, although it must be remembered that these words were recorded in 1936, when there were enough terrifying events happening in Spain, Germany, and elsewhere. The closing lines of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* are a serious, passionate, eloquent plea to turn back the hands of time, an approach not shared by the Marx Brothers, nor, to some extent, by Chaplin's own Little Tramp. The Little Tramp, after all, is known for his ever marching onwards, albeit with a certain uneasy nostalgia for more restful times. Indeed, the Little Tramp himself imposed a threat to the status quo; although he was, in Nathan Scott's words, 'a charming though utterly irrelevant little scapegrace', he nonetheless revealed the inhumanity of a capitalist, materialist society. He went around unnoticed, brazenly treating humans as they should be treated, while the materialists around him were too engrossed in their business to 'consider his eccentricity for the profoundly subversive thing it was'.

Charlie Chaplin turned his world upside down no less than the Marx Brothers or any clown; what he regretted was their unquestionable readiness to match chaos and terror playfully on their own terms.

One might venture that what frightened Chaplin was not so much the humour of his times, but the demands the times themselves placed on the humourist. It is fundamental knowledge that the comedian must adapt to the realities of his situation early in order to offer a relevant humourous comment; thus the Marx Brothers did not so much 'make insanity the convention' as deftly expose it by its own methods. Max Eastman explained the Marx Brothers' undaunted sense of play while implying the impossibility of looking backward with nostalgia:
It is more necessary for the humorist than for anybody else to be up-to-date -- that is all that can be said. The fashions in humor ... cannot be influenced by considerations, because entertaining considerations is work. Humor is play, and it has to happen at the first glance or never happen at all. That is why 'antique funnyings ... bring on a pleasant melancholy', as Booth Tarkington so deftly says.

(Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter, p. 213.)

Such melancholy indeed pervades the comedy of Chaplin, as does a nostalgia for a social order of a different sort from that which his Tramp upsets. While evidently regretting the fact of it, Chaplin proved as much as anyone that the grounds for anguish are also those for comedy; as Eastman says in a reference to Chaplin himself, 'If the same character and situation which were provoking us to comic laughter can by a mere movement of the wrist, the flexing of an eyebrow or a muscle around the lips, be made a cause for tears, it is clear that objectively the comic and the painful are the same'. Thus the Marx Brothers chose to provoke a response as valid, objectively, by virtue of its mirth, as was Chaplin's by virtue of its melancholy. The Marx Brothers gave lessons in vivacious adaptation and survival; of course, the Tramp triumphantly survives each episode to waddle towards the sunset, but it is often with a strong degree of sadness, potentially as 'soul-destroying' as the abject craziness he condemns.

Chaplin's comedic stance was often broken by his periodic refusals to adopt Ishmael's spirit of 'godly gamesomeness', similar to the refusals of Mark Twain and Lenny Bruce. In Chaplin's case, his dismissals of play were instrumental in his recognized mastery of tragedy. His criticism of the modern humourists seems to stem from their reluctance to include the overt tragic elements which he felt the times demanded; yet such inclusion is made redundant to some extent by the understanding that the comedian's intent is often to adopt overt play for the exposure of tragedy. Chaplin, or any comedian, alters or
sacrifices his comedy to the extent that he refuses to adopt the sense of play; for with the constant of comedy being that spirit in which a man will always rise to continue the game no matter how often he falls, any intimation of the opposite is a step towards tragedy.96

Freud says that the major concern of humour is to repudiate suffering, to act as a human defence mechanism by turning pain into pleasure.97 Comic pleasure occurs when a serious mind naturally expects pain but is given a joke instead; the joke will not be successful without the tacit understanding between the comedian and the audience that all is in fun. This understanding overrides the awareness that the subject matter may be acutely painful; as Eastman notes, the most successful topics of humour throughout the ages have been the likes of 'mothers-in-law, unpaid bills, drunks, taxes, tramps, corpses, excretory functions, politicians, vermin, bad taste, bad breaks, sexual ineptitudes, pomp, egotism, stinginess, and stupidity'.98 Thus in their private consciences, the Marx Brothers must have suffered under the very impositions their comedy made light of, but their task was to make light of them, in the name of the repudiation of suffering.

Comedians contrive to create in adults the same response they had as babies, which, though repressed with the formation of adult consciousness, was an automatic comic response to all unpleasantries made not immediately dangerous. The necessary conviction of gamesmanship is indeed that nothing is dangerous — 'it's only a game'. Thus when babies are playfully disappointed, as when a toy is hidden from them or as they thump down on their behinds while trying to walk, their response is invariably laughter, which buffers their immediate disappointment. As Piaget described, the comic feeling is born in humans before their conception of the universe outside their frame of reference; so with the minor disappointments of babies as potentially
threatening to their restricted universe as are threats of holocaust to adults, they will still laugh as long as they perceive no immediate danger to themselves. This perception is the basis of the sense of play, artificially instilled in the adult consciousness by the comedic convention that all is said in jest, demanding that all disappointments be taken as a joke.\textsuperscript{99}

Eastman describes as the first law of humour the recognition that 'things can be funny only when we're in fun. There may be a serious thought or motive lurking underneath our humor. We may be only "half in fun" and still funny. But when we are "in dead earnest", humor is the thing that is dead'. Wondering aloud how many articulate and thoughtful people must have been despised because of their failure to convince an audience of their play, Eastman cites as the crux of the comedian's confidence game the Virginian's response to an insult: "Smile when you say that".\textsuperscript{100}

The theory of play was most thoroughly delineated by Johan Huizinga in \textit{Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture}. With its particular relevance to the understanding of the comedic manipulation of belief, it deserves to be related in full:

\textit{All play has its rules. They determine what 'holds' in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a 'spoil-sport'. The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its illusion -- a pregnant word which means literally 'in play' (from \textit{inlusio}, \textit{illudere}, or \textit{includere}). Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community. The spoil-sport breaks the magic world, therefore he is a coward and must be ejected. In the world of high seriousness, too, the cheat and the hypocrite have always}
had an easier time of it than the spoil-sports, here called apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors, etc. (Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens, translated by R.F.C. Hull (London, 1949), p. 11.)

Lenny Bruce and the aged Samuel Clemens immediately come to mind as successful 'false players' who somehow tired of keeping within the prescriptions of the play community. The case of Lenny Bruce especially reveals the comedian at the mercy of a society 'much more lenient ... to the cheat than to the spoil-sport'; for the successful comedian cannot give the impression of himself as a spoil-sport, but rather must cheat and 'pretend to play the game, on the face of it', regardless of his underlying motive of social criticism. He must convince the audience that he is not a rule-breaker, that any impression they might hold of him as a heretic is immediately subordinated to their impression of him as a games player. The comedian as confidence man requires the consent of his victims in creating and manipulating their belief; his technique is a transfer of trust between the audience and himself, utilizing though often straining the accepted conventions of social intercourse. By his acceptance of the rules of the game, the comedian invites the impression that his creativity lies in the realm of illusion. As Wadlington notes, the comedian's role is in fact to make belief in the audience, so that they immediately accept his dire implications as make-believe.101 No matter the degree of despair or bitterness inside the comedian, his mastery lies in his ability to mask it enough so as to escape immediate recognition. Thereby can he assault the terrible realities, transforming the assaulted ground into a magic area of ludic permissiveness, wherein lie respite, freedom from fear, and impunity. Seen in the comedic frame of playfulness, even the darkest conditions of humanity and nature can be faced with unflinching attention.102

The extent to which the charm of play acts as a buffer to the
unbearable is most powerfully revealed in the brand of humour known as 'gallows humour', described by Vonnegut as 'the only saving response to many situations of horror:

It's people laughing in the middle of political helplessness. Gallows humor had to do with people in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There were Jews, Serbs, Croats -- all these small groups jammed together into a very unlikely sort of empire. And dreadful things happened to them. They were powerless, helpless people, and so they made jokes. It was all they could do in the face of frustration. The gallows humor that Freud identifies is what we regard as Jewish humor here: It's humor about weak, intelligent people in hopeless situations.


Thus the illusion of play allowed the European Jews to direct their attention to the immediate, demonstrable threats of pogroms, just as in a film like *Dr Strangelove* it allowed modern Americans to comedically think of the unthinkable. There has indeed been an evident strain of dismal reaction running through the classics of American cinematic, theatrical, and literary comedy, so much so that observers have often questioned how an artist could ever hope to raise the laugh that acts as the necessary barrier to despair. An important part of the answer lies in the artist's explicit adoption of the comedic identity, for implicit in that role is the illusory assurance that all is in jest.

* * *

The three subjects of this study have made variously successful comedic responses, with their successes measured in terms of their reception and their own willingness to accommodate the demands of play and illusion. It is proper that a study of particular American comedians should begin with Mark Twain, the first American literary and performing comedian to gain world renown with his mythical translations of the national character. His successors, Lenny Bruce and Kurt
Vonnegut, have likewise displayed unavoidably American countenances, like Mark Twain treating with utmost irreverence and skepticism the spiritual, social, political, and economic conventions of their society, with hopes of arousing laughter.

The extent to which all American comedians have acted with their deceptions in the tradition of Mark Twain was something admitted by Vonnegut himself. Noting that Mark Twain was 'almost Lincolnesque, and Quixotic, too, in his wish to please crowds without lying to them', Vonnegut proposed that the 'pessimism and religious skepticism and anti-patriotism' of Samuel Clemens would have been intolerable without the mitigating public appearance of Mark Twain, the artistic illusionist who presented himself as 'an utterly winsome sort of teddy bear, in need of all the love he could get'. Moreover, Vonnegut infers, the confidence game adopted by Clemens was the American beginning of the necessary deception variously adopted by Lenny Bruce, himself, and all artists who would incorporate in themselves the paradox of the comedian and social critic:

If I am right about this, then every present day comedian who says after mocking something supposedly sacred, 'But I'm only kidding, folks', is following in the footsteps of Samuel Clemens, of the uxorious, Victorian American gentleman, diligent in business and often depressed, who became a world citizen while necessarily disguised as Mark Twain.

(Kurt Vonnegut, 'Opening Remarks', The Unabridged Mark Twain, I, p. xv.)

Thus while Lenny Bruce persistently despaired of the necessary disguise, and while Vonnegut readily accepts and compounds it, to the extent of their maintenances they have continued in the tradition of Mark Twain, who himself met with varied success in sustaining the confidence game of the social critic masked as a funny man.
Notes, Chapter I


5. Lindberg, pp. 4-7.


15. Hauck, pp. 33-34.

16. Lindberg, p. 87.

17. Lindberg, p. 96.


22. Lindberg, pp. 93-94.


24. Hoffman, p. 76.

30. Lindberg, pp. 18, 23.
32. Lindberg, pp. 25, 40.
34. Lindberg, p. 24.
37. Lindberg, pp. 32-35.
38. Lindberg, p. 231.
42. The Dialogues of Plato, translated by B. Jowett, 5 vols (Oxford, 1892), IV, p. 599.
43. The Dialogues of Plato, IV, p. 621.
45. McFadden, pp. 54-55.
46. McFadden, p. 50.
53. Radin, pp. 3-4, 114.
54. Radin, pp. 3-4, 132.
60. Nelson, pp. 102-03.
63. C.G. Jung, 'On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure', in Radin's *The Trickster*, 195-211 (p. 195).
64. Kern, p. 117.
69. Rourke, p. 86.
70. Rourke, pp. 72-73, 84.
71. Rourke, p. 87.
73. Rourke, pp. 92, 100.
75. Hauck, p. 43.
78. Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction*, p. 53.
80. Hoffman, p. 52.
81. Wadlington, p. 11.
82. Wadlington, p. 12.
84. Lindberg, p. 185.
85. Lindberg, p. 184.
86. Wadlington, p. 87.
87. Wadlington, p. 110.
90. Wadlington, p. 82.
91. Wadlington, pp. 73-74.
92. Wadlington, pp. 68-69.
94. Nathan Scott, 'The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith', in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, 81-115 (pp. 91-92).
96. Corrigan, 'Comedy and the Comic Spirit', in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, p. 3.
102. Wadlington, p. 22.
CHAPTER II

MARK TWAIN:

The Mask of Samuel Clemens
On 3 February 1863, the day Samuel Langhorne Clemens first signed his name in public as 'Mark Twain' there began in him the life-long trauma of leading a double existence. With the appearance of the pseudonym below a travel Letter in the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise, Clemens established himself with the commitment of becoming and remaining a professional humourist. As James Cox has noted, the decision to confine his art to the restricted humourous identity of Mark Twain caused Clemens to wrestle with his self-imposed artistic limitations in a battle to extend the scope of the humourist's expression farther than had hitherto been attempted. Clemens assigned to Mark Twain the task of invading 'the very citadel of seriousness, transforming it into humor with each encroachment'2 In doing so, he implicitly forbade Mark Twain from revealing overtly the critical intentions of his creator; with varying degrees of willingness throughout his life as a writer, Clemens effected his encroachments under the guise of a comedian named Mark Twain.

In examining the success of Mark Twain's invasions into 'the citadel of seriousness', one might begin with a seemingly obvious observation the like of which was made by Cox:

> to be a complete humorist he could never be serious. Yet if he were never serious or never seemed serious, he would offend the serious minded and culturally ambitious readers who formed such a sizeable and influential segment of his audience. Mark Twain met this requirement largely through the art of impersonation, which allowed him to seem serious without necessarily being so.


Yet as the theories of play and comedy have revealed, even more important for the comedian and social critic is the ability to seem in jest without necessarily being so. Clemens effected this also through his 'art of impersonation', or to use Vonnegut's more exact term,
'misrepresentation'. In examining this art, one must consider the serious critical inspirations of Samuel Clemens and the manner in which he variously and necessarily presented them through the comedic fabrication known as Mark Twain.

A study of Samuel Clemens and Mark Twain is one of conflict between a human being operating in a country and century whose attributes he both admired and despised, and the artistic persona who depended on both the artist's motivation and the acceptance of an audience often opposed to that motivation. Mark Twain's precarious position was in part caused by ambivalences within his creator, who though critical of the ills of his culture was nevertheless obliged as a successful comedian to make placatory artistic gestures to the representatives of that culture. Often his gestures went so far beyond placation as to amount to approbation or emulation of those qualities he chose to criticize; but even more notably, Clemens's disgust in his later life with what he called 'the damned human race' effected such a reversal of approval that his art of 'misrepresentation' was crippled beyond hope. While the primary requisite of his art lay in convincing his audience that his words were in jest, the comedian Mark Twain was variously unwilling or unable to accommodate such a deception, especially in his final works of fiction.

One reason for Clemens's recurrent frustrations with the comedian's game of confidence was the nature of that conflict embroiling the artist who must publicly and commercially comment on the conditions which have privately put him, in Mark Twain's own words, 'in eruption'. The conflict was exacerbated further by tensions within the psyche of Samuel Clemens, and between Clemens and the image of Mark Twain: sophisticate vs provincial; philosopher vs jokester; hack journalist vs artist; businessman vs artist; outsider vs socialite; Presbyterian vs atheist and
The comedic art of Mark Twain was the product of another sort of tension as well, that between the static 'compulsion to make fun' and the repeated sense of discovery or disillusionment that often amounted to horror and disgust. As Cox notes, Mark Twain's compulsion to treat his disappointments comedically amounted to an intrinsic irreverence which is a 'deeply rooted' and primal element of the comedian's nature. Mark Twain's task lay in treating the sacred cows of his audience irreverently, often mercilessly, without the outright impression of irreverence. Thus in order to make the irreverence of Samuel Clemens palatable, Mark Twain had to impersonate reverence, as he did in Huckleberry Finn, or at least a lack of irreverence, as he did in exchanging Huck's reverence for the ironic distance and neutrality of Puddn'head Wilson. Of all Mark Twain's works, these two books are especially noteworthy in that they not only reveal Mark Twain's awareness and despair of confidence games in both social and artistic terms, they also demonstrate his own comedic mastery of them. Moreover, these books by contrast bring into relief the failures and refusals of Mark Twain in maintaining the necessary comedic deception in his other efforts; thus do Huckleberry Finn and Puddn'head Wilson stand out as two variously comic successes in a career alternately sustained by genius and confidence, and thwarted by frustration and despair.

The earlier of the two books, Huckleberry Finn, was begun in America's centenary year, 1876, in the heart of the corrupt era which Mark Twain himself had named 'the Gilded Age'. At its inception, Mark Twain intended Huckleberry Finn to be nothing more than a sequel to the boys' adventure book, Tom Sawyer, published the same year; the last thing
he could have expected was that he was starting the book Hemingway would cite as the beginning of all American literature. A letter to his friend William Dean Howells shows how casually he viewed his new creation in its early stages:

began another boy's book -- more to be at work than anything else. I have written 400 pages on it -- therefore it is very nearly half done. It is Huck Finn's Autobiography. I like it only tolerably well, as far as I have got, and may possibly pigeonhole or burn the MS when it is done.


Although he fortunately never chose the latter course of action, Mark Twain pigeonholed the manuscript for two years while he consciously and unconsciously wrestled with the technical and moral difficulties in deciding whether the book would be merely 'another boy's book' or the provocative social criticism it was to become. He overcame his first creative block in 1879 or 1880, only to pigeonhole the manuscript again until 1884, when it was completed -- eight years and seven books after it was begun.

In deciding to present the book as Huck Finn's autobiography, Mark Twain placed himself in the position of creating the first full-length book in an American vernacular. But more importantly, in comedic terms, he provided himself with a voice of ignorance, innocence, and reverence that could transmit to the world the irreverent rage of the sophisticated Samuel Clemens. The voice and the vernacular were even more than the means of describing the serious issues that Clemens saw between 1876 and 1884; they were ways of discovering them, the means of self-revelation and creation. The language and experience of Huck Finn both required and instigated in Clemens the emotions of 'indignation, pathos, and guilt' over the society that bore him -- emotions which the voice of Huck Finn
accommodated and transformed into humour. 8

The decision to use Huck as the narrative persona not only resolved some difficulties with literary style and viewpoint that had plagued Mark Twain's earlier creations, it also revealed previously unconsidered literary potential, such as the use of vernacular speech for serious intent. Moreover, it enabled Mark Twain to add an overwhelming degree of humanity and conflict to a character who might otherwise have been a mere voice or persona. But with this decision, Mark Twain was faced with a difficulty that caused him to pigeonhole his manuscript time and again, for what began as a comic adventure developed 'incipiently tragic implications' that countered the premises and spirit of comedy. 9 This was revealed in Chapter Sixteen, when Huck and Jim bypass Cairo, Illinois, the last free-soil outpost, with their raft destroyed in a fog. Here, after an agonizing four years of indecision, Mark Twain chose to commit himself to a process of creation by which he confronted his own repressed preoccupations with morality, guilt, and social freedom and restraint. 10 With this commitment he faced the necessity of imbuing Huck with varying degrees of innocence, ignorance, deference, reverence, and disgust. One of his greatest problems, comedically, lay in calculating just how much of these various attributes Huck must and could display in order to serve as an acceptable mouthpiece for Samuel Clemens.

Concomitant with Mark Twain's difficulties in presenting Huck as a mitigating shield came the opportunity of presenting the conflict between vernacular values and the dominant culture. As Tony Tanner notes, this conflict precludes the belief that Huck's narration was merely 'a good, healthy vernacular protest blowing in from the West to disperse the stagnant rhetorical mists hovering over Brahmin New England'. 11 Much more than this, the character of Huck Finn personified in a single consciousness the warped moral code of the slaveholding society and
vernacular commitment to freedom and spontaneity'. Through the act of creation which produced Huck Finn, Mark Twain himself came to discover the issues he seemingly had no initial intentions of confronting. He exposed them, and through his humour implicitly pronounced judgement on them.

As a comedian, especially one of the Gilded Age, it was only through implication that he could pronounce such judgement. In choosing an American vernacular to carry his implications, Mark Twain reorganized the entire value system of language; since the whole narration is set in Huck's non-standard English, with a few notable exceptions, all values had to be transmitted through that one form. By abandoning the socially accepted norms represented by standard, 'proper' English, and replacing them with the 'implied norms' represented by Huck's semi-literate expression, Mark Twain forced the reader to question what really defines respectability. In spite of its grammatical imperfections, Huck's vernacular is understood to be in a precarious state of purity in relation to the corrupt, though linguistically correct, expressions of society. Indeed, the purity of his vernacular is constantly threatened and sometimes contaminated, especially when he is seen as a product of his decadent social environment. But as he distances himself from society, the implied purity of his vernacular becomes not only the accepted form of expression, but the defining, threatened, character of Huck himself.

In a calculated inversion of the book's moral sentiment, upon which the humour of the book rides, Huck's character is exemplified by his conviction that what are, to the reader, his best actions, are actually his worst. The more he chastises himself for doing 'bad' things which will land him in hell, the more the reader approves of him for doing the same 'good' things that will prevent his going there. If his ironic
state of confusion should ever be rectified, his immunity, as well as the humour of the book, would be threatened. His erroneous conviction that he is evil, because his innate morality pits him against the decadent code of the South, sustains not only the broadest comedy in the book, but the poignancy and tragedy as well.

When Huck looks within himself and is confused by the disparity between what Mark Twain called his sound heart and deformed conscience, his confusion arouses laughter which is at once critical and indulgent. In order to control this response, Mark Twain had to negotiate with three areas of perception and voice: Huck Finn's, the knowing reader's, and his own, conscious of both Huck's ignorance and the reader's awareness. By maintaining and regulating Huck's misconceptions about his moral status in relation to that of the community, Mark Twain created in Huck a mouthpiece that would allow the bitterest social commentary to stand while convincing the reader that from the mouth of a humourous ignorant will come words of deep insight, morality, and compassion.

Thus one important aspect of the mask which is Huck's narration is the ever-present sense of denunciation with which he confronts himself, continually berating himself to the opposite effect. His natural compassion gives him an erroneous resignation of impending doom in hell, since that compassion so often opposes the values which the St Petersburg folk deem right. He has pitted his innate goodness against his conscience so often that anytime he feels compassion for one of society's victims, it is accompanied by a strong dosage of self-denunciation. This is shown early in the raft voyage, when he tries to prevent some robbers from drowning aboard a sunken steamboat:

I begun to think how dreadful it was, even for murderers, to be in such a fix. I says to myself, there ain't no telling but I might come to be a murderer myself, yet, and then how would I like it?

(Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, edited
Huck avers this with a straight face, and by projecting into the boy's future sense the abhorrent qualities of a murderer, Mark Twain not only reinforces the contrast between the moral worth of Huck Finn and that of the thieves over whose predicament he suffers; he also implants the dark knowledge that Huck's humanity is seriously in danger. Huck has, after all, been forced to point a gun at his own father, whose physical abuse he had constantly suffered. Thus his unsure prophecy highlights the fragility of his juvenile compassion, darkly suggesting that he may yet become his father's son.

When his heart aches over the plight of another pair of 'rapscallions,' the Duke and the King, Huck believes that his pain is just punishment. Having been tormented enough by an innate morality at odds with a conditioned one, he develops a scorn for his own conscience. As the Duke and the King are tarred, feathered, and ridden out of town on a rail, Huck makes the obvious though crucial perception that 'human beings can be awful cruel to one another' (p. 302). Yet in spite of this awareness, which produces one of his few explicit social judgements, he still misplaces the blame for the pair's misfortune on himself:

I warn't feeling so brash as I was before, but kind of ornery, and humble, and to blame somehow -- though I hadn't done nothing. But that's always the way; it don't make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person's conscience ain't got no sense, and just goes for him anyway. If I had a yaller dog that didn't know more than a person's conscience does, I would pison him. (p. 302.)

Evidently similar to the hatred of Clemens as witnessed in his biography and other writings, Huck's hatred for his own conscience is based on tormenting, erroneous convictions of his own shortcomings. Being at odds with his conscience causes him to cast himself as no better
than a murderer or arch villain and traitor, as he reflects on Mary Jane Wilks's determination to pray for him:

Pray for me! I reckoned if she knewed me she'd take a job that was more nearer her size. But I bet she done it, just the same -- she was just that kind. She had the grit to pray for Judas if she took the notion -- there warn't no backdown to her, I judge ... and if ever I'd a thought it would do any good for me to pray for her, blamed if I wouldn't a done it or bust.

(p. 258.)

Mark Twain juxtaposes such depictions of Mary Jane's true faith with passages describing the clerical burlesques of the Duke and the King; he provides the same contrast in the internal monologues of Huck Finn, who tries to distinguish true faith from religious pretension and show. Nowhere are his pathetically erroneous impressions so plainly exemplified as in his arguments over his own religious faith, or lack of it. In his literal-mindedness, he cannot accept the more irrelevant aspects of religious ceremony, yet he believes it is because he cannot be touched by that faith which distinguishes the 'good' from the 'bad'. The reader knows that Huck cannot be swayed by religious pretension and finery, while Huck himself believes that he will never be touched by goodness or grace, divine or otherwise.

* * *

The conflict embodied in Huck over the separation of spiritual wheat from chaff -- belief from hypocrisy -- is of the same sort experienced by Samuel Clemens, a Calvinist Presbyterian who came to write exceptionally vitriolic attacks against organized religion and the concept of a merciful, meaningful God. By presenting Huck as an ignorant, moral lad agonizing over the illogic of religious convention, Mark Twain attempted to secure his own impunity and shield his audience from the rancour with which he plainly treated religion later in What Is Man? and The
Mysterious Stranger. In Huckleberry Finn he does not so much question the concept of God per se, but rather the irrelevancies that surround it to the point of taking precedence over humane behaviour on the part of professed Christians.

To understand just how mitigating and deceptive a shield is the anguished juvenile voice of Huck Finn, one might consider the shame of Samuel Clemens throughout his courtship with the wealthy and pious Olivia Langdon, at the hands of her mother. Newly arrived in Elmira, New York, with the influences of five years of roughing it in the West, Clemens saw in Olivia a reason for earnest self-improvement, and was no doubt shamed and insulted when her mother launched a character investigation based on her conviction that his status as a Christian worthy of her daughter was in doubt. Carried with many insistences on improvement is the tacit suggestion that one's past has been worthless; and as he had once so questioned his own worth as to actually put a pistol to his head, Clemens swallowed a bitter pill when he saw the standards by which Mrs Langdon measured improvement. She allowed him a short time for a miraculous transformation, and when all of his best efforts at accommodation and promises of a better Christian deportment were placed before her, she met them with the cynical, irrelevant question:

"from what standard of conduct, from what habitual life, did this change, or improvement, or reformation, commence? Does this change, so desireably commenced, make of an immoral man a moral man, as the world looks at men? or -- does this change make of one, who has been entirely a man of the world, different in this regard, that he resolutely aims to enter upon a new, because a Christian, life?"

(Mark Twain to Mrs Fairbanks, edited by Dixon Wecter (San Marino, 1949), p. 53.)

Certainly wondering how to draw blood from a stone, Clemens could only respond with a protest of exasperation: "I do not live backwards. God does not ask of the returning sinner what he has been". As if this
were not enough, after all his actual demonstrations of forbearance and temperance were dismissed as worthless, it was an example of utter hypocrisy and fabrication which finally softened Mrs Langdon towards him. In a last-ditch effort to woo her approbation, he allowed himself to be talked into writing a gaudy, flatulent essay on the Nativity as a demonstration of his Christian awareness; he thus depicted a glorious, idyllic Bethlehem which, during the writing of *The Innocents Abroad*, he had seen and irreverently reported as a leprous, stinking slum. 16

* * *

These shameful, self-effacing steps that Clemens was forced to take in order to marry the woman he loved rested uneasily in the pit of his stomach, providing him with enough examples of the ways in which professed Christians can be so swayed by pretension and ceremony, while so unmoved by honest endeavour. In *Huckleberry Finn* his cynicism and rage is presented, softened and disguised, as the Socratic internal debate of a confused, though precocious, child:

I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Wynn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuff-box that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it.... Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body's mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see that there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him any more. I thought it all out, and reckoned I would belong to the widow's, if he wanted me, though I couldn't make out how he was going to be any better off than what he was before, seeing I was so ignorant and so kind of low-down and ornery. (*Huckleberry Finn*, pp. 60-61.)

The final sentence of this passage is more than the comedian's ancient tactic of attacking himself before the audience has a chance to;
it also demonstrates that Clemens recognized the crippling effects of organized religion's unbalanced preoccupation with pretence and outward appearance, himself having been made to feel 'so kind of low-down and ornery' at the hands of Mrs Langdon. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain is patient and creative enough to propose ironically that there might be two Providences, one for show and one for true conviction, without explicitly saying that few pay attention to the latter. In his final writings, he would conclude that the latter does not even exist.

After praying for the courage to betray Jim, Huck Finn declares with a guilty heart, 'You can't pray a lie -- I found that out' (p. 282). On one hand, and fortunately for the nineteenth century's reception of Mark Twain, this may be taken as an admission of Huck's true faith in the widow's Providence, as pitted against the drawing-room piety of Miss Watson. On the other hand, it might be taken as a conclusion that all prayer is a lie; therefore Huck cannot earnestly pray. This is revealed in the pointedly contrasting example of the Duke, who gloats while running his hands through the gold coins of the pilfered Wilks inheritance, "Thish-yer comes of trust'n to Providence. It's the best way, in the long run. I've tried 'em all, and ther' ain't no better way" (p. 230).

Meanwhile, as he agonizes over his inability to pray, Huck sees himself as evil because he cannot be as devout a believer as the Duke must be to his particular Providence. If Huck cannot pray for the courage to do an evil thing, it is because in his eyes he is a coward. In one passage during the voyage, he faces some slave hunters who ask whether Jim, hidden in the raft, is black or white. The disparity between Huck's evident courage in boldly lying to these bounty hunters who might not think twice of killing him, and his conviction of his own cowardice, produces both the comedy of the passage and the sympathy for
Huck in his pathetic torment and ignorance:

I didn't answer up prompt. I tried to, but the words wouldn't come. I tried, for a second or two, to brace up and out with it, but I warn't man enough -- hadn't the spunk of a rabbit. I see I was weakening; so I just give up trying, and up and says --

'He's white'.
(p. 147.)

Mark Twain, by inference, assures the reader of Huck's innate morality in taking this daring step, while explicitly stating the opposite in Huck's own makeshift rationalization:

Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on -- s'pose you'd a done right and give Jim up; would you felt better than what you do now? No, says I, I'd feel bad -- I'd feel just the same way I do now. Well then, says I, what's the use you learning to do right, when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same?
(p. 149.)

That 'the wages is just the same' is an indication of his torment gives full measure to the magnitude of the conflict between Huck's heart and his conscience. Although he says he will 'bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time' (p. 149), the reader can be confident that, based on this decision, the conflict will be met with again in the future. In fact, the conflict is never resolved; it caused a second creative block in Mark Twain that was sidestepped by the burlesque end sequence on the Phelps plantation, and left dangling with Huck's resolution to 'light out for the territory'. When next Huck confronts the issue, it is with the same indecision he has just temporarily surmounted.

Immediately prior to his decision to 'do whichever come handiest', Huck and Jim are approaching Cairo, Illinois, the point at which Jim can escape up the Ohio River to freedom, and the point at which Mark Twain experienced his first creative block in the unconscious debate between
the social critic and the humorous adventure writer. In choosing as his forum for commentary the battleground between Huck's heart and his conscience, Mark Twain depicts the approaching of Cairo as the point at which Huck reveals he is indeed at battle. Up to now he has been willing to maintain Jim's secrecy without hesitation, but here he admits:

Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he was most free -- and who was to blame for it? Why, me. I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way.

(p. 145.)

The surprise that Huck actually now feels guilty is sprung in a reversal of the reader's expectations. Compounding the impact is the inversion of two interpretations of the word 'free': Huck's interpretation, connoting criminality, and the reader's, connoting natural justification. Maintaining this inversion of the book's and his own moral sentiment, Huck continues to substitute blame for credit, and morality for conscience:

I tried to make out to myself that I warn't to blame, because I didn't run Jim off from his rightful owner; but it warn't no use, conscience up and says, every time, 'But you knowed he was running for his freedom, and you could a paddled ashore and told somebody'. That was so -- I couldn't get around that noway. That was where it pinched. Conscience says to me, 'What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word?'

(p. 145.)

This is one of the book's earliest indications that the main issue is not the mechanics of Jim's escape, as it would have been in an adventure story; nor is it an indictment of slavery itself, since the book was begun thirteen years after emancipation. At this point Mark Twain is about to step onto dangerous ground and attack the very society corrupt enough to have produced slavery -- the society that bore him and
which was still such a sizeable part of his audience. In order to mask his indictment, he presents it through the sheer illogic unconsciously delivered by Huck Finn:

> Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children -- children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm. (p. 146.)

This is the buildup to the impasse that, once overcome, will lead Huck and Jim into an American inferno. At this point the reader's expectations suffer a drastic blow, for in spite of all former protestations of friendship, it is evident that, at least consciously, Huck considers Jim as property. This is especially surprising since it brings into doubt the earlier heroic and defiant promise he had made to Jim: "People would call me a low-down Ab'litionist and despise me for keeping mum -- but that don't make no difference" (p. 96).

Huck's change of mind is necessary in order to establish and foreshadow the recurring conflict, as well as to strengthen the incongruity between the reader's certainty of Huck's morality and his obvious conditioning. As he reflects on how Jim and his wife would steal their own children out of slavery, the total extent of Huck's brainwashing is evident in the vicious language so at odds with his compassion:

> He was saying how ... they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them.

> It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, 'give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell'.

(pp. 145-46.)

The contrast between the cruelty of a Southern bigot's maxim and the
honest, spontaneous language that Huck otherwise speaks from the heart is evidence of the conflict between his generous impulse and conditioned belief. One might question whether Huck is even aware of the old saying's literal meaning. At moments when his brainwashing is most apparent, his conscience addresses him in the language of his society, either corrupt and debased, as above, or in a caricature of an elevated style which Henry Nash Smith notes is the verbal equivalent of the gaudy ornaments in the Grangerford parlour. The twisted, exalted language is especially prevalent in the words of the Duke, the King, and Pap Finn; it is also the language of Tom Sawyer when he is at the height of his romantic pretensions. In Huck's own narrative, it is at its strongest during his final debate on whether to betray Jim, at which time his conscience torments him in the language of a backwoods Jonathan Edwards:

The more I studied about this, the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't going to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so far and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warnt so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, 'There was the Sunday school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire'.

(pp. 281-82.)

That Huck's goodness is innate, and that it would entail his complete brainwashing to remove it, is apparent with the comparison of his own honest vernacular with the debased or ornamental language of his conscience. The absence of this pretension is notable in the passage wherein he finally admits that he will not be swayed by his conscience.
In spite of the inverted viewpoint, the language is powerfully honest and spontaneous, pure in spite of its grammatical imperfections; and whereas at moments of crisis the humour is produced by the contrast between a corrupt vernacular and a 'pure' one, the humour that remains in this heartfelt soliloquy depends on the ignorance with which Huck asserts his own depravity:

And I about made up my mind to pray; and see if I couldn't try and quit being the kind of boy I was, and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. Why wouldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from me, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn't come. It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I warn't square; it was because I was playing double. I was letting on to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth say I would do the right thing and the clear thing, and go and write to that nigger's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie -- and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie -- I found that out.

(p. 282.)

It is clear that here, as elsewhere, Huck honestly believes he is evil, whatever opinion the reader might hold of him. The mechanics of humour are the same as those previously employed; by the ironic reversal of 'right' and 'wrong', or 'righteousness' and 'sin', Mark Twain lays bare the opposite convictions of Huck and the reader. The element of prayer, and Huck's failed effort in applying it, testifies to his inability to accept what, to the reader, is immoral. And since the Sunday school, Miss Watson, the widow, and all the 'good' people uphold the Southern code while he cannot, Huck, in his naivety, has no choice but to conclude that he is beyond saving.

Staring at the informing note he has just written, Huck is tempted like Jesus in the wilderness by the voice of the devil, recalling to him memories of Jim's selflessness, friendship, humanity — and he succumbs:
'All right, then, I'll go to hell' -- and tore it up.

It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head; and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter, I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.

(p. 283.)

By the time he reaches this final decision, Huck has already witnessed enough evidence of social decadence as represented in the evil con games of the Duke and the King, the shooting of Boggs and the townsfolks' relish over it, the murder of Buck Grangerford and the brutal feud, and the suffering of an entire race in chains. Certainly now more aware of shore life and its moral implications, Huck still has yet to draw the proper conclusions about his own moral worth in relation to that of society. Until the conclusions are drawn, he is devoid of proper knowledge, sheltered from the truth, and thus fertile for comic exploitation.

* * *

An entry from 1891 in Mark Twain's notebook gives a hint of what might have followed were Huck Finn ever to have resolved his conflict, losing his innocence in the final disillusionment that his aspirations had landed him in neither hell nor heaven:

Huck comes back, 60 years old, from nobody knows where -- & crazy. Thinks he is a boy again, & scans always every face for Tom & Becky & c.

Tom comes, at last, 60 from wandering the world and tends Huck, & together they talk the old times; both are desolate, life has been a failure, all that was lovable, all that was beautiful is under the mould. They die together.

(Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals, edited by Robert P. Browning et al., 3 Vols. (Berkeley, 1979), III, p. 606.)
One senses that the comedy of Mark Twain's projected sequel would not be light. With such a plot, one course might be in exploiting the pseudo-innocence of Huck's craziness, but that would probably be too pathetic to sustain the necessary comedic screen through which Clemens could vent his cynicism on his audience. In such a work, Huck necessarily must have come to face an unthinkable truth: 'life has been a failure'. If the only relief from this truth were craziness or death, as opposed to the sustained ignorance given Huck in the complete text, the comedic element could be only dismally black, since the last glimmer of hope for the world is extinguished with Huck's soundness. So in Huckleberry Finn, rather than killing the reader's hope, Mark Twain kills Huck's, consigning to him the permanent torturous conviction that whatever causes his conscience to torment him is the deserved result of his own faulty internal wiring. Mark Twain is merciful enough, though, to give Huck that self-preserving instinct which compels him to 'light out for the territory' where his remaining soundness of heart may survive until society's next encroachment.

* * *

Huck's decision to 'light out' follows the controversial burlesque sequence on the Phelps plantation, during which his passivity seems so out of place with his reactions to the downriver experience, especially the horror of the feud. The rise and fall of Huck's awareness is exceptionally steep between his arrival at the Grangerford house and his game playing at the Phelps plantation. The humour through which his awareness is transmitted between these two events conversely follows a drastic alternation between black and burlesque, exemplifying Mark Twain's difficulty in maintaining the blameless voice of the comedian without either slipping into overwhelmingly bleak satire or negating the
impact of his social comment through clownishness. As it happened, he suffered artistic crises in both respects. In the first, he was unable to maintain Huck's generally delightful, innocent precocity in the face of the feud, Buck's death, the Sherburn-Boggs brutality, and the connivances of the Duke and the King. Secondly, the burlesques on the Phelps plantation threaten to make a mockery of Mark Twain's critical intentions; Huck is consigned to a minor part, with only a hint of his former precocity.

Given the subject matter Mark Twain chose to treat during Huck's downriver experience, it is not surprising that he diminished Huck's role as an instrument of humour, choosing instead to highlight the bleak incongruities within society, rather than those within Huck himself concerning his own morality and conscience. In order to understand how Mark Twain could treat humanity's barbarism as a humourist, one must focus on his attention to incongruity, by which he simultaneously depicts such disparities as those between piety and murder, gentility and animalism, pretension and action; such disparities are embodied especially in the persons of the Grangerfords and the Duke and the King. The intensity of Huck's humour depends upon these incongruities and the decreasing degree of innocence with which he reveals them. Through the buildup to the first blow to that innocence, the death of Buck Grangerford, and beyond it to the Duke and King episodes, Huck's narration develops from mere precocious observation to undisguised disillusionment and disgust. The decrease of his innocence coincides with the swift shedding of the incongruous gentility of the feudists and confidence men, who eventually are portrayed purely as animals.

It is significant that at Buck's death Huck utters his first unmasked betrayal of disgust: 'It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree' (p. 175). From here onwards, until the appearance of Tom Sawyer,
Huck's revelations are never as unconsciously masked as they have been; he is openly bitter when the situation demands it, as on the Duke's and the King's conning of the Wilks family: 'It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race' and 'I never see anything so disgusting' (pp. 226, 228). Considering his humanity, it is fitting that his detached innocence should be warped by the horror of Buck's death and the successive disillusionments encountered downriver. Were he to maintain an outlook emotionally unscarred in the midst of such bloody deformities, he could no longer be offered as a humane model alternative to those characters he deplores. As Huck views the increasing corruption and becomes more overtly critical, it is apparent that Mark Twain cannot deal with these issues without revealing more of his cynicism and disgust than previously. Huck himself no longer remains the object of humour or the reader's primary concern; he becomes a reporter directing the reader's attention to the horrors he witnesses, with those horrors themselves becoming the object of Mark Twain's disgust.

A lightly humorous foreshadow of Huck's exposure to the incongruity between outward respectability and inward depravity is given early in the book: 'But Tom Sawyer, he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable' (p. 49). There is no conscious intent on Huck's part to reveal any irony, but later on, when he sees respectability disguising the robbery of life and sustenance, his disgust will preclude the same chuckle that his naivety produces here.

When he arrives at the Grangeford house, Huck is relatively free of opinion; he reports, rather than editorializes, on being interrogated at gunpoint by a 'gentleman' and his sons, and on the shuffling entrance of little Buck, rubbing his sleepy eyes and dragging a shotgun twice his size. He does not judge the oddity of Colonel Grangerford's fatherly
reassurance that Buck, too, will have his chance to kill some Shepherdsons. If the passages give rise to laughter, it is more sardonic than benign; there is an awareness and foreboding on the part of the reader from which Huck is yet spared. Short, pointed references to shooting and murder are nearly swamped by Huck's childish banter with Buck about dogs and rabbits and skipping school. Huck is unaware of the implications as he comments on the gaudiness of the house and its furnishings; he merely reports what he sees and hears: 'There was a little old piano, too, that had tin pans in it, I reckon, and nothing was ever so lovely as to hear the young ladies sing 'The Last Link Is Broken' and play "The Battle of Prague" on it' (p. 163).

The total extent of Huck's present inability to pronounce judgement is made apparent as he admires and mistakes for art the obsessively warped, elegiac creations of Emmeline Grangerford. The morbidity of her drawings affects him adversely, but he cannot place the reason: 'These was all nice pictures, I reckon, but I didn't seem somehow to take to them, because if ever I was down a little, they always give me the fantods' (p. 160). Similarly, his qualified admiration shields him from the comicality of the mechanical unpunctuated rhythms of Emmeline's picture titles, such as 'I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas' and 'Art Thou Gone Yes Thou Art Gone Alas' (p. 160). He is baffled and awed by what he thinks is Emmeline's artistic perseverance and command of poetic technique: 'she would slap down a line, and if she couldn't find anything to rhyme with it, she would just scratch it out and slap down another one, and go ahead' (p. 162). Two voices are activated here: the cynical voice of Mark Twain, aware of the reader's sophistication, and the awed, ignorant voice of Huck Finn, who delivers unawares Mark Twain's sarcasm with no hint of his dual role as admirer and critic. He opens himself to both appreciation and ridicule with his envious though unconsciously
double-edged declaration: 'Every time a man died, or a woman died, or a child died, she would be on hand with her "tribute" before he was cold' (p. 162).

The initial passages present Huck as cushioned in a padding of deceptive familial warmth whose seaminess informs only the reader that all is not harmonious in the Grangerford household; Huck's awful awakening will be all the more powerful when the cushion is torn apart at the seams. The disparity between his innocent appreciation and Emmeline's morbid, mechanical sentimentality is apparent at the outset, but the passages do more than merely display the Grangerford superficiality; more importantly, they provide a contrasting foreshadow to the simple and honest force of Huck's own elegy on the loss of Buck: 'I cried a little when I was covering up Buck's face, for he was mighty good to me' (p. 175). This sole mention in the book of Huck Finn shedding an honest tear, while he otherwise 'lets on' to cry to save himself in a scrape, is a telling indication of the crippling blow to his psyche.

Another factor making the loss of his innocence all the more crippling is the initial admiration he feels for Colonel Grangerford, the chief adherent to that brand of barbarism described as chivalry. The colonel is the closest thing to a father that Huck might wish to have, after the neglect and mistreatment at the hands of Pap Finn. In his admiration for a father figure, Huck is unaware of the thick deceptive coat of gentility worn by the colonel:

He was a gentleman all over; and so was his family. He was well born, as the saying is, and that's worth as much in a man as it is in a horse, so the Widow Douglas said, and nobody ever denied that she was of the first aristocracy in our town; and pap he always said it, too, though he warn't no more quality than a mud-cat, himself. (p. 164.)
In his blind reverence and appreciation, Huck does not realize, first of all, that he has called the Grangerford women 'gentlemen'. But more importantly, he does not realize that he has implied the opinion of Mark Twain -- one which he himself will soon have cause to believe -- that in spite of his genteel trappings, Grangerford is one among a number of beasts, drunkards, and slimy creatures. Huck is awed and respectful of the Grangerford manners which shroud the animalist psyche, and of the power with which the colonel commands these manners at church, at the table, and in the parlour. Thinking that he is reporting on Grangerford's command of etiquette, Huck unknowingly reveals the man's true character as he describes the colonel's reaction to Buck's close brush with a Shepherdson:

The old gentleman's eyes blazed a minute -- 'twas pleasure, mainly, I judged -- then his face sort of smoothed down, and he says, kind of gentle:
'I don't like that shooting from behind a bush. Why didn't you step into the road, my boy?'
(p. 166.)

Both Mark Twain and the reader take for granted that Grangerford is vicious, that he would, in Jim's lingo, "as soon chop a chile in two as a cat" (p. 134). Huck himself is coming closer to that knowledge, which he will receive in the boughs of a tree; and as he approaches it, his humour intensifies in its grimness. Buck's close encounter with Harney Shepherdson signals the rise of Huck's consciousness, as Buck, in his innocence, explains the mechanics of the feud:

'Well', says Buck, 'a feud is this way. A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man's brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the cousins chip in -- and by-and-by everybody's killed off, and there ain't no more feud'.
(p. 167.)

As Huck has been up to now, Buck is unaware of the implications as
he proudly describes the process of his own and his family's extinction as though it were an arithmetic problem he has just mastered. He cannot even say why he shot at a Shepherdson, why a Shepherdson shot at him, or how the feud began: "Laws, how do I know? it was so long ago" (p. 168).

The humour, albeit grim, depends on Buck's naivety; and in spite of its dark undercurrent, the dialogue is somewhat amusing because it describes the futility of the feuding process in such abstract and general terms. But when the topic is brought from the general to the particular — when Buck describes his own family's involvement — the dialogue is no longer even amusing, but sickening, in spite of the fact that Buck maintains the same detached, juvenile tone:

"Bout three months ago my cousin Bud, fourteen year old ... sees old Baldy Shepherdson a-linkin' after him with his gun in his hand ... so they had it, nip and tuck, for five mile or more, the old man a-gaining all the time; so at last Bud seen it warn't any use, so he stopped and faced around so as to have the bullet holes in front, you know, and the old man he rode up and shot him down'.
(p. 168.)

Thus in the space of two paragraphs, with no change in the vocabulary or tone of the speaker, the quality of humour darkens from blackly absurd banter to even blacker, grimmer irony. The comedic devices are the same: incongruity between the deadpan narration and the macabre subject matter, and incongruity within the subject matter itself, namely, the emphasis on proper procedure and show in a hopelessly terminal process. What changes the quality of humour is the shortened distance between the narrator and the subject matter; although Buck maintains an almost ghostly mask of innocence, the reader perceives the extent to which the boy is scarred and doomed by the grotesqueness of his family.

These two paragraphs demonstrate the same manner in which Huck's humour will darken over the next four pages, as he approaches the
apocalyptic death of Buck. Huck likewise is drawn into immediate contact with the subject matter; the death of his friend brings it from the general to the particular. But unlike Buck, Huck will become emotionally and verbally affected. The entire Grangerford experience produces a bitterness that does not dissolve until the disruptive sequence of events at the Phelps plantation. The extent to which he critically speaks his mind and pronounces judgement on the feud, the Duke and the King, and humanity in general shows how Mark Twain could not allow Huck to remain as unaware as he had been before stepping ashore; with his decreased aloofness comes an accompanying decrease in comic intensity. The final, undeniable increase in comic intensity created during the Phelps burlesques depends on the regression of Huck Finn to a pre-feud distance and a somnambulistic innocence, in which he seems almost hypnotized into forgetting all he has seen, merely to accommodate the romantic fantasies of Tom Sawyer.

Having been consciously instructed by Buck in the mechanics of the feud, and having witnessed the shootout between Buck and Harney Shepherdson, Huck is given some events to mull over. Accompanying the Grangerfords to church, he is at first too preoccupied with suffering through the service to notice the multiple ironies he reveals:

The men took their guns along, so did Buck, and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall. The Shepherdsons done the same. It was pretty ornery preaching — all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomeness; but everybody said it was a good sermon, and they all talked it over going home, and had such a powerful lot to say about faith, and good works, and free grace, and preforeordestination, and I don't know what all, that it did seem to me to be one of the roughest Sundays I had run across yet.

(p. 169.)

The humour here depends on the irony of the Grangerfords' appreciating a sermon alongside the Shepherdsons, only to shoot and be
shot at later, while, so imbued with brotherly love that he will become
the most emotionally scarred by its absence, Huck can only fidget and
yawn through the sermon he dismisses as 'ornery'. Later, as he runs back
to the church to retrieve Sophia Grangeford's bible, he makes a seemingly
more conscious remark on the irony of the families' presence in church:

So I slid out and slipped off up the road, and there warn't anybody at the church, except maybe a hog or two, for there warn't any lock on the door, and hogs likes a puncheon floor in summertime because it's cool. If you notice, most folk don't go to church only when they've got to; but a hog is different.

(pp. 169-70.)

At this time Huck is not necessarily referring to the Grangerfords
themselves, for he has yet to return to the empty house and thereafter
witness from the tree the bloody event that will have made a mockery of
their presence in church. Here he at least is astute enough to realize
the difference between human and animal motivation.

Upon arriving at the Grangerford house, he finds nobody; running to
the riverbank, he climbs a tree to scout for Buck, only to see him shot
to pieces by a band of full-grown Shepherdson men. When that happens,
Huck's voice -- the sole instrument of Mark Twain's humour -- is
temporarily arrested. To have made him anything other than speechless
would either have made his reporting as incredibly detached as Buck's
own, or as insincere and obsessively gushy as Emmeline's. He is not even
given the ability of precocious backwoods allegory that his limited
vocabulary had previously allowed him to express. Instead he can only
answer with a powerful silence: 'I ain't going to tell all that happened
-- it would make me sick again if I was to do that' (p. 175).

It is here that Huck's innocence and mere precocity receive their
death-blow. Scarred by this shattering revelation of utter brutality in
the guise of a code of honour, he henceforth delivers a quality of humour
that remains bitter as long as his consciousness is his own. As he says of the bloody events he has witnessed, 'I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night, to see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them -- lots of times I dream about them' (p. 175). From here onwards his spirit of acceptance is stingily guarded, and he is less ready to forgive. By allowing Huck to outwardly show his bitterness for objects outside of himself, Mark Twain to a large extent reduces his capacity for comedic implication, but for him to have done otherwise would have kept Huck so detached as to seem unnatural and incredible. To be sure, Mark Twain would indeed resort to such eerie detachment in his later works, notably *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *The Mysterious Stranger*, but by then he would have already given up any intentions of presenting a model alternative through comedy, as he tries to do in *Huckleberry Finn*.

That the feud experience is so crippling for Huck is evidenced by the fact that, after this and subsequent lessons, he begins a pattern of attempting returns to juvenile solace; this in fact might be one way of 'explaining' the end sequence, wherein Huck becomes totally absorbed in Tom Sawyer's game playing. Since he is after all a child, it seems a natural enough course of action; there is implicit tragedy, however, in the fact that without exception these returns to innocence are only temporary, always thwarted or compromised by occurrences within the surrounding adult world. Immediately after covering up Buck's face, Huck runs back to the fatherly comfort of Jim, the maternal warmth of the Mississippi, and the protection of the raft: 'We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft' (p. 176).

The pattern of escapism thus begins, but Huck finds his rejuvenation by the raft and the river to be short-lived. He is immediately saddled
with the Duke and the King, and his torturously heightened sense of
perception, whose revelations have just caused his flight, forces him to
continue making such accurate and critical social judgements from which
most children are spared. Immediately sizing up the Duke and the King as
'low down humbugs and frauds' (p. 185), Huck remains silent only in the
interests of keeping peace aboard the raft and preserving Jim's safety.
Having seen the Grangerfords with their gentility stripped away, he is
not impressed with the Duke's and the King's pretensions of it. When
they land ashore in a hellish Arkansas village, Huck willingly reports
the townsfolk to be the sadistic animals they are, with no apologies or
reckonings: 'There couldn't anything wake them up all over, and make them
happy all over, like a dog fight — unless it might be putting turpentine
on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail
and see him run himself to death' (pp. 202-03). The humour here, if a
sick and helpless chuckle can be counted as such, is based on the
incongruity between the townspeople's delight and their means of
obtaining it. The deadpan of Huck's narration caused by his limited
vocabulary does not fully hide the evident tone of disgust in his voice.

Boggs is soon shot, drunk and unarmed, by Colonel Sherburn, and is
carried to the drug store alongside his hysterical daughter. The people
gather outside to watch him die, and Huck quotes their voices in a
hopelessly ludicrous mixture of sadism and consideration as they push for
choice viewing spots: "Say, now, you've looked enough, you fellows;
'tain't right and 'tain't fair for you to stay thar all the time, and
never give nobody a chance; other folks has their rights as well as you"
(p. 206). Similarly, Huck reports on how a townsman performs a version
of the shooting before a delightfully pleased audience:

he stood up straight and stiff where Sherburn had stood,
frowning and having his hat-brim down over his eyes, and
sung out, 'Boggs!' and then fetched his cane down slow to
a level, and says 'Bang!' staggered backwards, says 'Bang!' again, and fell down flat on his back. The people that had seen the thing said he done it perfect; said it was just exactly the way it all happened. Then as much as a dozen people got out their bottles and treated him. (p. 207.)

So eerily similar to the depiction of wartime Rome in Catch-22 or the red-painted town of Lago in High Plains Drifter, this village is Hell undisguised. Here Mark Twain provides the height of black comedy, showing the townspeople as spectres with even less pretence of morality than the Grangerfords had. If any laughter arises from these village passages, it is not due to a boy's precocious commentary on grown-up affairs, but rather the ignorance of the grown-ups themselves of the hell they create. If the reader laughs, he laughs out of that sour, sardonic despair which characterizes black comedy: 'we can't do anything, so we may as well laugh'.

The presence of Boggs's assassin, Colonel Sherburn, creates the one instance in the book wherein Huck, as narrator, is so out of character that he repeats verbatim Sherburn's lengthy and verbally sophisticated diatribe on cowardice, with no trace of his own stunted dialect. Henry Nash Smith gives as a reason for this Mark Twain's impatience with being a passive observer through the persona of Huck Finn, seeing Sherburn as 'an alternative persona who was protected against suffering by being devoid of pity or guilt'. Sherburn in fact does more to erase Huck's character than does Tom Sawyer in the final sequence; it is as though Huck is speaking strange tongues while demonically possessed, for this occasion is the only one in the book wherein his narration sustains a vocabulary and diction he cannot possibly have mastered. It is an indication that Mark Twain felt it necessary to erase totally the comic voice in order to deal with a subject he could not present humourously.

In order to reintroduce Huck with the character of the child he is,
while still commenting on the tragedy of the Sherburn-Boggs brutality, Mark Twain causes him to express his disgust in a more appropriate and credible manner: he runs away, it being the only protest in his power. As he had done after the death of Buck Grangerford, he again attempts a retreat into innocence as a reaction against his disgust: 'I could a staid, if I'd a wanted to, but I didn't want to. I went to the circus' (p. 210). Again his escape is only temporary. He enjoys the circus, but his enjoyment comes from the relief of seeing whom he thinks is a drunk come to no harm on a runaway horse. The passage is a reaffirmation of Huck's innate compassion, sincerity, and noteworthy lack of a sense of humour or irony that allows him to make unwittingly pointed statements with impunity. While he hopes for the rider's safety, the townspeople lust for his injury, watching the horse 'with that sot laying down on him and hanging to his neck, with first one leg hanging most to the ground on one side, and then t'other one on t'other side, and the people just crazy. It warn't funny to me, though; I was all of a tremble to see his danger' (p. 212). Thus Huck's escape into the relief of juvenile play provides yet another example of the townspeople's sadism, for they are just as unaware as he that the drunk is actually an expert circus horseman in disguise. Had Huck seen the show before witnessing the feud, his character suggests, his reaction would probably have been the same; he would have been just as relieved to find the rider out of danger. But the circus would have been less of a stop-gap for his intensified disillusionment than it seems to be now.

After seeing the Duke and the King con the town with the Royal Nonesuch, Huck is quick and merciless in passing critical judgement on them while giving Jim a lesson in monarchy. In spite of his cynicism, this is nonetheless one of the most comical passages in the book, because while Huck may have grown wiser in matters of human nature, he presents a
total ignorance in the matters of history that he uses as allegory:

'All kings is mostly rapscallions, as fur as I can make out.... My, you ought to seen old Henry the Eight when he was in bloom. He was a blossom. He used to marry a new wife every day, and chop off her head next morning.... Well, Henry he takes a notion he wants to get up some trouble with this country. How does he go at it -- give notice? -- give the country a show? No. All of a sudden he heaves all the tea in Boston Harbor overboard, and whacks out a declaration of independence, and dares them to come on. That was his style -- he never give anybody a chance. He had suspicions of his father, the Duke of Wellington. Well, what did he do? -- ask him to show up? No -- drowned him in a butt of mamsey, like a cat.

(pp. 216-17.)

This passage is particularly important not only because it emphasizes Huck's opinion of the Duke, the King, and aristocracy in general, but also because it again places Huck in a precarious closeness to corruption; although he criticizes the Duke and the King, he unwittingly parallels them in their own corruptions of Shakespeare. But in spite of this underlying darkness, the passage provides a degree of broad comic relief from the sardonic black humour of the passages that sandwich it. Huck has just left the sadism of the Arkansas village, and will next witness the swindling of the Wilks daughters, which will cause the usually compassionate Huck to spit out epithets of utter contempt for the human race. As in those passages, the above extract is based on Huck's observations of human corruption, but the narration's confusions and incongruity of regal history and Missouri dialect provide a release of comic tension wholly dependent upon Huck's remaining ignorance. It is admittedly a time-worn burlesque device, like the Duke's hodge-podge soliloquy from Hamlet, but it carries the same dark undercurrent while being so strategically placed as to nonetheless contrast with the increasing blackness of Huck's humour. Henceforth, until the Phelps episodes, any similar bits of light humour will be provided only by those instances that portray Huck in states of ignorance or confusion.
When he witnesses the Duke's and the King's attempt to swindle the Wilks girls out of their inheritance by impersonating their dead father's brothers — pious clergymen, one deaf and dumb — Huck is fully aware of and disgusted with their con game. One senses his exasperation and rage as he helplessly watches the deception unfold:

Well, the men gathered around, and sympathized with them, and said all sorts of kind things to them, and carried their carpet-bags up the hill for them, and let them lean on them and cry, and told the king all about his brother's last moments, and the king he told it all over again on his hands to the duke, and both of them took on about that dead tanner like they'd lost the twelve disciples. Well, if I ever struck anything like it, I'm a nigger. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race.

(p. 226.)

This passage and the following one are noteworthy in that their very construction plainly evidences Huck Finn's disgust; he tells the story in one rushed, run-on sentence as though he cannot wait to rid the bad taste from his mouth. In contrast, his final pronouncement is succinct, sharp, and stinging. He describes the Duke and the King feigning bereavement alongside the casket:

And when they got there, they bent over and looked in the coffin, and took one sight, and then they bust out a-crying so you could a heard them to Orleans, most; and then they put their arms around each other's necks, and hung their chins over each other's shoulders; and then for three minutes, or maybe four, I never see two men leak the way they done ... it worked the crowd like you never see anything like it, and so everybody broke down and went to sobbing right out loud — the poor girls, too; and every woman, nearly, went up to the girls, without saying a word, and kissed them, solemn, on the forehead, and then put their hand on their head, and looked up towards the sky, with the tears running down, and then busted out and went off sobbing and swabbing, and give the next woman a show. I never see anything so disgusting.

(pp. 227-28.)

Again the construction of the passage reveals Huck's disgust over the pair's confidence game; run-on sentences simulating a gushing flow of
slime, punctuated by a short, barbed, final judgement. The humour here might be cinematically presented by alternating cuts of the thieves' burlesques, the mourners' hysterics, and Huck rolling his eyes heavenward in disbelief.

And, just as he had sought immediate relief at the circus after the shooting of Boggs, he now finds solace, albeit temporary, in the singing of hymns, not because of any religious sentiment, but simply because 'music is a good thing, and after all that soul-butter and hogwash, I never see it freshen up things so, and sound so honest and bully' (p. 228).

Given that his relief is only temporary, it is apparent that Huck's tolerance of human nature has become so strained that he cannot even stand the harmless dinner-table pretensions of the otherwise saintly Mary Jane Wilks:

Mary Jane she set at the head of the table ... and said how bad the biscuits was, and how mean the preserves was, and how ornery and tough the fried chicken was -- and all that kind of rot, the way women always do for to force out compliments; and the people all knowed everything was tip-top, and said so -- said, 'How do you get biscuits to brown so nice?' and 'Where, for the land's sake did you get these amaz'n pickles?' and all that kind of humbug talky-talky, just the way people always does at a supper, you know.

(p. 235.)

It is peculiar that such scarcely veiled cynicism should come from the mouth that once gushed in awe over the Collected Works of Emmeline Grangerford. As Huck suggests, he would be bored with any sort of 'talky-talk', but the placing of the passage here, after all the pretensions he has witnessed, and especially as the attack is directed at Mary Jane, highlights the deepened critical colour that he casts on all human deceptions -- even those of the people he reveres.

* * *
Then as quickly as Huck has learned to judge, he seems to forget. Immediately upon vowing to set Jim free after escaping from the Duke and the King, he is at the Phelps plantation. If he indeed plans on going to hell, he takes a good time in going, unheroically diminishing into a shadow behind Tom Sawyer's antics. The only pointedly critical remarks he makes on the plantation are about Tom's romances -- "'He had a dream ... and it shot him'' (p. 351) -- and about Silas Phelps, who 'never charged nothing for his preaching, and it was worth it, too' (p. 297). With these remarks, Huck shows only a mere grain of his former precocity, as opposed to his late awareness, again cast as the unwitting double edged voice of Samuel Clemens. There is surely more comedy to be found in the book, but one must look to Tom Sawyer and Jim for it. As for Huck, his days as a social critic are over -- save for his decision to say little, do little, and 'light out for the territory'.

Broad as the comedy is during the last ten chapters, the final sequence is in a sense the saddest part of the book -- sadder, possibly, than those moments when Huck's humour is necessarily darkened. Not only does it leave Huck's conflict between his heart and his conscience unresolved, but more tragically, and by virtue of Mark Twain's having separated comedy from Huck's late social resolve, it suggests Clemens's conclusion that comedy, as artistic illusion, could not stand against the social realities he deplored. In this sense, Huck's sustained, final lack of social judgement may in fact be the ultimate judgement of Mark Twain: if the audience want comedy and laughter, he would give it to them -- at the expense of the criticism and warning they desperately need and deserve. Referring to Mark Twain's decision in resorting to the 'inharmonious burlesque' of the final sequence, Bernard De Voto wrote, "'In the whole history of the English novel there is no more abrupt or more chilling descent'.20 Mark Twain himself forecasts the ghostly chill of the entire sequence with Huck's first impression of the
plantation: 'When I got a little ways, I heard the dim hum of a spinning-wheel wailing along up and sinking along down again; and then I knewed for certain I wished I was dead -- for that is the lonesomest sound in the whole world' (p. 289). The spinning wheel instigates the sound of death, of decomposition, as Huck finds himself 'a kind of hub of a wheel' spoked by the howling and barking dogs that surround him (p. 289). Now at the centre of this wheel of death, Huck begins his own decomposition from a potent instrument of comedic subversion to a powerless ghost of his former self.

Thus the implications of Mark Twain's having abandoned Huck's resolve are more drastic than those suggested by Henry Nash Smith, who believed that the final sequence amounted to nothing more than the means by which Mark Twain beat his way back from incipient tragedy to comic resolution. There is even more to the ending than its being the 'final joke' of the book; in presenting this theory, James Cox notes that Mark Twain exposes the complacency with which the reader, from a safe distance, comfortably approves of Huck's heroic intentions:

For if Tom is rather contemptibly setting a free slave free, what after all is the reader doing, who begins the book after the fact of the Civil War? This is the 'joke' of the book — the moment when, in outrageous burlesque, it attacks the sentiment which its style has at once evoked and exploited. To see that Tom is doing at the ending what we have been doing throughout the book is essential to understanding what the book has meant to us. For when Tom proclaims to the assembled throng that Jim 'is as free as any cretur that walks this earth', he is an exposed embodiment of the complacent moral sentiment on which the reader has relied throughout the book. And to the extent the reader has indulged the complacency, he will be disturbed by the ending.

(Cox, Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor, p. 175.)

Professor Cox's theory cannot be ignored because all he suggests surely does occur. But from the comedic standpoint there is another implication revealed in the final burst of creative energy that produced
the end sequence. Cox notes that by the time Mark Twain was engaged in the final phase of *Huckleberry Finn*, he was also swamped in speculative business in 'everything from vineyards to history games', as well as investing heavily in 'a steam generator, a steam pulley, a new method of marine telegraphy, a watch company, an insurance house, and in a new process of engraving -- the kaolotype'. Clemens was also on the verge of launching, as 'chief investor and senior partner', the ill-fated Webster Publishing Company, whose first publication would be *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Clemens's efforts in these areas either never bore fruit at the outset, or were to be abandoned as financial failures. Thus if his disillusionments with America in the Gilded Age, exacerbated by his own recurrent failures in business, caused him to lose hope and confidence in the power of his comedy and art as potent forces for social improvement, it is conceivable, then, that the end of the book is an indictment of comedy itself, represented in the final impotence of Huck Finn against the contemptible pretensions of Tom Sawyer. The implications of the ending were also carried into the plans for the unpublished sequel, *Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians*. In this story, Huck still plans to light out for the territory, but not to escape the corruptions of society; he merely wishes to "cut for the Injun country and go for adventures" along with Tom and Jim, who evidently decides that his wife and children are not worth finding. Even this plan is postponed as Huck accommodates himself to the society from which he had planned to escape; as he says, he and Jim "kind of hung fire. Plenty to eat and nothing to do. We was very well satisfied". Thus did Mark Twain offer his audience all the comedy they wanted -- but at a price.

If *Huckleberry Finn*, especially its ending, indicates the degree to which Mark Twain not only saw the illusions maintained by society and
himself, but also despaired of both their prevalence and the impotence of the more idealistic of them, then it indicates that same despair in which he periodically abandoned artistic illusion and deception throughout his career as a comic artist. Those realities from which he could not fully divert his attention, and which frequently caused him to lose confidence in his own comedic game of confidence, were not only those business ventures that preoccupied him during the completion of Huckleberry Finn and afterwards; nor were they solely those inherent in the social, political, economic, and spiritual corruptions of America in the Gilded Age. Among the realities that evidently could not be displaced or transformed by the illusions of art and comedy were the internal conflicts and questions in Samuel Clemens over his own worth, as both a comedian, an artist, and a human being. Huckleberry Finn is among other things both a condemnation of pretence and a product of it, exemplifying that paradox inherent in the duality of Samuel Clemens, cynical critic, and Mark Twain, genial comedian. Just as the book's ending indicates the ultimate sacrifice of the comic illusion on the part of Clemens, it is a manifestation of a trend that plagued the artist all his creative life. As his biography shows, the illusions created by Mark Twain could never wholly obliterate the torturous realities experienced by Clemens. Thus can the inconsistencies and ending of Huckleberry Finn be seen as a product of the crisis that influenced the overall artistic development of Mark Twain, as witnessed in the biography of Clemens.

The fluctuating comic illusion of Mark Twain began with the bitter realities of Clemens, who since the age of eighteen had taken to wandering, trying his hand at various occupations, and invariably failing. By the time the twenty-eight-year-old journalist first signed
the pen name 'Mark Twain', he had been a shop clerk, a journeyman printer, a riverboat pilot, a Confederate deserter, a secretary, an unlucky silver and gold prospector, and a quartz miner. Each of these failed attempts provided fuel for the material that would find its way into the written works of Mark Twain: the medieval newspaperman in *A Connecticut Yankee*; the riverboat characters in *Life on the Mississippi*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*; the guilt-ridden Confederate in 'The Private History of a Campaign That Failed'; the hapless clerks, secretaries, and miners in 'To the California Pioneers' and *Roughing It*; all developed out of the true-to-life failures of Clemens and were comedically exploited by him as Mark Twain.

While more plausible than the pseudonyms of such other Southwestern humourists as Petroleum V. Nasby and Orpheus C. Kerr, the name 'Mark Twain' was nevertheless a humorous pseudonym; Clemens established Mark Twain first as a humourist, and it was to this fate that he committed himself throughout his life. This consequently initiated severe conflicts in Clemens, evidenced in his recurrent attempts to obliterate the comic personality of Mark Twain in favour of 'nobler', more serious contributions to art and knowledge. The comic personality had been successfully subordinated, for example, by Dickens, who sensed that 'Boz' would never be accepted as a credible, serious novelist; yet while the pseudonymous character 'Mark Twain' never erased nor was erased by the reality of Clemens, it established a co-existence that was often precarious, especially at those times when Clemens most questioned his own worth and identity.  

Mark Twain was for Clemens both a source and means of creation; the comedic nature of Mark Twain rested in his representation as an exaggeration of the living Clemens, with all his failures and disillusionments. Whenever Clemens attempted to suppress or deny Mark
Twain, he blocked the creative flow through which his imagination most distinctly expressed itself; it is thus noteworthy that two of his most ponderous, serious, and 'lifeless' creations, Joan of Arc and What Is Man?, were published under the authorship of Samuel L. Clemens rather than Mark Twain.  

The humour of Mark Twain arose from the act of exploiting the discrepancies between the futile hopes of Clemens and the bitter realities he experienced; through exaggeration, Mark Twain invented an unbelievable 'reality' that comedically transformed the experiences of his creator. His earliest exaggerations took the form of tall tales, with his early letters to his mother from Nevada abounding in burlesque accounts of failures blown out of proportion. In adopting this deception, Mark Twain came across the means by which he later created the impression of first-person discomfiture that so shielded him from criticism and converted into humour his most painful inadequacies.

Mark Twain's first published tale was 'The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County', through which he first became known in the publishing circles of New York. Clemens's varying descriptions of it reveal the extent to which he suffered a conflict between the serious artist and the comedian. He referred to the tale in 1868 as "a villainous backwoods sketch" and "an infamous volume"; yet a year later he wrote to his wife, "Between you and I, privately Livy dear, it is the best humorous sketch America has produced yet, and I must read it in public some day".

Yet as much as Clemens would attempt to dismiss his comedic personality, he would come to rely on it as a means of asserting himself and discharging his aggressions without fear of reprisal. This technique had to be learned painfully, for, renowned for his mastery of invective and sarcasm, Clemens operated constantly under the risk that he would
immediately be taken seriously. Comically tempered and masked in his most readily appreciated works, his aggression was raw enough in the Nevada days to provoke the challenge to a duel by a rival editor after a searing attack in one of his editorials. The extent to which Clemens depended on comedy as a means of assertion is fully revealed in his role as a platform lecturer, through which he experienced immediately the sheer power he wielded through his art. His first lecture, delivered in 1866, began after such a severe case of stage fright that he thought he saw in each of the audience "the face of death"; but afterwards he felt the triumph of controlling an audience, making them laugh and respond at his bidding. His career as a lecturer eventually carried him to the point of undermining presidents and kings before him, reducing them to hysterics, with his power delivered through the persona of a meek, confused, shuffling, winsome, sincere, self-effacing Missourian.27

That Clemens saw in comedy a last self-saving alternative to a life of constant failure is evidenced in a letter from California to his brother Orion, in which he finally commits himself to the profession and fate of the humourist:

'I have had a "call" to literature of a low order -- i.e. humorous. It is nothing to be proud of, but it is my strongest suit, and if I were to listen to that maxim of stern duty which says that to do right you must multiply the one or the two or the three talents which the Almighty entrusts to your keeping, I would long ago have ceased to meddle with things for which I was by nature unfitted, and turned my attention to seriously scribbling to excite the laughter of God's creatures. Poor, pitiful business!' (Quoted in Cox, Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor, p. 33.)

This letter reveals two paradoxical suggestions in its tone and wording: Clemens's denigration of the humourist's value is a comic implication of an opposite opinion; and at the same time it is his true opinion. This is the crux of the artistic conflict between Samuel Clemens and Mark Twain, also represented by his phrase 'seriously scribbling'. Clemens's
dependence on the persona of Mark Twain, coupled with his need to assert himself seriously and critically, indeed extended the comedian's reach into formerly sacred territory, keeping his comic art far from the 'low order'. The tragedy of Samuel Clemens is that he was never fully convinced of this, and so suffered through a life of alternating opinions of himself. When Clemens failed as a businessman and artist, he would assert himself as Mark Twain; and when Mark Twain was attacked for irreverence or amateurism, a nobly intentioned Clemens would attempt a return.

* * *

The extent of this conflict, and its part in the development of Mark Twain's comedic game of confidence, is recognizable in the entire chronology of his works, with each production revealing striking evidence of the variously successful artistic manipulations that accommodated the conflict. In 1865, Mark Twain's 'Jumping Frog' story was first published in New York; Clemens had sent it there after previous western publications on the advice of Artemus Ward, the premier comedian so admired by Lincoln that a story of his was read to the cabinet to put them in good humour for the first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. On the strength of his story's reception in the New York Saturday Press, Clemens sailed east to establish himself as an author and lecturer there. In April 1867, he gave his first New York lecture as Mark Twain, to promising reviews. While his success was still glowing, he was given an assignment to send travel letters from Europe to the New York Tribune and the Alta California. Sailing on the ship 'Quaker City' in June 1867, Mark Twain began writing the letters that would eventually be rewritten and compiled as The Innocents Abroad, the book that established his reputation before the world.28
In *The Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain cultivated on a large scale the ability to present a double viewpoint, half of which presented the experiences of the travelling-reporter Clemens, and the other half with which Mark Twain comedically exaggerated and mocked them. The highly fictionalized book depicts the journey of a provincial American tour group into the sophistication of historic Europe and Asia. The Innocent — Samuel Clemens, presented by Mark Twain as Mark Twain — is unsophisticated and remarkably naive, and consequently immune from criticism as he reports with irreverence the blemishes he sees. As it relates to the development of Mark Twain's comedic art, the book is important in two respects: first, it shows how Mark Twain departed from the tradition of the minor humourists by assaulting sacred ground, represented by the Holy Land and the culture of classical Europe. Secondly, as mentioned, although presenting himself as undeniably irreverent, he also presented himself as less aware than he really was, thus providing an excuse for his seemingly unwitting criticisms of the sacred. In mastering this deception he found the approach that he would most successfully employ in *Huckleberry Finn*.29

* * *

As regards his comedy, two other important events occurred on the voyage that produced *The Innocents Abroad*: Clemens first saw a portrait of Olivia Langdon, and he met Mrs Mary Fairbanks, who became his first unofficial editor and literary censor. Throughout his career, Clemens relied on the editing of his wife and friends to refine what they thought was the coarseness of his comic delivery; at times he appreciated their censorship, while at others he resented it. In his quest for acceptance by a genteel audience, Mark Twain similarly reacted to them with alternating degrees of placation and hostility; and the events of his
courtship and marriage relate directly to those opposing emotions he felt as an artist and humourist.

When Clemens returned from the voyage, he called on the Elmira home of Olivia Langdon, whose brother he had met on the ship. His reception by the Langdon family, as has already been described, was not immediate. During his courtship Clemens remarked about Olivia to his new friend, Mary Fairbanks, 'Poor girl, anybody who could convince her that I was not a humorist would secure her eternal gratitude! She thinks a humorist is something pretty awful'. Having coaxed Clemens into softening some of the more vitriolic passages in The Innocents Abroad, Mary Fairbanks set to work trying to soften his coarseness in the eyes of the Langdons and their society. 'I want the public, who know him now only as "the wild humorist of the Pacific Slope", to know something of his deeper, larger nature', she said. 'I remember being quite incensed by a lady's asking, "Is there anything of Mr Clemens except his humor?" Due largely to the efforts of Mary Fairbanks, Clemens wrote and published the passage on the Nativity that so filled him with self-disgust afterwards.

The necessity of Clemens's comedic pretensions often clashed with his fear of the designation 'buffoon'. After many contributions to the prestigious Boston magazine, Atlantic Monthly, he told the editor, William Dean Howells, that what he liked about the Atlantic audience was that they 'don't require a "humorist" to paint himself striped and stand on his head every fifteen minutes'. Later identically presented in the Royal Nonesuch in Huckleberry Finn, this denigrating image corresponds to the way in which Clemens evidently thought of himself and his profession at the times he most resented bearing the identity of Mark Twain. "I am demeaning myself", he once complained aloud during a lecture tour. "I am allowing myself to be a mere buffoon. It's ghastly. I can't endure it any longer".
One thing rescuing him from the fate of buffoonery, said Clemens after Olivia's death, was her criticism against the tendency to sacrifice morals or points of instruction for the sake of a laugh. Eventually the unofficial final editor of her husband's writings, Olivia was in this way responsible for the perceptibly tempered extension of Samuel Clemens into the comedy of Mark Twain. However, the dominance of Mark Twain over the serious intentions of Clemens, against which Clemens rebelled time and again, is indicated in a well-meant congratulatory letter from George Bernard Shaw, on the occasion of Clemens's receipt of an honourary Oxford doctorate in 1907. The letter begins, "'My dear Mark Twain -- not to say Dr Clemens (although I have always regarded Clemens as mere raw material -- might have been your brother or your uncle)."  

Yet Shaw also recognized that this dominance was necessary for the critical expression of Clemens, saying, "'He is in very much the same position as myself. He has to put things in such a way as to make people who would otherwise hang him believe he is joking".  

* * *

Thus following the publication of The Innocents Abroad, Clemens was obliged to continue the deceptions that allowed him to joke about previously untouchable matters. After his marriage in 1870, his next book was Roughing It, published in 1872. In this autobiographical novel, Mark Twain comedically exploited Clemens's overwhelming failures as a gold prospector in the Nevada territory. These failures in prospecting led directly to the invention of Mark Twain, for as Cox notes, Clemens's quest for the legendary vein of gold led to his finding nothing but the resources of the comic imagination by which he could transform into humour the futility of the Nevada experience. With Roughing It, Mark Twain introduced the tall tale to the American novel, thereby converting
accounts of his humiliations and anger into a literary form that could
provoke the reader to indulgent laughter while both arousing and
accommodating his skepticism. By exploiting this skepticism, Mark
Twain's tall tales acted as 'truth-exposing lies', for they moved the
reader to ask what the truth was, if not that which was presented by Mark
Twain. Like its predecessor, Roughing It demonstrated early that Mark
Twain's comedy depended on a divergence from reality, that the truth of
his statements lay precisely in the degree of skepticism to which the
reader was forced.36

Although Mark Twain successfully presented Clemens's
disillusionments as comic implication in Roughing It, his next novel was
not so immediately concealing. Written in collaboration with Charles
Dudley Warner, The Gilded Age reveals fully the disgust with which
Clemens watched and participated in the corruptions of the age he so
named. He reserved his growing bitterness in the 1870s for the
bloodsucking mania of speculation which he saw in both himself and
America at large; thus his chapters are vindictive treatments of the
stock market, the railroad, politics, official seduction, murder,
blackmail, and mob violence. Clemens was to write years later, "'Was
reporter in a legislature two sessions and the same in Congress one
session, and thus learned to know personally three sample bodies of the
smallest minds and the selfishest souls and the cowardliest hearts that
God makes". Out of this experience came his portrayals in The Gilded
Age, presented less by implication than by sheer outraged revelation.
The first production of Mark Twain's Hartford years, when he was dipping
his feet into the mire of business deals that would eventually bankrupt
him, The Gilded Age was written at a time when the headlines revealed
daily new implications against President Grant in the Credit Mobilier
scandal, and against Clemens's illustrious neighbour, the Reverend Henry
Ward Beecher, smeared by accusations of adultery. As Justin Kaplan notes, the basic subject of the book is 'democracy gone off the tracks'.

The disgust that produced *The Gilded Age* did more than cause Clemens to flee the United States for the relative purity of the same Europe he had ridiculed in *The Innocents Abroad*. It also proved to him that he could only treat 'the wash of today' with a satiric bitterness too caustic for his comedy; he needed to find a medium flexible enough to accommodate his outrage while still remaining entertaining. He was to remark to Howells that 'a man can't write successful satire unless he be in a calm judicial good humor.... I don't ever seem to be in a good enough humor with ANYthing to satirize it; no, I want to stand up before it & curse it, & foam at the mouth -- or take a club & pound it to rags & pulp'. With *The Gilded Age*, Mark Twain concluded that, in order to deal with his disgust with corruption and his guilt over his own participation in it, he must rely on fantasy and the past.

Upon his return to the United States in 1875, Mark Twain applied this conclusion to the writing of *Tom Sawyer*. In this book he temporarily displaced the negative elements of his personality by inventing a juvenile character who could disguise his own participation in the events. *Tom Sawyer's* position as a child introduced a new element of distance while effectively demanding the reader's indulgence; thus although Tom and his gang live in a world of play, their games re-enact various adult rituals with impunity. As Bernard De Voto noted, *Tom Sawyer's* idyll is in fact "surrounded by dread"; yet the narrator's tolerance and condescension charm an element of immunity into the terror and violence of the depicted world.

By instituting play -- fantasy -- as the 'reality principle' in his writing, Mark Twain demonstrated his inability to operate within the mode
of conventional fiction while still erecting a shield for his cynicism. Discovered in *The Gilded Age* and first applied in *Tom Sawyer*, this realization caused him to maintain the format of *Huckleberry Finn*, outwardly at least, as an adventure story. Mark Twain increasingly came to rely on fantasy for his full comedic expression; as Cox notes, he had after all 'found his being in the tall tale', which reveals the truth through a lie, while the conventional forms of fiction he so often condemned seemingly presented lies as the truth. For this reason he told Howells that bringing Tom Sawyer into manhood would make him 'like all the one-horse men in literature'. Also for this reason, he chose to begin his next book in the form of a semi-literate boy's autobiography.

Immediately upon the publication of *Tom Sawyer* in 1876, Mark Twain began work on *Huckleberry Finn*, progressing up to the end of Chapter Sixteen, wherein a depressed Huck battles with his conscience and sees his idyllic raft destroyed. Huck's depression and hatred of his conscience were seen by Henry Nash Smith as the result of a sense of guilt whose sources were buried in the psyche of Clemens. Such an opinion is supported by a short story written just before the completion of *Tom Sawyer*, called 'The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut'. In this comic tale, the narrator Mark Twain destroys a deformed twin dwarf, his conscience, who had been tormenting him all his life. The consequent euphoria of a man without a conscience, 'dead to remorse', is shown as the narrator murders, pillages, and swindles his way across the state. Although the story makes light of Mark Twain's torment under his conscience, it is well known that the private sufferings of Clemens were very real, though evidently often without justification. All his life he blamed himself for the death of his brother Henry, killed by a steamboat explosion when he himself was not even present. He accused himself of murdering his baby son by neglecting
to keep him covered during a carriage ride, when in fact the child died of diphtheria.\textsuperscript{41} The hardships to his family brought on by his business failures resulted in the death of his daughter Susy, he said, although she actually died of meningitis. Lurking behind all this and adding to his feelings of inadequacy and depression was the necessary maintenance of his role as a joker amid such uncomical circumstances.

The creative block preventing the progression of \textit{Huckleberry Finn} similarly prevented Mark Twain from exploring any other dangerous virgin territory. He devoted himself to tame, tired possibilities such as a collaboration with Bret Harte on a play based on Harte's well-worn poem, 'The Heathen Chinee'. Afterwards, he resurrected Simon Wheeler from the 'Jumping Frog' story in a detective drama that proved a disaster. In 1877, Mark Twain's most profitable book was a forgettable gimmick called \textit{Mark Twain's Self-Pasting Scrapbook}.\textsuperscript{42}

Adding to the frustration of his creativity was the unsympathetic reception in some corners of \textit{Tom Sawyer}, immediately considered by the self-proclaimed guardians of youthful morality as a bad influence and frivolous. Injured and ashamed, Mark Twain began as a reaction against unfavourable criticism a pattern of withdrawal from the comedic responsibility to which his name had committed him; in this instance he commenced work on the relatively humourless \textit{The Prince and the Pauper}. With a colossal chip on his shoulder, he vowed to publish it anonymously, "such grave and stately work being considered by the world to be above my proper level".\textsuperscript{43} An indication of the reactions which caused Mark Twain to attempt to pit 'nobility' against comedy of 'a low order' is given in a passage from his daughter Susy's juvenile biography of him, written when she was fourteen, after the publications of both \textit{The Prince and the Pauper} and \textit{Huckleberry Finn}.\textsuperscript{44}
One of papa's latest books is "The Prince and the Pauper" and it is unquestionably the best book he has ever written, some people want him to keep to his old style, some gentleman wrote him, "I enjoyed Huckleberry Finn immensely and am glad to see that you have returned to your own style". That enoyed me that enoyed me greatly, because it trobles me to have so few people know papa, I mean really know him, they think of Mark Twain as a humorist joking at everything.... I have wanted papa to write a book that would reveal something of his kind sympathetic nature, and "The Prince and the Pauper" partly does it!


In The Prince and the Pauper, Mark Twain's need to present himself as a serious, ennobled writer led him to sacrifice comic implication and characterization to a plot designed to criticize the injustices of monarchy and aristocracy. In his attempt to be serious, he betrayed his comic genius by elevating criticism above entertainment and pleasure, in spite of the book's medieval setting. Although Susy calls it 'so funny and nice', the book is generally a comedic failure because, with the exception of a few burlesque situations, comedy is precisely what it lacks. The Prince and the Pauper seems mostly to display Mark Twain's technical ability as a writer without employing the comedic deception necessary to his art. Even Susy in her little biography was willing to propose about her father, "Papa very seldom writes a passage without some humor in it somewhere, and I don't think he ever will". As it happened, there were many instances in his career that defied Susy's prediction.

In a review for the New York Tribune upon the publication of The Prince and the Pauper, William Dean Howells wrote, to Clemens's immense gratification, "The fascination of the narrative and the strength of the implied moral are felt at once, and increase together to the end in a degree which will surprise those who have found nothing but drollery in Mark Twain's books, and have not perceived the artistic sense and the
strain of 'deep earnestness underlying his humor'\textsuperscript{46}. This is almost verbatim in sentiment to a review that Howells had written a few years earlier of Mark Twain's \textit{Sketches, New and Old}. Seeing it as having "a growing seriousness and meaning in the apparently unmoralized drolling" of a "subtle humorist"\textsuperscript{47}, Howells submitted a review that prompted a grateful response from Clemens:

\begin{quote}
Yours is the recognized critical Court of Last Resort in this country; from its decision there is no appeal; & so, to have gained this decree of yours before I am forty years old, I regard as a thing to be right down proud of. Mrs Clemens says, 'Tell him I am just as grateful to him as I can be'. (It sounds as if she were grateful to you for heroically trampling the truth underfoot in order to praise me -- but in reality it means that she is grateful to you for being bold to utter a truth which she fully believes all competent people know, but which none has heretofore been brave enough to utter). You see, the thing that gravels her is that I am so persistently glorified as a mere buffoon, as if that entirely covered my case -- which she denies with venom.

\textit{(Mark Twain-Howells Letters, I, p. 107.)}
\end{quote}

There is no telling precisely how much Susy, Olivia, Howells, Mary Fairbanks, or anyone else influenced Clemens in the delivery of his comedy; but as Cox points out, although Clemens was not obliged to write humorous books, Mark Twain was. For this reason, although \textit{The Prince and the Pauper} was initially published under the authorship of Mark Twain, a growing number of companies took to publishing later editions crediting Clemens. The varying credit for \textit{The Prince and the Pauper} reveals that Clemens could not at that time fully accept the idea of being a humourist, yet wished to exploit his reputation by having it published initially under the authorship of Mark Twain. His indecision over whether or not to publish it anonymously had ended with the glowing delight of Howells's review; yet the indecision, both in itself and as it is manifest in the book, clearly betrays Clemens's lack of confidence in the power of his comedy at that time\textsuperscript{48}.  

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In 1877, as the manuscript of *Huckleberry Finn* lay resting in a pigeonhole and *The Prince and the Pauper* was being hailed as the finest and noblest production of Mark Twain's career, it was clear that as a humourist Clemens felt more insecure than ever. When asked by Howells to take a public part in the presidential campaign of Rutherford B. Hayes, he declined, saying, 'When a humorist ventures upon the grave concerns of life, he must do his job better than another man or he works harm to his cause'.49 That same year his insecurity intensified to the point of self-hatred, mostly as a result of his embarrassment over his publicly condemned Whittier birthday speech. Given in Boston in honour of Whittier's seventieth birthday, the speech humourously depicted a scene in which three disreputable tramps gain entry into Mark Twain's mining shack by passing themselves off as Emerson, Holmes, and Longfellow, quoting from their works over a poker game. The audience included the cream of Bostonian society and the three poets themselves; Howells, who was present, remembered that they responded only with a silence "'weighing many tons to the square inch'". Embarrassed for his friend, Howells kept his eyes glued to his plate, looking up once to find Clemens "'standing solitary amid his appalled and appalling listeners, with his joke dead on his hands'".50 Clemens spent the next months in the agony of shame and remorse, begging forgiveness both publicly and privately in letters and speeches. He wrote to Howells shortly afterwards, 'My sense of disgrace does not abate. It grows. I see that it is going to add itself to my list of permanencies -- a list of humiliations that extends back to when I was seven years old, & which keep on persecuting me regardless of my repentancies'.51 And, as he had done amid his days of disgust over his part in the decadence of the Gilded Age, he fled again to Europe.

Arriving in Germany in April 1878, with the key to the completion of
Huckleberry Finn only in his unconscious, he began work on another safe bet, the travel book called *A Tramp Abroad*. When asked what this book was to be about, Clemens replied with what may as well have been a reference to the completion of his greatest book and his own 'call' to the humourous profession: "A man sets out from home on a long journey to do some particular thing. But he does everything except what he set out to do".52 Six chapters of *A Tramp Abroad* depict a fictionalized account of Clemens's raft voyage from Heilbronn to Heidelberg, which is a shortening of the name 'Heidelbeereberg', meaning 'Huckleberry Mountain'. At the end of the voyage, the narrator sees a raft destroyed; to Justin Kaplan this is a subtle exorcism of Clemens's anxiety over *Huckleberry Finn*, suggesting both the persistence of his comic genius and the waywardness of his creativity. Mark Twain had come back to his creative block and stopping point, the destruction of Huck's raft, 'just as the tongue comes back to the site of the missing tooth'.53

Upon his return to America in 1879, Clemens experienced a rejuvenation of confidence in his comedic mastery and power when, at a banquet for ex-President Grant, he gave a speech that reduced the immobile 'Iron General' himself to hysterics. That the authority and austerity of the former Union commander could be so undermined by the drawling, shuffling, defiant teasing of a former Confederate private established Mark Twain as a comedic anti-hero victorious over the hero, with laughter as the weapon. Ostensibly a toast in honour of the country's babies, the speech that sent Grant and the Army of the Tennessee into fits of laughter was a double-edged tribute depicting Grant as the scourge of the battlefield but bumbling and helpless with a baby in his arms. "You could face the death storm at Donelson and Vicksburg and give back blow for blow"; Mark Twain taunted, "but when he clawed your whiskers, and pulled your hair, and twisted your nose, you
had to take it". Justin Kaplan continues this account of how Mark Twain's speech, easily as provocative as that of the Whittier fiasco, completely erased the shame and embarrassment of the former event:

Relentlessly, with an apparent unawareness of the reverence in which these veterans held Grant, he described the future commander in chief of the American armies lying in his cradle and occupied with 'trying to find some way of getting his big toe in his mouth'. This goal, Clemens went on, 'the illustrious guest of this evening turned his entire attention to some fifty-six years ago'. Here he remembered that the laughter ceased; there was only 'a sort of shuddering silence' which he associated with the Whittier dinner, and then he sprang his masterful and breathtaking surprise: 'And if the child is but the prophecy of the man, there are mighty few who will doubt that he succeeded'.

(Justin Kaplan, Mr Clemens and Mark Twain (London, 1967), pp. 226-27.)

The roar of laughter that shattered the silence rang in Clemens's ears for hours afterwards, as he shook hands and received congratulations well into the morning. His joyous letters written the next day glow with his relish over having vanquished Ulysses Grant himself; as Kaplan notes, they are written in terms of mortal combat. To his wife he wrote, "I fetched him! I broke him up utterly! The audience saw that for once in his life he had been knocked out of his iron serenity". He told Howells, "I knew I could lick him. I shook him up like dynamite ... my truths had wracked all the bones of his body apart". To his brother he wrote, "He laughed until his bones ached".54

The success of the Grant tribute certainly must have helped to revive Clemens's confidence in the comedic power of Mark Twain. Yet before he could apply it to the completion of Huckleberry Finn, he had to make one more voyage back to Hannibal and the Mississippi of his childhood. His motive in returning to Missouri in 1882 was to gather material to augment the compilation of his magazine serial, 'Old Times on the Mississippi', later published in book form as Life on the
Mississippi. Clemens found on his return to the river the remnants of a
dead Southern aristocratic society, barren of any moral or cultural
progress, worshipping violence and bigotry, utterly corrupt. Although he
would write in his autobiography of "the pathetic past, the beautiful
past, the dear and lamented past", the predominant reminders of the past
were conjured up as memories of loss and terror, all depicted in Life on
the Mississippi: the steamboat explosion that killed his brother; the
burning of a tramp in the village gaol; assassinations and lynchings; the
stoning of a slave. Clemens saw the remains of the defunct riverboat
heritage that was his own, and ended Life on the Mississippi with a
brutally honest, regretful account of the South's decline. The
disillusionments he encountered on his return home compelled him to
refrain from romantic nostalgia; he would soon refer to it as "mental
and moral masturbation". As a Southerner, he was humiliated, so much so
that in Huckleberry Finn he presented a South not of 'the dear and
lamented past', but as a realm of terror from which the protagonist must
flee or be extinguished. Surging through his final burst of creativity
upon his return from Missouri, he began the completion of Huckleberry
Finn in 1883, writing to his mother, "I haven't had such booming working
days for many years. This summer it is no more trouble to me to write
than it is to lie".

As he was referring here to the final phase of that book, Clemens
evidently betrayed his reservations over the potency and validity of
comedy and artistic illusion in general; it is possible that the
seemingly newfound confidence with which he had viewed his artistic
abilities was transferred to, and subsequently dwarfed by, those areas of
business that were such a bane to him, and would so remain. In any
event, the ink of Huckleberry Finn was not yet dry when Clemens launched
his publishing firm, invented his history game, poured his earnings into
vineyards and insurance and manufacturing companies, and devoted himself to the other affairs that would combine to financially ruin him. His subsequent writings, private and public, show that his loss of confidence in both business and artistry, combined with the darkening of his outlook on the entire course of human progress in his own century, led in a direct path to the cynical depression and bitterness variously manifest in the remainder of his works.

Immediately after the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*, the literary endeavour that most preoccupied Clemens was the publishing of Ulysses Grant's *Memoirs*, the experience of which seems to have greatly undermined Clemens's artistic confidence. Bankrupt and dying of cancer, Grant had promised Clemens's publishing firm the contract in return for a settlement that would save his family from starvation. Far from securing a penurious sum, the *Memoirs* brought in a royalty from Clemens of $250,000, the largest single royalty payment thus far in the history of publishing. Although Clemens, as publisher, was in the unique position of offering his former military adversary 'terms as liberal as those Grant had given at Appomattox', he was nevertheless awed and intimidated by Grant as an artist. Clemens watched in wonder as the dying general, sustained by cocaine, raced to complete his memoirs before his strength gave out. Noting with envy that Grant had dictated ten thousand words in a single sitting, while he himself had taken eight years to complete his last book, Clemens complained, "It kills me, these days, to write the half of it". He was made so insecure by the example of Grant that, when the general asked for his opinion of the *Memoirs*, Clemens said that he felt the way Columbus's cook would have felt had the Admiral asked him about navigation.

In 1885, the year of Grant's death, Mark Twain wrote and published 'The Private History of a Campaign That Failed', formerly entitled 'My
Campaign Against Grant. A humourous apology of Clemens's two-week sojourn in the Confederate army as a naive, incompetent scout, the sketch seems not only a conversion of his humiliation at the hands of the Union general as both soldier and artist, but also an implicit burlesque of the sort of private history he had just published for Grant.60 Again the anti-hero felt the need to confront the hero, with comedy as the only weapon at his disposal.

The next year, Clemens entered into what would be his most financially and morally crippling attempt in business, organizing a company to manufacture and market the Paige typesetting machine, a temperamental and complicated invention that would operate only once, with only Clemens and the inventor present. This year he also began work on A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, completing it in 1889, five months after the sole operation of the typesetter. As Justin Kaplan notes, the Yankee and the machine were inseparably twinned in the mind of Mark Twain: 'Both were tests of a perfectible world in which, contrary to all his insights and experience, friction and mechanical difficulties were equivalents of ignorance and superstition. Both expressed a secular religion which had as an unexamined article of faith a belief not in eternal life but in perpetual motion'.61 Also, both were to fail Clemens as businessman, artist, and comedian.

Not less important in A Connecticut Yankee is evidence of another twinning in the mind of Clemens, that of his own reliance on deceptions and his obvious despair of them as they existed in both himself and his society. Comparisons have frequently been made between the failure of the Paige typesetter and that of Hank Morgan's technological utopia, concluding that Clemens's repeated frustrations in business were the sole inspiration for the reversal and holocaust in the plot, which began as a burlesque entry in Mark Twain's notebook of December 1884:
Dream of being a knight errant in armor in the middle ages. Have the notions & habits of thought of present day mixed with the necessities of that. No pockets in armor. No way to manage certain requirements of nature. Can't scratch. Cold in the head -- can't blow -- can't get at handkerchief, can't use iron sleeve. Iron gets red hot in the sun -- leaks in the rain, gets white with frost & freezes me solid in winter. Suffer from lice and fleas. Make disagreeable clatter when I enter church. Can't dress or undress myself. Always getting struck by lightning. Fall down, can't get up. (Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals, III, p. 78.)

Yet it is evident that Mark Twain had conflicting tragic feelings even before getting embroiled in the problems of the Paige typesetter. An entry in his notebook from December 1885 reveals this prediction for Hank Morgan:

He mourns his lost land -- has come to England & revisited it, but it is all changed & become old, so old! -- & it was so fresh & new, so virgin before.... Has lost all interest in life -- is found dead next morning -- suicide. (Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals, III, p. 216.)

The timing of these entries casts doubt on the total influence of the typesetter's failure on the outcome of the book, as well as Bernard De Voto's contention that the final tragedy was a direct result of Clemens's despair over his consequent bankruptcy and the death of his daughter, Susy, for the book was completed five and seven years prior to both events respectively. Thus it was not that Clemens's financial and familial tragedies so preoccupied him that he let his despair seep into the writing of the book; they certainly must have played a part, but it was deeper than this, for his despair was present while his family was intact, and remained after he had finally cleared his debts and regained a vast fortune.

Concomitant with his personal tragedies were those of the failures, moral and concrete, of western civilization in the nineteenth century. In his own country, the industrial revolution had snowballed out of hand
with the accompanying social corruptions and deceptions over which he had despaired decades before. Thus more than reflecting the personal failures of Samuel Clemens, the Yankee represented the failures of American society during the industrial and technological revolution. While as a businessman Clemens had lauded Paige as one of the most original thinkers and inventors in history, as Mark Twain he was to discount all claims to human originality and progress. Through the markedly harsh and cynical voice of the doomed Hank Morgan, Yankee and arch confidence man, Mark Twain declared:

All that is original in us, and therefore fairly creditable or discreditable to us, can be covered up and hidden by the point of a cambric needle, all the rest being atoms contributed by, and inherited from, a procession of ancestors that stretches back a billion years to the Adam-clam or grasshopper or monkey from whom our race has been so tediously and ostentatiously and unprofitably developed.

(The Unabridged Mark Twain, edited by Lawrence Teacher, 2 vols (Philadelphia, 1976), I, p. 1035.)

The object of Mark Twain's satire is not only the American technological dystopia, but also the confidence man who lives by it, destroys by it, and is eventually destroyed himself. Hank Morgan is a nineteenth century exaggeration of Franklin, though without Franklin's wit, good humour, social conscience, or philosophical depth. He is in his own words 'a Yankee of the Yankees ... nearly barren of sentiment', and in Clemens's words, 'an ass'. With a shallow, half-baked democratic idealism as the justification for boosting himself and his gimmicks, he dupes the unavoidably credulous subjects of Camelot with his seemingly miraculous abilities at plumbing repair, solar calculation, setting off dynamite, and shooting down a man with a pistol. He thus becomes a magical demi-god, 'the Boss' -- until he is put to sleep for thirteen centuries by a real magician; but before Merlin can put him safely away, he and his Gatling guns succeed in wasting twenty-five thousand knights.
in ten minutes, all in the name of progress. When he finally dies in his own century, a madman raving about his part in the destruction of Arthur's England, Mark Twain says, "He was getting up his last "effect"; but he never finished it."  

Hank Morgan is indeed as 'barren of sentiment' as the industrial society he represents. With such a hollow, underdeveloped character at his disposal, Mark Twain was prevented from impersonating those qualities of innocence, compassion, gravity, and general human depth so essential to the humour of Huck Finn. The character of Hank Morgan proved little more than a caricature of his own society, with a con man's slang and advertising bombast as its defining qualities; such shallowness could not contain enough unwitting intelligence, wit, or humanity to accommodate and convert into humour the cynicism and rage of Samuel Clemens. It is not that Mark Twain's cynicism prevented him from turning A Connecticut Yankee into effective comedy, for there was enough of that motivating the comic genius of Huckleberry Finn. Hank Morgan was a failed, petty confidence man, comedically as well as socially, while Huck Finn's unconscious and conscious mastery at deception, with his mock innocence and unwitting irony, provided the inverted point of view upon which the humour of his narrative depended. Thereby could Mark Twain disguise his cynicism, while with the employment of Hank Morgan he unquestionably betrayed it.  

In 1885, the year of the notebook entry predicting the suicide of Hank Morgan, Huckleberry Finn had come out to reviews of its "blood-curdling humor", its "coarse and dreary fun", and its "irreverence". Mark Twain was accused of having "no reliable sense of propriety", with newspapers from the Atlantic to the Mississippi rallying behind the sentiment of Louisa May Alcott: "If Mr Clemens cannot think of something better to tell our pure-minded lads and lasses,
he had best stop writing for them". In a final measure of social condemnation, the Concord, Massachusetts, library committee voted to expel the book from its shelves as "trash suitable only for the slums". "That will sell 25,000 copies for us sure", Clemens wrote in a published letter; but in spite of such public shows of confidence, his private letters reveal his sense of injury and anger. It is therefore reasonable to surmise that this also may have played a part in the outcome of A Connecticut Yankee, that once again attacked for his comedic efforts, Clemens lost confidence in the power of his comedy, and in an effort to refrain from applying it to unfavourable criticism, strove to make his next book overwhelmingly serious to the point of tragedy. And, just as he had done after the unsympathetic reaction to Tom Sawyer, he fell back upon characters that had already been proved safe and reliable. Before attempting his next wholly original production, Pudd'nhead Wilson, he attempted to revive Colonel Sellers from The Gilded Age in what resulted in the completed, though negligible, effort, The American Claimant. At the same time he wrote the notebook entry darkly predicting the deaths of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn at sixty, but later changed his mind to bring them back in Tom Sawyer Abroad.

By 1891, still not convinced of the hopelessness of the Paige typesetter, Clemens was investing in it to the tune of three thousand dollars a month. His resources nearly dissipated, he began to borrow from friends and relations; and in a last-ditch effort to economize his meagre holdings, he and his family once again sailed for the relatively cheaper economy of Europe. Basing himself in Germany, Clemens continued to manage the typesetter affairs along with a handful of other ventures, making eight Atlantic crossings over the next three years, finally returning a bankrupt. In 1894, after thirteen years of hope and a loss of over $190,000, he wrote in despair to his partners in New York, "Get
me out of business! and I will be yours forever gratefully". In what was primarily an effort to stave off his creditors, he that year completed and sold to *Century Magazine* for $6,500 a story that would be serialized and published in book form as *Puddn'head Wilson*.

Possibly the most enigmatic of all Mark Twain's comedies, this book was his final look at America, written from the distant vantage point of Italy, nearly sixty-five years after the time of the narrative. In *Puddn'head Wilson*, Mark Twain explored with overwhelming ambivalence and ambiguity, and from the depths of depression, the frightening degree to which human relations depend on the manipulations and interpretations of outward posture. He converted into humourous fiction the agonizing debate over man's slavery to his own uncertain identity, to a great extent a manifestation of Clemens's own preoccupation with the dual identity he shared with the comedian Mark Twain. The final implications of *Puddn'head Wilson* are easily as bleak, or more so, than those of *A Connecticut Yankee*, for while the fate of Hank Morgan's England implied an alternative, given that man might still draw in the reins of a runaway technology, the fate of Tom Driscoll, Valet de Chambre, and Dawson's Landing is given as hopelessly inevitable, with no consoling justification other than that our condition is thus because it is thus. Yet of the two, if *Puddn'head Wilson* is the greater comic success, it is because rather than relying on the passionate blusterings of the underdeveloped Hank Morgan, Mark Twain utilized a particularly distant and effective voice, that of an ironic observer, embodied in both the narrator and the final arbiter of the antagonist's fate, Pudd'nhead Wilson himself. These two personae combine into a mastery of ironic distance and deception that allowed Mark Twain to present one of his
darkest fables as the effective comedy not attained in his following, and final, novelistic attempt, *The Mysterious Stranger*. As the outcome of *Puddn'head Wilson* suggests, the book was not only one of Mark Twain's finest comedies, but also his final denial of the validity of humour as an instrument of social criticism or change.

* * *

*Puddn'head Wilson* began as a burlesque short story called 'Those Extraordinary Twins', as Mark Twain explained in the author's note, which so developed through the introduction of new characters that it became two incompatible tales, finally separated by what Mark Twain called a 'literary Ceasarean operation'. Clemens's obsession with twinship had manifested itself long before this short story was begun; in 1869 he had written another farce, 'The Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins'. Based on the real Siamese twins, Chang and Eng, the comedy of this story exploited 'the co-existence of two morally different persons in a shared body'. The real twins were known to have quarreled violently over moral matters, and Mark Twain utilized this, for example, by having them fight on opposite sides of the Civil War, capturing and then exchanging each other as prisoners. His literary preoccupation with twinship continued, often with the synonymous subjects of claimants and changelings; his most recurrent strategies were to play upon twins and pairs: Chang and Eng, Tom and Huck, Huck and Jim, Huck and Buck, the Prince and the Pauper, the Duke and the King, Angelo and Luigi Capello, Tom Driscoll and Valet de Chambre. This emphasis placed on dual personality and mistaken identity seemingly extends back to the initial creation of the persona 'Mark Twain', out of which developed the internal conflict that Justin Kaplan sees as suggested by two sets of near homonyms: Twain/twins and Clemens/claimants.
The debilitating extent to which Clemens regarded his twinship with Mark Twain is revealed by his repeated treatment of twins as freaks, either when joined as Chang and Eng, or as the joined and separated Capello brothers in 'Those Extraordinary Twins' and Puddn'head Wilson respectively. At the time of his death, the last coherent words Clemens spoke before drifting into coma were ravings about "the laws of mentality", dual personality, and the most monstrous embodiment of literary twinship, Jekyll and Hyde. A month before his death, while noting that his birth had coincided with the 1835 appearance of Halley's Comet, Clemens imagined God saying about the comet and himself, "Here are those unaccountable freaks. They came in together, they must go out together". On the day of his death in 1910, Halley's Comet had just reached its perihelion.

Leslie Fiedler sees Mark Twain's treatment of twins as freaks as an indication of Clemens's feeling that such 'monsters' as Chang and Eng, the Tocci brothers, the fictional Capellos, or, one might suggest, the twins Clemens and Mark Twain, are in the final analysis tragic, since their dignity and suffering incite laughter rather than the compassion upon which human serenity depends.

Such indications are abundant in Puddn'head Wilson, wherein Mark Twain not only faces the question of general humanity's slavery to contrived identity, but, in the subplot, he reveals his preoccupation with his own slavery to the 'freakish' identity of Mark Twain. Thus can Puddn'head Wilson be interpreted on two levels, the universal and the personal, both explicitly pertaining to manipulations of confidence and posture.

*Mark Twain expressed a telling opinion in an omitted passage from A Tramp Abroad, wherein he describes himself as a comedian talking "nonsense" to his audience, feeling "serious almost to sadness", with "no impulse toward the opposite direction".

(Mark Twain-Howells Letters, I, p. 231n.)
The subplot centres around the agonies of the twins, Angelo and Luigi Capello, newly arrived in Dawson's Landing with memories of their dependence on a freakish public identity. No longer physically joined to his brother, though still psychologically bound, Angelo reveals the tragedy of a human's exploiting his own freakishness in the name of laughter, out of monetary necessity:

'Ours parents could have made themselves comfortable by exhibiting us as a show, and they had many and large offers; but the thought revolted their pride, and they said they would starve and die first. But what they wouldn't consent to do we had to do without the formality of consent. We were seized for the debts occasioned by their illness and their funerals, and placed among the attractions of a cheap museum in Berlin to earn the liquidation money. It took us two years to get out of that slavery'.

(Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson, edited by Malcolm Bradbury (Harmondsworth, 1981), p. 91.)

At the time of writing Pudd'nhead Wilson, Clemens was about to begin a world-wide lecture tour to regain his lost finances. He had often rebelled against the necessity of stepping onto the lecture platform, repeatedly vowing never to do so again for any price. Notable in his complaints was his repugnance over audience possessiveness, so that his impression of his own slavery to the fabricated identity of Mark Twain was exacerbated by the unmerciful grasp of public adulation. In Pudd'nhead Wilson, the twins' first appearance at the home of the Widow Cooper and her daughter, Rowena, culminates with all the neighbourhood rushing in to seen the new, fine, foreign birds:

the twins drifted about from group to group, talking easily and fluently and winning approval, compelling admiration and achieving favour from all. The widow followed the conquering march with a proud eye, and every now and then Rowena said to herself with deep satisfaction, 'And to think they are ours -- all ours'.

(p. 93.)
The narrator here is ironically distant enough to prevent the same resentment that Clemens often felt for his audience from appearing in its brutal immediacy on the pages. Clemens's persistent complaint that he was demeaning himself before mindless audiences prompted Oliver Wendell Holmes to write to him in sympathy, "'These negative faces with their vacuous eyes and stony lineaments pump and suck the warm soul. They are what kill the lecturer'". Although Clemens certainly concurred with this damning opinion, in _Pudd'nhead Wilson_ the irony of the narrator presents his disgust in the form of indulgent condescension, with sarcasm lurking behind the evident sympathy with the widow and Rowena as they bask in the cheap thrills of hosting 'their' celebrities:

> Eager inquiries concerning the twins were pouring into their enchanted ears all the time; each was the constant centre of a group of breathless listeners; each recognized that she knew now for the first time the real meaning of that great word Glory, and perceived the stupendous value of it, and understood why men in all ages had been willing to throw away meaner happinesses, treasure, life itself, to get a taste of its sublime and supreme joy. Napoleon and all his kind stood accounted for — and justified. (p. 94.)

Only slightly less sarcasm is employed in a passage wherein Judge Driscoll, wishing to be the first to 'display' the twins in public, takes them on a whirlwind showing-off of the town's churches, gaol, Freemason's hall, slaughterhouse, and fire department. The sentiment expressed in the passage is an ironically softened echo of many similar descriptions in Mark Twain's letters written during his lecture tours. The bitter resignation with which he had to ingratiate himself to well-meaning, thoughtless hosts is comedically transformed into the twins' unspoken responses to the Judge's efforts:

> the twins admired his admiration, and paid him back the best they could, though they could have done better if some fifteen or sixteen hundred thousand previous experiences of this sort in various countries had not
already rubbed off a considerable part of the novelty of it.
(pp. 96-97.)

That Clemens did feel a slave to his identity, and a sort of freak or buffoon as well, is made evident enough in his letters, especially those written in the exhaustion of his globe-spanning lecture tours, or at other times when 'being funny' seemed a monstrously inhuman expectation. As early as 1871, when his financial troubles were nowhere near their magnitude as during the writing of Pudd'nhead Wilson, Clemens had despaired to his brother about necessarily "seeing my hated nom de plume (for I do loathe the very sight of it) in print again every month". His other sufferings had also piled on, irrespective of his expected bearing as a comedian; when they became too heavy, he resigned as a regular contributor to Galaxy Magazine with this valedictory admission:

For the last eight months, with hardly an interval, I have had for my fellows and comrades, night and day, doctors and watchers of the sick! During these eight months death has taken two members of my home circle and malignantly threatened two others. All this I have experienced, yet all the time being under contract to furnish 'humorous' matter once a month for this magazine. I am speaking the exact truth in the above details. Please to put yourself in my place and contemplate the grisly grotesqueness of the situation. Some of the 'humor' I have written during this period could have been injected into a funeral sermon without disturbing the solemnity of the occasion.

(Mark Twain's Contributions to 'The Galaxy', edited by Bruce McElderry (Gainesville, 1961), p. 131.)

One of those funereal pieces had been 'Mark Twain's (Burlesque) Autobiography', in which Clemens assigned his 'hated nom de plume' to a direct lineage of history's most infamous criminals. The hostility and self-hatred that so prevades the sketch were later transformed into the bitter knowledge that such suffering inspires the best of comedy, as Mark Twain would admit in the words of Pudd'nhead Wilson himself: "The secret
source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven. 74

As he wrote Pudd'nhead Wilson with the conscious intent of staving off bankruptcy, Clemens faced the realization that he must again exploit his sorrow in the name of an alter-ego whose identity forever threatened to displace his own. Were the question of his own identity the sole inspiration of the book, he might not have been able to extend the dilemma into universally social, political, economic, and moral spheres. But this he did do, upon recognizing that his own internal struggle was embodied in the impostures of civilization in the nineteenth century, and especially in the America of the Gilded Age, where imposture so seemed to be identity. Thus in Pudd'nhead Wilson, all comic and moral tension stems from the ambiguities of identity caused by Roxy's miscegenation and confidence game; the ripeness for imposture and exploitation of confidence thereby become Mark Twain's main theme. 75

* * *

Clemens's questions concerning his own identity were embodied on a universal scale during the 1890s in the questions of heredity and environment, and the accompanying obsession with science and technology in lieu of a former religious security. Accompanying the increasing reduction of moral certainty after Darwin was a seemingly heightened susceptibility in the national psyche to manipulations by characters of confident nature; for however dubious the confidence man had become in post-bellum America, he nevertheless flourished, to a large extent depending on a prevailing moral insecurity. The ambivalence revealed by the author over moral questions caused Pudd'nhead Wilson to remain as unresolved as Clemens himself during his final ravings about dual personality; thus like Huckleberry Finn and Melville's The Confidence-
Man, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* amounts to both apology for and condemnation of manipulations of appearance and belief. The book's ambivalence arises from the unresolved debate over whether 'the Moral Sense is not an absolute power but a social acquisition' as vulnerable to manipulations of confidence as any other sense.  

Thus could Mark Twain repeat in a famous late-letter the sentiment expressed in both *A Connecticut Yankee* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*: "We have no real morals, but only artificial ones, morals created and preserved by the forced suppression of natural and healthy instincts", yet still depict Tom Driscoll's depravity as the result of a distinctly unhealthy 'native viciousness'. And thus could he present two equally caustic entries in 'Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar', one lamenting environmental manipulations:

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Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.
(p. 84.)
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and the other lamenting the unshakable influence of heredity:

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Adam was but human -- this explains it all. He did not want the apple for the apple's sake; he wanted it only because it was forbidden. The mistake was in not forbidding the serpent; then he would have eaten the serpent.
(p. 61.)
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Mark Twain's prevailing obsessions in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* with duplicity, doubles, changelings, and 'dressing up' play on the moral ambiguities of identity represented by the prevailing questions over environment and heredity. As Malcolm Bradbury writes, the world of the book is one of a paradox in which 'no one can be sure, literally or figuratively, of his own whiteness or blackness'. The absence of secure identity amid the social confusions of America, where a man could be made
or doomed by a single fleeting impression, is first depicted in the naming of David Wilson as 'Pudd'nhead'. A brilliant lawyer and sophist, Wilson is branded a fool for life by his neighbours because they cannot see the irony of his innocent joke about a noisy dog: "I wish I owned half of that dog... Because I would kill my half". Pudd'nhead's comic view of identity embodied in the concept of two halves of a dog represents Mark Twain's main thematic preoccupations: duality and uncertainties of identity.  

The underlying irony of the book is the bitter knowledge that displays the hopelessly deterministic fate of man in a paradoxical alliance with the equally forceful assertion that 'training is everything'. The unmaking of Tom Driscoll hinges on the one evidence that all his pretences could not disguise — his fingerprints — with his fate suggesting Mark Twain's belief that every man's identity as a man designates his slavery to the paradox. He would write late in life that all men are thus fatally bound, that "the skin of every human being contains a slave". Mark Twain's adherence to the paradox led to his portrayal of Tom Driscoll as, on the one hand, a slave by virtue of his thirty-one parts of Negro blood, while on the other hand he is designated a slave because society had been trained — or convinced — into accepting the moral validity of slavery. Thus is he a human cast by an unavoidable inherited condition into a bondage that is arbitrarily and environmentally imposed. The paradox is further represented by the fact that the only given depiction of Tom as a fully developed character is as an impostor, since everything the reader knows about his character comes after Roxy has exchanged him in the cradle; yet underlying all is the reader's awareness that he is not in fact the 'white' Tom Driscoll, but the 'black' Valet de Chambre. Then, in a further confusion, the reader is reminded that those standards designating the babies as 'black' or
'white' by virtue of the blood in their veins are 'fiction of law and custom' (p. 64), since in all outward appearance, Tom, Roxy, and Valet de Chambre are white-skinned. Thus Pudd'nhead Wilson echoes the paradoxical resolution of The Confidence-Man: we are bound to rely on final appearances that can never be trusted.

The narration first explicitly reveals a conviction of environmental slavery; yet a balancing conviction of inherited slavery is implied by the reader's awareness that the entire narration is based upon a switch, a hiding of an inherited condition. Thus can the narration reveal the power of conditioning over Roxy, who upon exchanging the babies convinces herself into forgetting the familial relation:

by the fiction created by herself, he was become her master; the necessity of recognising this relation outwardly and of perfecting herself in the forms required to express the recognition, had moved her to such diligence and faithfulness in practising these forms that this exercise soon concreted itself into habit; it became automatic and unconscious; then a natural result followed: deceptions intended solely for others gradually grew practically into self-deceptions as well; the mock reverence became real reverence; the mock obsequiousness real obsequiousness.... He was her darling, her master, her deity all in one, and in her worship of him she forgot who she was and what she had been. (p. 77.)

Thus 'the dupe of her own deceptions', Roxy displays an unavoidable susceptibility to impressions equal to that of Tom, who undergoes a change of his moral landscape overnight when an outraged Roxy reveals to him his true Negro heritage: 'Some of his low places he found lifted to ideals, some of his ideals had sunk to valleys, and lay there with the sackcloth and ashes of pumice-stone and sulphur on their ruined heads' (p. 118). With such reversals of conviction exposed to Roxy, Tom, and the reader, Mark Twain creates a troubling ambiguity by depicting humans hopelessly suspended in a hall of mirrors, their identities defined by conflicting attributes of appearance and inherence. This is the tragi-
comic irony upon which the book is based; thus the reader must ask whether Tom's reactions are those of a man born a black man, or a man persuaded into thinking he is a black man:

it was the 'nigger' in him asserting its humility, and he blushed and was abashed. And the 'nigger' in him was surprised when the white friend put out his hand for a shake with him. He found the 'nigger' in him involuntarily giving the road, on the sidewalk, to the white rowdy and loafer....

He dreaded his meals; the 'nigger' in him was ashamed to sit at the white folks' table, and feared discovery all the time; and once when Judge Driscoll said, 'What's the matter with you? You look as meek as a nigger', he felt as secret murderers are said to feel when the accuser says, 'Thou art the man!' (pp. 118-19.)

The inability to conclude the source of our beliefs, resulting in a plot structure depending equally on the pre-ordained and the arbitrarily imposed, causes Mark Twain to establish the one inescapable certainty of the book, that judgements based on outward appearance are both unavoidable and unpredictably invalid. He thus contrasts appearances of gentility with the barbarism that inspires them, as depicted in his treatment of the Virginian aristocrats; similarly the impressions of the townsfolk that earn David Wilson the name 'Pudd'nhead' are countered with the cleverness he reveals at the end; and the appearances of Roxy and Tom as white cannot prevent them from falling prey to the 'fiction of law and custom' designating them as black slaves.

Mark Twain's intention is to attack the gullibility with which people depend on appearances, yet he also implies no alternative lying between those of sheer credulity and black mistrust — a prospect fairly bleak, giving validity to the comedy's seemingly ironic designation as a tragedy. Mark Twain warns in 'Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar' of the danger of relying on outward appearance:
Even the clearest and most perfect circumstantial evidence is likely to be at fault, after all, and therefore ought to be received with great caution. Take the case of any pencil, sharpened by any woman; if you have witnesses, you will find that she did it with a knife; but if you take simply the aspect of the pencil, you will say she did it with her teeth.

Yet he provides no recourse to do other than 'take simply the aspect of the pencil'. The hopelessness of the situation is given in the twins' opposing visual perceptions of Tom at their first meeting:

Angelo thought he had a good eye; Luigi thought there was something veiled and sly about it. Angelo thought he had a pleasant free-and-easy way of talking; Luigi thought it was more so than was agreeable. Angelo thought he was a sufficiently nice young man; Luigi reserved his decision.

Tom in fact displays all these qualities in the course of the novel, some of which are cultivated, some of which exist in spite of all pretence. The trouble for the twins comes not in determining the existence of such incongruous attributes, but in determining which are genuine and which are not. While the reader is privy to the omnipresent narrator's guidance in making a judgement, the implication remains that in real life we are without such guidance.

For this reason is concern justified when Mark Twain depicts the gullibility of the townsfolk in their blind reverence of York Driscoll, Pembroke Howard, and the aristocratic code of the FFV. The religion of these austere figures is that of gentlemen 'without stain or blemish'; and so the community sees them, but it takes the narrator's irony to reveal how far from the truth their impressions are:

Pembroke Howard, lawyer and bachelor, aged about forty, was another old Virginian grandee with proved descent from the First Families. He was a fine, brave, majestic creature, a gentleman according to the nicest requirements of the Virginian rule, a devoted Presbyterian, an authority on the 'code', and a man always courteously
ready to stand up before you in the field if any act or word of his had seemed doubtful or suspicious to you, and explain it with any weapon you might prefer from brad-awls to artillery.

(pp. 57-58.)

In the same manner in which he treated Colonel Grangerford in *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain shows the incompatibility between York Driscoll's barbarism and show of gentility; at times he does this solely through ironies inherent in the dialogue, as when Driscoll, himself a judge, vents his rage on Tom for settling an assault case off the dueling ground: "'You cur! You scum! You vermin! Do you mean to tell me that the blood of my race has suffered a blow and crawled to a court of law about it?'" (p. 141). And, just as Colonel Grangerford unconsciously revealed his hidden nature by chiding Buck for shooting from behind a bush, the Judge reveals the same by lamenting over the shame of his having met a confessed assassin on the dueling ground: "'That this assassin should have put the affront upon me of letting me meet him on the field of honour as if he were a gentleman is a matter which I will presently settle -- but not now. I will not shoot him until after the election'" (p. 171).

Another description of the aristocrats reveals a particularly important example of Mark Twain's ironic tone -- important because it is upon this sort of irony that a valid interpretation of the book frequently rests. In a marked difference from his handling of the aristocrats in *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain allows the narrator to employ blatant sarcasm in a description of Percy Driscoll, who resolves to sell three slaves down the river for an unsolved petty theft. First described as 'a fairly humane man towards slaves and other animals' and 'an exceedingly humane man toward the erring of his own race' (p. 66), Driscoll relents at the last moment when all three confess:
He knew, himself, that he had done a noble and gracious thing, and was privately well pleased with his magnanimity; and that night he set the incident down in his diary, so that his son might read it in after years, and be thereby moved to deeds of gentleness and humanity himself.

(p. 68.)

This is not the only instance of Mark Twain's sarcastic treatment of the petty aristocracy of Dawson's Landing; and Cox notes that the failure to recognize this is the failure to understand the irony of the entire novel, as F.R. Leavis evidently did in saying that "Mark Twain unmistakably admires Judge Driscoll and Pembroke Howard". To be aware of the contempt in which Mark Twain held the corrupt Southern gentility, one might consider, as Henry Nash Smith did, that the names of Tudor nobility given to York Leicester Driscoll, Thomas a Beckett Driscoll, Cecil Burleigh Essex, Percy Northumberland Driscoll, and Pembroke Howard ironically link the petty elite of Dawson's Landing with the English aristocracy annihilated by Hank Morgan at the end of A Connecticut Yankee. 81

Another problem in understanding Mark Twain's treatment of the corrupt elite, and one with bleak implications, is that he offers no opposing faction or model of good for the reader's approbation or emulation. Although ridiculing the aristocratic code, he presents it as not much worse than the democracy practised by the townspeople. 82 It is an indictment of the entire community when the local newspaper reports the unwitnessed murder of Judge Driscoll, known to be an enemy of the Capello twins, though in fact killed by his own nephew Tom:

"Judge Driscoll, an old and respected citizen, was assassinated here about midnight by a profligate Italian nobleman or barber, on account of a quarrel growing out of the recent election. The assassin will probably be lynched."

(p. 197.)
The 'quarrel' between the Judge and the twins is actually the duel over Luigi's assault on Tom. The townspeople are criticized for their admiration of the duel as much as the aristocracy are condemned for their participation in it; the community's subsequent farcical democracy gives no alternative to the corrupt remnants of the FFV's feudal code. Not only are the participants deified by the community on the morning after the duel, but

Even the duellists' subordinates came in for a handsome share of the public approbation: wherefore Pudd'nhead Wilson was suddenly become a man of consequence. When asked to run for the mayoralty Saturday night he was risking defeat, but Sunday morning found him a made man and his success assured. The delighted community rose as one man and applauded; and when the twins were asked to stand for seats in the forthcoming aldermanic board, and consented, the public contentment was rounded and complete.

(pp. 163-64.)

It is no compliment to Pudd'nhead Wilson that the townspeople choose him as mayoral candidate, for it is not due to his merits, but rather to his foolhardy participation in the duel as Judge Driscoll's second. Mark Twain does not so much offer Pudd'nhead as an alternative worthy of praise as much as a necessary, somewhat disenchanted, ironic observer. He is generally aloof from the happenings in town throughout the book, withdrawn under the reputation of a fool. While he is depicted as the most rational and good-natured character in the book, he nevertheless takes no pains to dismiss either the absurd democracy or the aristocratic code; his best friend is in fact Judge Driscoll. Pudd'nhead's main role is as the agent who exposes the false identity of Tom through his mastery at law and fingerprint detection; thereby does he reveal the slavery of man to predetermination in the form of a fingerprint, and to environment in the form of Tom's legal status as a slave. His courtroom revelation exposes the untrustworthiness of appearance and the inescapable
dependence on it; this more than anything else justifies the naming of the book after him. Even this justification is compromised by the fact that Pudd'nhead notices Tom's fingerprints only through a lucky accident in a moment of distraction.

The character who seemingly attracts the most of Mark Twain's sympathy is Roxy; her actions are understood, under the circumstances: "Was she bad? Was she worse than the general run of her race? No. They had an unfair show in the battle of life—and they held it no sin to take military advantage of the enemy" (p. 67). Described as 'the heir of two centuries of unatoned insult and outrage' (p. 109), Roxy embodies the only clear potential of threat to the complacency of Dawson's Landing. She is the only fully developed character, who, in Henry Nash Smith's words, 'resembles a portrait in full color set in a black-and-white background'. Yet for all her potential of acting as an opposing force to a decadent society, Mark Twain attaches to her the same mindless conditioning as to the community itself, thus again compounding slavery of blood with that of environment. In the search for justification in committing the acts on behalf of her son, she repeatedly emulates her aristocratic neighbours. It begins the moment she debates her decision to exchange the babies:

'De preacher said it was jist like dey done in Englan' one time, long time ago. De queen she left her baby layin' aroun' one day, en went out callin'; en one o' de niggers roun' 'bout de place dat was 'mos' white, dey come in en see de chile layin' aroun', en tuck en put her own chile's clo'es on de queen's chile, en den left her own chile layin' aroun' en tuck en toted de queen's chile home to de nigger-quarter, en nobody ever foun' it out, en her chile was de king bimeby, en sole de queen's chile down de river one time when dey had to settle up de estate. Dah, now -- de preacher said it his own self, en it ain't no sin, 'ca'se white folks done it. Dey done it -- yes, dey done it; en not on'y jis' common white folks nuthur, but de biggest quality dey is in de whole bilin! Oh, I's so glad I 'member 'bout dat!" (pp. 72-73.)
Roxy is later shown to be just as inhumanly ridiculous as the Judge or Colonel Grangerford when she berates Tom for refusing to challenge Luigi to a duel. Tom is the product of an affair between Roxy and Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex of the FFV, and his mother consequently succumbs to the same brainwashing as the whites:

'Whatever has come o' yo' Essex blood? Dat's what I can't understand. En it ain't on'y jist Essex blood dat's in you, not by a long sight -- 'deed it ain't! My great-great-great-gran'father en yo' great-great-great-great-gran'father was ole Cap'n John Smith, de highest blood dat Ole Virginy ever turned out, en his great-great-gran'mother, or somers along back dah, was Pocahontas de Injun queen, en her husban' was a nigger king outen Africa -- en yit here you is a-slinkin' outen a duel en disgracin' our whole line like a ornery low-down hound! Yes, it's de nigger in you!' (pp. 157-58.)

Roxy's pretensions and bogus pride at being one of 'de Smith-Pocahontases' reduce her from being a potentially powerful adversary and representative of justice to the pathetic status of a darky minstrel. Her emulation of the whites gives validity to the words of Driscoll's real heir, exchanged into slavery, who responds to Roxy's angry taunt of being an 'imitation nigger':

'Yah-yah-yah! Jes listen to dat! If I's imitation, what is you? Bofe of us is imitation white -- dat's what we is -- en pow'ful good imitation, too -- yah-yah-yah! -- we don't amount to noth'n' as imitation niggers. (p. 103.)

With no one in the world represented by Dawson's Landing to act as the sort of model alternative embodied in Huck Finn, it is apparent that Mark Twain had succumbed to utter cynicism over the irreconcilable and unchangeable forces of human nature that manifest themselves as selfishness in moral terms, and 'survival of the fittest' in social Darwinist terms. Even Roxy's apparently unselfish motives in sacrificing all for her son attract a critical eye when one considers her obsession,
at the possible risk of her son's life, with keeping alive her dubious aristocratic heritage. Each major character carries out his plans with no sense of internal division or conflict, with no little space of undeformed morality, as Huck Finn had, in which an alternative may germinate. The futility seen by Mark Twain in hoping to alter this inescapable state gives a caustic ring to his blanket pronouncement over all displays of human confidence in 'Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar':

April 1. -- This is the day upon which we are reminded of what we are on the other three hundred and sixty-four. (p. 211.)

Mark Twain not only casts his conviction of hopelessness in the form of such answers that contrast with the optimism of Poor Richard; he also demonstrates it in the fate of the two changelings themselves. Having usurped his twin master's identity so as not to be sold down the river, the false Tom Driscoll is convicted of his uncle's murder and exposed as a slave. Sentenced to be hanged, he is saved because the creditors of his father's estate argue that, had his true identity been known, he would have been sold with the other slaves. Thus he could not have murdered Judge Driscoll, therefore it was not he that had really committed the murder, the guilt lay with the erroneous inventory. Everybody saw that there was reason in this. Everybody granted that if 'Tom' were white and free it would be unquestionably right to punish him -- it would be no loss to anybody; but to shut up a valuable slave for life -- that was another matter.

As soon as the Governor understood the case, he pardoned Tom at once, and the creditors sold him down the river. (pp. 225-26.)

Indicative as it is of a universal absurdity from which there is no escape, this final ironic reversal of Tom's fortune might not seem so unjust since all along he had been shown acting with his 'native viciousness'; the implications for the brainwashed society that transmuted his sentence could conceivably be camouflaged by the reader's
conviction that Tom got his just deserts — assuming that 'native viciousness' is a valid grounds for punishment. Yet in presenting the fate of the real Tom Driscoll, consigned to the identity of Valet de Chambre, Mark Twain depicts the same ironic bondage of those who have done nothing in particular to deserve it. It is not an expression of judgement or morality, but merely the presentation of a cruelly indifferent prevailing condition:

The real heir suddenly found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter. His gait, his attitudes, his gestures, his bearing, his laugh — all were vulgar and uncouth; his manners were the manners of a slave. Money and fine clothes could not mend these defects or cover them up, they only made them the more glaring and the more pathetic. The poor fellow could not endure the terrors of the white man's parlour, and felt at home and at peace nowhere but in the kitchen. The family pew was a misery to him, yet he could nevermore enter into the solacing refuge of the 'nigger gallery' — that was closed to him for good and all.

(p. 225.)

Thus the real Tom Driscoll is still a slave; as the one most tragically duped by Roxy's con game and an inescapable universal paradox. The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson pertains more to him than to anybody, for his fate expresses the knowledge that the same tragic absurdity will bind the undeserved as well as the deserved. The question remains of how the irreversibly cynical Mark Twain could depict such universally tragic implications, yet still present them in an unquestionable comic success. It necessitated more than exposing the incongruity between 'the socially absolute, the confident, gullible world of Dawson's Landing, and the historically changeable world in which identity is finally a fingerprint'. After all, Hank Morgan had presented a similar ironical relationship between the two worlds of Camelot and nineteenth century America, yet in the final analysis failed in delivering a convincingly
comic narrative. Mark Twain included isolated comic effects in *Pudd'Nhead Wilson* almost as if to remind the reader that he was reading a comedy, in spite of the title; various bits of slapstick and diversion, the burlesque appendix of 'Those Extraordinary Twins', and Mark Twain's own declaration of his being 'a jackleg novelist' almost beg the reader not to take the book seriously. 85

However, if the novel succeeds as a comedy, it does so in spite of these efforts, for the comic success for the most part depends on the narrative tone. The voice in *Pudd'Nhead Wilson* is that of a chronicler as withdrawn as Pudd'Nhead himself. He succeeds in depicting the ironies of the universe represented by Dawson's Landing by presenting his tale as a history or a chronicle without editorial, 'showing that the world itself creates burlesques, disguises, and paradox.' 86 While Hank Morgan had the ambition, but not the capacity, to articulate a comedic judgement upon the condition of his own and adopted world, the narrator in *Pudd'Nhead Wilson* sees fit only to ironically expose that situation which Hank Morgan felt he could describe and exploit. The narrator is closer to that of *Huckleberry Finn*, who, as a child, was able to maintain a certain degree of distance that allowed a perspective which Hank Morgan was denied, due to his deliberate participation in the events he described. In choosing the perspective of a chronicler, the narrator of *Pudd'Nhead Wilson* is in the elevated position of viewing as a whole the ironic relationships between man, society, fate, and circumstance; he can see man as both the agent and victim of his own deceptions, and describe the situation with a ghostly, distant comedic deadpan. 87

Although the comic voice undeniably succeeds, Mark Twain suggests that it has more to do with the ironic relationships within the world than with his own efforts as a comedian — for in *Pudd'Nhead Wilson*, the comedian suffers a grave defeat. The townspeople brand David Wilson a
'pudd'nhead' and an outcast because of his joking — to which Clemens had devoted his entire professional life. At the end of the book, the only way for Wilson to gain respect from the community is to effectively 'take back his joke', that is, prove himself an unqualified master of the least humourous of professions, the law. In doing so, he succumbs to the will of the corrupt society of Dawson's Landing, making no effort to criticize or undermine it. His comedic efforts are reduced to the private, cynical grumblings of 'Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar', with which Mark Twain forecasts his own withdrawal as a comedian.

Thus the important function of Pudd'nhead Wilson in the comedic transmission is in the role of an 'ironic stranger', an outsider who comes on the scene with alien technology and skills, acting as an agent or catalyst who exposes the tragic ironies of the universe. In most of his later comic fiction, Mark Twain came to rely on the ironic stranger as a means of realizing and revealing his own irremediable disillusionments and cynicism over his own fate and that of man. The effective ironic stranger seemingly accepts the chaotic paradoxes of the society he enters as granted; he is unsentimental and amoral, in contrast to the humans whose immoralities and hypocrisies he exposes. After Pudd'nhead Wilson, the ironic stranger continued his exposés in such tales as 'The £1,000,000 Bank Note' and 'The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg', both of which depend on the intrusion of an ironic outsider into a confident, gullible society, wherein by monetary temptations he reveals the corruptions of the social order.

These were the last attempts of Mark Twain in which the ironic stranger was a successful converter of cynicism into comedy. His next and final work of fiction notably failed in effecting this conversion; it
was the posthumous, editorially bowdlerized The Mysterious Stranger. In this work, the stranger, Satan himself, attempts to convince the narrator of the nature of human insignificance and universal indifference as he has witnessed it since the creation:

'It is true, that which I have revealed to you; there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream -- a grotesque and foolish dream. 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'.


More than anything else, The Mysterious Stranger sadly demonstrated that the despair of Mark Twain in his final years caused him to lose his mastery of the art of 'misrepresentation' or comedic impersonation; his last attempt at a comic novel did nothing to hide his true disillusionment. In order to see this, one might compare The Mysterious Stranger with the non-fictional, philosophical volume written concurrently in part with it, and published privately under the title of What Is Man?. This collection of essays gives an indication of the thoughts that inspired The Mysterious Stranger, containing many striking similarities which the narrator of the fiction could not disguise.

Clemens called What Is Man? his bible; in a letter to Howells written in 1899 from Austria, the setting of The Mysterious Stranger, he betrayed the convictions that inspired the predominant tone of both works:

'I suspect that to you there is still dignity in human life, & that Man is not a joke -- a poor joke -- the poorest that was ever contrived -- an April fool joke, played by a malicious E'urchin' crossed out] Creator with nothing better to waste his time upon. Since I wrote my Bible (last year), which Mrs Clemens loathes & shudders over & will not listen to the last half nor allow me to print any part of it, Man is not to me the respect-worthy person he was before; & so I have lost my pride in him &
can't write gaily nor praisefully about him any more. And I don't intend to try.
(Mark Twain-Howells Letters, II, p. 689.)

Clemens had begun What Is Man? shortly after Susy's death in 1896; by 1903 his wife was dead. In spite of his having lectured his way out of debt and into a second fortune, and having met his benefactor, Henry Rogers of Standard Oil, he had still sunk into the depths of a depression that no financial security could ever assuage. Always in his conflict of dualism, he was perpetually torn: the ward of an industrial magnate, supporting the principles of the Russian revolution; a child of Calvinism, undermined by Darwinism; a comedian who could only find a bitter humour in an existence based on the cruel, arbitrary juxtapositions of fate, circumstance, and illusion. Not only had he lost his pride in man; he had lost confidence as well; he had rejected the will to argue through a comedic mask, and ceased to take delight in the cunningly playful correction of false concepts and the alleviation of prejudice, as he had done in the bulk of Huckleberry Finn. In his final years he indeed continued his active campaigns against prejudice and atrocity, as such fervent works as 'The War Prayer' and 'King Leopold's Soliloquy' demonstrate; but they might justifiably be published under the authorship of Clemens rather than Mark Twain, for Clemens could no longer abide the mask of comedy and play that had defined the persona of Mark Twain. He had come to experience, in Lewis Simpson's words, 'the dark anarchy of consciousness when what is called "the mind" is released from faith'.

What Is Man? was anonymously and privately published in 1906, and copyrighted under another name. In the preface, Clemens explained his reticence in publishing such convictions of contempt and doom:

Every thought in them has been thought (and accepted as unassailable truth) by millions of men -- and concealed,
kept private. Why did they not speak out? Because they
dreaded (and could not bear) the disapproval of the people
around them. Why have I not published? The same reason
has restrained me, I think. I can find no other.
(What Is Man?, edited by Paul Baender (Berkeley, 1973),
p. 124.)

Mark Twain was obliged to express comedically the sentiments of
Clemens; but the 'comedy' of The Mysterious Stranger, which attempted to
convey the sentiments of What Is Man?, was applied under Clemens's own
refusal to 'write gaily' about humanity. Although there are some
sporadic attempts at burlesque in the fiction, there are few who would
consider it an overall comic success. It is mostly important as a
measure of Mark Twain's hopeless intent of presenting the philosophy of
What Is Man? under the guise of comedy, in which he had already lost his
confidence.

Within the text is a clue to Mark Twain's final, bitter, and
evidently half-hearted justification for the employment of laughter, no
longer even slightly associated with entertainment or relief. As Satan
describes it, laughter had become a destructive weapon; as Cox notes, it
was assigned to deliver verbally the destructive power of Hank Morgan's
fifty-four. The final mysterious, ironic stranger chides a member of
the human race which he has come to despise as cowardly and pathetic:

'Your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really
effective weapon -- laughter. Power, Money, Persuasion,
Supplication, Persecution -- these can lift at a colossal
humbug, -- push it a little, century by century: but only
Laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against
the assault of Laughter nothing can stand'.
(The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts, pp. 165-66.)

Yet as it was shown not only by the ending of Huckleberry Finn and
Pudd'nhead Wilson's abandoning of the joke for the law, but also by Mark
Twain's admitted inability and refusal to 'write gaily' anymore, Satan's
declaration is the final lie in the career of Mark Twain. Moreover, even
if he did believe it, had Clemens stood on the podium alongside Ulysses Grant and admitted this as his reason for subjecting the general to his onslaught, he certainly would have ended his career as a humourist then and there. He ended it instead with *The Mysterious Stranger*, for with this revelation of his aborted comedic intentions, Mark Twain punctuated the rupture of his confidence game. The comedian's responsibility lies in deception, and Mark Twain had irrevocably surrendered his responsibility at the writing of his last ostensibly comic novel.
Notes, Chapter II


2. Cox, p. 60.

3. David Daiches, 'Mark Twain as Hamlet', Encounter, 22 (February 1964), 70-76 (p. 73).


11. Tanner, p. 381.


15. Kaplan, p. 91.


17. Smith, p. 122.


19. Smith, p. 137.


22. Smith, p. 115.


29. Cox, pp. 44, 51; Smith, p. 47.
31. *Mark Twain to Mrs Fairbanks*, p. 67n.
34. Kaplan, p. 382.
36. Cox, pp. 94, 103.
41. Smith, p. 132.
42. Kaplan, p. 200; Cox, p. 150.
43. Kaplan, p. 206.
44. Cox, pp. 151-52, 159-60.
46. Cox, p. 152.
52. Kaplan, p. 220.
56. Cox, p. 124.
58. Cox, p. 189.
60. Cox, pp. 7, 192.
64. Cox, p. 224.
67. Kaplan, pp. 312-20 passim.
69. Kaplan, p. 101; Cox, p. 21n.
70. Kaplan, pp. 386-88.
73. Kaplan, p. 133.
74. Kaplan, p. 124.
75. Bradbury, p. 35.
76. Bradbury, pp. 15-16.
77. Bradbury, p. 16.
78. Bradbury, pp. 18-23.
79. Cox, p. 245.
81. Smith, Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer, p. 175.


83. Smith, pp. 178-79.

84. Bradbury, p. 38.


86. Bradbury, pp. 27, 39.

87. Cox, p. 240.

88. Toles, p. 74.

89. Cox, p. 245.

90. Cox, p. 265.


94. Cox, p. 286.
CHAPTER III

LENNY BRUCE:

The 'Nightclub Cassandra'
The comedic career of Mark Twain reached a culmination with the writing of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, wherein irony and narrative distance combined in a comic effectiveness that was sustained in spite of the bleak, hopeless implications of the novel. Mark Twain's notable mastery of the comedian's confidence game in that novel was irreconcilable with his avowed deployment of laughter as a destructive weapon in *The Mysterious Stranger*, resulting in the latter novel's failure as comedy. Mark Twain's career had begun with the accepted 'call' to 'excite the laughter of God's creatures', and had ended with the expressed intention of attacking an object, to 'blow it to rags and atoms at a blast'. Although Mark Twain had felt the existence of violence in comedy far earlier, his final assignation through Satan was an outburst of futility, for the masterful comedy of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* did not change the status quo represented in the novel one bit; Pudd'nhead's joke only makes him an outcast, and his final retraction of humour, in the form of the law, gains him a comfortable admission into the community that Mark Twain condemns. Evident in this is Mark Twain's bitter conviction of the impotence of laughter; in his fury to annihilate his targets, Mark Twain did not have the heart to maintain a game of confidence that would produce such negligible results. It is ironic that such disheartening should have befallen the man who had written an entire essay based on the principle that successful confidence games are prevalent and necessary in all social relations, that 'An awkward, unscientific lie is often as ineffectual as the truth':

Now let us see what the philosophers say. Note that venerable proverb: Children and fools always speak the truth. The deduction is plain — adults and wise persons never speak it. Parkman, the historian, says, 'The principle of truth may itself be carried into an absurdity'. In another place in the same chapter he says, 'The saying is old that truth should not be spoken at all times; and those whom a sick conscience worries into habitual violation of the maxim are imbeciles and
nuisances'. It is strong language, but true. None of us could live with an habitual truth-teller; but thank goodness none of us has to.

("On the Decay of the Art of Lying", *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I, p. 742.)

Not only does Mark Twain here foreshadow his own 'violation of the maxim', he foreshadows the same violation by a comedic descendant of his: Lenny Bruce, perhaps the twentieth century's most notable example of the comedian who could not lie, who, like Mark Twain, ruptured his illusory role as a 'funny man' with the explicit revelation of his aims. Lenny Bruce's failure to maintain the comedic confidence game was due not as much to an inability as to a steadfast refusal to sacrifice his artistic integrity and freedom of expression in the name of placation.

The distance — the aloofness — that produced a work like *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a particularly rare ingredient in the comedy of Lenny Bruce, especially his later work. The content of his material remained less disguised to actual events in his life than much of Mark Twain's material; Lenny was in fact repeatedly criticized for making his private life his professional life. As a performing cabaret artist, he walked a more precarious tightrope than those comedians who reach the public through print, in that the reception of his comedy was more immediate; few literary comedians ever had glasses thrown at them by angry nightclub patrons, including Mark Twain and Kurt Vonnegut in their roles as public speakers. Lenny Bruce's career is especially worthwhile in a study of the comedian's game of confidence, for it clearly exemplifies the immediate hazards in not maintaining the comedic stance.

In one of his routines, Lenny revealed a certain insight as regards the successful transmission of comedy:

I definitely know that I could do a satire on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and really get screams with it on television. Although Abraham Lincoln was a wonderful man.
But, here's the thing on comedy. If I were to do a satire on the assassination of John Foster Dulles, it would shock people. They'd say, 'That is in heinous taste'. Why? Because it's fresh. And that's why my contention is that satire is tragedy plus time. You give it enough time, the public, the reviewers, will allow you to satirize it. Which is rather ridiculous, when you think about it.

(The Essential Lenny Bruce, edited by John Cohen (St Albans, 1981), p. 204.)

This statement shows not only that Lenny recognized a public insistence on a distance factor, here expressed as 'tragedy plus time', but also that he was prepared to explicitly ridicule and dismiss that insistence. His career is an example of a comedian whose refusal to provide distance or any other mitigating factor resulted in the often frightening absence of a shield from his rage, between himself and his audience, and between himself and his subjects. Sometimes a partial lowering of the comedic mask is deliberate and effective, as in the case of Huck Finn's narration, wherein Huck necessarily came closer to the objects of his disgust in order to show his properly disgusted reaction. Such partial narrowing of distance is necessary for purposes of awakening and balance; Lenny Bruce knew this clearly. It was often this deliberate technique that gave him the deserved impression of daring, of challenging the seemingly arbitrarily and unfairly imposed limitations on free expression.

Lenny Bruce's challenge to these limitations brought revenge from the injured in the form of intense and relentless legal harassment, resulting almost overnight in the effective blacklisting of his name by nightclub owners across the United States and abroad. Accompanying his loss of work was the increase of his drug habit, the violent breakup of his marriage with its futile reconciliations, bankruptcy, and the loss of his self-respect. More so, possibly, than in the case of Mark Twain, the chronology of increased trauma in Lenny's personal life matches that of
the deterioration of his art. To say that he failed ultimately as a comedian is not to judge his overall ability and contributions as an artist; his biography suggests that few vulnerable and sensitive men might have survived in one piece the overwhelming pressures under which Lenny Bruce worked and lived.

There are various reasons for the deterioration of Lenny's comedic rapport, or the prevention of its full realization, since he died so young: his refusal to placate through comedic convention; the inability of his audience to understand his hip, lightning-fast delivery; his explicit identification with the outsider at the expense of audience sympathy; his own vulnerability and inability to withstand personal criticism; and his stated final intention of being more of a healer or a preacher than a comedian, resulting in the dismissal of the comedic stance.

When Lenny Bruce chose to discard the mask of the comedian, he discarded years of informal training that he had acquired in his rise from an obscure jokester to the daring comic star of America in the 1960s. After an abortive career as a showman in his native New York, he had begun a slow rise in some of the shabbier West Coast nightclubs and jazz cabarets. This important period in his professional life had allowed him the obscurity in which to perfect a unique and shocking comic delivery based on the argot of the hipster, the street hustler, the jazz musician, flavoured with Yiddishisms out of his own childhood, and delivered virtually unnoticed by any sophisticated audiences or censors. The first clubs to book him were invariably the lowest of the low on the nightclub circuit, patronized mostly by pimps, hookers, junkies, and other members of the underworld. By the time he appeared on any of these stages, he was well into the development of his comic technique -- a technique which from the beginning had established him as an outsider in
Lenny's comic delivery began when he was a teenager in Brooklyn, as part of a street group that rubbed shoulders with pushers, prostitutes, pimps, black jazzmen, and small-time show business people. On Saturday nights they would gather on street corners and stage sessions of ritual and parody, trying to impress each other with exaggerations and fantasies of the previous week's sexual exploits, family arguments, and neighbourhood events. In these impromptu gatherings, Lenny learned how to 'free-associate on his feet', developing a technique of spontaneous comic delivery that gathered momentum as it went along, building in energy towards a climactic release of inhibitions. This sort of delivery was known by the Jewish comedians of New York, who invented it, as 'the Spritz'.

Lenny had a mentor on the Brooklyn streets, a comic genius too shy for the stage, who remained on the street to inspire Lenny and his companions. Joe Ancis was a Jewish 'street rapper' whose delivery was described by Albert Goldman as follows:

The Germans have a word -- Todlachen. Laugh till it kills you. That's the way he likes to make them laugh. Demonic! The Marquis de Spritz. He gets this mad glint in his eye and starts working like a Jewish rhythm 'n' blues act. A seizure, a paroxysm. Such restless tickling, twitching, hair patting, collar pulling, throat clearing, finger popping, hand slapping, knee bending, with elbows into the gut, shoulders up around the ears, bent from the waist.

You're caught in this terrible double-bind. You're loving it. It's killing you! You can't bear to miss a single word. When he sees you're on the ropes, going down, he works twice as hard to kill you. Zooms in close to your face, locks onto the rhythms of your body, lasers and razors you till finally you tear yourself away. Then he stands up straight and laughs. He wants to laugh you out of existence.

(Albert Goldman, Ladies and Gentlemen ... Lenny Bruce!! (London, 1975), p. 106.)
The Spritz was a potpourri of verbal violence, a mixture of physical clowning, visual jokes, timing, mugging, dialect, sound effects, baby talk, intellectual phrases mixed with old-country Yiddish, hip jazz slang and the argot of the American underworld, all delivered at lightning speed. Single phrases were thrust out in flashes, syntax and word order ignored, and alliteration underscored and pounded out in accents. Lenny Bruce, by his own admission, had a temperament especially receptive to this technique, which Jonathan Miller once described as that of a mad projectionist in a booth, tearing pieces from a jumble of films and throwing them all on the screen at once. Lenny admitted having been ripe for it since childhood:

As a child I loved confusion; a freezing blizzard that would stop all traffic and mail; toilets that would get stopped up and overflow and run down the halls; electrical failures — anything that would stop the flow and make it back up and find a new direction. Confusion was entertainment for me.
(Lenny Bruce, How To Talk Dirty and Influence People (London, 1981), p. 46.)

Lenny tried, often unsuccessfully, to make confusion entertainment for his audiences as well. The idea of stopping a flow and making it find a new direction is the essence of jazz, the art form most directly inspirational to Lenny's comic delivery. It is the idea of improvisation, the impromptu experiment that distinguishes jazz from conventional or composed forms of music by testing, straining, and breaking the rules of musical tradition. Lenny's oral delivery has unanimously and consistently been compared with the instrumental delivery of such noted musicians as Charlie Parker and Miles Davis; this is hardly surprising, since in his philosophy of art and its presentation, Lenny totally identified himself with the jazz musician, the musical outlaw of his day.

When Lenny was a local unknown at a seedy California nightclub
called Strip City, in 1964, he had already made his identification with the jazzman. This was partially a reason for the incomprehensibility of his routines to much of his audience, who could only be placated through severe artistic restriction; to an artist of Lenny's unbridled development, whose mentors were musicians who regularly defied convention, such placation could only alienate him from the very sources of his creativity.

He had hung out with jazz players, partied with them and shot heroin and smoked reefers with them; he made a practice of incorporating the house bands into his routines, or testing his routines on them. Consequently, he was repeatedly chided by the manager, "Lenny, you're working to the band again", a warning he was destined to hear throughout his early days onstage:

It was true, of course. The musicians were the only intelligent people on the premises. The only people who dug fantasy and abstraction and alliteration and the comedy of crazy non-sequiturs. They'd heard dozens of comics and thousands of lines. They would get a guy down and chant his lines in unison with him as he stood onstage. (Which made most comics feel like shit.) They were the toughest audience on earth. If you could break up the boys in the band, you were cooking! (Goldman, p. 133.)

Lenny himself was aware of his manager's criticism, understood it, but refused to adapt to it:

The reports on me were now: 'All Lenny Bruce seems concerned with is making the band laugh'. That should have been my first hint of the direction in which I was going: abstraction. Musicians, jazz musicians especially, appreciate art forms that are extensions of realism, as opposed to realism in a representational form. (Bruce, p. 63.)

With all Lenny's devotion to abstraction, it is understandable why, when he carried his delivery to the mass American audience, he faced a sea of arched eyebrows. The majority of Americans were at that time
listening to nothing more daring than Doris Day and Patti Page; just about the only people who preferred the incomprehensibility of Charlie Parker were the other musicians who tried to emulate him. If avant-garde jazz could find no welcome from the mainstream of America yet, then Lenny Bruce's jazz-based monologues would meet with equal resistance. He repeatedly insisted that abstraction was inevitable in all modern art forms, whether they be jazz, painting, poetry, or fiction; yet advocates of jazz were still finding difficulty in effecting a fusion of their music with even the most avant-garde art forms of the day.

Abstraction was purely spontaneous and instinctive in Lenny's oral delivery; just like the jazzmen, he felt that when he became too familiar with the old outline to even bother finishing it, it was time to adopt some symbolic abbreviation to convey a complex emotion or series of emotions. In his case, such abbreviations could only be based on words, which often got him into trouble with the authorities. His words were flashed to the audience immediately as they occurred to him—this is what improvisation is all about. In the habit of the jazz player and the street man, Lenny was inspired to express an emotion or condition with one word. Thus if the word 'shit' was flashed into his brain, it may have at any time referred to such various things as anguish, marijuana, dishonesty, or shoddy workmanship. It was something he slipped into with the freedom of instinct, and out of devotion to his principles of abstraction and improvisation, he refused to put the damper of gentility on his expression. Consequently, not only the authorities, but often the audiences themselves could not see beyond the presentation of the word: shit was shit, excrement, period. This became a point of contention to Lenny's defenders in his obscenity trials, who questioned how he could be convicted of obscenity when the legal definition of obscenity was any matter that arouses a 'shameful or morbid interest in nudity, sex, or
excretion', 5 while the context of his routines and responses from witnesses showed that his routines aroused no such interest.

Sometimes sympathetic and sometimes not, audiences hovered between extremes of hostility and idolization; but even the more sympathetic audience members were often puzzled or disconcerted by Lenny's surreal oral delivery. For one reason, he spoke very quickly and not always clearly, at times afflicted with a fuzziness of speech that only allowed words such as 'you know' and 'like' to be heard. Furthermore, the other words were often unfamiliar if audible, being a vocabulary of the jazz sub-culture, the drug sub-culture, Yiddish, and many argots less widely known at the time. 6

As he slowly rose from the obscurity of the small clubs where he perfected his delivery, Lenny had to come to terms with a growing audience that in spite of its middle-class sophistication was less attuned to the complexity of his material than the jazz devotees and undergrounders at Strip City, the Cobblestone Club, or any of the other California ranch houses where he began. Such places had allowed him to break free from the restraints, inhibitions, and disabilities which might have kept him politely mediocre in the more sophisticated cabarets. The lower Lenny sank into the grossness and crudity of the Sacramento strip clubs, the more daring, ironic, and imaginative became his art. 7 The higher he rose out of these surroundings with their unfettered influences of jazz and drugs, the more troubled was the reception by confused, often frightened nightclub patrons.

These later Midwestern, middle-class audiences could hardly have mixed with the street types that were Lenny's companions in Brooklyn and California; nor could they have had much conception of the ghetto idiom, the slum language that depends on the power of extreme linguistic compression to reduce complexities to their essences in thought and
image. The pure abstraction of jazz slang was a foreign language to most people outside the largest American cities; tight, mono-syllabic expressions like 'dig', 'groove', and 'hip' were strict compactions of meaning, incomprehensible to most of white America. New expressions were sheared and shaved, words and syllables digested until the expression became a standard ghetto short. The audiences struggling with such abbreviations were attuned to neither the far-fetched conceits nor the elaborations of the Negro jazz idiom that Lenny chose to use. Few had any way of knowing, for instance, that a man over forty and long past his sexual peak was "on the Jersey side of the snatch play". In his essay, 'The White Negro', Norman Mailer described Lenny's language, the language of jazz and Hip, 'a language of energy':

[To the cunning of Negro language], the abstract ambiguous alternatives in which from the danger of their oppression they learned to speak ('Well, now, man, like I'm looking for a cat to turn me on ...'), add even more the profound sensitivity of the Negro jazzman who was the cultural mentor of a people, and it is not too difficult to believe that the language of Hip which evolved was an artful language, tested and shaped by an intense experience and therefore different in kind from white slang, as different as the special obscenity of the soldier, which in its emphasis upon 'ass' as the soul and 'shit' as the circumstance, was able to express the existential states of the enlisted man. What makes Hip a special language is that it cannot really be taught -- if one shares none of the experiences of elation and exhaustion which it is equipped to describe, then it seems merely arch or vulgar or irritating. It is a pictorial language, but pictorial like non-objective art, imbued with the dialectic of small but intense change, a language for the microcosm, in this case, man, for it takes the immediate experiences of any passing man and magnifies the dynamic of his movements, not specifically but abstractly so that he is seen more as a vector in a network of forces than as a static character in a crystallized field.

(Norman Mailer, Advertisements For Myself (London, 1961), pp. 292-93.)

A primary importance of Mailer's description is the sense of mass alienation from the jazz idiom on the part of those not of the sub-culture. Orrin Keepnews, a jazz record producer for over twenty-five
years, said that talking with Lenny Bruce was "so much like conversation with a jazz musician that it was hard to remember that I wasn't talking with one. I can think of no other non-musician about whom I can make that statement." When Lenny finally realized that his middle-class, post-collegiate audiences were not on such easy terms with his lingo, he incorporated their confusion into a routine, simultaneously expressing his recognition of his stance as an outsider and reinforcing that stance. In the routine, the spokesman for middle America, band leader Lawrence Welk, auditions a new saxophone player who is a version of Lenny's best friends and influences:

MUSICIAN [stoned out of his kug]: Ah, like hello, man, ah ... you know, like, ah ... alotta cats put you on, Mr Wig, but, ah ... you really something else, sweetie, ah ... really, you know, like ... like when I laid the scene on some people, I said like I'm gonna make the scene with Welk, you know that cat's busted up, ya know, but, ah ... I said no matter what, you're the best banjo -- or whatever your ax is -- you swing ... that's it, sweetie, swing with your ax ... you know, like ... I got Byrd's ax, man, he gave me his ax, you know, like, and you're pretty wild, Mr Funk, and, ah ... I really wanna make the scene with you, baby ... like everyone's got their own scene, like you got your bubbles, Jim, I got my thing ... like, ah ...

WELK: I DUNNO WHAT THE HELL YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT! WHAT THE HELL, YOU A QUEER OR SOMETHING? YOU A GODDAMN COMMUNIST OR SOMETHING?
(The Essential Lenny Bruce, pp. 228-29.)

Lenny's affinity with the jazz sub-culture led him to use not only the unfamiliar slang of the musician, but also elements of music itself in his routines. Music was a part of the impromptu street sessions that Lenny and his companions had launched while loafing on the street corners of Brooklyn. They patterned their language, further abstracting it, by turning words into music and music into symbolism:

The guy would put on his thickest, funniest Molly Goldberg voice and start hollering, while the other two kids improvised fills and socks on their real or imaginary instruments. 'Yussle! [drum roll] Come in this house!

(Goldman, p. 116.)

Lenny later introduced such musical counterpoint into one of his most notable cabaret routines, 'To Is a Preposition, Come Is a Verb'. A central point of contention in Lenny's first obscenity trial, this routine, according to Lenny, was about the inability of men and women to communicate emotionally, physically, and mentally, about the overemphasis of sex in an otherwise empty relationship, about insecurity, and about the hypocrisy of the 'dirty word' syndrome. The verbal presentation is rhythmically intricate and syncopated, accompanied by drums and cymbals, in an attempt to portray sex talk as what Lenny called "the real American folk music". Most of the routine's effect depends on aural perception -- like all of Lenny's routines -- yet while its presentation on paper might seem as flat as any orchestral score to a non-musician, even such a presentation reveals some of its inherent musicality:

[In falsetto] Toooooo is a preposition.
[Hits cymbal] To is a preposition.
[Hits drums] Come is a verb.
[Very rapidly] To is a preposition. Come is a verb.
To is a preposition.
Come is a verb, the verb intransitive.
To come.
To come.

I've heard these two words my whole adult life, and as a kid when I thought I was sleeping.
To come.
To come.

It's been like a big drum solo.
Did you come? [hits drum]
Did you come? [hits cymbal]

[Faster, hitting drums and cymbals for emphasis]
Did you come good?
Did you come good?
Did you come good?...
I really came so good.
So good.
But don't come in me. [hits tom-tom]
Don't come in me. [hits snare drum]
[Singing, in march cadence] Don't come in me, mim-mim-mim-me.
Don't come in me, mim-mim-mim-me.
Don't come in me....

Now if anyone in this room, or the world, finds those two words decadent, obscene, immoral, amoral, asexual — the words 'to come' really make you feel uncomfortable, if you think I'm rank for saying it to you, you the beholder gets ranked from listening to it — you probably can't come!

(Quoted in Frank Kofsky, Lenny Bruce: The Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralist (New York, 1974), pp. 31-33.)

Such routines as this were among other things attempts to fuse an element of jazz with another art form, comedy. Regardless of the subject matter, such attempts were often lost on an audience that had previously and consistently resisted the fusion of jazz with other forms of art; in San Francisco, where this routine was premiered, poetry readings accompanied by jazz music were presented to almost empty audiences, even in the more avant-garde coffee houses and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's bookstore. 

'Cool' jazz was in a world by itself, mysterious, spooky, the territory of mainlining ghetto blacks. It was a relatively new jazz, not Dixieland, not the happy swing of Glenn Miller or the eye-bulging comedy of Louis Armstrong. The jazz of Lenny's world was the musical outlaw, exiled to Paris or the innermost slums of America's darkest cities, the incomprehensible slithering and bopping of Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk — respected enough now, but quite frightening then, restricted to candle-lit lofts and dark, smoky cellars.

Although Lenny found difficulty with his fusion, he had already had the ice broken for him somewhat. There had always been a small but constant presence of jazz-inspired comics in America's nightclubs, from the time the comedian Lord Buckley broke up speakeasy gangsters with his impressions of the great Negro jazzmen. There was Harry 'the Hipster' Gibson, who strutted the stage in a zoot suit; there were black musicians who doubled as jive-talking comics, like Slim Gaillard, composer of
nonsense songs like 'Flat Foot Floogie With the Floy Floy', and Babs Gonzales, who wrote comical talking blues flavoured with jive talk. By the late 1950s, the jazz influence had found its way to Lenny's toughest competitor, the comedian Mort Sahl, who had established the jazz-inspired hip monologue as popular entertainment to a vast collegiate audience, with much success.12

* * *

Mort Sahl was in fact more than successful; he was and is a comic legend who managed to bridge the gap between the bohemian jazz culture and the middle class, urbane, college-educated audience -- something Lenny Bruce never accomplished in his lifetime. Like Lenny, Mort Sahl was an innovator, the first nightclub comedian to become an onstage political analyst. On his first night at San Francisco's 'hungry i', so the legend goes, Sahl convulsed the audience with such quips as, "For a while, every time the Russians threw an American in jail, the Un-American Activities Committee would retaliate by throwing an American in jail, too". Thus did Sahl smash 'a long standing taboo against introducing political themes into nightclub comedy'. He was quietly confident in his rebellion, with a sense of self-composure that could hardly be attributed to Lenny Bruce. Although he repudiated the image of the ingratiating, flashily dressed comedian with carefully rehearsed routines, he did not go much further than being comfortably casual, confronting his audience in a button-down shirt and pullover sweater, approaching them with a mixture of friendliness and admonition, criticizing them while remaining one of them.13

Sahl might have been welcomed into anybody's living room, in spite of his identification with bohemia and the jazz culture. He was daring but clean, 'nice' in spite of his opinions. On the other hand, Lenny
Bruce and the image he cultivated would be welcome in few suburban living rooms. His image was that of the hipster, a lower class urban dandy, dressed like a pimp in a zoot suit, affecting a cool, cerebral tone, always after the 'finest' things in life -- the finest pot, the finest jazz, the finest women. As Caroline Bird noted in 'Born 1930: The Unlost Generation', the hipster was the enfant terrible of his day:

'In character with his time, he is trying to get back at the conformists by lying low ... his main goal is to keep out of a society which, he thinks, is trying to make everyone over in its own image. He takes marijuana because it supplies him with experiences that can't be shared with "squares".... He does not try to enforce his will on others, Napoleon-fashion, but contents himself with a magical omnipotence never disproved because never tested.... As the only extreme nonconformist of his generation, he exercises a powerful if underground appeal for conformists, through newspaper accounts of his delinquencies, his structureless jazz, and his emotive grunt words'.

(Quoted in Mailer, Advertisements For Myself, pp. 281-82.)

If actually experienced by the conformists Bird mentions, the appeal of the hipster, as noted, could be appreciated through the shield of newspapers and information; although one might read about the hipster in comfort and complacency, there were few in middle America who would choose to be in close proximity to people of such incipient subversive power. For as Mailer notes, the hipster represented the antithesis of success and security in America during the Eisenhower years, since success was based on one's willingness and ability to conform. 'No wonder', wrote Mailer, 'that these have been the years of conformity and depression!:

A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of the nerve. The only courage, with rare exceptions, that we have been witness to, has been the courage of isolated people ... the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as
l'univers concentrationnaire, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled ... the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey to the rebellious imperatives of the self.... Whether life is criminal or not, the decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore the domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is beat....

(Mailer, Advertisements For Myself, p. 283.)

Lenny Bruce's identification with the hipster placed him in opposition to a comedian like Mort Sahl, who in spite of his own subversive attempts still kept his ear attuned to the receptivity of a middle class audience, in much the same way as Mark Twain endeavoured, though with varying success, not to alienate his white middle class and/or Southern readers. No matter how much he abhorred the plight of the Negro in ante- and post-bellum America, he could never overtly identify with the Negro as an outsider to the white society; therefore was he so cunning and ironic in his musings on Negro humanity, as delivered through the mouth of Huck Finn: 'I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their's. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so'. In America of the 1950s, where race riots were fought and murders committed over issues of integration whose repercussions are yet being felt, Lenny Bruce's identification with the hipster was of a sort to strike actual fear into the hearts of middle class Americans nervously watching the developments in the Southern and Northern ghettos. For as Mailer notes, identification with the hipster meant explicit identification with the Negro, who in the consciousness of affluent America has ever been a source of incipient disruption and retribution. Mailer's description in 'The White Negro' of the hipster's cultural inspiration firmly establishes the character of Lenny Bruce as
an outsider to the majority of his audience:

A totalitarian society makes enormous demands on the courage of men, and a partially totalitarian society makes even greater demands, for the general anxiety is greater. Indeed if one is to be a man, almost any kind of unconventional action often takes disproportionate courage. So it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries.... Any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day, and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk. The cameos of security for the average white: mother and home, job and the family, are not even a mockery to millions of Negroes; they are impossible. The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger. (Mailer, pp. 284-85.)

Personal, physical danger was the lifestyle of the hipster, the outlaw of American nightlife, who had so absorbed the existentialist philosophy of the Negro, 'looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts', that Mailer chose to refer to him as 'The White Negro'. Further in the essay he describes that self-indulgence and self-destructiveness that is so alien to the work ethic and morality of WASP America, the majority. Herein lies the inspiration for the subculture of Hip:

In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could. Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive. He lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his range and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream, and despair of his orgasm. For jazz is orgasm, it is the music of orgasm, good orgasm and bad, and so it spoke across a nation ... it was indeed a communication by art because it said, 'I feel this, and now you do too'. (Mailer, p. 285.)
Thus thehipster, in emulating the Negro, was similarly motivated by love and pleasure, not for their own sake or for selfish reasons, but as a means of asserting humanity in a culture whose sterility was a life-denying factor which crossed all racial boundaries. Such assertion, such 'war', as Mailer calls it, could not be without casualties — yet casualties to the hipster, when self-imposed, were preferable to slow strangulation at the hands of the bourgeois culture. Paraphrasing Terry Southern, Kenneth Tynan noted the self-destructive element in the hipster's lifestyle, the choice of which could at times seem the lesser of two deaths, as it particularly related to Lenny Bruce:

a hipster was someone who had deliberately decided to kill a part of himself in order to make life bearable. He knows that by doing this he is cutting himself off from many positive emotions as well as the negative, destructive ones he seeks to avoid; but on balance he feels that the sacrifice is worthwhile. By this definition, Bruce was (and is) authentically, indelibly hip. (Kenneth Tynan, 'Forward', in Lenny Bruce's How To Talk Dirty and Influence People, p. 10.)

Lenny, the White Negro, lived up to the dangerous image of the hipster, and indeed destroyed himself in making his life more bearable. The veins in his elbows had become hematomas from his shooting Methedrine up to ten times daily; he gobbled fistsful of mescaline and often performed after mainlining Dilaudid dissolved in Methedrine. He died with a syringe of heroin in his hand and a bathrobe sash around his arm, naked in his bathroom, at the age of forty.

* * *

Yet the very factors that made Lenny a social and creative outlaw seemed to inspire the best of his comic delivery. Onstage, with the Methedrine coursing through his system, his verbal disabilities evaporated, his images came to him at lightning speed, he was deft and
cunning with the microphone whereas without a fix he was clumsy. The intensity of his hip delivery was mind-boggling, the pace of his patter astounding:

Lenny is really getting into his rhythm. It takes him a while to warm up and get his curve breaking across the dinner plates. Now he's catching that inside corner with every line. His high-pitched nasal voice is shaping the hip words and phrases just like a jazzman bending a note or bopping a tune. Talking fast, fast, fast. A Charlie Parker tempo. Those hands of his flying all over the place, like a deaf-mute in a panic.

(Goldman, p. 43.)

Lenny did not only emulate the jazz musician in the dynamics of his routines; he approached their conception in the same manner in which a jazzman approaches a solo. An improvising musician playing the same tune over and over again will incorporate new ideas and motifs into the framework of the song while continually discarding concepts that have turned predictably stale and boring. Lenny devised his routines in the same manner, much to the chagrin of those nightclub patrons expecting to hear impeccably polished, rehearsed routines -- just as the more unimaginative listener of music is only satisfied with a set melody that appeals more to the memory than the ear. Lenny explained his own creative process:

I've never sat down and typed out a satire. What I will do, is I will ad lib a line on the stage. It'll be funny. Then the next night I'll do another line, or I'll be thinking about it, like in a cab, and it'll get some form, and it'll work into a bit.

Everything I do on the stage I create myself. If I do an hour show, if I'm extremely fertile, there will be about fifteen minutes of pure ad lib. But on the average it's about four or five minutes. But the fact that I've created it in ad lib seems to give it a complete feeling of free form. And the new stuff pushes the other -- old -- out.

(The Essential Lenny Bruce, pp. 191-92.)

Although the influence of street comedians like Joe Ancis and other
Brooklyn cronies had a profound effect on Lenny's comedy, the urge for much of his improvisation did not occur until he went west to California. Before then, he had attempted a career in the standard role of the stand-up comic -- the role most audiences were comfortable with -- with carefully rehearsed bits thrown out again and again. In California, the jazz musicians who worked the same dank clubs and cellars showed him the euphoria of total professional improvisation; they were an exclusive club, playing to each other instead of the audience, often at the audience's expense. Lenny emulated them in delivering his routines, beginning his improvisations with audience participation, finding pictures in the local newspapers to associate with faces in the audience when the resemblance was strong. He used the audience as butts, commenting as well on the waitress, the bartender, the decor of the club, and its surroundings. Such 'ad libbing' slowly replaced the steady routines he began with, until improvisation became his forte.20

This was the same technique practised by Mort Sahl; lining his hotel room with books and magazines, Sahl voraciously skimmed through them, picking up enough information by osmosis to comment on any current events, from de Gaulle to segregation to birth control to the Strategic Air Command. When Lenny saw the advantage of this practice, he picked it up himself, rarely reading but having friends discuss the news with him.21 The importance of remaining current before an audience that expects up-to-date entertainment was an awareness that Lenny maintained in his early years as a performer. One of his routines, 'The Celebrity Killing Service', shows his recognition of the comedian's necessity of keeping abreast of the audience's concerns:

You know, get this organization together, you figure, 'Who's a threat to me?' In the cafe industry. All right, we'll say Mort Sahl. Who, by the way, I think is a genius, I love him. All right, say I wanna get rid of Mort. Celebrity Killing Service.
'All right. Now, let's see. Now, whaddawe do with Mort Sahl? 'Well, it'll cost you about fifteen grand. What we'll do is, we will buy up all of the newsstands within a fifteen mile radius of the club. Then we will hire a newsboy and we'll start delivering nothing but old newspapers'. Understand? So Mort will come out, 'Well, folks, a funny thing happened tonight -- the Von Hindenburg exploded'. And he'll get completely whacked out.

(The Essential Lenny Bruce, p. 203.)

It is sadly ironic that Lenny would base an entire routine on the importance of remembering an audience's current preoccupations, of dealing with material that concerns them as well as the comedian, yet evidently forget that importance years later when his legal harassments became so heavy that he could only stand onstage and read his court transcripts verbatim, calling it comedy; he not only failed to convince his audience that what happened to him in the matter of civil rights had important implications for them as well, but he failed to make them laugh. He could not find a means similar in deception to that of Mark Twain, who after writing The Gilded Age felt that he could only treat 'the wash of today' through the guise of fantasy. Lenny Bruce's final bewailments were hardly disguised, comedically or otherwise artistically, and seemed to the audience to have more bearing on the comedian than on society -- on themselves.

* * *

Yet when he was learning his craft, Lenny indeed concerned himself with the importance of comedic and aesthetic deception. He began show business as an impressionist, having learned to discard props in favour of mimicry. Capturing the musicality of Ronald Colman's voice or mimicking H.B. Warner's palsied hands, he learned that the essences of impersonation could create illusions just as successfully as if he had spent hours applying makeup. He also learned the art of double-talk from
analyzing the work of comedian Sid Caesar, who, though he could not speak any foreign languages, could so capture a language's characteristic sounds as to convince an audience of his perfect German, French, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Polish, or Japanese. Having realized that once words were reduced to gibberish and he could characterize wholly through the tonal qualities of the subject, Lenny learned not only the standard Bogart and Lugosi impressions, but the ability to make his 'junkie-spade-jazzman' talk with a richness of glissandi, lisps, pauses, and husky throat sounds. With a total devotion to aesthetical deception, Lenny patiently mastered the abstractions of ghetto street speech.22

* * *

When considering the effort with which Lenny Bruce sought to create the illusion of a character through the sparing use of words and intonation, one must realize the narrow limits within which the performing comedian can work, that every word and its emphasis is a precious and necessary tool in the characterization. Mark Twain wrote that the writer must 'Use the right word, not its second cousin';23 in his determination to apply that advice to verbal comedy, Lenny landed before the bench in his first obscenity trial, held in San Francisco in 1961. At this trial, in which he was acquitted, he first revealed his insistence on 'phonographic accuracy'.

A major charge against Lenny in the trial was his use of the word 'cocksucker' in a routine portraying a dialogue between himself and a crude talent agent. When defense witness Dr. Lou Gottlieb was asked by the prosecuting attorney whether he found anything comical in the use of the word itself, the following dialogue commenced:

THE WITNESS: I do not [see anything funny that word], but as Mr. Bruce presents his performances he creates a world in which normal dimensions ... are transmuted into a
grotesque panorama of contemporary society, into which he places slices of life, phonographically accurate statements that come out of the show-business world ... and sometimes the juxtaposition of the generally fantastic frame of reference that he is able to create and the startling intrusion of slices of life in terms of language that is used in these kinds of areas, has extremely comic effect.... What excuses the use of that term ... is its unexpectedness in the fantastic world that is the frame of reference, the world which includes many grotesqueries that Mr Bruce is able to establish. Then when you get a phonographic reproduction of a snatch of conversation, I find that this has a comic effect very frequently.

Q: Do you mean 'phonographic' or 'photographic'?
A: 'Phonographic'. I mean reproducing the actual speech verbatim with the same intonation and the same attitudes and everything else that would be characteristic of, let's say, a talent agent of some kind.

Q: I see. In other words, the changing of the words to more -- well, we might use genteel -- terms, would take everything away from that, is that right?
A: It wouldn't be phonographically accurate. It would lose its real feel; there would be almost no point.

(Quoted in Bruce, How To Talk Dirty and Influence People, p. 171.)

It was apparent to Lenny that not only comic effect depended on phonographic accuracy, but that also his ability to re-create reality, funny or not, depended on it. While the above dialogue admits that the unexpected juxtaposition of a word and a given frame of reference has a shocking comic effect, Lenny insisted that this was not his main intent:

'I don't make any bones about the fact that sometimes I'm irreverent and sometimes I allow myself -- this is a rationalization -- the same poetic license as Tennessee Williams, or Shakespeare. In other words, I'll never use four-letter words for shock value, for a laugh; but if it fits the character, then I want to swing with it and say it'.

(Kofsky, Lenny Bruce: The Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralist, p. 27.)

As the charges of obscenity became more frequent, Lenny chose to describe his approach to humour as 'distinguishing between the moral differences of words and their connotations'. Such differences were the central points of argument at the trials, at which Lenny insisted that such minute substitutions as 'the' for 'an' might imply significant
differences in characterization. It was an argument for the artist's right and responsibility to re-create reality as he sees it, and a refusal to mitigate his delivery through the illusion of gentility or convention. In Lenny's case this included the right to use any word necessary to convey the proper impression, and he would argue for the right to use 'the' if that right were jeopardized, as much as he would argue for the right to use 'cocksucker'.

When charged that he had used the term 'Eat it' in a lewd connection, Lenny replied that he had actually said 'Kiss it'. An attorney asked whether there was a significant difference between the two terms, to which Lenny replied, "Kissing my mother goodbye and eating my mother goodbye, there is a quantity of difference". Thus rather than arguing that a more genteel term was unacceptable, Lenny argued that another equally lewd term was unacceptable, establishing his appeal not for the right to use profane terms, but appropriate terms, profane or not. He successfully incorporated that appeal into the comedy of one of his routines:

"If I talk about a chick onstage and say, 'She was a hooker', an uncontemporary person would say, 'Lenny Bruce, you are coarse and crude'.

'What should I have said?'

'If you must be specific, you should have said "prostitute"'.

'But wait a minute; shouldn't the purpose of a word be to get close to the object the user is describing?'

'Yes, and correct English can do this; "hooker" is incorrect'.

The word has become too general. He prostituted his art. He prostituted the very thing he loved. Can he write any more? Not like he used to -- he has prostituted his work.

So the word 'prostitute' doesn't mean anymore what the word 'hooker' does. If a man were to send out for a $100 prostitute, a writer with a beard might show up.

(Bruce, pp. 145-46.)

Lenny repeatedly argued his belief that audiences did not resent him for his use of profanity, that if they did, he would stop using it. He
came to this conclusion because in all the times he was collared and hauled offstage for obscenity, the police had moved in without having received a single complaint from a patron. Yet there were walkouts at every performance. Throughout his career, Lenny often lost contact with all but the most open-minded of his audience; by his last performance, his estrangement had become almost total. Ingmar Bergman judged that it was not Lenny's verbal presentation of the subject matter that offended the public, it was the subject matter itself; Bergman said, "His only offence was that he dared to tell people the truth." Echoing the sentiments of Parkman and Mark Twain on 'the art of lying', this statement, if correct, may be qualified with the suggestion that Lenny told the truth too blatantly to an audience whose liberality he misjudged. In the above routine he assumed what an 'uncontemporary' audience was, implying his knowledge of a 'contemporary' audience. He was genuinely puzzled when he had been proved to have misjudged the receptivity of an audience, as he wondered aloud after one patron created a scene and stormed out of the club:

What the hell did that guy come in for?... What kind of humor is his humor? Is his humor the Joe E. Louis, the Sophie Tucker, the double-entendre, the naughty-but-nice, the spicy ha-ha-you-know-what-that-means ... wedding night jokes, motel jokes, Rusty Warren, Johnny got a zero, Dwight Fisk, Mr Yo-Yo can't get his yo-yo up, he's got the biggest dingy in the navy?
(The Essential Lenny Bruce, p. 206.)

Lenny's hatred of the double-entendre is perhaps the most notable example of his refusal to adopt the shield upon which comedians have depended traditionally, both in literature and performance. Lenny rarely hid his disdain for the stand-up comics who relied on the double-entendre or any other shield; and he was dismayed by those nightclub patrons who could not face the truth without it. He realized that such comics as Sophie Tucker and Joe E. Louis had grown up at a time when discussion of
sex and other taboo topics was risqué and secretive, so that even the use of the double-entendre was once daring in itself. But society had matured since then, he assumed, and the reliance on that kind of shield was nothing if not immature and hypocritical:

It delighted the customer to be 'in' -- 'Ha, ha, you know what that means, don't you?'

My generation knows -- and accepts -- what that means, so there is no need for humor in that whoopee-cushion vein.

(Bruce, p. 63.)

One obvious problem was that not everyone in Lenny's audiences was of his generation; certainly the people that caused him the most harm were not. Mark Twain had William Dean Howells to remind him that not only his contemporaries would be reading Tom Sawyer -- 'I'd have that swearing out in an instant', Howells had said of the manuscript -- but there was nobody to remind Lenny Bruce that his audiences were not composed solely of Beats and hipsters. He in effect took on singlehandedly the moral traditions of his elders -- and many of his contemporaries -- making no attempt to disguise that fact. The worst retributions came from the law; yet other forces within the Establishment also responded with vindictiveness in whatever form they could: for Time magazine, the voice of the Establishment, the response was the label of 'Sick Comic'. Lenny fought desperately against this label because, other than at the very beginning of his career, he had refused to employ the use of the 'sick joke' or 'sick humour', which was a fast-growing fad in the late 50s and early 60s.

Lenny Bruce viewed sick humour as juvenile and utterly cruel; its history would tend to support that impression. As Goldman notes, sick humour is an 'incredibly inhuman' response to objects that inspire false compassion and liberal piety, such as disease, disaster, and physical deformity. Although performing and literary comedians have arguably
employed sick humour since the beginnings of comedy, as a juvenile fad it first surfaced on the playgrounds of middle class schoolchildren in the 1950s, the milder forms running along the lines of 'Mommy, why do I only run in circles?' 'Shut up, or I'll nail your other foot to the floor'. Junior and senior high school students refined it to their own tastes, college students had their own brand, until it found an international forum in the pages of Mad, ' the sick, cynical comic book of the new generation of sick, cynical kids'. By the fall of 1958, sick comics were the big pop culture phenomenon, with elements of sick humour finding their way into the comedy of Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Don Adams, the songs of Tom Lehrer, the cartoons of Charles Addams, and the comic strips of Jules Feiffer.29

Such comedians as these, when they employed sick humour, often did so as a means of pointed social comment; but a whole host of other established comedians, the old-timers on the scene before Lenny's arrival, had since the vaudeville days resorted to the cruelty of sick humour solely as a means of getting laughs. Lenny resented the hostility that accompanied the undeserved label of 'Sick Comic', while the traditionalists had for years received accolades for that brand of humour to which he had refused to resort. One of his bitterest diatribes on record is worth giving in its entirety, for it clearly establishes Lenny's relation to the popular comedians of his day:

Concomitant with the 'sick comic' label is the carbon cry, 'What happened to the healthy comedian who just got up there and showed everybody a good time and didn't preach, didn't have to resort to knocking religion, mocking physical handicaps and telling dirty toilet jokes?'

Yes, what did happen to the wholesome trauma of the 1930s and 1940s — the honeymoon jokes, concerned not only with what they did but also with how many times they did it; the distorted wedding-night tales, supported visually by the trite vacationland postcards of an elephant with his trunk searching through the opening of a pup-tent, and a woman's head straining out the other end, hysterically
screaming, 'George!' -- whatever happened to all this wholesomeness?

Whatever happened to the healthy comedian who at least had good taste?... Ask the comedians who used to do the harelip jokes, or the moron jokes -- 'The moron who went to the orphans' picnic', etc. -- the healthy comedians who told good-natured religious jokes that found Pat and Abie and Rastus outside of Saint Peter's gate, listening to all those angels harping in stereotype.

Whatever happened to Joe E. Louis? His contribution to comedy consisted of returning Bacchus to his godlike pose with an implicit social message: 'If you're going to be a swinger and fun to be with, always have a glass of booze in your hand; even if you don't become part swinger, you're sure to end up with part liver'.

Whatever happened to Henny Youngman? He involved himself with a nightly psychodrama named Sally, or sometimes Laura. She possessed features not sexually but economically stimulating. Mr Youngman's Uglivac cross-filed and classified diabolic deformities definitely. 'Her nose was so big that every time she sneezed....' 'She was so bow-legged that every time....' 'One leg was shorter than the other....' and Mr Youngman's mutant reaped financial harvest for him. Other comedians followed suit with Cockeyed Jennies, et al., until the Ugly Girl routines became classics. I assume this fondness for atrophy gave the nightclub patron a sense of well-being.

And whatever happened to Jerry Lewis? His neorealist impression of the Japanese male captured all the subtleties of the Japanese physiognomy. The buck-teeth malocclusion was caricatured to surrealistic proportions until the teeth matched the blades that extended from Ben-Hur's chariot. Highlighting the absence of the iris with Coke-bottle-thick lenses, this satire has added to the fanatical devotion which Japanese students have for the United States....

Whatever happened to Milton Berle? He brought transvestitism to championship bowling and upset a hard-core culture of dykes that control the field. From Charlie's Aunt and Some Like It Hot and Milton Berle, the pervert has been taken out of Krafft-Ebing and made into a sometimes-fun fag. Berle never lost his sense of duty to the public, though. Although he gave homosexuals a peek out of the damp cellar of unfavorable public opinion, he didn't go all the way; he left a stigma of menace on his fag -- 'I sweah I'w kiw you'.

I was labeled a 'sicknik' by Time magazine, whose editorial policy still finds humor in a person's physical shortcomings: 'Shelley Berman has a face like a hastily sculptured hamburger'. The healthy comic would never offend ... unless you happen to be fat, bald, skinny, deaf, or blind.

(Bruce, pp. 146-47.)
Lenny to drop any pretence of comedy and entertainment. One such occurrence took place at London's Establishment Club in 1962, when Lenny faced one of his most hostile audiences. Offended by the material, the actress Soibhan McKenna made a point of noisily storming out of the club, pausing long enough to allow her escort to punch the proprietor, Peter Cook, in the nose. Other patrons followed suit, some staying behind to resort to verbal abuse, rudeness, and hurling glasses at Lenny. The next night, to an equally offensive audience, he angrily rebelled:

'You people, having dutifully read the newspapers, are calling me a sick comedian ... yet in this country and my own, children can see in the cinema as many beatings as they can stomach. But to show anything that approaches the act of love would bring down the anger of the righteous. Who is really sick? You or me? Your very obscenities betray your sickness!'

(Goldman, p. 361.)

He then played for the audience a tape of the previous night's performance, clearly depicting the crowd's violence and rudeness.

Yet at other times, especially before his legal preoccupations got to the point of disabling his art, Lenny could turn such rejection into comedy while still maintaining his criticism. One routine sounds a striking echo of the Establishment Club ordeal:

I'm doing a new bit that you'll just flip out with. It's social commentary. I do it with a colored guitarist, Eric Miller. The bit is on integration.

So anyway, we do the bit together. Halfway through the bit -- there is a party of four to my right, and they're really bugging me, you know, saying, 'I don't understand anything'.

So I give the woman a quick stab: 'You schlub, you wouldn't understand anything' -- you know.

So her husband says, 'What'd he say to her?'

The other guy says, 'He said something dirty in Jewish'.

So I said, 'There is nothing dirty in Jewish'.

So dig, she takes this old-fashioned glass and starts winging it, man, vvvooom! Right past me, man. I'm shocked. It crashes behind me.

So I say, 'You've got a bad sense of humor, and bad aim'.

So she gets bugged again, throws a second glass.
I said, 'Well, assuming I'm the most vulgar, irreverent comedian you've ever seen, you've capped it with violence. You realize what a terrible thing -- you threw a glass at me!' So dig what her husband says: 'What else would a lady have done?' I said, 'Faint!' (The Essential Lenny Bruce, pp. 204-05.)

Similarly, one of Lenny's most popular routines, 'The Palladium', deals with a comedian's inability to accept rejection by an audience, and his own return of their hostility. In this routine, a New York comedian lands a job at the London Palladium, failing abysmally with each act for two consecutive nights. In a last-ditch effort to get a response from an audience as stone-cold as 'granite', 'Mount Rushmore', or 'an oil painting', the comedian shouts, "Hey, come on, you Limey assholes, what are you, kiddin'? I was in the service too, you jack-offs, what are you provin' or sometin', eh? I can tell you get a kick outta it -- ya got bum-rapped, ya, the IRA. Screw the Irish, awright?... SCREW IRELAND!"

Bedlam ensues; the audience foam at the mouth and tear the theatre apart like frenzied werewolves, as the comedian screams plaintively that he was only kidding. The irate manager informs him that he has just caused the altering of the architecture of the oldest theatre in London. Lenny always ended the routine by saying, 'The bit is, ah, naturally, part me'.

When Lenny could not manage to create comedy out of trauma, yet still assumed a rapport with the public, the nature of his delivery was radically sobered. Much of his personal trauma was the result of snowballing legal persecution between 1961 and 1966, when he died. Compounding his indictments for obscenity were those for the possession and use of narcotics.

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In spite of protestations to the contrary, enough evidence and personal reminiscences exist to fairly well establish that, if he was not actually addicted to heroin, Lenny was seriously debilitated by a drug habit, spending up to $1200 a week on heroin, Dilaudid, Methedrine, marijuana, and various pills. Even without complications, the pressure of maintaining such an expensive habit would certainly be grinding, especially after becoming a legal pauper, as Lenny eventually did. 32

His first arrest for the possession of narcotics occurred in Philadelphia in 1961. Hauled from his bed while fighting a serious staph infection, he was taken to court on a stretcher to answer charges that were eventually suspended; he had with him a doctor's prescription for self-injected Methedrine to fight 'depression and lethargy'. Although the doctor later protested that he was powerless to refuse the prescription under Lenny's pleading -- Lenny was known to have that effect on many people -- he admitted his action to be improper. Having escaped prosecution in this instance, Lenny was nonetheless branded and could no longer support his habit with anonymity. He resorted to carrying with him at all times a book filled with physicians' statements and counterfeit prescription labels, allegedly admitting to a friend, "If they bust me, I'll show them this book, with these hundreds of prescriptions written by all these fuckin' doctors and filled by these fuckin' druggies and I'll say these bastards made me into a junkie. No wonder I take stuff when they prescribe it for me. Damn right, Jim. If they ever bust me, I'll bust the whole fuckin' AMA". 33 When it came to his habit, Lenny's maintenance of a confidence game was noteworthy.

Released on bail, at which time the case was dismissed, Lenny opened at San Francisco's Jazz Workshop the following week. During this engagement he was first arrested for obscenity, to be acquitted after a lengthy and well publicized trial. The trial in fact helped his career
more than anything he had yet done himself as a performer; petitions were signed on his behalf, as the Beats of San Francisco spread the word through the arts underground that a comedian named Lenny Bruce was under persecution for the free expression of art.  

Although acquitted in America, Lenny was humiliated and banned from performing in Australia after one performance there in September 1962. One month later he was again arrested for possession of narcotics in Los Angeles. Three weeks following this he was arrested again for obscenity, at the Troubadour Theatre in Hollywood. His previous obscenity acquittal had dealt only with that particular performance, declared not obscene because the ordinance stated obscenity to be a valid charge only in cases where the material was utterly without social significance. At that trial, enough scholars and critics had been at hand comparing Lenny with Rabelais, Swift, and Aristophanes to convince the judge and the jury of the material's social significance. But in his second obscenity trial there arose the first hint of outright legal persecution: the charges were based on the testimony of a Yiddish-speaking undercover detective, who actually insisted that Lenny used Yiddish as a cover for profanity.  

Less than two months later, Lenny was again arrested for obscenity at the Gate of Horn Theatre in Chicago. With its overwhelming Catholic population, the city boasted the largest membership of any American Archdiocese. Among the routines Lenny performed that night were 'To Is a Preposition, Come Is a Verb', and 'Religions, Inc.', which portrays the Pope, Cardinal Spellman, and Oral Roberts as fast-talking businessmen with no religious scruples. Two of the cabaret's waitresses witnessed the following dialogue between the manager and the arresting officer, who evidently used the authority of his badge to enforce his own private convictions:
POLICE OFFICIAL: I want to tell you that if this man ever uses a four-letter word in this club again, I'm going to pinch you and everyone in here. If he ever speaks against religion, I'm going to pinch you and everyone in here. Do you understand?
MANAGER: I don't have anything against any religion.
POLICE OFFICIAL: Maybe I'm not talking to the right person. Are you the man who hired Lenny Bruce?
MANAGER: Yes, I am. I'm Alan Ribback.
POLICE OFFICIAL: Well, I don't know why you ever hired him. You've had good people here. But he mocks the Pope -- and I'm speaking as a Catholic -- I'm here to tell you your license is in danger. We're going to have someone here watching every show. Do you understand?
(Quoted in Bruce, p. 211.)

Of the fifty people from whom the jury of his 'peers' was selected, forty-seven were Catholic; they were not chosen at random, as is the custom, but hand-picked according to their seating -- and they had kept changing seats. Lenny described the outcome:

The eventual jury consisted entirely of Catholics.
The Judge was Catholic.
The Prosecutor and his assistant were Catholic.
On Ash Wednesday, the judge removed the spot of ash from his forehead and told the bailiff to instruct the others to go and do likewise. I cold never conjure up a more bizarre satire than the reality of a judge, two prosecutors and twelve jurors, each with a spot of ash on his forehead.
When the late Brendan Behan heard about this, he said: 'That scares me -- and I'm Catholic!'
(Bruce, p. 212.)

Lenny was convicted of obscenity; after the appeal to the Illinois State Supreme Court, the verdict was unanimously upheld. Lenny was forced to perform under the stigma of that conviction for two years, until the United States Supreme Court declared in Jacobellis vs State of Ohio that the film The Lovers was not obscene, due to its social significance. The outcome of that case caused the lower Illinois court to reverse Lenny's conviction, which they did only grudgingly, as their decision reveals:
'While we would not have thought that constitutional guarantees would necessitate the subjection of society to the gradual deterioration of its moral fabric which this type of presentation promotes, we must concede that some of the topics commented on by the defendant are of social importance. Under Jacobellis the entire performance is thereby immunized, and we are constrained to hold that the judgement of the circuit court of Cook County must be reversed and the defendant discharged'.

(Bruce, pp. 214-15.)

Lenny had only this comment about the reversal: 'They're really saying that they're only sorry the crummy Constitution won't permit them to convict me, but if they had their choice....'

Immediately following the initial Chicago decision of 1962, Lenny was again arrested for narcotics in Los Angeles. His previous narcotics arrest had resulted in conviction, but the decision was overturned when it was discovered that the arresting officer, who had allegedly seen Lenny drop a packet of heroin into the gutter, was himself convicted of perjury, smuggling, and possession of heroin. In this second narcotics case, however, a California statute was utilized, saying that the defendant would be exempt from criminal prosecution only if it could be established that he was certifiably an addict in need of treatment. After examination by a doctor later found by a jury to be morally and professionally unfit to discharge his duties, Lenny was declared an addict and sentenced to confined treatment at the State Rehabilitation Center -- a sentence that could last up to ten years, as opposed to a fine and criminal sentence only half as long. There was naturally a stigma of corruption accompanying either sentence.

With this decision and the subsequent appeal, Lenny's performing career took a nosedive. He was virtually finished as an aesthete and artist, for from this point on until his death, his energies were primarily devoted to legal battles. Rather than focusing his attention on the delivery of comedy and satire from the cabaret stage, he became
wholly preoccupied with the courtroom; as Goldman notes, he was thus changed from an 'intuitive, imaginative being to a legalistic logic-chopper'. After the California decision, nightclub owners across the country viewed Lenny Bruce as a liability; whether or not criminally convicted, the fact of his being a certified drug addict frightened even the most sympathetic club owners into blacklisting him. In addition, his Chicago obscenity conviction had yet to be reversed, so although he had been red-hot and marketable after his San Francisco acquittal, he was now viewed generally as a convicted, foul-mouthed junkie and felon. This not only crippled his ability to function as an artist and performer, it crippled his entire self-esteem.

The combination of the obscenity conviction and the addiction certification led to Lenny's being barred from performing in, or even visiting, Great Britain. Booked at the Establishment Club again by Peter Cook, among the few willing to take a chance on him, Lenny was refused entry at London Airport on 2 April 1963. The immigration officials cited the 1955 Aliens Order, which allowed refusal of entry for having no work permit or for 'general' reasons. Lenny was deported for the latter, in spite of documents attesting to his 'good character'. Upon landing at New York, he was subjected to a humiliating strip-search for narcotics, including a brutal rectal probe. This did nothing for his self-respect, and he burst into tears before the news cameras.

In Parliament the following week, in reply to two Labour MPs' request for an explanation of Lenny's deportation, Home Secretary Brooke's reply was: "Mr. Bruce was refused leave to land on April 2 because I had decided that it would not be conducive to the public good to admit him". Lenny returned to Britain a week later as a tourist only, via the Irish 'back door route' -- Dublin to Belfast -- and made it to the Establishment Club where he was arrested at the door.
spending the night in gaol, he was again deported. 42 Three months later, in spite of an invitation and petition to allow Lenny to participate in the Edinburgh Festival, the Home Secretary maintained, "It is not in my mind to revoke the order". 43

The official American and British decisions accompanied by opinions of vocal private citizens were enough to shatter Lenny, who faced such harassment and evil opinion without ever having attempted any crime against society; for if he did commit any crimes, they were against himself only. The hipster's lifestyle was indeed self-destructive; Lenny was aware of this and never took the pains to advocate anyone else's following it. He was genuinely mortified to be the object of such public hatred, usually coming from people who had never seen or heard him. In March of 1964, the New York Post predicted, "Bruce stands up against all limitation on the flesh and spirit, and someday they are going to crush him for it". 44

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By the time of that writing, Lenny Bruce had already begun to crumble. Comedians have always been among the most sensitive of individuals, possessed of a gift for seeing things in their ultimately ludicrous aspects; as Vonnegut notes, they are often the youngest in a family, like Mark Twain and himself, and they are generally 'overwhelmingly depressed'. 45 Lenny himself was an only child, in a family atmosphere that gave him little protection from domestic trauma. Upon becoming a performing comedian, he found himself among the least protected of artists, for a talent for comedy is a different thing than a talent for most public performance:

To get out in front of the public, you have to have a special kind of nerve that is given to very few men. Comedians are, of all performers, the most vulnerable.
Unlike every other species of entertainer, they do not appear to have a craft; a mystery. 'Who is he, after all, this guy in the tuxedo, showing off and trying to be funny? Lots of people are funnier than he is -- I'm sometimes funnier than he is! Am I right, Myrna?'

(Goldman, p. 117.)

Kenneth Tynan saw Lenny as an impromptu prose poet who trusted his audience so completely that he could talk in public no less outspokenly than he would talk in private. When one considers the element of trust implicit in Lenny's type of delivery and the fact that the comedian makes the first vulnerable manoeuvre, one might appreciate the debilitating effect of having that manoeuvre backfire, as happened to Lenny in misjudging the contemporaneity of his audience and society. This is especially so when considering the element of self-recognition in the comedian's material:

The psychological mechanism of this kind of comedy is well enough known by now: it is a means of expressing hatred and contempt and still escaping punishment. But the matter is complicated by the fact that the comic's sensitivity to imperfection and ugliness is heightened by a conviction of his own inadequacy, vulgarity, hypocrisy, leading him to become doubly intolerant of these faults in others. They haunt him; they are demons which he seeks to exorcise by comic confrontation.

(Albert Goldman, 'The Comedy of Lenny Bruce', London Magazine, 3 (January 1964), 68-75 (p. 70).)

To a performing comedian, immediate public acceptance can be the only measure of his worth, the only assurance of his ability -- this is true no matter the degree of success or notoriety the comedian has experienced in the past. One might think of Mark Twain after the attempt of levity that seemed only to insult Boston at the Whittier birthday dinner, how the comedian spent the months following in severe depression, begging for forgiveness and acceptance. Conversely, one might remember the sheer joy he expressed in the letters to his family and friends after his success in reducing Ulysses Grant to laughing hysterics. Mark
Twain's letters demonstrate that the immediate reception at public speaking events either animated or crushed him more directly than any slowly received critical response to his written work.

So was Lenny Bruce equally affected by the euphoria of immediate acceptance and the depression of immediate rejection. In a reconstruction of the aftermath of one of Lenny's more successful performances, Goldman describes the come-down felt by the comedian at the end of his hour of glory:

As soon as he gets the last laugh, Lenny charges off, head down, hands jammed in pockets, shouldering through the tumultuous house like a grimly slicing ice plow. Without a coat, he jumps into the getaway cab that Terry has waiting, its engine running beside the curb. The driver takes off. Lenny crumbles in a corner. Crashing. Suffering emotional bends worse than the pains of kicking. It's the ghastly moment of partition from the audience, the umbilical snip that every comic dreads. You've killed the people, wiped them out, realized your dream of total power. Every gag, every laugh has carried you higher and higher. But when you start to come down, you realize that you're a million miles from reality. You can't talk to anyone, reach out to anyone, touch anyone -- you're excruciatingly alone.

(Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen ... Lenny Bruce!*, p. 46.)

The nightclub stage was too tiny a fulcrum on which a man could place the weight of his entire self-esteem. The narcotics and obscenity convictions and the subsequent boycott on the hiring of Lenny Bruce by club owners the world over almost totally removed that fulcrum. Any remaining professional resilience he might have had was finally smashed by his last arrest and conviction, again for obscenity, at New York's Cafe Au Go-Go in April 1964. Lenny had been playing his home town for eight years with no trouble, and the arrest caught him pathetically off guard:

What does it mean for a man to be found obscene in New York? This is the most sophisticated city in the country. This is where they play Genet's *The Balcony*. If anyone is
Yet it happened. A postponement of the trial was given while Lenny fought a battle against pleurisy, some doctors refusing to treat him even for this because they did not want to get 'involved'. After his recuperation, in spite of testimonies and petitions signed by eighty of America's most prominent artists and public figures, the New York Criminal Court convicted Lenny of obscenity, sentenced him to three four-month terms in the work house, and banned him from performing in New York. The Supreme Court granted him a certificate of reasonable doubt and the case went to appeal, but the stigma and fear of the District Attorney's office on the part of New York's club owners permanently cut Lenny off from his most sophisticated and sympathetic audience. He died before the decision was reversed.

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He also died before the bottom line on the District Attorney's intentions was fully brought to light. Beyond all doubt, Lenny was the object of concentrated legal harassment by the DA; he was a man of whom an example was to be made. The prosecuting attorneys at his New York trial later admitted that they believed him innocent of violating the law, but pressed charges against him anyway. Others on the DA's staff, those in lower positions and who had less to lose, refused to participate in the prosecution at all. One of these young lawyers spoke for some of his colleagues in expressing relief that he had nothing to do with Lenny's final trial: "I saw and heard about Lenny Bruce during and after the trial. The case helped to kill and destroy him.... I'm glad I don't have Bruce on my conscience." Another lawyer, an assistant DA who assisted in the prosecution, later spoke for his partners who obviously
suffered under guilty consciences: "We drove him into poverty and bankruptcy and then murdered him. We all knew what we were doing. We used the law to kill him." 50

Whether or not the legal pressures facing Lenny caused him to jab a needle into his arm once too often, they certainly had an irreversible effect on his livelihood. In October of 1965 he was declared a legal pauper; a few years before he had been earning upwards of $3500 a week. 51 Between the time of his first arrest in 1961 and the declaration of bankruptcy, he spent more hours in court than on the nightclub stage. When he was not in court, he was in hospital; in 1965, during an hallucinatory drug trip, he fell from the second storey of a San Francisco hotel, breaking both ankles, his pelvis, his right arm, and causing an infection and fever that nearly killed him. The injuries caused him to cancel one of his last engagements in Chicago. This was the only engagement outside of San Francisco that he had been able to secure after the New York obscenity verdict. 52

With an awareness of the course of events that determined the decline in the quality of Lenny's life after 1964, it is easier to understand the ultimate effect on his art as a comedian and social satirist. His preoccupations with indictments and appeals kept him from reading newspapers and magazines, watching television, and engaging in social intercourse -- the means by which he might have kept current before an audience. 53 With an increase of chronic paranoia that had existed since childhood and which had understandably been heightened by his legal and public persecutions, Lenny hired and discharged lawyer after lawyer, until he virtually, though ineffectively, conducted his own defences. During the last years, 1964 to 1966, which Goldman describes as years of legitimate madness, Lenny lost the possession of his one magic weapon: his sense of humour, which might yet have defended him against...
any amount of social prejudice. When he used up his creative energy on courts and lawyers at the expense of nurturing an audience rapport out of which a massive public opinion could press for his vindication, Lenny was doomed as a comedian.54

* * *

Since the beginning of his career, Lenny had been more prone to incorporate undisguised elements of personal trauma into his material than most other comics -- so much so that as early as 1959 he was slapped with this review from an otherwise admiring columnist, Herb Caen, then of Chicago:

"Confidential to Lenny Bruce: We're all sorry you're having personal problems, but an endless airing of them does not constitute nightclub entertainment, sorry".

(Goldman, Ladies and Gentlemen ... Lenny Bruce!!, p. 254.)

It is ironic that this review should have come at a time when Lenny was conscious of a definite responsibility to 'be funny'. The review was given the same year in which Lenny made the statement, "A comedian should get a laugh every 25 seconds for a period of not less than 45 minutes and accomplish this feat with consistency 18 out of 20 shows".55 Whether or not any comedian, including Lenny Bruce, ever intended to measure and pace his delivery according to such ludicrous guidelines, it is more than anything else a recognition of a comedian's expected devotion to an audience in keeping in tune with them consistently and maintaining the front of entertainment. After his final decline, all Lenny could offer his audience was rage and frustration. He could not keep abreast of the topics and situations that concerned the people directly; he was too involved in his own legal battles. His delivery by 1964 had deteriorated to the point of virtual incoherence, so that
audiences in the few houses that booked him faced a hostile, violent man who spewed out barely intelligible monologues peppered with flat obscenities. Goldman's 1964 review of his act describes a fat, dissipated, sunken-eyed derelict in a rumpled overcoat, who only gave a faint glimmer of former genius:

What is unsatisfactory in Bruce's work is his frequent failure to transmute his rage into real comedy. Sometimes he has nothing more to offer than an attitude ('Everything is rotten. Mother is rotten. The flag is rotten. God is rotten'). At other times, what starts with a promise of rounded development will flatten out into a direct and insulting statement. A sophisticated listener forgives the comic these lapses, understanding that the ad-lib approach and the often intractable material are apt to betray the performer into mere obscenity; but people with no natural sympathy for this approach are shocked and offended.

(Goldman, 'The Comedy of Lenny Bruce', London Magazine, (January 1964), p. 73.)

Time has softened some of the resentment that Lenny caused in much of his audience; it has given people a chance to mature and explore the meanings of his routines which may have been missed in the rapidity of the initial spontaneous delivery; it has given them a chance to consider the sources of his rage, both personal and moral. But in 1965, when that rage was fresh and livid, Lenny did nothing but alienate all but his most sympathetic listeners. The critic Clive Barnes had at first admired the early acts, having seen Lenny in 1962 as embued with an 'almost boyish charm' that allowed him to seem, at the worst, 'curiously disconcerting'. By 1965 that charm had been reduced to arrogance and insult, creating a loathing that diminished only in retrospect:

I didn't much admire Bruce's nightclub act -- but I wasn't ready for it; many people weren't. And I didn't understand the moral fervour behind it. The two or three times I saw him -- pretty much toward the end of his career -- he seemed like an incompetent, foul-mouthed loudmouth... When I saw Bruce, white and ferret-faced, caught in the spotlight of notoriety and trying to face the horror, the guy wasn't very funny... he was livid and
tense, the boyishness had been replaced with the snapping vitality of a cornered animal. He kept on straying from his act, and he was pretty unfunny, and funnily unpretty. (Clive Barnes, 'Lenny: The Fine Art of Obscenity', The Times, 5 June 1971, p. 7.)

Lenny's first routines had had their disconcertingly comical effect from the imaginative manner in which the comedian perceived and displayed before the audience the ironical hypocrisies of society; but in his final routines, Lenny imagined that the dry inconsistencies in his trial transcripts were ironical to the point of constituting legitimate cabaret comedy. It is true, there were hundreds of ironic contradictions in the thousands of transcript pages -- contradictions that reveal the pathetic extent of official harassment and straw-grabbing -- but there was nothing in them that remotely approached the sort of comedy that audiences were willing to pay for.

* * *

Lenny Bruce ended his career by relinquishing the comedian's mask outright; he was perhaps the only recognized comedian in the history of American comedy to verbally repudiate his profession from the very stage on which he stood. By 1965, he was closing his acts with the nightly apology, "I'm sorry I haven't been very funny, but you see I'm not a comedian; I'm Lenny Bruce".\(^{57}\) In light of his denial, theorists have tried since his death to determine just what he was, if not a comedian. Above all things, he was a man whose private tragedies and the immense social pressures surrounding them prevented the final realization of his art. But lingering on the periphery of this central explanation are a number of other considerations showing that his stance as a comedian would still have been jeopardized by an implicit refusal to maintain the comedian's guise. It is possible that his apology was more than a rationalization for a given performance's sombreness; it may have been a
means of saying that all along his audience had had the wrong
expectations of him -- that he never was a comedian. The question
remains of what nightclub patrons actually paid their money to see, if
the comedian was denied them.

* * *

One of the non-comedic labels given to Lenny was that of a moralist.
It is admittedly a worn-out cliche to hang on anybody who has wrongly
suffered notoriety, but it takes on particular importance when dealing
with a comedian, a man whose job it is to make people laugh. Mark Twain
showed a particular insight when he said, 'Humor must not professedly
teach and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would
live forever'. Lenny was often accused of approaching his unfunny
subjects with the intent of preaching or moralizing; as Mark Twain said,
the intent may very likely be in the comedian, but it must be disguised.
To Lenny's accusers, the stage was a centre of entertainment -- yet there
were successful precedents of comedic social criticism on the American
cabaret stage, Mort Sahl being among the most notable. The tactics of
Sahl and, in the best of his comedy, Lenny Bruce, were seen only
belatedly by the majority as an extension of those used by Swift and Mark
Twain: the use of fantasy and entertainment as shields in the delivery of
contemporarily unpopular ideas.

Lenny began his career by delivering the same sort of tired routines
as the established supper club comedians he came to despise as sell-outs.
His change of approach, the first step in a process which his worst
critics said he carried too far, was to personalize his act and
unquestionably display himself as an example. At first he portrayed
himself explicitly as an example of what not to be, thereby deflecting
the criticism of being an unhealthy influence while still implying the
necessity of the hipster's rebellion against conformity. He slyly inserted into his early routines self-effacing statements that augmented those against following his own crazy lifestyle; this was enough to produce a contrary effect, making him seem beguiling in spite of his self-destructive daring. It was a way of saying 'What do I know?' while allowing him to tell all he did know about topics other comics did not touch — religious hypocrisy, sex, death, politics, official corruption, and other things which, in Vonnegut's words, 'Billy Graham won't talk about'.

After committing himself to attacking such taboo subjects, but before he began to present himself as a victim of official harassment, Lenny denied any claim to being a moralist, just as he denied that his chosen lifestyle was worth following. He wanted only to earn a buck, he insisted, and if he did speak the truth that hurts, it was only because such truth was a marketable commodity to be sold with the even-handedness of an 'honourable Jewish trader'. Yet this in itself was a partial cover, not only from the comedic standpoint but from that of morality as well; for in introducing the element of Judaism, he implicitly introduced that of morality. The two cannot be separated; Lenny as moralist cannot be examined without attention to Lenny as Jew. In the early years, 1959 to 1962, he was as much of a moralist as he ever was to become, but it was then hidden more carefully behind characterizations and effective masks, among which were those of the Jew.

* * *

Lenny exploited his Jewishness to the hilt onstage, but it was not totally a calculated manoeuvre on his part. Judaism was an inseparable part of his being; and with it came the tendency and need to moralize. He was brought up in a Jewish house by a father devoted to book learning,
and though Lenny never graduated high school, the spirit of Jewish law, upon which all aspects of Jewish culture rest, was instilled in him by his father. One could not be infused with the spirit of traditional Jewish law without developing a noteworthy sensitivity to and for compassion, or in Yiddish, rachmones. As Lenny was frequently to repeat in his performances, 'had roch munas ... have some pity, Jim'.

Frank Kofsky pays particular attention to Leo Rosten's descriptions in The Joys of Yiddish of rachmones, one of Lenny's characteristic words, which actually means more than compassion. It "lies at the heart of Jewish thought and feeling":

'All of Judaism's philosophy, ethics, ethos, learning, education, hierarchy of values, are saturated with a sense of, and heightened sensitivity to, rachmones....

'Note that the Hebrew word rechem, from which rachmones is derived, means "a mother's womb". The rabbis taught that a Jew should look upon others with the same love and feeling that a mother feels for the issue of her womb'.

(Quoted in Kofsky, Lenny Bruce: The Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralist, p. 83.)

Rosten explains that the element of a mother's love and compassion, rachmones, is coupled with the necessity to improve unhealthy conditions, to moralize upon wrongs, to teach. The earliest cultural drive behind Lenny Bruce's being, his Jewishness, is further emphasized with Rosten's description of Jewish attitudes to humour, which has an important position in the transmission of Jewish thought:

'The story, the anecdote, the joke is] a teaching instrument of unique efficacy. A joke is a structured, compact narrative that makes a point with power, generally by surprise. It is therefore an excellent pedagogic peg on which to hang a point....

'[Moreover, the] Jewish anecdote possesses a bouquet all its own. Since almost every Jew is raised to reverence learning, and is encouraged to be a bit of a teacher, the Jewish story (mysheh) is at its best when it points to a problem or moralizes a problem'.

(Quoted in Kofsky, p. 90.)
Thus Rosten emphasizes a connection between Judaism and humour other than that addressed by Freud and Vonnegut as regards 'Jewish' or 'gallows' humour; the emphasis here concerns the inseparability of morality from Jewish tradition, especially its humour. Morality was thus inseparable from the humour of Lenny Bruce, whose deportment since the beginning was specifically as a Jewish comedian -- admittedly resulting in a unique combination when paired with the hipster, the 'White Negro'. It is true that Judaism produced an ambivalence in Lenny as it does in many Jews; he maintained a contempt for all organized religions, including Judaism, in spite of his own conscious identification with Jewish culture. Never entertaining the notion of being publicly identified as anything but a Jew, he rarely disguised his disgust with those who attempted to hide or minimize their Jewishness when among gentiles. Such Jews were often the butt of his comedy -- he sarcastically applauded the success of the affluent Jews who 'passed' as gentiles, noting that some Jews were so 'reformed' as to be ashamed of being Jewish. He reserved his contempt especially for his Jewish competitors on the nightclub stage -- Joey Bishop, Mort Sahl, Phyllis Diller, Shelley Berman -- who in his view tacitly and weakly accepted assimilation into the gentile cultural and moral vacuum by working entirely in English.

Lenny took the frequent risk of infusing Yiddish words into his routines, often with no explanation of their meanings, as a way of identifying himself with his culture. He expressed his view of contemporary WASP-dominated America as having no culture of its own, or at best a wholly artificial one. The essence of Judaism for Lenny was its adherence to cultural diversity, naturalism, and richness of spirit; his love for Judaism was irrespective of religion.
In the literate sense -- as literate as Yiddish can be since it is not a formal language -- 'goyish' means 'gentile'. But that's not the way I mean to use it. To me, if you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you are Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish.

Evaporated milk is goyish even if the Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish. Spam is goyish and rye bread is Jewish.

Negroes are all Jews. Italians are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews. Mouths are very Jewish. And bosoms. Baton-twirling is very goyish.

(Bruce, p. 22.)

Lenny's adherence to cultural Judaism in a real sense, as opposed to the standard portrayal of the Jewish tailor with the ski-slope nose, often put him at odds with his less sophisticated audiences, since such adherence was maintained largely through the employment of Yiddish in his routines. The sheltered, lily-white Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution had a difficult enough time in understanding his fast-rapping, hipster-jazzman delivery, without its being peppered with foreign words. Although he was aware of this, Lenny did nothing to accommodate these audiences; in fact, he expressed his recognition by using them as butts in one of his routines. He explained the feeling of being stuck onstage in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, before an audience out of the bland American heartland, 'where the Gray Line bus tours begin':

I'm out there for about fifteen minutes and people are staring at me in disbelief. Then the shock wears off, and I start to hear:
'What's "poots" mean?'
'I dunno'.
'What is he supposed to be talking about?'
'I dunno'.

'What is he? What's "schmuck"? He keeps saying "schmuck" and "pootz", "pout", "poots", "parts", ... and, and "bread", "cool", "dig", "schmooz", "grap", "pup", "schlumph", "murgh" --'

It sounds like garble to them -- these are Jews asking this now.
'I dunno what the hell he's talking about'.
'I dunno, it's a bunch of silliness'.

'It's double-talk, I think. That's what he's doing,
'Well, I dunno, it's, ah, it's, ah, good ... I guess'.
'You like him?'
'I wanna go to the toilet'.
'Awright ... I'll go with ya'.
'I donwanna walk in front of him'.
'Yeah, but everybody's walking out. And he's still up there -- "poots", "brootz", "mugrup", "blog" -- he's up there. Whaddishe, crazy? ... How come he hasn't got any music? No singing, nothing. Sure, even the band left him. Ha ha ha! There's no band up there! Sure, they know he's crazy'.

'He's crazy. He's a weirdo. He's on the dope. Yeah. He's on it now. Oh yeah. He's right on it now. Cloud seven'.

(The Essential Lenny Bruce, pp. 208-09.)

The change in audience reaction portrayed in this routine might fairly well correspond to the reactions Lenny faced during his career, going from curiosity to confusion to hostile rejection. As he was an outsider to most of his contemporary audience, seemingly a slang-talking, drug-addicted Jew, moralizing on indelicate matters, they could not perceive fully any sense of compassion or love in his routines; for often implicit in the Jew's sense of love is a tendency to reject in the objects of that love those emotions and attitudes considered undesirable. As Goldman explains in a description strikingly familiar to the stereotype of the true 'Jewish mama', a Jewish sense of love is something alien to most gentiles, who often escape subjection to this complex and polarized emotion -- an emotion so positive and affectionate yet so crossed with antagonism and negative impulses, that it constantly teeters on the fulcrum of ambivalence:

It's love mingled with such a big slug of pity, cut with so much condescension, embittered with so much tacit disapproval, disapproval, even disgust, that when you are the object of this love, you might as well be the object of hate. Jewish love made Kafka feel like a cockroach. What Jewish love really is ... is the final distillate of the twisted and contorted feelings of a people who have been the most hated race in history.

(Goldman, Ladies and Gentlemen ... Lenny Bruce!! p. 77.)
Lenny repeatedly told his audience, 'I feel alotta love for all of you'\(^6\) -- yet if Goldman's theory is to be accepted along with Rosten's emphasis of the need in the Jew to apply love as a corrective force, then it might seem that Lenny gave to his audiences a kind of love that they could not always handle. It was a love that caused him to lecture, to accuse often without mitigation, to admonish a paying audience, for example, by saying of the American GIs in Europe: 'That's why they don't like Americans anywhere. That's why we have lost the world completely -- because we fucked all of their mothers for chocolate bars. And don't you forget it, Jim. Don't ever forget that.'\(^6\) In spite of his early assertion that he was just a comedian out to make a buck, Lenny resorted to calling himself a professional moralist when he found society treating him without their professed measure of Judeo-Christian compassion and tolerance. It wasn't until he was in the thick of his legal battles that he described his approach to humour as in 'distinguishing between the moral differences of words and their connotations' (emphasis his). One reason for the deterioration of his comedic art, and the lack of his audiences' receptivity, was that he explicitly carried himself as a moralist, defiantly ignoring the advice of Mark Twain; he often screamed, pouted, ranted and raved to the extent that audiences could find no justification or qualification for it. He was frequently careful to provide qualification, but lost it through his preaching. It too often seemed that his negativism outweighed his central good intentions.

Kenneth Tynan looked deeply enough into Lenny's work as to find him overwhelmingly compassionate, with a troubled voice crying for people to be shocked 'by the right things, not by four-letter words, which violate only convention, but by want and deprivation, which violate human dignity.'\(^6\) Tynan called Lenny a 'nightclub Cassandra bringing news of impending chaos, a tight-rope walker between morality and nihilism',
bearing the simple message that 'whatever releases people and brings them together is good, and whatever confines and separates them is bad'.

One problem Lenny faced in delivering his warnings was that the success of his delivery was based on immediacy, and most of the nightclub patrons -- paying customers out for a good time -- were not necessarily as intellectually motivated as were the literary critics and sociologists called to Lenny's defence. His audiences formed opinions based on their immediate reactions, usually not taking the time to search for hidden compassion behind the rage and insults hurled out over their martinis. They expected entertainment, and they saw neither entertainment nor the implicit cry for compassion when Lenny, for instance, used the stage to deplore the death sentences of the Rosenbergs:

Goddamn the priests and the rabbis. Goddamn the Popes and all their hypocrisy. Goddamn Israel and its bond drives. What influence did they exert to save the lives of the Rosenbergs -- guilty or not? Again, the Ten Commandments doesn't say, Thou Shalt Not Kill Sometimes....
(Bruce, p. 110.)

Lenny's audiences did not immediately see these words as those of a man pleading that moral principles be a guide to action, not merely a set of abstractly held precepts. They saw him as a foul-mouthed, irreverent Jewish derelict bitching against the Pope and the Church and even his own religion, probably because he had a bone to pick with those authorities that publicly chastised him (like he deserved) for getting out of line. Often their first attendances were their last, for they did not pay to hear their cherished institutions verbally insulted from the nightclub stage. They wanted a joke with a punchline; and after hearing their Legions of Decency and Christian organizations blasted for the tacit approval of the death sentence, they found no humour in such punchlines as, 'And since they condone capital punishment, I want them to stop...
bitching about Jesus getting nailed up. 68

Comedians have traditionally thrived on the audience's impression that they are watching 'one of us'. Lenny was the first popular comic to effectively alter that impression, and though he suffered for it professionally, he broke the ice for the next generation of injured comedians who felt justified in attacking societies that victimized them as outsiders. After Lenny Bruce came other hip comedians like George Carlin, other sexually preoccupied Jews like Woody Allen, and black comedians such as Richard Pryor, who turned into comedy their outrage at white bigotry. Native American comics and Oriental-American comics were likewise free to lash out at the WASP society that was first attacked from the nightclub stage by Lenny Bruce.

* * *

Guilt and the persuasion of historical evidence have caused much of white America to accept criticisms for wrongs they committed against outsiders; yet as recently as the early 60s, when Lenny was performing, the civil rights movement was in its infancy, and the Silent Majority was not so silent when an outsider had the nerve to attack them and their institutions. Here was this Jew, they said, carrying on the same old paranoid evasion of responsibility for the death of Our Lord, nurturing his own private grudge against our elected officials whom he thinks are all conspiring Catholics -- and demanding money for the privilege of doing it! These were real accusations, and Lenny was aware of much of them. He could laugh off and turn into comedy the accusation of the Jew as Christ-killer:

*As regards the later generation of black comedians after the 60s, due recognition must be given to the ice-breaking influence of the comedian Dick Gregory.
two thousand years of Polack kids whacking the shit out of us coming home from school. Dear, dear. And although there should be a statute of limitations for that crime, it seems that those who neither have the actions nor the gait of Christians, pagan or not, will bust us out, unrelenting dues, for another deuce.

And I really searched it out, why we pay the dues. Why do you keep breaking our balls for this crime? 'Why, Jew, because you skirt the issue. You blame it on the Roman soldiers'.

Alright. I'll clear the air once and for all, and confess. Yes, we did it. I did it, my family. I found a note in my basement. It said:

'We killed him,
signed,
Morty'.

And a lot of people say to me, 'Why did you kill Christ?'
'I dunno ... it was one of those parties, got out of hand, you know.'

We killed him because he didn't want to become a doctor, that's why we killed him.

Or maybe it would shock some people, some people who are involved with the dogma, to say that we killed him at his own request, because he knew that people would exploit his name. In his name they would do all sorts of bust-out things, and bust out people. In Christ's name they would exploit the flag, the Bible, and -- whew! Boy, the things they've done in his name.

(The Essential Lenny Bruce, pp. 54-55.)

Lenny could accept with a clear conscience the Jews' questionable responsibility for the death of Jesus, providing that organized religions accept the responsibility for the abuse of his teachings. Without a sense of guilt, he could distance himself from a potential personal accusation, confronting it as a comedian head-on, and thereby standing up to a major portion of WASP audience hostility.

But the accusation that he had the audacity to insult the society that buys his tickets affected him deeply. Just as Mark Twain felt that he was a parasite in 'milking' his lecture audiences, Lenny Bruce similarly recognized his dependence on the ills of society. Although aware that he was ripe for criticism, he rarely managed to convince an audience of this, possibly because his guilt as an overpaid performer made him so bitter. There was a genuine thread of self-denigration in
his routines, but it was swamped by the immediacy of his accusatory tirades and general attitude. In an expression of his own guilt as a professional moralizing talker, he revealed a sense of troubled self-knowledge that put him on the defensive:

If the Messiah were indeed to return and wipe out all diseases, physical and mental, and do away with all man's inhumanity to man, then I, Lenny Bruce -- a comedian who has thrived both economically and egotistically upon the corruption and cruelty he condemns with humor -- would in truth know that I had been a parasite whose whole structure of success depended on despair: like J. Edgar Hoover and Jonas Salk ... the dust would gather on all the people who hold that superior moral position of serving humanity, for they will have become aware that their very existence, creative ability, and symbolic status had depended wholly on intellectual dishonesty. (Bruce, p. 265.)

But accompanying Lenny's guilt was the protestation that he was, after all, in the 'superior moral position of serving humanity'. The tension between guilt on the one hand and the demand for recognition and reward on the other revealed itself in a troubling inconsistency in the quality of his humour -- the difference, as Clive Barnes noted, between Lenny's 'boyish charm' and his 'foul-mouthed, loud-mouthed' arrogance. It might be thought that guilt is a far-fetched cause for a stranger untrained in psychoanalysis to apply to Lenny's arrogant delivery, had Lenny himself not earnestly admitted the feeling of guilt over his private and professional ways of life. In addition to his guilt over being a social parasite, he continually berated himself for the auto accident that almost killed his wife, for their eventual breakup, for the neglect of their daughter, for his well-publicized drug habit -- all of which he found snowballing in the hectic life of show business.

Lenny's own mother was so star-struck as to have three or four stage names at a time, bouncing from one obscure spotlight to another in the lowest cabarets in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Long Island. Her hopeless
preoccupation with stardom caused her split with Lenny's father, who eventually took custody of Lenny with the accusation that his wife constantly neglected the boy for the stage. Lenny's mother, like Lenny, viewed show business with a terrible ambivalence, especially when she felt her guiltiest. And Lenny himself could not help but feel guilty as a performer, especially when courts all across the country took such outrageous pains to impress it upon him.

Lenny was always very critical and censorious of comedians who had made fortunes by 'doing an act'. He berated onstage performers while onstage himself, trying his hardest to improvise himself away from any comparison with set routine performers. It was as though he tried to distance himself as far from the stage as possible while still, out of necessity, remaining on it. He made clear in routines like 'The Palladium' his feeling that the only world he had ever mastered was the petty world of show business, that everything he had ever achieved to his credit had depended on a minor ability to transpose the world onto a puny stage. In 'The Palladium', when the comic, whom Lenny admits is 'part me', gets angry at the audience's failure to respond, he grabs at something stronger than a joke; the act explodes into hostility and violence, and the comedian is the first to suffer. 'The Palladium' especially is a portrayal of the reactions caused by a comedian who has lost all respect for himself and his profession, and loses his grip on his own guilt and self-contempt.

Before his own grip was lost, Lenny was able to come to terms with his ambivalence towards show business, using it as material for his first comedic creations. One of the earliest characters in his routines was the Shingle Man, a depiction of a real-life brand of comic, disreputable and conniving, with whom Lenny had identified since adolescence. The actual shingle men were prevalent in the 1940s; they
were confidence men who travelled in groups from slum to slum, doing
comic routines on the street corners, smoking their reefers, and when
money got tight, swindling gullible slum dwellers into buying new
roofing.\textsuperscript{73} The connection between comedy, confidence games, and
disrepute was inseparable, and Lenny's shingle men were as slick and
disreputable as any Sportin' Life out of \textit{Porgy and Bess}.

Out of the shingle man character grew an entire metaphor for all
sorts of people whom Lenny despised. Based on his own ambivalence
towards show business, especially the character of the comedian, this
metaphor depicted all corrupt power wielders as dubious, second-rate
shingle men and show-biz types. All the world's great personalities --
war heroes, evangelists, presidents, popes, even God himself -- were
reduced to the crude shyster businessmen found on Broadway, in the New
Jersey shingle business, or out selling encyclopedias and baby pictures
door-to-door on Long Island. The scenes at the White House, St Patrick's
Cathedral, and the Vatican revealed the entire world's social, political,
and religious activities as part of a giant racket run by shingle men.\textsuperscript{74}
Routines like 'Religions, Inc.', 'Christ and Moses', and 'The Bomb and
Political Bullshit' revealed a definite link in Lenny's mind between show
business and corruption. Perhaps no evidence better expresses this link,
and the accompanying guilt, than a routine called 'The Tribunal', in
which Lenny lines himself and all performers up for their last dues on
judgement day. He often began the routine with an evidently sincere
admission of guilt over the fact that the wages of schoolteachers were
appalling while performers like himself and Zsa Zsa Gabor could walk away
with thousands of dollars a week:

\textquote{But I know that someday there's going to be a tribunal. We'll all have to answer, I'm sure of that. I'm just waiting for the day. I'm saving some money to give back: "I know I was stealing. I didn't mean to take it -- they gave it to me." We'll all have to answer; the guy will be}
in the black shrouds, all the performers.

"Alright, line 'em up, all the offenders there. State their names and their salaries. The sentences will then be meted out. The first offender, what is your name, there?"

"Frankie Laine".

"How much do you make a week, Mr Laine?"

"Ten, twelve thousand dollars a week".

"It's remarkable! What do you do to earn from ten to twelve thousand dollars a week?"

[Sings]: "To spend one --"

"Burn his wig. Break his legs, thirty years in jail. Get them up here, the next one. What is your name?"

"Sophie Tucker".

"And how much do you make a week, Miss Tucker?"

"Twenty to thirty thousand dollars a week".

"What do you do to earn twenty to thirty thousand dollars a week?"

"I'm the last of the red-hot --"

"Burn her Jewish records and jellies, and the crepe gowns with the sweat under the arms. Get rid of her! Get them up here, the next one -- the one that's worshipping the bronze god of Frank Sinatra. What is your name?"

"Sammy Davis, Jr".

"And how much do you make a week, Mr Junior?"

"Twenty, sometimes thirty thousand dollars a week".

"What do you do to earn from twenty to thirty thousand dollars a week?"

[Imitating Jerry Lewis] "Hey Dean, I gotta ba --"

[Sings]: "That old black --"

"Take away his Jewish star and stocking cap ... and the religious statue of Elizabeth Taylor. Thirty years in Biloxi".

(Quoted in Kofsky, pp. 25-26.)

This is an indication of the material Lenny could produce when he distanced himself as a performer from the personal guilt he admitted feeling in that role. But as society -- hostile reviewers, audiences, and litigants -- constantly reiterated their accusations of decadence and criminality, the question of guilt became an overriding one in Lenny's mind. This caused him, out of compassion and an evident sense of martyrdom, to take on the role of healer in what he called a sick society. This was a stance he took at times when attacks against him were overwhelming and unanimous. As early as 1962, after being banned from performing anywhere in Australia, Lenny justified himself and his own worth while utterly dismissing the comedic stance: "I'm not a comedian.
And I'm not sick. The world is sick and I'm the doctor. I'm a surgeon with a scalpel for false values. I don't have an act. I just talk. I'm just Lenny Bruce."

As his self-respect took its final plunge, there arose in Lenny a seeming obsession to sacrifice his art and himself in an effort to help the sick society. It may have been a deliberate act of rebellion on his part; he may have wanted to save his 'people', the neglected segment of society represented by the hipster, and challenged the power-wielding authorities that set out to make of him an example. Or, in an effort at self-vindication, he was out to expose worse crimes in society than he could ever be accused of. Still a third reason might be that Lenny wished to save society from themselves by exorcising from them all the negative attributes he felt they had. One reviewer believing this to be so compared Lenny's comedy with that of ritual clowns of certain societies, most notably the Native American. Thus Lenny's intention, like those of the tribal clowns, might have been to alter society's norms of behaviour by breaking taboos; like the Trickster, he deliberately chose to explore and play on the very limits of acceptability, defining them for society and at the same time pushing them back.

Frank Kofsky compared Lenny with the Jewish Maggidim, the itinerant teacher-preachers who developed as the rabbis became more scholarly and aloof from the pains and troubles of ordinary people. Citing Leo Rosten's definition of the Maggid, Kofsky applied to Lenny the description of an untidy and shabbily clothed country preacher, wandering on foot or by wagon from town to town, mixing jokes, parables, and stories into their sermons, using the vernacular that the educated rabbis had abandoned.
But if it is assumed that Lenny emulated a healer, the closest comparison is that which sees the overwhelming elements of shamanism in his later acts. The shaman was the legendary tribal exorcist who knowingly and obsessively destroyed himself in the act of healing. In 1964, effectively the last year of Lenny's performing career, Goldman's contemporary review revealed that for the first time, Lenny Bruce was actually dramatizing his role as a shaman. Years before, he would appear onstage a brisk, good looking and stylishly groomed young man in an expensive Italian suit, depending entirely on the meaning of words in getting his point across; now, in 1964, he had 'discarded the civilized mask' of neatness, slouching in a rumpled black raincoat, unshaven with long sideburns, dishevelled and gaunt, almost satanic. Rather than depending solely on words, he now placed more emphasis on affected devices — his manner, his physical appearance, his tone. He introduced contrived bits of spooky magic, flashing lights on and off, beating on drums and cymbals, wailing and howling aboriginal chants and poems, screaming out of the darkness. He prowled about the stage, sometimes crouching in the darkness and hiding from the audience, jumping onto furniture and throwing things, opening and slamming doors in what appeared to be a ritual. He seemed now to be a primitive mythic figure who had chosen to suffer by acting out his people's forbidden desires — sexually, narcotically, aggressively — alternately terrifying his audience and arousing their sympathy. It was evident that the last thing he was interested in was 'being funny'. His aggression was now naked; he opened his acts by offering to piss on his audience or douse them with gasoline and toss out a match. He would pick up a chair and menace a patron, and if the audience laughed, he would in all seriousness scold them for their savagery, saying that had he gone so far as to kill the patron, they would easily accept the murder as all part of the act.
According to Geza Roheim, the shaman, at the centre of his society, was often a neurotic or psychotic, with a raw delivery based on neurotic and psychotic mechanisms, playing on the hidden anxieties of his tribe in order to exorcise them. To this description, S.M. Sherokograff added that the shaman functioned as a 'safety valve', regulating the 'psychic life of the clan'. Were the shaman to lose control of the spirits, he would necessarily be killed. The shaman entered into his responsibilities fully prepared to sacrifice himself for his healing powers. As Goldman witnessed at Lenny's final New York appearance, performed in defiance of the legal ban, the comedian, with his cabaret card revoked, his name effectively blacklisted, and himself finished as an artist, seemed to realize that he could drop all the pretence inherent in the comedic stance:

The show was Carnegie Hall three years later, with all the enormous soul-changes those terrible years had produced. Lenny was now a man who had nothing to lose, a performer without hope, a show-biz kamikazee. When he got onstage, he became the Jewish equivalent of James Brown, stripping down his mind to the bare bone just the way the rhythm-and-blues cats tear off their clothes and scream out their guts and finally regress to tribal totems drenched in sweat. Soul, not jazz, was Lenny's final aesthetic.

(Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen ... Lenny Bruce!!*, p. 269.)

Lenny was dead within two years; but even before the man died, the artist died. In the limbo between those two deaths, a reviewer in the November 1965 edition of *Esquire* magazine offered a hurried, telegraphed elegy for both the man and the artist:

'I saw his act ... in Chicago .... He looked nervous and shaky ... wretched, broken.... You thought of Dorothy Parker, who, when she saw Scott Fitzgerald's sodden and too-youthful corpse, murmured, "The poor son of a bitch".  

(The Essential Lenny Bruce, p. 269.)

His final acts were composed of undisguised tantrums and bewailments
of frustration and contempt, psychologically primitive rituals hurled at
defenceless audiences without the mitigating barrier of art. Gone with
his former artistry were the rich metaphors of show business, jazz, the
street, and the underworld, as well as the familiarizing illusions of
story-telling, personal narrative, and dramatic impersonation. All that
remained in Lenny's last acts were incoherent mumblings punctuated by
shouts, and sketchy, underdeveloped scraps of former routines used to
buttress the humourless recitals of court transcripts and crippling
personal grievances.81

The mask was down for good; all suggestion of comedic pretence was
gone. Lenny seemed to be just a guy who had somehow commandeered a
vacant, dusty stage, hurling epithets of contempt at a society he either
loved or despised — one couldn't immediately tell which. It was only
after time had worked its softening effects that the dead man's former
accusers would consider that he had railed out for their benefit as well
as his own.
Notes, Chapter III


2. Goldman, Ladies and Gentlemen ... Lenny Bruce!! (London, 1975), pp. 112, 115. [Hereafter referred to as 'Goldman'.]


7. Goldman, p. 133.


24. Bruce, How To Talk Dirty and Influence People, p. 33.

25. Bruce, p. 176.


31. The Essential Lenny Bruce, pp. 197-99.

32. Goldman, pp. 9, 249.

33. Goldman, pp. 10-12.

34. Goldman, pp. 189-90.


36. Bruce, p. 215.

37. Kofsky, Lenny Bruce, pp. 57-58; Goldman, p. 377.

38. Goldman, p. 431.


41. The Times, 13 April 1963, p. 12.

42. The Times, 15 April 1963, p. 5; Goldman, p. 418.

43. The Times, 26 July 1963, p. 6.

44. The Essential Lenny Bruce, p. 269.


46. Bruce, pp. 11-12.

47. Bruce, pp. 220-21.


49. Kofsky, p. 119.

50. Kofsky, p. 119.

51. Kofsky, p. 60.

54. Goldman, p. 345.
56. Goldman, p. 469.
57. Gleason, p. 9.
61. The Essential Lenny Bruce, p. 264.
62. Kofsky, Lenny Bruce, p. 84.
63. Kofsky, p. 86.
64. The Essential Lenny Bruce, p. 201.
65. The Essential Lenny Bruce, p. 41.
68. Bruce, p. 111.
70. Goldman, p. 80.
71. Goldman, p. 236.
72. Goldman, p. 244.
75. Goldman, Ladies and Gentlemen, p. 375.
77. Kofsky, Lenny Bruce, p. 88.
79. Goldman, 'The Comedy of Lenny Bruce', p. 73.
81. Goldman, 'The Comedy of Lenny Bruce', pp. 73-74.
CHAPTER IV

KURT VONNEGUT:
The Canary in the Coal Mine
As the second chapter showed, the anarchic power of Mark Twain's comedy was often restrained by both the official and unofficial codes of a society whose attributes he at once admired and loathed. Out of historical necessity he was forced to contain his critical outrage at the expense of his free creativity, so much so that one can only imagine the unbridled force of his contempt were it not somehow held in check, not only by the opinions of Olivia Clemens and William Dean Howells, but of the genteel society they represented. Mark Twain found that he could either quit his society altogether and operate fully as an outsider, remain within society's bounds and respect its limitations, or remain and fight against those limitations from within. His career demonstrates that he availed himself of all three choices at various times; yet when viewing the chronology of his works, it becomes apparent that he despaired of the necessity of using deception or wearing masks. Unable to permanently adopt the example of Huck Finn, he frequently returned to act within the limits of acceptability; and by doing so he found, just as Pudd'nhead Wilson did, that public acceptance often depended on his seeming approbation of cultural mores. In his twilight years the pressures of remaining within the bounds of 'calm, judicial good humor' caused the final eruption that spewed the bitterness of *What Is Man?* and *The Mysterious Stranger* onto the pages, confirming his refusal to 'write gaily' anymore and don any longer the comedian's mask of play.

Half a century later Lenny Bruce stepped onto the stage, picking up where Mark Twain left off in the sense that, at the outset, he refused to either retreat or adopt the guise of the genial comedian. To some extent, the constraints of culture and social propriety seemed hardly more relaxed in his time than in Mark Twain's, considering the immense backlash he faced when trying to break free from those constraints. Throughout his career he operated as Mark Twain could only do when
withdrawn into isolation: stripped to the core. Lenny rarely left any doubt in the minds of his audience as to the impatience and contempt he held for arbitrary genteel trappings in an era when crimes against the individual and the collective seemed to be official courses of action. Why adopt the mask of a comedian, he argued, when the most demonic comedy exists without my having to create it? Thus Lenny's comedy in the end depended on the bitter ironies inherent in the juxtapositions of history and conflicting moralities. He did not temper, rearrange, or shroud the brutalities of his comic material; seemingly more of a presenter than an inventor, he flung his realities in the faces of his audience, using few deceptions to shield them or himself from the consequences.

In opposition to these two comedians stands Kurt Vonnegut. While both Mark Twain and Lenny Bruce despaired of their masks, Vonnegut has adopted a legion of them. Having by necessity learned to be more devious than any double-, triple-, or quadruple-agent, he seemingly has more faces than Janus. Rarely does he lower a mask in print, and even when he does there is immediate uncertainty as to whether another mask lies behind it. Vonnegut professes to be many things, ensuring that the reader cannot be certain as to when he is or is not bluffing; for evident among his many stances is that of a man pretending to pretend. In *Mother Night* he set down as one of the few explicit morals of his work, 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be'.

It is not only with such apparent willingness to pretend that Vonnegut stands in opposition to Mark Twain and Lenny Bruce; his relationship to his culture seems to be the reverse of theirs. Both Mark Twain and Lenny Bruce found themselves chained to their cultures, bound by them, while Vonnegut sees himself as having been cut adrift from secure ground, floating in the American cultural void. His books contain
evidence of his own anguish at being so necessarily free in a dynamic
American existence wherein anything goes, and goes quickly. While the
firm grasp of society demanded that Mark Twain and Lenny Bruce wear
acceptable masks, whether they would or not, the release of that grasp on
Vonnegut forces him to adopt not one mask but many, and to change them
frantically as he tries to adapt to the rapid changes of a fluid American
life.

* * *

Vonnegut's pretensions lie not so much in what he claims to be, but
in the extent to which he claims to be it. Mark Twain once admitted that
all his characters were various aspects of himself; Vonnegut could make
the same claim with little danger of perjuring himself, but the danger
lies in attempting to determine just how fully he reveals his true self.
He does not make the determining any easier as he continually calls
attention to the fact of his work as fiction or 'horseshit', while at the
same time espousing the belief that fiction is as good a truth teller as
any factual account, if not better. His work simultaneously begs for
and strains the reader's willing suspension of disbelief, fueling a comic
energy that allows his books to surmount the despair, anguish, and
outrage that inspire them. The three books in this study, Slaughterhouse-Five, Breakfast of Champions, and Jailbird, seem worth the
attention given them because they show most particularly how Vonnegut's
success depends on a willingness to adopt not only one mask, but more.
His multitudinous full and partial façades have established him as a
writer of paradox, as represented in the contradictions listed by Joe
David Bellamy: 'fatalistic moralist, cynical pacifist, holy atheist,
anti-intellectual philosopher, apocalyptic futurist, and grim humorist'.

Vonnegut's confidence game, then, consists not of telling lies, but
partial truths that often contradict one another. Yet it must be emphasized that he is devious and self-contradicting out of necessity, as his survival seems to demand voluntary or involuntary changes of stance as rapidly as time progresses. As he does to so many of his characters, he calls attention to himself as a necessary fabrication: 'I keep losing and regaining my equilibrium, which is the basic plot of all popular fiction. And I myself am a work of fiction'. Like his characters, the Vonnegut revealed to the public is a multiple personality. Part of himself he might draw, for instance, as Kilgore Trout, the science-fiction writer who is a further composite of multiple personalities, acting as one of Vonnegut's many voices speaking 'multidimensional fables'. In addition, as Robert Scholes notes, 'He is himself, of course, the lovely false prophet Bokonon, the foolish philanthropist Rosewater, and above all the kindly, untrustworthy, honest, quadruple turncoat Howard Campbell of Mother Night'.

It is difficult to tell whether these, like Vonnegut's many other characters, are dishonest figures or actually contradictorily honest; but in any event, as Scholes notes, honesty does not preclude untrustworthiness. As the example behind Vonnegut's 'moral' about being what we pretend to be, Howard Campbell describes what may be a fictive attribute of the chameleon-like Vonnegut: he notes in Mother Night that schizophrenia is a 'simple and widespread boon to modern mankind'. In the preface, Vonnegut himself describes the extent to which the outward façade should be believed, no matter the personality lying behind it: 'If I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have been a Nazi, bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around, leaving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my secretly virtuous insides'.

There may be little that is genuinely laughable in the implications of this particular statement, but it does express the potential for comic
tension as it exists in the multiple personalities of Vonnegut's characters. As his books demonstrate, the capacity for humans to astonish themselves and others by confronting various conflicting aspects of themselves provides fuel for the most comical moments describable. The sort of tension that Vonnegut describes above, that of a murderer with 'secretly virtuous insides', need not necessarily have such dire outward results; good as well as evil can come from such tension, as Vonnegut states in Cat's Cradle: 'It was the belief of Bokonon that good societies could be built only by pitting good against evil, and by keeping the tension between the two high at all times'. Thus the tension that Vonnegut provides is not only part of a trick with the goal of producing laughter, but also the means through which humans can maintain a glimmer of hope and at least a partial glimpse of truth.

Vonnegut suggests that such a glimpse can only be partial, that an individual can never fully perceive the truth 'since it consists of the sum total of all individual points of view'. Out of this comes his frequent depictions of multi-faced characters and a pluralist universe in which truth is not absolute: one can not see Truth, but one, a few, or many truths. Not only does Vonnegut give his characters as personifications of contradictory truths, but in many of his books he gives himself as an example. Although he rarely comments openly on the contradictions within himself, an observer could hardly fail to notice the paradoxes that make up the composite Vonnegut. On one hand, for instance, he has repeatedly boosted himself as a middle-aged, middle-class guy with a Middle-West background, paying his bills on time, with a wife, a car, kids, Brooks Brothers suits, and a traditional American morality he has had reason to justify as that of a 'first-rate patriot':

I am in fact a large, strong person, fifty-one years old, who did a lot of farm work as a boy, who is good with tools. I have raised six children, three my own, and
three adopted. They have all turned out well. Two of them are farmers. I am a combat infantry veteran from World War II, and hold a Purple Heart. I have earned whatever I own by hard work. I have never been arrested or sued for anything.

(Vonnegut, Palm Sunday (London, 1981), p. 5.)

He has in short described himself as one of the 'establishment', saying in so many words, "'My goodness, if Mr Ginsberg and I aren't already members of the establishment, I don't know who is". Yet, like many of his statements, it is loaded with contradiction; witness his willingness, in this respect at least, to cast himself into the same category as Allen Ginsberg. Moreover, something about this middle-class, decent, 'regular guy' caused youth groups and hippies of the sixties to flock to him as a counter-culture hero, a guru, camping on his front lawn, asking him for answers. The Jefferson Airplane, one of the most psychedelic rock groups of the sixties, invited him to participate in their programs. This was during the Vietnam War, when many 'regular guys' and 'first-rate patriots' were engaged in pitched battles with anti-war protesters on the streets of New York, Washington, and San Francisco. Vonnegut was an infantry booster, evidently proud of it: 'I took my basic training on the 240-millimeter howitzer'. Yet his out-of-print novels were selling for upwards of fifty dollars apiece in the college underground of the Vietnam era. Youth identified with him and raised him to cult status. In a 1970 address to the graduating class of Bennington College, he gave the reason for such an unusual reception for a middle-class, middle-aged American veteran:

When I was at Cornell University, the experiences that most stimulated my thinking were in ROTC -- the manual of arms and close-order drill, and the way the officers spoke to me. Because of the military training I received at Cornell, I became a corporal at the end of World War Two. After the war, as you know, I made a fortune as a pacifist.

(Vonnegut, Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon (New York, 1979), p. 160.)
Vonnegut has indeed consistently deported himself as a pacifist, maintaining other youth-minded notions such as planetary citizenship and extended communities — at the same time solidly identifying himself as an Indianian, an American, and a family man. He has called himself an 'old poop' and 'an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls' while saying at nearly the same time, 'I was born only yesterday morning, moments after daybreak — and yet this afternoon, I am fifty-four years old. I am a mere baby....' As Vonnegut suggests, his public reputation is one of contradictions, and he was genuinely dismayed that so much of the youth population had naively seized on one facet of it, mistaking it for the unknowable whole. They had read his books and heard his speeches, accepting them at face value; without having heard him say of his books, 'They aren't me. Neither is my reputation.' The irony of the Bennington speech diminishes the extent to which labels such as 'pacifist' can be taken at face value. The pacifism Vonnegut adopted after his military awakening he has described as 'the impossible thing' — yet, as he says, he nevertheless sees value in the adoption, albeit not to the extent that he is deified:

'I've said I am a pacifist under any conditions, that I'd never fight, no matter what. I don't believe that on any level. But, but -- I keep saying it, because I think people are supposed to fulfill roles, to take theatrical stances. It helps other people, when they are growing up, to see ham actors making this grotesque speech or that grotesque speech. The principle enunciated in Mother Night is we are what we pretend to be, and by the time I'm dead that's what I will have been through my whole life, a pacifist who would not fight at all'.


This is one of Vonnegut's precious few statements on the philosophy behind his confidence game and his readiness to adopt a mask or role; yet even here the reader is justified in asking whether, as elsewhere, Vonnegut is pretending to pretend. The paradoxes with which he boosts
himself do not end with his reputation as a pacifist and loyal American; he has established seemingly endless reputations for himself, all of which, it might be argued, 'aren't him'.

* * *

Sometimes he boosts his own intelligence, at other times the lack of it. He admits surprise at his own unexpected insights when writing fiction, as though they are well above his capabilities. 'I was dumb in school', he says, 'Whatever the nature of that dumbness, it is with me still'. He has more than once undermined the suggestion of the writer's special insight and value, at the same time claiming in self-justification, 'My books are probably more widely used in schools than those of any other living American fiction writer'. Such a defence would hardly seem valid, however, to anyone taking the following Vonnegut statement at its word, which says that novelists have, on the average, about the same IQs as the cosmetics consultants at Bloomingdale's department store. Our power is patience. We have discovered that writing allows even a stupid person to seem halfway intelligent, if only that person will write the same thought over and over again, improving it just a little bit each time.

(Palm Sunday, p. 128.)

Still, the reader is advised not to take this statement at face value, for it is followed by the same sort of punchline that reveals the irony of so many Vonnegut statements: 'It is a lot like inflating a blimp with a bicycle pump. Anybody can do it. All it takes is time'. A further example of the untrustworthiness of a Vonnegut statement taken in isolation lies in his descriptions of Palm Sunday: it is at once 'a very great book by an American genius' and a 'blivit', translated as 'two pounds of shit in a one-pound bag'.

Vonnegut has learned to advertise his failures like the public
relations man he once was. 'This is actually a career of a quitter. I have quit and quit.'23 One of his quittings took place in 1949, when he resigned from the public relations department of General Electric in New York; in Jerome Klinkowitz's words, it was 'the very Sherwood Anderson-like act which, like Anderson, he continued to celebrate in much of his fiction thereafter.'24 Evidently, Vonnegut's public relations did not end with his stint at GE; they have continued in the sustained career of one of America's most successful literary comedians.

* * *

Vonnegut's celebrations of himself in the literary role must always be viewed in tandem with their contradictions. As already mentioned, he has deflated the notion of the writer's intelligence with that of his 'dumbness', calling Palm Sunday 'a confrontation between an American novelist and his own stubborn simplicity.'25 Beyond this, with as much attention as he gives to himself in the role of the artist and writer, often celebrating the wonders of the artistic imagination, he then dismisses art and glorifies himself in an antithetical role, that of a 'barbarous technocrat' or scientist.26 Pretending to place his allegiance in that role, describing himself as from a family of scientists and technicians, with firm groundings in scientific training, he will then dismiss both science and art as dangerous playthings.

He has often told of his desire to have been an architect like his father and grandfather, of his benign envy for his brother, a distinguished physicist, of his pride in his son, a medical doctor. 'I enjoy the company of scientists, am easily excited and entertained when they tell me what they're doing', he says. 'I've spent a lot more time with scientists than with literary people, my brother's friends, mostly. I enjoy plumbers and carpenters and automobile mechanics, too'.27 He
talks with pride of having studied chemistry at Cornell, and mechanical engineering at the University of Tennessee. Referring to his enthusiasm for technology as a 'religion', he describes how at home he felt in his family's hardware store in Indianapolis:

I still do not believe that I was wrong to adore the cunning devices and compounds on sale there, and when I feel most lost in this world, I comfort myself by visiting a hardware store. I meditate there. I do not buy anything. A hammer is still my Jesus, and my Virgin Mary is still a cross-cut saw.

(Palm Sunday, p. 69.)

Yet Vonnegut's boostings of the wonders of science and technology are often preludes to impassioned attacks on their vicious uses, attacks written with the fervour and heartbreak of a man betrayed by his religion. He has not ceased to warn writers to pay attention to technology, praising scientists who approach their work with conscience -- yet for all his pride in his scientific background, science has felt the brunt of his criticism. As a prisoner of war at Dresden, he saw Allied technology applied to the firebombing and destruction of the city and its 135,000 inhabitants in the space of fourteen hours. Although Slaughterhouse-Five and other novels have revealed how profoundly crippling the experience was for him, he said that even after Dresden he had not lost faith in the virtues of science. 'Why? Because the technology which created that firestorm was so familiar to me. I understood it entirely, and so had no trouble imagining how the same amount of ingenuity and determination could benefit mankind once the war was over.' Instead, he awoke one morning to learn that the leaders of his country had ordered the dropping of the first atomic bomb. 'Scientific truth was going to make us so happy and comfortable', he had thought. 'What actually happened was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima. We killed everybody there.'
Thus Vonnegut, the brother of scientists, was to become one of the foremost critics of science in postwar American writing. The contradiction of claiming and rejecting allegiance to the fraternity of scientists he once expressed as follows: 'I'm no scientist at all. I'm glad now, though, that I was pressured into becoming a scientist by my father and my brother. I understand how scientific reasoning and playfulness work, even though I have no talent for joining in'. By virtue of his having seen the less playful aspects of scientific reasoning applied during the war and afterwards, he has often taken to claiming allegiance to science only inasmuch as he could thereby reveal its betrayals of humanity. The loss of his 'religion' he describes with pathos, noting how it brought to him 'not only the startling discovery of the human soul, but of how diseased it can be':

How sick was the soul revealed by the flash at Hiroshima? And I deny that it was a specifically American soul. It was the soul of every highly industrialized nation on earth, whether at war or at peace. How sick was it? It was so sick that it did not want to live anymore. What other sort of soul would create a new physics based on nightmares, would place into the hands of mere politicians a planet so 'destabilized', to borrow a CIA term, that the briefest fit of stupidity could easily guarantee the end of the world? (Palm Sunday, p. 70.)

It is not that Vonnegut despairs of science and then looks to art as the source of the world's sanity or salvation. On the contrary, while continually adopting the roles of spokesman for science and the arts, separately or simultaneously, he will dismiss both in favour of other forms of human endeavour. Thus could he say to a college graduating class in 1970:

we would be a lot safer if the Government would take its money out of science and put it into astrology and the reading of palms. I used to think that science would save us, and science certainly tried. But we can't stand any more tremendous explosions, either for or against
democracy. Only in superstition is there hope. If you want to become a friend of civilization, then become an enemy of truth and a fanatic for harmless balderdash. (Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons, p. 163.)

Included amongst the 'harmless balderdash', of course, are the fictive creations of Kurt Vonnegut and all other artists. His seeming praise of the artistic imagination should be viewed with caution, not only because of his description in such denigrating terms, but because of the irony of those very terms. As his books frequently show, Vonnegut tends to dismiss the 'harmless balderdash' just as he dismisses the horrific 'truth' of technology, calling for other courses of action. Thus his professed faith in the arts as the guardians of the social conscience, on the one hand demonstrated by his devotion to his profession, is countered by his persistent self-denigration as an artist, here exemplified in another commencement address:

I am about to make my own ancestral guess as to what life is all about, and what young people should do with it. I will again issue the caveat that I am as full of baloney as anybody, and that anybody who says for sure what life is all about might as well lecture on Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, and tooth fairies, as well.

I am, incidentally, the world's greatest authority on tooth fairies. That is how most of my life has been spent: in the study of tooth fairies. (Palm Sunday, p. 198.)

Here, as elsewhere, the question to be answered is whether Vonnegut is pretending to pretend. After seeing him adopt the role of spokesman for the arts and sciences both, only to dismiss them both, one might look for a clue in the words of Eliot Rosewater: "You can safely ignore the arts and sciences. They never helped anybody. Be a sincere, attentive friend of the poor". It would seem, then, that Vonnegut offers an alternative; but as God Bless You, Mr Rosewater shows, the hero's attentive efforts on behalf of the poor are quixotic, self-destructive failures, as are the best efforts of many of Vonnegut's characters. By
continually pitting his statements against each other. Vonnegut, as an artist of paradox, continually forces his readers to ask what his real stance is.

* * *

Vonnegut wears the mask of an idealist as hopefully displayed as that of Rosewater, yet admits to the futility of his ideas in a manner foreign to Rosewater. Countering idealism with cynicism, moralism with fatalism, Vonnegut makes it apparent that his task lies in presenting all the alternatives open to people existing within a vacuum created by a cataclysm that rests at the core of his work. He faces an apocalypse caused not only by the projected destruction of the physical world, but also by the breaking loose of knowledge, certainty, and reality from their historical moorings. Just as Vonnegut's juvenile certainty of technology's balm was shattered by the flash at Hiroshima and subsequent cataclysms, the historical and moral certainty of all humanity has been undermined by the unavoidable glut of newfound technology, opinions, and multiple viewpoints. Vonnegut demonstrates that the effective choices open to humanity in times of prevalent chaos are not only remarkably few in number, but often quixotic and risky.

As he explains through the tenacious comic voices of his characters, survival means co-existence with chaos and multiple truths, not futile attempts at mastery over them. Vonnegut reaffirms the honour of the quixotic only inasmuch as it is a worthy symptom of human dignity and resilience; hence the example of the doomed, but honourable, Eliot Rosewater, who exemplifies the manner in which Vonnegut counters his fatalism with an idealism that is avowedly and necessarily limited. Rosewater is engulfed in a personal cataclysm; his own world has been destroyed as surely as Hiroshima and Dresden were destroyed, but he is
forced to make choices that will enable him to survive the destruction. Vonnegut's other characters are similarly forced to make dangerous choices out of historical necessity — choices which often force them to adopt or betray as many contradictory stances as Vonnegut himself.

Thus does Eliot Rosewater adopt the role of samaritan in the face of overwhelming odds and squalor, to the extent that he is on one hand lauded as a saint, and on the other decried as insane. Also in God Bless You, Mr Rosewater, the most nobly motivated Kilgore Trout, although having "never tried to tell anything but the truth", must adapt to so many facets of it that he becomes deluded, to the extent that Vonnegut says, "what Trout had in common with pornography wasn't sex, but fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world".32

Perhaps the character most explicitly demonstrating the necessity of wearing a different mask for each situation is Howard Campbell, the unknowable confidence man in Mother Night. As inspiration for the anti-Semitism and genocide of the Nazis while simultaneously acting as an irreplaceable agent for the Allies, Campbell exemplifies Vonnegut's ability in arranging 'contradictory "truths" on parallel planes'.33 Campbell's adoptions of paradoxical stances are not due to his knowledge of the truth, but rather to his unavoidable ignorance of it — so much so that although he would 'no more lie without noticing it' than he would 'unknowingly pass a kidney stone',34 he is as much bound by an inability to tell the truth as anyone.

* * *

The inability to determine reality is a symptom of the personal cataclysm out of which come the tragi-comical experiences of Vonnegut's characters. But depictions of national, global, and universal cataclysms are not wanting in the body of Vonnegut's works. As Glenn Meeter notes,
however localized are the cataclysms in a given Vonnegut book, they are apocalyptic symbols, representing the end of the world. Thus the personal apocalypse of Eliot Rosewater represents a blow to humanity as telling as the destruction of Dresden in Slaughterhouse-Five, the neutron-bombing of Midland City in Deadeye Dick, or the freezing of the earth in Cat's Cradle. Referring to the latter book, Vonnegut once implied how at home he has been forced to become with the modern notion of apocalypse:

I myself once staged the end of the world on two pieces of paper -- at a cost of less than a penny, including wear and tear on my typewriter ribbon and the seat of my pants. Think of that. Compare that with the budgets of Cecil B. DeMille. (Palm Sunday, p. 163.)

As Slaughterhouse-Five shows, history determines that modern humanity think of the end of the world in impending terms. Even without the prospect of global destruction, the book suggests, there will always be "plain old death," which means, in the philosophy of every Bokononist suicide in Cat's Cradle, the end of the world. Yet the implication that Vonnegut is in fact at home with the notion of personal and universal cataclysm must again be seen as part of his confidence game; no matter how often he throws out a 'So it goes' in Slaughterhouse-Five, it is said by a frightened man with a vigilant eye turned toward the possibility of obliteration.

In viewing the apocalyptic head on from the beginning, Vonnegut in a sense surmounts the obstacle that silenced Mark Twain and Lenny Bruce, who were seemingly drawn towards apocalypse unawares. "It is true, that which I have revealed to you," says Mark Twain's Satan, "there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream, a grotesque and foolish dream." The thought of such a void left Mark Twain sickened, appalled, and silent. Afterwards, Lenny
Bruce, the 'nightclub Cassandra', frantically tried to warn his society of moral and physical obliteration, like Mark Twain unable to couch his warnings in trappings of gaiety as the apocalypse drew near. And here is Kurt Vonnegut, shrugging off the end of the world in terms of pennies, or so it seems. Thus a vital difference between Vonnegut and his comedic predecessors is that he has looked beyond the apocalypse, resolutely posing the question: Where do we go from here?

He poses his question strategically and craftily. One strategy is to outwardly affect 'the voice of a man recollecting emotion in tranquillity'.\(^{37}\) Seemingly this is the voice of one who went through cataclysm or hell in the distant past, and survived to tell the tale. Another strategy is to outwardly accept the notion of the unreal, which so terrified Mark Twain, and use it as a means of drawing attention to the apocalypse. As it will be discussed later, Vonnegut does not rely on unreality as a valid alternative to reality, but he is willing to use it in a deviously serene manner, unlike Mark Twain, who only approached it with a frightened, morbid fascination. Meeter uses a phrase of John Barth's in discussing Vonnegut's readiness to relate the real with the fantastic, "the contamination of reality by dream".\(^{38}\)

It would be valuable to contrast the sickness Mark Twain betrayed in confronting the vision of Satan, with the apparent tranquillity of Vonnegut as he readily accepts the theory of Nothingness:

In the beginning and in the end was Nothingness. Nothingness implied the possibility of Somethingness. It is impossible to make something from nothing. Therefore, Nothingness could only imply Somethingness. That implication is the Universe.

We are wisps of that implication... Wisps of implication reproduce. I myself have fathered three wisps, and have adopted three more. It is all so spooky. On top of that, I honestly believe I am tripping through time. Tomorrow I will be three years old again. The day after that I will be sixty-three.

(Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon, pp. xxii-xxiii, xxvi.)
'Spooky' as it is, Vonnegut is neither terrified nor silenced by the vigilant confrontation with Nada, however appalled by the thought of its dominion; hence his frequent journeys into the Fourth Dimension. Not only does he view dream with an apparent cool readiness foreign to Mark Twain, but he also approaches multiple dimensions of time with an equal willingness, again not shared by Mark Twain. To be sure, Mark Twain experimented with time travel in much of his work, but it was often with the unexpected, unsought result of terror and cataclysm; A Connecticut Yankee is perhaps the best case in point. Vonnegut, on the other hand, employs time and dream as a means of directly looking to the apocalypse and beyond, as Slaughterhouse-Five so readily demonstrates.

Thus Vonnegut uses numerous deceptive strategies as a writer in the service of his many chosen roles. As Slaughterhouse-Five, Breakfast of Champions, and Jailbird show, two of his roles particularly stand out and vie for his allegiance and the reader's attention, never fully excluding, though often straining the credibility of, each other. One role is primarily fulfilled by Vonnegut's deportment as a comic artist: that of an anaesthetist or comforter providing a means of relief and momentary escape. As it will be shown, he attaches great importance to the necessary solace provided by the escape into laughter. Yet he qualifies and threatens to contradict himself in the stance of the second role, that of the social alarm device. In this role he employs ironic deceptions that call into question his faith in comedy and art, revealing an abhorrence of artistic complacency and the voluntary positioning of artistic and comedic blinders at the expense of action in desperate hours of need. The three chosen books form a body of work most effectively showing Vonnegut's adoption of these two roles: the comedian and the canary in a coal mine.

* * *
It would be a mistake not to take Vonnegut seriously when he talks of comedy as 'an analgesic for the temporary relief of existential pain'. More often than not, his publicly stated theories of comedy have revolved around the notion of providing temporary, though necessary, comfort and relief. Fulfilling the role of soother is not the total of his motivation, but it is noteworthy that many of his evidently unguarded statements have boosted him in that role. His reasons for adopting the role may be found in a consideration of the fact that the intensity of his comedy stands in direct proportion to the bleakness and agony of his material.

This relationship seems to lie at the heart of Vonnegut's comedic consciousness. He has referred to James Thurber's theory that a comedian is from a sad home and a humourist is from a tragic one. If the distinction is valid, then Vonnegut must be considered both a comedian and a humourist, for the family background he describes is inclusive of sadness while bordering on the tragic. He has written about a father who was 'a good man in full retreat from life' and a mother who by suicide 'surrendered and vanished from our table of organization. So', he wrote, 'an air of defeat has always been a companion of mine'. His description of himself as a writer seems also to hold true for his nature as a comedian and humourist: 'Overwhelmingly, we are depressed, and are descended from those who, psychologically speaking, spent more time than anyone in his or her right mind would want to spend in gloom'. He has repeatedly noted that he and most other comedians have come from situations laden with intimidation and pain, for instance, being the youngest child or among the youngest in a large family. 'When I was the littlest kid at our supper table, there was only one way I could get anybody's attention, and that was to be funny'. He describes listening intently to the radio comedians as a child, to learn how to 'be funny';
for jokes were flimsy but effective barriers to the pain that inspired them.

He felt intimidated not only as the youngest in his family, but also as an American with a German name at the end of World War Two, when it took little to remind most Americans who the enemies had been in that war and the previous one:

So it is a good idea for me to tell a joke as soon as possible. I have spoken to, and actually liked, several German veterans of the Second World War who live in America now. They, too, became screamingly funny as soon as possible. (Palm Sunday, p. 182.)

Vonnegut suggests that both he and Mark Twain drew some of their comic energy from a similar uneasiness. Mark Twain, he reminds us, 'had served in the Confederacy briefly, after all, in the bloodiest war in American history, and later faced paying audiences of, among others, Union veterans and their wives.' And, like Vonnegut, Mark Twain was the youngest in his family.

Tragedy, sadness, and pain as the sources of comedy were further experienced by Vonnegut as a child of the Great Depression, during which most of America was unified in common suffering. The drawing power of radio comedy, he notes, was then at its height:

'This was a great time for comedians ... the radio comedians. And a very bad time in the history of the country, far more unbearable than the First or Second World Wars ... you got your little dose of humor every day, and the people did cluster around radios to pick up an amount of encouragement, an amount of relief.... It got everybody through three more days of Depression.' (Robert Scholes, 'A Talk With Kurt Vonnegut, Jr', in The Vonnegut Statement, edited by Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (St Albans, 1975), 94-119 (pp. 110-11).)

Thus the idea of 'getting everybody through' is a partial motivation for the comedian's role. The recognition of the necessary limitations of
that role have not only prevented Vonnegut from going to the impossible extent of the charitable Eliot Rosewater, it has inspired him to maintain his other role as a social alarm device. Moreover, it has allowed him to surmount the despair of Mark Twain and Lenny Bruce, who had assigned impossible tasks to the powers of comedy. Vonnegut accepted Robert Scholes's statement that the major impact of laughter cannot lie in the improvement of man or changing the world; it can only bring a bit of immediate relief. Scholes had referred to Vonnegut's creations as sugar-coated pills or something the like of a vaccination: 'small, manageable doses of poison neatly packaged', with the comedy making palatable the terrible ills of its subject. While Lenny Bruce saw himself in the monumental role of 'a surgeon with a scalpel for false values', Vonnegut only admits to being a humble anaesthetist, carefully administering sympathetically measured doses. The difference in the two approaches to the role helps to distinguish an open, though bitter, comedian from a more devious, though more palatable, one. Vonnegut admits that his comic success lies in the judicial administering of anger, using Aristophanes as an example in contrast with 'angry satirists' who sometimes caused their audiences to retreat from them; he names among them Swift, Ambrose Bierce, and the later Mark Twain. One might add to this list Lenny Bruce, who so rarely chose to ameliorate his rage.

Mark Twain wrote of laughter's blasting humbug 'to rags and atoms at a blast'. Though similarly anarchic, Vonnegut is more stealthy; he would never outwardly assign such a task to laughter, but rather would admit to more humble expectations. Instead of boldly dynamiting a target, he would craftily attack it at its weakest points -- and if caught red-handed and interrogated as to what he was attempting, he would effectively roll his eyes, whistle a tune, and say, 'Oh, nothing'. This he does when expounding on the meagre, immediate, comforting
accomplishments of comedy, never giving it credit for the destructive potential that Mark Twain's Satan assigned it. By donning the mask of the anaesthetist, and admitting the role to be a valid social service, Vonnegut seemingly tries to draw attention away from the subversion of his comedy. His reply, 'Oh, nothing', is couched in his description of laughter, so at odds with that of the Mysterious Stranger:

Laughter is a response to frustration, just as tears are, and it solves nothing, just as tears solve nothing. Laughing or crying is what a human being does when there's nothing else he can do. Freud has written very soundly on humor.... The example he gives is of a dog who can't get through a gate to bite a person or fight another dog. So he digs dirt. It doesn't solve anything, but he has to do something. Crying or laughing is what a human being does instead. (Wampeters, Foma, and Granfaloon, p. 256.)

Thus when Vonnegut says that laughter is a source of relief, he does not speak falsely; he tells a partial truth. The deception lies in his failure to say that laughter is at least a source of relief, but that it might do more -- such as draw attention to the humbug of its subject. He would not admit this in his role of anaesthetist, since the role is adopted for his own benefit as well as that of his audience; for without providing himself with that protection -- the admission of only small expectations -- he would not only call direct attention to his subversion, but he might also fall victim to the disillusionment of Mark Twain, for whom the atomic blast of laughter proved a failure.

* * *

Vonnegut does not overplay his role as comic anaesthetist; he readily admits that providing comfort is not enough, that too much comfort leads to de-sensitization, self-delusion, and complacency. With this admission he adopts another role, the ethics of which he traces back to the lessons learned in junior civics during the Great Depression --
at School 43 in Indianapolis, with full approval of the school board.\footnote{45} Fulfilled with the conscience of a devoted public servant, this role gives warning rather than comfort, alarms rather than soothes, awakens rather than anaesthetizes. It is the role of the social warning device, more precarious and less benign than that of the comforter, since it often speaks of foreboding rather than relief. As Vonnegut describes it, the role in isolation is not only unappreciated, but potentially self-destructive:

> Writers are specialized cells doing whatever we do, and we're expressions of the entire society -- just as the sensory cells on the surface of your body are in the service of your body as a whole. And when a society is in great danger, we're likely to sound the alarms. I have the canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts. You know, coal miners used to take birds down into the mines with them to detect gas before men got sick. The artists certainly did that in the case of Vietnam. They chirped and keeled over. But it made no difference whatsoever. Nobody important cared. But I continue to think that artists -- all artists -- should be treasured as alarm systems. 

> (Wampeters, Foma, and Granfallos, p. 238.)

Vonnegut is aware of the dangers inherent in the role of the social alarm system -- the canary in a coal mine -- since his warnings unavoidably come as criticisms of sacred objects, conventions, and institutions that have somehow gone wrong, outlived their usefulness, or have always been dangers to society. The extent to which he has been misinterpreted is evidenced not only in William F. Buckley's accusation that Vonnegut 'had made a career of despising America',\footnote{46} but also in the fact that certain school boards across America have taken to banning and even publicly burning his books, notably Slaughterhouse-Five. Such hostility suggests how necessary it has been for Vonnegut to resort to various tactics in the service of his role as a social warning device. Among these tactics has been the boosting of his various partial reputations as sub-roles.
The first of these sub-roles, as already mentioned, is that of the
loyal, respectable American -- the insider. The degree to which Vonnegut
has presented himself as one of the same mass as his audience has been
instrumental in allowing him to criticize the acts of his society and
country; as most Americans know, it is often beneficial to establish that
you've voted in every election before you badmouth the government.
Vonnegut has consistently reminded his readers of his solid Middle-
American origins, his patriotism, and his pride in the American
Constitution. In spite of attacks from the likes of Buckley and isolated
school boards, a testimony to his popularity is the fact that he was the
first major American author to have begun and sustained his career in the
paperback trade.47 And if his own statement may be repeated and
believed, more of his books are required reading in schools than those of
any other living American novelist. His municipal school upbringing, his
status as an enlisted man, his mediocre, aborted college education, his
former poverty, his failed attempts at various professions -- all are so
presented as to cast him into the same modest muddle as the bulk of his
readers. He has often repudiated the impression of the writer as an
outsider to his society -- though, predictably, not without
contradiction, as it will be seen. As a spokesman for his society, he
sees writers as often ineffective because of the degree of alienation
they impose on their readers. Critical agreement on Vonnegut's appeal
centres around his clarity, and the impression that he has not fallen
into the same trap as certain elitist authors who 'tried very hard to
tell the common man of his plight, but ... read so many more books than
he that they forgot his language'.48

The extent to which Vonnegut has presented himself as an insider,
and the determination with which he has done it, is a major factor
distinguishing him from Lenny Bruce, who emphasized his role of the outsider -- the hipster, the Jew, the night-stalker of the underground -- in hopes of securing society's recognition of the outsider's claims. On the other hand, rather than maintaining the guise of an outsider pounding on doors and demanding entry, Vonnegut stands as a spokesman for the inside, though so carefully positioned as to open the door and invite inspiration from all outsiders who would knock.

This partial reputation has its contradiction, however, for even as Vonnegut claims allegiance from the inside, another aspect of his presented self stands outside, waiting to function as a warning device at the earliest signs of impending trouble. The motivation for maintaining this aspect of himself as an outsider is more than the knowledge that a prophet is without respect at home; likening himself to the sensory cells on the outside of the body, he must stand on the outside of his society in order to maintain a vision unobscured by blind allegiance and patriotism. The necessary view from the outside is effectively described in Player Piano by Ed Finnerty, who would resist having his vision and sensitivity deadened by a psychiatrist trying to bring him back into the fold:

>'He'd pull me back into the center, and I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center.... Big, undreamed-of things -- the people on the edge see them first'.

(Vonnegut, Player Piano (St Albans, 1981), p. 78.)

As Finnerty shows, the stance of the man at the edge is precarious, for while to stand too far within is to blind oneself, to stand too far without is to destroy one's usefulness, and potentially, oneself. Vonnegut has expressed the emotional, mental, and physical difficulties in maintaining the upright stance of a man of vision on the outside:

'That is how you get to be a writer, incidentally: you feel somehow
marginal, somehow slightly off-balance all the time."49

Thus it is as though Vonnegut stands with one foot in each camp, straddling a chasm of nihilism while dangerously buffeted by the winds of conflicting pressures emanating from the opposing camps. In simultaneously casting himself as an insider and an outsider, he follows the example of Mark Twain, who, while attempting to write for 'the mighty mass of the uncultivated' rather than 'the thin top crust of humanity',50 not only looked for and publicized his admission into the thin New England crust, but also relished his reputation as the dusty pariah from the far Pacific slopes.

* * *

In reconciling his genuine allegiance and devotion to his entire society with the resolve to provide necessary though unappreciated warning, Vonnegut adopts another tactic also used by Mark Twain; in addition to the voice of a man who has gone through hell, he adopts the voice of a newcomer, a child. By doing so, he can reveal the consciousness of a character who, as a bona fide member of his society, can still be profoundly shocked or enlightened by experiences which, however old, are made to seem newly encountered. He thereby defamiliarizes history and refamiliarizes it, allowing the reader to experience as though for the first time the universal struggles and associations with life and death. In adopting the voice of the juvenile newcomer, Vonnegut can sound the alarms without seeming to criticize or condemn, presenting his characters as those who, for whatever the reason, either heed or fail to heed similar warnings. The adoption of the childlike voice precludes the impression of judgement and elevation. Aware that 'comedy stops where the preaching begins',51 Vonnegut is also aware that attention and respect are often lost to those who preach. He
consciously assumes the stance of innocence while at the same time revealing situations as only a man of experience can do.

He described this stance in saying, 'My books are protests against explanations. It drives me nuts when someone tells me what's going on'. Therefore he places himself and his characters on the same level of ground as his readers, without openly revealing that his visions can only have come from higher or unfamiliar ground. As he wrote in Palm Sunday, 'Whenever my children complain about the planet to me, I say: "Shut up! I just got here myself. Who do you think I am -- Methuselah?"'. In a further refusal to admit to any special vision which would arouse hostility, suspicion, or skepticism, he described the cardinal rule he established and scrawled across the blackboard in each writing class he taught: "All you can do is tell what happened. You will get thrown out of this course if you are arrogant enough to imagine that you can tell me why it happened. You do not know. You cannot know".

The idea of being a bewildered newcomer to life inspires the voices of Vonnegut's most comic characters, who never cease to be amazed, yet who by constant practice come to take their amazements in stride. "History is merely a list of surprises", says Wilbur Swain in slapstick. "It can only prepare us to be surprised yet again". A frequent punctuation to Vonnegut's revelations is 'Imagine that', expressed with an incredulity that precludes any impression of delivering judgement. His characters are usually more dumbfounded than critical, telling their tales with the deadpan of balancers who continually try to master the craft of remaining on their feet. Vonnegut describes the voice that overwhelmingly betrays wonder, however delighted or appalled:

Henry David Thoreau said, 'I have traveled extensively in Concord'. That quotation was probably first brought to my attention by one of my magnificent teachers in high
school. Thoreau, I now feel, wrote in the voice of a child, as do I. And what he said about Concord is what every child feels, what every child seemingly must feel, about the place where he or she was born. There is surely more than enough to marvel at for a lifetime, no matter where the child is born. (Palm Sunday, p. 58.)

Counting as his simultaneous birthplaces Indianapolis, the United States, the planet Earth, and the Universe, Vonnegut treats all his focal points with the voice of wonder, outwardly marvelling at what he has experienced to enough of an extent as to necessitate the sounding of an alarm. Without undermining the urgency of the alarm, his chosen stance makes him approachable. This stance Bokonon describes in Cat's Cradle, in 'a parable on the folly of pretending to discover, to understand' the workings of the universe. He says of a cocksure, self-righteous Episcopalian that she is 'a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is doing'. The apparently willing diminishment of the self to the stature of innocence is an effective shield which does not prevent Vonnegut from expressing his opinions with confidence in their value; and although Bokonon counts himself as a fool, he is nonetheless willing to propose some knowledge of the world.

The last impression that Vonnegut would hope to create is that which Joe David Bellamy holds of him: 'those eyes have seen God in a burning bush. He has come down from the mountain with eyes like Charlton Heston's in The Ten Commandments by Cecil B. DeMille'. Yet as his books demonstrate, he has faced the apocalyptic with the determination of Moses facing the Almighty; so in revealing to his audience images and warnings of their own doom, he has had to resort to manipulations of a scope far broader than those of Mark Twain, Lenny Bruce, or, it might be considered, many of his predecessors and contemporaries. He has adopted countless roles and disguises with a craftiness that defies imitation or investigation. Keeping one foot in the concrete reality of three
dimensions and the other in the swirling fantasies and dreams of the fourth, he speaks from both the inside and outside of his society, a subversive from the heart of the Establishment, offering the apocalyptic as a starting point for idealism and hope. With his comedy he anaesthetizes while arousing, comforts while alarming, and is 'only kidding, folks' as he presents his urgent truths. Far from speaking with the authority of Moses as a man of vision and experience, he affects either the voice of an 'old poop' or 'old fart', or the voice of awe, wonder, and incorruptible innocence, the voice of a child. Although all his books reveal these manoeuvres or aspects of them, the three that do so most comprehensively, playing off each other as though to provide a coherent analysis of Vonnegut's technique, are Slaughterhouse-Five, Breakfast of Champions, and Jailbird.

The experience behind Slaughterhouse-Five dominated Vonnegut's creative attention for nearly twenty-five years before its writing. Confronting the fire-bombing of Dresden was to Vonnegut 'a Duty-Dance with Death', a phrase inspired by Céline's statement that 'No art is possible without a dance with death'. Having survived the fire-bombing as a POW imprisoned in an underground slaughterhouse, Vonnegut hoped to write about the experiences as a means of coming to grips with the overnight massacre of 135,000 people in an undefended city. Yet the 'Duty-Dance' was an elusive task, evading him through the writing of five other novels. He found himself aborting various attempts to outline the story, as all the preoccupations of the writer -- 'climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations' -- seemed preposterously inadequate means of conveying the magnitude of the horror experienced. Vonnegut recreated a dialogue
between himself and fellow POW Bernard O'Hare after the war, when he was trying to approach Dresden in the conventional story-teller's manner:

'I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby', I said. 'The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's shot by a firing squad'.

'Um', said O'Hare.

'Don't you think that's really where the climax should come?'

'I don't know anything about it', he said. 'That's your trade, not mine'.

(Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five (St Albans, 1980), p. 11.)

According to Vonnegut, it was O'Hare's wife, Mary, who gave him the key to the voice and viewpoint of Slaughterhouse-Five. Having overheard Vonnegut's plans, she confronted him with the objection that his novel would follow the irresponsible path of previous war novels:

'You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs'.

(Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 17.)

In Mary O'Hare's objection was an analogy that allowed Vonnegut to articulate his own bewildered impressions of what he had witnessed at war, and its effect on him afterwards. Adopting the voice and viewpoint of a child, he created the character of Billy Pilgrim, born in 1922, the same year as Vonnegut, and who finds himself a confused youth imprisoned in a slaughterhouse during the destruction of Dresden. The global war he participates in is called 'The Children's Crusade', after a medieval swindle in which thirty thousand naïve children were recruited to fight in the Crusades, only to become slaves. In the novel, a British officer imprisoned for most of the war says of Billy and the other newly arrived
prisoners:

'You know -- we've had to imagine the war here, and we
have imagined that it was being fought by ageing men like
ourselves. We had forgotten that wars were fought by
babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a
shock. "My God; my God --" I said to myself. "It's the
Children's Crusade"'.
(p. 74.)

Billy Pilgrim is indeed an innocent youth when he is captured, and
he retains that viewpoint throughout the book — even as a middle-aged
man, a foetus, and a corpse. He witnesses his own death many times, as
well as his birth, marriage, fatherhood, childhood, and war experiences
— for, we are led to believe, he is 'unstuck in time' (p. 23). Science-
fiction and the element of a time warp give Vonnegut the freedom to embue
his character with the viewpoint of a man who, like himself, is at once
'fifty-four years old' and 'a mere baby'. By presenting Billy as a
constant traveller in time, he found a means of confronting Dresden as it
affected the entire scope of his life, as well as that of humanity.
Billy's travels to the past and future are more than flashbacks and
projections; they provide an immediacy that draws the fleetness of life
to the foreground. Billy as an older man can wonder 'Where have all the
years gone?' while at the same time experiencing his first encounter with
the world as an infant. Behind his experience is that of Dresden's
destruction, symbolic of waste in an already too short life span; and
behind Dresden lies the experience of humanity: the Crucifixion and the
Crusades share the same pages as World War Two, Vietnam, the Depression,
American politics, and space travel. It is apparent that Vonnegut could
not treat Dresden in historical isolation, that its destruction was a
symptom reflecting the ongoing experience of humanity; not only did it
affect him as a youth and man, but it mirrored other events and
catastrophes before and after which make up the chain of historical
progress, however shameless or shameful. Vonnegut's concern with Dresden was inseparable from his concern with the erratic directions of unpredictable public and personal history, all represented by the wanderings in time of Billy Pilgrim.

Billy's time travels are the result of his alleged capture by the Tralfamadorians, extra-terrestrials who put him through a time warp. Through science-fiction, Vonnegut treats the Dresden experience with both comedy and the utmost seriousness. In a statement which, like many, may not reveal the whole truth, he dismisses his use of science-fiction as a mere practical joke and literary manipulation:

the science-fiction passages in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are just like the clowns in Shakespeare. When Shakespeare figured the audience had had enough of the heavy stuff, he'd let up a little, bring on a clown or a foolish innkeeper or something like that, before he'd become serious again. And trips to other planets, science-fiction of an obviously kidding sort, is equivalent to bringing on the clowns every so often to lighten things up.

(Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons, p. 262.)

Vonnegut indeed adopts science-fiction seemingly as a means of providing relief to both Billy Pilgrim and the reader, to counter 'the heavy stuff' and 'lighten things up'. One is not so sure, however, that the science fiction is entirely of 'an obviously kidding sort'. We are asked to believe that the pain of Billy Pilgrim's death is ameliorated by the fantastic suggestion of his constant and concurrent birth and growth, just as he is advised by the Tralfamadorians to view death with a complacent serenity:

'The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments
are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.'

(Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 25.)

Billy's ability to adopt the Trafalmadorian philosophy seems apparent as he explains the use of the phrase that punctuates every mention of death in the book:

'When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is "so it goes".

(p. 25.)

Such would be an impossible utterance from the mouths of the aged Samuel Clemens or Lenny Bruce, or anyone with an inability to think of temporarily resorting to the crutch of illusion. In a sense it is a phrase that Vonnegut has learned to repeat often in the form of his books, when the pressure of anguish has become great enough to produce it. It is given as an expression of relief and comfort that must be periodically applied, like the blinking of the eyes, repeated so often because the conditions it tries to assuage are so acute. Appearing exactly one hundred times in the book, the phrase 'so it goes' is said to be taken from the example of Céline:

I only now understand what I took from Céline and put into the novel I was writing at the time, which was called Slaughterhouse-Five. In that book I felt the need to say this every time a character died: 'So it goes'. This exasperated many critics, and it seemed fancy and tiresome to me, too. But it somehow had to be said.

It was a clumsy way of saying what Céline managed to imply so much more naturally in everything he wrote, in effect: 'Death and suffering can't matter nearly as much as I think they do. Since they are so common, my taking them so seriously must mean that I am insane. I must try to be saner'.

(Palm Sunday, p. 296.)
Yet as Vonnegut shows in referring to Erika Ostrovsky's *Céline and His Vision*, the decision to say or imply 'so it goes' is the result of a frantic attempt to cope with the dread of suffering and extinction. Céline's need to escape into the Fourth Dimension, the unreal, with such frequency was evidently the result of unquiet -- rabid -- desperation:

Time obsessed him. Miss Ostrovsky reminded me of the amazing scene in *Death on the Installment Plan* where Céline wants to stop the bustling of a street crowd. He screams on paper, Make them stop ... don't let them move anymore at all ... There, make them freeze ... once and for all!... So that they won't disappear anymore! (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 21.)

A similar sort of desperation is given in the example of Billy Pilgrim, through whom Vonnegut shows that even with the employment of science-fiction and fantasy, his role as the comforting comedian is limited, qualified by the devotion of the canary in the coal mine. In spite of his carefree admission, Vonnegut employs science-fiction with the result of something other than comic relief. Billy's travels through time are given not only as a source of comfort, but of pain, warning, and dreadful historical recollection. And in spite of his attempts to obtain serenity, there is something torturously wrong with him, brought on not only by his first trip to Dresden, but also by his recurrent voyages through the time warp. His anguish is evidenced by the fact of a nervous breakdown, periodic hysteria and somnambulism, his weeping while both awake and asleep, and an apathy for life which goes so far as to suggest a nagging wish for death and release. Far from being only a means of relief, time travel is a constant source of anxiety for him:

Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next. (p. 23.)
At times Billy resorts to dreams and wishes in his efforts to ward off the pain of his experience. Vonnegut first offers dream as a source of solace after Billy suffers a nervous collapse in the POW compound and is taken to the infirmary. Having just come from the Battle of the Bulge, he crumbles into fits of hysteria directly due to an overdose of comic relief offered by a prison camp comedy show. Rather than being a healthy indication of his equilibrium, Billy's laughter takes him to the brink of madness, and can only be stopped by a morphine injection. Under the drug he dreams of an idyllic paradise in which he is a giraffe in a garden among other giraffes, their warlike horns made obsolete by the prevalence of eternal peace, the absence of which is a true source of Billy's anguish:

The giraffes accepted Billy as one of their own, as a harmless creature as preposterously specialized as themselves. Two approached him from opposite sides, leaned against him. They had long muscular lips which they could shape like the bells of bugles. They kissed him with these. They were female giraffes -- cream and lemon yellow. They had horns like doorknobs. The knobs were covered with velvet.

Why?
(p. 69.)

Billy is allowed to take comfort from dreams only so far, however. Of his dreams, Vonnegut says, 'he dreamed millions of things, some of them true. The true things were time travel' (p. 105). Thus even in his dreams he is brought back to the source of his anxiety: that which will bring him to the truth by virtue of its impotence as a source of comfort. He resorts to wishing that the events of not only his life, but history, could be reversed. Believing he sees Adam and Eve in the patina of a cavalry officer's boots, he loves them, for 'They were so innocent, so vulnerable, so eager to behave decently' (p. 41). When he slips into a time warp as an older man, he sees that such decent behaviour can only be accomplished by the impossible reversal of history, itself only an
illusion caused by the backward running of a late night war movie. He sees bombs sucked back into the bay doors of retreating airplanes, bomb craters filled in and fires extinguished, shrapnel sucked from people and objects, bombs returned to their racks on the ground and dismantled, their metal turned back into raw minerals, and the minerals hidden back in the earth 'so they would never hurt anybody ever again':

The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids. And Hitler turned into a baby, Billy Pilgrim supposed. That wasn't in the movie. Billy was extrapolating. Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity without exception conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed.

(pp. 54-55.)

For all his wishful extrapolations, his various glimpses at solace by courtesy of morphine, dream, and Tralfamadorean balderdash, Billy must eventually face the unmitigated reality of Dresden, not through time travel, but through his own memory. It is a slow process of confronting the historical fact and ultimately assigning it its proper attention and horror, at odds with the teaching of the extra-terrestrials. While imprisoned in a Tralfamadorean zoo, he notices a prayer engraved on the necklace of fellow Earthling Montana Wildhack, the same prayer he has framed on the wall of his office at home: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference" (p. 46). He thinks of this prayer often on Earth, for 'Among the things that Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future' (p. 46). While Billy seems to put concerted effort into following the guidance of his prayer, Vonnegut gives frequent examples of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of finding serenity and acquiescing to even the unchangeable.

Billy Pilgrim in fact can never fully accept the advice of the
prayer or the Tralfamadorians; when they suggest to him, "Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones!", he can only reply, "Um" (p. 81). Reminders of the war make him think of a phrase which, however comforting, is described as 'a good epitaph' -- not only for Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut says, but 'for me, too': "EVERYTHING WAS BEAUTIFUL, AND NOTHING HURT" (p. 84). In his attempts to believe this, Billy is like the hobo captured with him during the war, who claims the ability to shrug off all horrors. An ominous note is sounded in the hobo's Famous Last Words, uttered before his death and freezing in the foetal position: "You think this is bad? This ain't bad" (p. 57).

In spite of his efforts at finding the serenity of his prayer, it becomes apparent that Billy is seriously crippled by an experience he cannot or will not face. A symptom of his condition is his general lack of enthusiasm for life; he feels ungrateful in the presence of his mother for no other reason than that 'she had gone to so much trouble to give him life, and to keep that life going, and Billy didn't really like life at all' (p. 71). Knowing he should be thankful for having been spared in the war, he finds the peaceful mundanities of routine life to be ineffective distractions for a despair he cannot diagnose. As an optometrist after the war, he had always 'tried hard to care' about his profession, with little success (p. 44). He is bored as a husband and father, fulfilling these roles with integrity, but no joy. He feels trapped; seeing the orange and black stripes on his daughter's wedding marquee, he can only recall that the same stripes were used during the war to identify trains carrying POWs. Often finding himself unexpectedly weeping 'for no apparent reason', he seeks medical treatment. Doctors apathetically advise daily naps on a vibrating massage bed, providing a scene of the utmost tragi-comedy:
Billy took off his tri-focals and his coat and his necktie and his shoes, and he closed the venetian blinds and then the drapes, and he lay down on the outside of the coverlet. But sleep would not come. Tears came instead. They seeped. Billy turned on the Magic Fingers, and he was jiggled as he wept. (p. 47.)

Although the doctors refuse to accept the reason for his anguish, Billy himself realizes it upon hearing a barbershop quartet sing 'That Old Gang of Mine'. With each chord change, 'his mouth filled with the taste of lemonade, and his face became grotesque, as though he really were being stretched on the torture engine called the rack' (p. 115). It is at this point that Vonnegut fully dismisses Billy's dependence on the complacent Tralfamadorian concepts of simultaneous life and death; Billy is forced to confront the source of his acute anguish not through the fantasy of time travel, but through his own tortured memory. Vonnegut is explicit about this:

Billy thought hard about the effect the quartet had had on him, and then found an association with an experience he had had long ago. He did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it shimmeringly.... (p. 118.)

The discords of the barbershop quartet bring to the surface of Billy's consciousness the full impact of the Dresden firestorm, reminding him of the blasts of high explosives and incendiaries, the incineration of schoolgirls, the shrouding of the sun by black smoke, the heat of the rubble, the reduction of the city to minerals, and the faces of the guards as they emerged to view the remains of their homes:

The guards drew together instinctively, rolled their eyes. They experimented with one expression and then another, said nothing, though their mouths were often open. They looked like a silent film of a barbershop quartet.

'So long forever', they might have been singing, 'old fellows and gals; So long forever, old sweethearts and pals
The implication of Vonnegut's dismissal of time travel, fantasy, and the escape into false comfort is similar to that of his essay 'Yes, We Have No Nirvanas', wherein he rejects the irresponsible withdrawal into rapturous meditation as the planet deteriorates and atrocities continue unchecked. On one hand he suggests the wisdom of putting one's potential in its proper perspective, in a sense, endorsing Billy Pilgrim's prayer with the advice that one not destroy oneself through the quixotic. He indeed calls for the acceptance of one's own limitations, even admitting that the writing of his own book was an exercise in futility -- as he said, he recognized that writing an anti-war book was like writing an 'anti-glacier' book, that wars are 'as easy to stop as glaciers', and that 'even if wars didn't keep coming back like glaciers, there would still be plain old death'.

This apparent acceptance, while allowing him to confront Dresden through art, fantasy, and comedy, is not evidence of complacency; it is a facade that he periodically undermines, countering his sense of play and irresponsibility with one of dread and awakening. Although the structure of the entire book seems playful and fantastic, evidently told from the viewpoint of a fortunate survivor, Vonnegut warns us not to be deceived by this impression. At the outset of the book he calls into question not only Billy's credibility, but his very sanity, upon which the acceptance of the book's playful premise depends:

Listen:
Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.
Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day.... He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.
He says.
(p. 23.)
Throughout the book Billy's sanity is left in doubt; although there is no evidence to determine just how ill he is, his distress is given as a warning and example of the inability for people of conscience to avert their gaze from the horribly inevitable truth, no matter how wisely or instinctively they might try. Billy is an evident victim of the terror of man, in spite of his usual outward facade of serenity in the face of distress. Although his losses of composure are few and usually subtle, they are horrific symptoms of suffering. Vonnegut uses a Christmas carol to show the similarity between Jesus and Billy in their generally quiet suffering, offering it both in the text and as an epigraph:

The cattle are lowing,
The Baby awakes,
But the little Lord Jesus,
No crying he makes.
(p. 131.)

In spite of his refusal to show it outwardly, Billy is not only a partner in suffering with Jesus, but may in fact be just as doomed. Also, as with Jesus, his suffering is not only on behalf of himself, but extends through the pain of his nation to that of his world. He regrets having sired a son, a juvenile delinquent who, with his adroitness at cruelty, slipped with ease into the Green Berets to become a decorated 'Leader of men' in Vietnam (p. 126). He anguishes over the cruelties his country has committed not only to others but to itself, by turning its children into killers and nurturing a national self-hatred.

If Billy's suffering on behalf of others and his refusal to outwardly mourn likens him to the Christ of the carol, then there is enough analogy provided to show the extent of his suffering with Jesus. As a chaplain's assistant just before his capture, he recalls the tortured Jesus on the crucifix in his bedroom, with its morbidly precise spear wound, thorn wounds, and nail holes. As Vonnegut notes, 'Billy's
Christ died horribly' (p. 32). Vonnegut also regrets that the spiritual, mental, and physical sacrifice of Billy and others as bomb targets, cannon fodder, and witnesses, will never have the same repercussions as the death of Jesus. This is implied as Billy, in hospital, is told about a science-fiction story:

> It was The Gospel From Outer Space, by Kilgore Trout. It was about a visitor from outer space, shaped very much like a Tralfamadorian, by the way. The visitor from outer space made a serious study of Christianity, to learn, if he could, why Christians found it so easy to be cruel. He concluded that at least part of the trouble was slipshod storytelling in the New Testament. He supposed that the intent of the Gospels was to teach people, among other things, to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low.

But the Gospels actually taught this:

> Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected. So it goes.

(p. 75.)

Vonnegut effectively admits the futility of his wish by assigning it to the ignored fantasy of the space traveller who rewrites the Gospels, stating God's holy word that "From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections!" (p. 76). Like all Kilgore Trout stories, this one had been found in the back shelves of a pornography shop, suggesting Vonnegut's contention that the answers to mankind's anguish are not to be found in the selfish, pleasurable self-absorption into fantasy. Retreat into the pleasures of the unreal, he suggests, will do no one any good, except, possibly, in the Fourth Dimension, where according to Eliot Rosewater, art keeps company with 'vampires and werewolves and goblins and angels and so on' (p. 72).

In the concrete amber of three dimensions, Vonnegut considered his efforts to mitigate the lesson of Dresden a failure. This is evidenced not only by his description of Slaughterhouse-Five in those terms, but also by the nonsensical word punctuating the book, chirped on the last
page by a bird surveying the remains of Dresden with Billy Pilgrim. Of his book, his 'failure', Vonnegut told his publisher:

> It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.
> And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like 'Poo-tee-weet?'

(p. 20.)

But this admission of the fiction and futility of his artistic efforts, far from being an admission of defeat, is in keeping with Vonnegut's awareness of the demands of his role as a social alarm device. In explaining to the American Physical Society his theory of how artists, as warning systems, chirp and keel over like canaries in coal mines, he said, 'The most useful thing I could do before this meeting today is to keel over. On the other hand, artists are keeling over by the thousands every day and nobody seems to pay the least attention'.

Thus like the last speaker in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut chirps but does not keel over.

Instead, he resolves to continue chirping, needed or not, partly out of devotion to his society, and partly out of his own necessity. For although he had considered his writing about Dresden an act of social alarm, it was an act of exorcism for himself as well. He found this reckoning with Dresden to have left him unsatisfied. It was to have been his last book, he said, the punctuation of a writing career which, although having already produced five praiseworthy novels, had evaded the torturous extent of Dresden's impact and what Dresden revealed. Initially, after its completion, Vonnegut felt that he no longer had to write — 'you know, that I had done What I was supposed to do and everything was OK'.

Yet he had found that the creative process which
gave birth to *Slaughterhouse-Five* left him with the beginnings of its successor.

*Breakfast of Champions* again relies on Vonnegut's employment of deception, a childlike voice fired with the irony of an experienced, wounded man, as both warning and anaesthetic for the benefit of its readers, and in the service of exorcism for the benefit of the writer himself. The similarities between the two books lie not only in voice and intent, but also in their origins: *Slaughterhouse* and *Breakfast* used to be one book. But they just separated completely. It was like a pousse-café, like oil and water -- they simply were not mixable. So I was able to decant *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and what was left was *Breakfast of Champions*.63

Thus Vonnegut had undergone an experience vaguely similar to that of Mark Twain -- the limited, farcical idea of 'Those Extraordinary Twins' had revealed in Mark Twain the mass of dark conceptions that would form his final credible tragi-comedy, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Vonnegut may well have been as surprised as Mark Twain with what was left him upon the completion of his intended project. He felt that with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he, like Lot's wife, had looked back and paid the price for it; he was finished with looking back. He said that the writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five* had turned him into a 'pillar of salt',64 suggesting not only the quenching of his creativity, but also of the need to confront the internal darkness of his past and present. With the responsibility of his 'war book' out of the way, he ironically determined that his next novel would be 'fun', suggesting that he might now even view Dresden with the same gay, unreal sense of irresponsibility he would wish to apply to all writing:
I recently went back to Dresden with my friend O'Hare. We had a million laughs in Hamburg and West Berlin and East Berlin and Vienna and Salzburg and Helsinki; and in Leningrad, too. It was very good for me, because I saw a lot of authentic backgrounds for made-up stories which I will write later on. One of them will be Russian Baroque and another will be No Kissing and another will be Dollar Bar and another will be If the Accident Will, and so on.

And so on.  
(Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 20.)

Vonnegut's irony, of course, suggests that such a toujours gat plan would be as unhelpful to himself as to society, that he must again look back, that his equilibrium could be maintained only with repetitive creative production, that each project could only do a limited, temporary, though necessary, amount of good—much as in the case of laughter itself. Thus writing Breakfast of Champions became a task of urgency and necessity matching that of Slaughterhouse-Five. Vonnegut even implied that he might not have been able to wait through the writing of another five novels before confronting the subject matter of Breakfast of Champions. The implication lies in his statement that the completed novel was his promise that he was beyond considering suicide. Before the writing of the book, he said, he had viewed suicide as 'a perfectly reasonable way to avoid delivering a lecture, to avoid a deadline, to not pay a bill, to not go to a cocktail party'.65 Or it might have been 'a logical solution to any problem, even one in simple algebra':

Question: If Farmer A can plant 300 potatoes an hour, and Farmer B can plant potatoes fifty percent faster, and Farmer C can plant potatoes one third as fast as Farmer B, and 10,000 potatoes are to be planted to an acre, how many nine-hour days will it take Farmers A, B, and C, working simultaneously, to plant 25 acres? Answer: I think I'll blow my brains out.  
(Palm Sunday, p. 304.)

There is no telling where the personal tragedies of Kurt Vonnegut separate from those he witnessed in his community, country, and world during the writing of Breakfast of Champions; for between the same covers
he indeed addresses the suicides, real and potential, of himself, his characters, his nation, and his planet. The book represents both private and public anguish, showing how in Vonnegut the two are mutually inclusive, feeding on each other. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* he had dealt with the past -- Dresden -- though, by virtue of the time warp, projected its impact not only into the present, but the future as well. Also concerned with the past, *Breakfast of Champions* binds the characters in a more restricted scope; they are stranded in a stagnant, indifferent American present with no promise of a viable future. Short of their voyages into their own imaginations, they can only look to the past for a different perspective; but they can find no comfort there, for as Vonnegut explains, one object of the book was to exorcise the rubbish that seemed to define the past, and which threatens to define the present and the future:

> I think I am trying to clear my head of all the junk in there....
> I think I am trying to make my head as empty as it was when I was born onto this damaged planet fifty years ago....
> The things other people have put into my head, at any rate, do not fit together nicely, are often useless and ugly, are out of proportion with life as it really is outside my head.
> I have no culture, no humane harmony in my brains. I can't live without a culture anymore.
> So this book is a sidewalk strewn with junk, trash which I throw over my shoulders as I travel in time back to November eleventh, nineteen hundred and twenty-two.


The dearth of a culture, of 'humane harmony', threatens to compound the personal emptiness of all the book's characters as it expressly does the author himself; there is a public overtone to each character's private anguish. Herein is represented a trend in Vonnegut mingling the public with the private, the present with the past. All his books deal with the public, either on a community, national, or global scale, as it
personally affects his characters and himself; in this respect, at least, he acts in the traditions of both Mark Twain and Lenny Bruce. Yet a difference lies in a tactic of Vonnegut's resulting in an apparent willingness, after exposing the past, to leave it where it lies. Treating exposition as an accomplishment in itself allows him the employment of comedy on his own terms -- terms which, as it has been shown, outwardly avow the impotence of comedy while allowing it to act in the service of a devious anarchy; for the 'junk' that Vonnegut hopes to exorcise is in fact the amassed sacred cows and deeds that have threatened to deny Americans any claims to justice, health, compassion, or the tenets of their expressed national ideals. Without the admitted expectations of Mark Twain and Lenny Bruce, even the dire subject matter of Breakfast of Champions permits humour to act as a disarming magical charm, distracting the reader from alarm while simultaneously sounding it with impressive urgency.

* * *

One task that Vonnegut assumes is in his power as a social warning device is the reinforcement of painful, even despicable, historical lessons, showing their impact on the individual and collective American psyches -- a task he fulfils in all his books. In Breakfast of Champions he calls for rememberance and productive reflection, notably through the voice of Kilgore Trout, the embittered science-fiction writer. When asked if he is afraid of the future, Trout can only reply that "it is the past which scares the bejesus out of me" (p. 174). His voice, like that of Vonnegut the narrator, is one of highly deceptive irony, upon which the entire interpretation of the book depends. With the ironic voice acting as an efficient, effective shield, Vonnegut proceeds with a scathing attack on the national and cultural mores that threaten to
exterminate his characters and himself, just as they threatened to do in the real and fictive Dresdens of history and *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

On one level *Breakfast of Champions* pits death against the lives of the characters: Trout; Dwayne Hoover, the mind-poisoned car salesman; Wayne Hoobler, the black ex-convict experiencing America on the outside for the first time; and Vonnegut, the author, presented as a character in the book, suffering the same mental and physical injuries as his creations. On a broader level death is pitted against the life of America itself, a nation deceived by the impression of its own glory and moral supremacy, slowly suffering from the crumbling of its very foundation, the spirit of its people. Vonnegut first gives us the nation of his characters, bloated with a touch-me-not pomposity that infects the very laws of the republic:

> It was the law of their nation, a law no other nation on the planet had about its flag, which said this: 'The flag shall not be dipped to any person or thing'. Flag dipping was a form of friendly and respectful salute, which consisted of bringing the flag on a stick closer to the ground, then raising it up again. (p. 18.)

Importantly, for the sake of his comedy, Vonnegut leaves it at that, declining to editorialize on the relationship between the law and the tradition. This is his approach throughout the book: ironical exposition without editorial -- similar to the approach of Mark Twain in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, though employed by Vonnegut with a willingness that prevents his embittered withdrawal. Certainly, he *implies judgement* with his juxtapositions, yet by adopting the seemingly juvenile voice of a deadpan chronicler, he precludes the voice of the fanatical preacher. Thereby can he strengthen the above impression of a nation isolated by its evident lack of friendliness and respect, relating it to a harmless parable about Dwayne Hoover's dog:
Sparky could not wag his tail -- because of an automobile accident many years ago, so he had no way of telling other dogs how friendly he was. He had to fight all the time. His ears were in tatters. He was lumpy with scars.

(p. 26.)

The deplorable condition of a nation doomed to fight and bully is further explained in a similar juvenile voice, suitable for the telling of bedtime stories, in a manner that strips away the extraneous and leaves the reader with a charmed account of a nation's blatant inhumanity:

When Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout met each other, their country was by far the richest and most powerful country on the planet. It had most of the food and minerals and machinery, and it disciplined other countries by threatening to shoot big rockets at them or to drop things on them from airplanes.

(p. 21.)

Vonnegut uses the same patient, explanatory voice to describe the nature of the men who carry out the national atrocities, such as the army officer Robert Pefko: 'He was a graduate of West Point, a military academy which turned young men into homicidal maniacs for use in war' (p. 145). Thus the America that grieves Vonnegut is one with the impersonality of a roadside motel, with a carelessness for its own citizens as well as the targets of its bombs. The economic cruelty of America seems on the face of it to be as harmless as a history of the birdseed industry; it seems that far removed from the emotions of the narrator. Therein lies the success by juxtaposition of tone and content of the narration's comedy:

Dwayne Hoover's and Kilgore Trout's country, where there was still plenty of everything, was opposed to Communism. It didn't think that Earthlings who had a lot should share it with others unless they really wanted to, and most of them didn't want to.

So they didn't have to. Everybody in America was supposed to grab whatever he could and hold on to it. Some Americans were very good at
grabbing and holding, were fabulously well-to-do. Others couldn't get their hands on doodly-squat. (p. 22.)

In the eyes of Kilgore Trout, the dogged, downtrodden science-fiction writer, the leaders of America had long ago betrayed any right to be considered valid representatives of the people. Vonnegut condemns them through Trout's stories, yet without the petulance of Lenny Bruce in saying, 'Everything is rotten. Mother is rotten. The flag is rotten. God is rotten'. On the contrary, his damnation is wrapped in the shroud of imaginative, fantastic analogy:

Trout couldn't tell one politician from another one. They were all formlessly enthusiastic chimpanzees to him. He wrote a story one time about an optimistic chimpanzee who became President of the United States. He called it 'Hail to the Chief'.

The chimpanzee wore a little blue blazer with brass buttons, and with the seal of the President of the United States sewed to the breast pocket.... Everywhere he went, bands would play 'Hail to the Chief'. The chimpanzee loved it. He would bounce up and down. (pp. 87-88.)

Trout is indeed unimpressed in the presence of intrinsic American 'greatness', though never rising to occasions of confrontation which would incense a more volatile character. Like Billy Pilgrim, he is a personification of the struggle to adapt. Like Billy, he is unenthusiastic about living, having been given 'a life not worth living' and 'an iron will to live'; as Vonnegut notes, 'This was a common combination on the planet Earth' (p. 72). In Trout's case it keeps him on a tenuously even keel, as he tells one representative of American glory:

The Governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller, shook Trout's hand in a Cohoes grocery store one time. Trout had no idea who he was. As a science-fiction writer, he should have been flabbergasted to come so close to such a man. Rockefeller wasn't merely Governor. Because of the
peculiar laws in that part of the planet, Rockefeller was allowed to own vast areas of Earth's surface, and the petroleum and other valuable minerals underneath the surface, as well. He owned or controlled more of the planet than many nations. This had been his destiny since infancy. He had been born into that cockamamie proprietorship.

"How's it going, fella?" Governor Rockefeller asked him. "About the same", said Kilgore Trout.

(Trout fails to see any connection between America as it is represented on paper and the campaign stump, and his own dismally American life. He rents a dingy basement flat in Cohoes, New York, and works as an installer of aluminium screens and storm windows. His stories are used as padding for pornographic picture magazines, and his only companion is a parakeet named Bill. He feels no sense of national or cultural unity, in spite of the ideals of the United States as represented in its irrelevant motto, 'which meant in a language nobody spoke anymore, Out of Many, One: "E pluribus unum"' (p. 18).

With the same voice of exposition, Vonnegut proposes that patriotic bombast and broken promises have crippled any integrity and relevance formerly attached to 'The Star-Spangled Banner': 'There were one quadrillion nations in the universe, but the nation Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout belonged to was the only one with a national anthem which was gibberish sprinkled with question marks' (p. 18). Vonnegut's descriptions ironically suggest that he might even tolerate national disunity and divorces from reality, were it not for one small factor, the soul-corroding impact of official negligence on his fellow citizens:

The undippable flag was a beauty, and the anthem and the vacant motto might not have mattered much, if it weren't for this: a lot of citizens were so ignored and cheated and insulted that they thought they might be in the wrong country, or even on the wrong planet, that some terrible mistake had been made. It might have comforted them some if their anthem and their motto had mentioned fairness or brotherhood or hope or happiness, had somehow welcomed them to the society and its real estate.
If they studied their paper money for clues as to what their country was all about, they found, among a lot of other baroque trash, a picture of a truncated pyramid with a radiant eye on top of it.... Not even the President of the United States knew what that was all about. It was as though the country were saying to its citizens, 'In nonsense is strength' (pp. 18-19).

Vonnegut's seeming indulgence is such that he can assign the 'nonsense' to the innocent playfulness of the founding fathers: 'The founders were aristocrats, and they wished to show off their useless education, which consisted of the study of hocus-pocus from ancient times' (p. 19). But he warns that 'some of the nonsense was evil', actually mind-poison concealing horrendous crimes that gave birth to the nation. The evil nonsense begins with the year 1492:

The teachers told the children that this was when their continent was discovered by human beings. Actually, millions of human beings were already living full and imaginative lives on the continent in 1492. That was simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill them. (p. 20.)

* * *

In exorcising the evil nonsense that makes up the bulk of the book, Vonnegut again acts in the simultaneous roles of the canary at warning and the comedian at play. The irony of the childishly playful narrative voice pervades all his descriptions, often making condemnation seem like acquiescence, praise, or in the least, mere reporting. This is particularly apparent as he attacks the debilitating preoccupation that seemingly has played such a great part in transforming America into a cultural vacuum: arbitrarily enforced standardization. Vonnegut's urgent warnings are sounded in his portrayals of Americans who strive to be 'average' to the extent that they destroy the serenity and health of themselves and others. Women are depicted as 'agreeing machines instead
of thinking machines' as they desperately try to conform to the model of the 'average woman' imposed by a male-dominated society (p. 131). Vonnegut's description of Patty Keene is an attack on such impositions, disguised as a patient sociological explanation:

Patty Keene was stupid on purpose, which was the case with most women in Midland City. The women all had big minds because they were big animals, but they did not use them much for this reason: unusual ideas could make enemies, and the women, if they were going to achieve any sort of comfort and safety, needed all the friends they could get.

(p. 130.)

Vonnegut's anger with the American passion for enforced standardization certainly has its roots in his own experience. In *Palm Sunday* he described his own debilitating encounters with triage, the educational grading system in which groups of students are divided into thirds based on their grade point averages. His description is a further indication of the irony with which he seems to see the other side of an argument while in fact condemning it:

Am I angry at having triage practised on me? I am glad it was practised on me at a university, rather than at a battalion aid station behind the front lines. I might have wound up as a preposterously tall private expiring in a snowbank outside the tent, while doctors inside operated on those who had at least a fifty-fifty chance to survive. Why waste time and plasma on a goner?

(*Palm Sunday*, pp. 75-76.)

He carries the same deceptively patient irony to his condemnations in *Breakfast of Champions*, often further disguising them as the ignored science-fiction tales of Kilgore Trout. The dire implications are transmitted in Trout's comic fantasy of standards being put to destructive psychological use by an extra-terrestrial advertising agency. Hoping to increase the sales of their product, 'shazzbutter', they promote it with statistics correlating high sexual endowment with the
consumption of shazzbutter. The greedy peanut butter eaters of Earth set out to conquer -- or in American historical terms, 'discover' -- the shazzbutter planet:

So the earthlings infiltrated the ad agency which had the shazzbutter account, and they buggered the statistics in the ads. They made the average for everything so high that everybody on the planet felt inferior to the majority in every way.

And then the earthling armored space ships came in and discovered the planet. Only token resistance was offered here and there, because the natives felt so below average. And then the pioneering began.

(Breakfast of Champions, p. 160.)

Vonnegut extends the crippling impact of arbitrarily imposed standards into the realms of literature and language, revealing it through various tactics of exposition. Warning of demoralization, inhibition, and the ultimate breakdown of communication, he in one instance describes Patty Keene as unnecessarily self-critical because she cannot speak English or appreciate literature of the irrelevant standards decreed by her teachers -- standards appropriate only to English aristocrats before the First World War (p. 132). Patty is given the impression that she is intellectually sub-normal, flunking English because she could not get much out of classics having no connection with reality as she sees it. For her, reality had meant being raped at sixteen, with a dead mother and a father incapacitated by terminal cancer; and Vonnegut ironically suggests that in between all this she should have appreciated Ivanhoe or The Good Earth, 'which was about Chinamen' (p. 133). The irony continues in his description of Midland City's black people, who adopt a defiance that Patty, as an 'agreeing machine', cannot afford to take:

The black people would not put up with this. They went on talking English every which way. They refused to read books they couldn't understand -- on the grounds they couldn't understand them. They would ask such impudent
Thus the externally imposed divorce of literature and language from reality is strewn over the sidewalk as a symptom of the myth of the acceptable standard. Another character recognizing this divorce is Kilgore Trout, invited to Midland City to participate in an arts festival. Asked to speak at a symposium on 'The Future of the American Novel in the Age of McLuhan', he thinks, "I don't know who McLuhan is, but I know what it's like to spend the night with a lot of other dirty old men in a movie theatre in New York City. Could we talk about that?" (p. 59). Trout has witnessed the deterioration of his language's relevance to the extent that he builds a story around it:

It was about a planet where the language kept turning into pure music, because the creatures there were so enchanted by sounds. Words became musical notes. Sentences became melodies. They were useless as conveyors of information, because nobody knew or cared what the meanings of words were anymore.

So leaders in government and commerce, in order to function, had to invent new and much uglier vocabularies and sentence structures all the time, which would resist being transmuted to music.
(p. 106.)

Trout's story demonstrates a recognition that Vonnegut shares with Lenny Bruce, who felt the need of keeping the communicative force of the language strong and unhindered by the imposition of irrelevant standards; as the scope of his obscenity persecutions showed, the standards were primarily moral. Lenny faced hostile audiences from the unguarded courtroom and cabaret stages, while Vonnegut relies on the fantastic shield of Kilgore Trout's stories and a soft-spoken demeanour; yet the inspiration behind the two approaches is the same: the need to warn of the erosion of communication caused by the arbitrary imposition of irrelevant standards, moral or otherwise, within the language. The
The ultimate implication of this erosion is given in another Kilgore Trout story, which in spite of its comic fantasy carries an urgent warning of 'a tragic failure to communicate':

Here was the plot: A flying saucer creature named Zog arrived on Earth to explain how wars could be prevented and how cancer could be cured. He brought the information from Margo, a planet where the natives conversed by means of farts and tap dancing.

Zog landed at night in Connecticut. He had no sooner touched down than he saw a house on fire. He rushed into the house, farting and tap dancing, warning the people about the terrible danger they were in. The head of the house brained Zog with a golf club.

\[ (p. 62. \)\]

Thus Vonnegut suggests that the imposition of conventional mores and standards so far removed from the necessities of reality -- in literature, language, politics, and education -- amounts to a cadre of beliefs which in the end can be metaphorically and literally deadly. The book calls for resistance to such impositions and beliefs, for vigilant contention with them. It in a sense builds on the moral of Mother Night that 'we must be careful about what we pretend to be'; we must also be careful about what we pretend to believe. Breakfast of Champions is among other things a cry for alternatives to the absurd 'solutions' that Vonnegut dismisses as junk strewn over the sidewalk. It is a call for constructive ideas to replace the ones that 'don't fit together nicely' but have nonetheless been implemented.

* * *

The call for good ideas is represented in the fateful relationship between Dwayne Hoover, the car salesman, and Kilgore Trout, whose stories inadvertently poison Dwayne's mind with bad ideas:

Here was the core of the bad ideas which Trout gave to Dwayne: Everybody on Earth was a robot, with one exception -- Dwayne Hoover.
Of all the creatures in the Universe, only Dwayne was thinking and feeling and worrying and planning and so on. Nobody else knew what pain was. Nobody else had any choices to make. Everybody else was a fully automatic machine, whose purpose was to stimulate Dwayne. Dwayne was a new type of creature being tested by the Creator of the Universe.

Only Dwayne Hoover had free will.

The ideas are part of a story in which the Creator of the Universe directly addresses the reader — in this case, Dwayne. He decides to believe what he has read, contrary to the expectations of Kilgore Trout:

It shook up Trout to realize that even he could bring evil into the world — in the form of bad ideas. And, after Dwayne was carted off to a lunatic asylum in a canvas camisole, Trout became a fanatic on the importance of ideas as causes and cures for diseases.

But Trout's fanaticism alienates people from him. Vonnegut shows his awareness of the need to avoid the appearance of fanatical preaching with the example of Trout, who is shunned for all his good intentions and ideas: "But nobody would listen to him. He was a dirty old man in the wilderness, crying out among the trees and the underbrush, "Ideas or the lack of them can cause disease!"" (p. 24). Were an explicitly stated moral presented in rabid earnest, the comedy of Breakfast of Champions might have been as ineffective as the cries of Kilgore Trout. Vonnegut is thus compelled to make a point of consigning his moral to an epitaph on Trout's tombstone: "WE ARE HEALTHY ONLY TO THE EXTENT THAT OUR IDEAS ARE HUMANE" (p. 25).

The 'bad ideas' inside Dwayne Hoover's head cause him to do and say some exceedingly inhumane things, on the grounds that his victims have no more feeling than machines. He beats the daylights out of his homosexual son for being a "Goddamn cock-sucking machine", and screams to a crowd about his suicide wife, "All you robots want to know why my wife ate
Dwayne?... I'll tell you why: She was that kind of a machine!" (p. 238).

He beats up his mistress because he thinks she asks for favours with her body: "Best fucking machine in the State", he told the crowd. "Wind her up and she'll fuck you and say she loves you, and she won't shut up till you give her a Colonel Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken Franchise" (p. 250). With the clarity of madness, Dwayne pinpoints what seems to be the reason for his own inhumanity:

He spoke about human slavery -- not only black slaves, but white slaves, too. Dwayne regarded coal miners and workers on assembly lines and so forth as slaves, no matter what color they were. 'I used to think the electric chair was a shame. I used to think war was a shame -- and automobile accidents and cancer', he said, and so on.

He didn't think they were shames anymore. 'Why should I care what happens to machines?' he said. (pp. 241-42.)

In the end Dwayne and his bad ideas put eleven seriously injured people in hospital, and himself on Skid Row. Vonnegut at first assigns as a reason for Dwayne's insanity the combination of mind poisoning and a bodily chemical imbalance:

Dwayne Hoover's body was manufacturing certain chemicals which unbalanced his mind. But Dwayne, like all novice lunatics, needed some bad ideas, too, so that his craziness could have shape and direction.

Bad chemicals and bad ideas were the Yin and Yang of madness. (p. 23.)

Vonnegut 'explains' in the book that he has often worked under the temptation to depict his characters as machines or robots plagued by 'faulty wiring' or as organisms with 'chemical reactions seething inside', which cause them to act in a particular manner (p. 13). He 'explains' that he writes what he is 'seemingly programmed to write', that in *Breakfast of Champions* he is 'programmed at fifty to perform childishly -- to insult "The Star-Spangled Banner", to scrawl pictures of
a Nazi flag and an asshole and a lot of other things with a felt-tipped pen' (p. 14). Although he 'explains' the reasons for Dwayne's cruelty as being the result of a similar programming, it soon becomes clear that he is being overwhelmingly ironical, that his 'explanations', like his books, are actually 'protests against explanations'. Thus he voluntarily undermines the credibility of his own artistic efforts to make sense of the corrupt American experience, to 'explain' it, just as he had finally admitted an inability to make sense of or explain Dresden.

* * *

With the inference that the forces and results of human behaviour are not only inexplicable, but also the means by which artists delude themselves with impressions of their own effectiveness, Vonnegut reserves the brunt of his scathing irony for the complacent artist Rabo Karabekian, who defends his work with an 'explanation' which, however eloquent, is invalid and a swindle. Karabekian has sold his painting, 'The Temptation of St Anthony', to the Midland City Arts Festival for fifty thousand dollars. Irate that so much should have been paid for a painting of a vertical stripe, the citizens attack the artist, who presumes to 'explain':

'I now give you my word of honor', he went on, 'that the picture your city owns shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out. It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal -- the "I am" to which all messages are sent. It is all that is alive in any of us -- in a mouse, in a deer, in a cocktail waitress. It is unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us. A sacred picture of Saint Anthony alone is one vertical, unwavering band of light. If a cockroach were near him, or a cocktail waitress, the picture would show two such bands of light. Our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us. Everything else about us is dead machinery'.

(p. 205.)
Vonnegut mocks Karabekian's presumptuousness -- and, apparently, his own artistic efforts -- with sarcasm, calling the artist's gaudy speech 'the spiritual climax of this book, for it is at this point that I, the author, am suddenly transformed by what I have done so far' (p. 203). Beginning with this preposterous admission, he goes on to ridicule Karabekian's explanation with more mock suggestions of his having been transformed by the concept of the painting. He assigns the 'unwavering band of light' to the cores of so many characters that it becomes ridiculous. Of Kilgore Trout he says, 'His situation, insofar as he was a machine, was complex, tragic, and laughable. But the sacred part of him, his awareness, remained an unwavering band of light' (p. 208). Of himself he says, 'And this book is being written by a meat machine in cooperation with a machine made of metal and plastic.... And at the core of the writing meat machine is something sacred, which is an unwavering band of light' (p. 208). Again, 'At the core of each person who reads this book is a band of unwavering light' (p. 208). He sarcastically suggests that even the eternal truths revealed by the efforts of genius are incomplete and useless without the revelations of Karabekian; of Einstein's $E=mc^2$, he says, 'It was a flawed equation, as far as I was concerned. There should have been an "A" in there somewhere for Awareness -- without which the "E" and the "M" and the "c", which was a mathematical constant, could not exist' (p. 222). The attack on Karabekian is punctuated with a final dose of mock praise:

My doorbell has just rung in my New York apartment. And I know what I will find when I open my front door: an unwavering band of light.

God bless Rabo Karabekian!

(p. 209.)

With Karabekian annihilated, Vonnegut's 'protests against explanations' continue with his own preposterous explanations, stemming
from his impatience with people who expect miraculous transformations from art rather than from their own responsible efforts. The citizens who moments before were ready to lynch Karabekian for his swindle congratulate him for his explanation, saying, "If artists would explain more, people would like art more" (p. 217). Vonnegut proceeds then with an overdose of explaining, just as he gave an overdose of mock appreciation of Karabekian's didactic self-defence. Assigning his "terrific sense of urgency about explaining" to a pill he has swallowed, Vonnegut takes off on a flight of irony, explaining and explaining again the most insignificant details:

Let's see: I have already explained Dwayne's uncharacteristic ability to read so fast. Kilgore Trout probably couldn't have made his trip from New York City in the time I allotted, but it's too late to bugger around with that. Let it stand, let it stand!

Let's see, let's see. Oh, yes -- I have to explain a jacket Trout will see at the hospital.... (p. 229.)

The irrelevant explanations go on for four pages, becoming more ridiculous as they are presented: 'I have to explain, too, see, why so many black people in Midland City were able to imitate birds from various parts of what used to be the British Empire. The thing was, see,...' (p. 231).

* * *

In total, Vonnegut's slatherings of praise and explanations amount to the warning that miraculous transformations, revelations, and salvation cannot be found by the self-absorption into art. For this reason he calls it 'a bad mistake' for Dwayne Hoover to look to the arts festival for a 'brand new viewpoint on life' (p. 157). Dwayne hopes the visiting artists will 'enable him to laugh at his troubles, to go on living, and to keep him out of the North Wing of the Midland County
General Hospital, which was for lunatics' (pp. 181-82). That is precisely where he ends up, because of his thoughtless, unreflective encounter with art.

Vonnegut suggests with the tragic example of Dwayne Hoover what Kilgore Trout openly and bitterly avows without the shield of irony or parable. Trout comes to Midland City with the intention of awakening the participants of the arts festival, as "a representative of all the thousands of artists who devoted their entire lives to a search for truth and beauty -- and didn't find doodly-squat" (p. 44). As a 'would-be creator who had failed and failed' (p. 183), he is disgusted with the deification assigned him by the citizens of Midland City, those same people who had found instant revelation in the irrelevancies of Karabekian. When one citizen begs Trout, "teach us to sing and dance and laugh and cry!", he is immediately rebuked:

"Open your eyes!" said Trout bitterly. "Do I look like a dancer, a singer, a man of joy?...
"Open your eyes!" said Trout. 'Would a man nourished by beauty look like this? You have nothing but desolation and desperation here, you say? I bring you more of the same!'
(p. 216.)

With his admission of failure as an artist, at least in the terms of art demanded by the citizens, Trout stands in opposition to the pompous, egotistical Karabekian, who is complacent and utterly pleased with having found the meaning of life through his irrelevant painting. Trout, on the other hand, is bitter, cynical, desolate, and scarred. He periodically tries to adopt a crutch similar to that given Billy Pilgrim on Tralfamadore:

There was only one way for the Earth to be, he thought: the way it was. Everything was necessary. He saw an old white woman fishing through a garbage can. That was necessary. He saw a bathtub toy, a little rubber duck, lying on its side
on the grating over a storm sewer. It had to be there.
(pp. 99-100.)

But Trout's flashes into a spirit of acceptance are forced and futile. He is in a constant state of flux, sometimes resigned and placid, though more often succumbing to a bitter, fanatical cynicism that approaches the contempt of Mark Twain or Ambrose Bierce. Alone in his apartment with his parakeet, he chides the bird about the end of the world: "Any time now", he would say. "And high time, too" (p. 27). Discussing various natural disasters like volcanoes, tidal waves, Ice Ages, and supernovas, Trout says that "God wasn't any conservationist, so for anyone else to be one was sacrilegious and a waste of time" (p. 84). One thinks of Mark Twain's cynical idea of slowly withdrawing the earth's oxygen supply, as Trout gives his own definition of conservation; replying to the statement that the Bible contains no mention of conservation, he says, "Unless you want to count the story about the Flood" (p. 85). His bitterness stems from his inability to accept the fact of his own impotence and failure as a 'would-be creator'. He is aware that the best of his ideas have wound up in the racks of pornography shops, or as recycled toilet paper in the gaol at Libertyville, Georgia, while other artists are hailed for their ineffective contributions to comfort, beauty, truth, laughing, singing, dancing, and joy. He is aware, in short, that 'honest working people had no use for the arts' (p. 122). And precisely because of this awareness, he can do nothing but smoulder.

Thus is Trout offered as a living refutation of Karabekian's premise and 'explanation'. Vonnegut suggests that awareness, the 'unwavering band of light', is in fact useless without its illuminating anything constructive and good. All his characters possess awareness, yet it is the awareness of something that determines their usefulness, superfluity,
health, or distress. Trout is aware of his impotence as an artist, and he is bitter. Dwayne is aware of a message in Trout's story, but cannot understand the irony of it, and so goes on a brutally violent rampage. Bunny Hoover is aware that he is about to be attacked from behind by Dwayne, but does nothing with that awareness:

Bunny saw the trouble coming, supposed it was death. He might have protected himself easily with all the techniques of fighting he had learned in military school. But he chose to meditate instead. He closed his eyes, and his awareness sank into the silence of the unused lobes of his mind.

(p. 237.)

And instead of reaching nirvana, he has his face broken in by his own father.

The awareness that Vonnegut ironically describes as providing 'the spiritual climax of this book' is in fact such an ordinarily empty attribute in itself that he assigns it even to the grasp of a dog. Lancer is aware that he is kept

in a one room apartment fourteen feet wide and twenty-six feet long, and six flights of stairs above street level. His entire life was devoted to unloading his excrement at the proper time and place. There were two proper places to put it: in the gutter outside the door seventy-two steps below, with the traffic whizzing by, or in a roasting pan his mistress kept in front of the Westinghouse refrigerator.

Lancer had a very small brain, but he must have suspected from time to time, just as Wayne Hoobler did, that some kind of terrible mistake had been made.

(p. 184.)

The 'sting in the tail', of course, is that for all his awareness, Lancer is not aware of anything constructive through which his situation can be improved. Neither can Wayne Hoobler effectively change the conditions that bind him. He has no job, no friends, no education; his skin is the wrong colour and he has a criminal record — all of which he is aware. Yet awareness of his condition does him as much good as the
awareness of irrelevant inanimate objects, such as those to which he in one instance devotes his full attention in Dwayne Hoover's car lot:

The used cars were all locked up tight for the night. Now and then aluminum propellers on a wire overhead would be turned by a lazy breeze, and Wayne would respond to them as best he could. 'Go', he would say to them. 'Spin 'roun'.'

(p. 176.)

But in spite of the unchangeable conditions of which he is aware, Wayne nonetheless remains on his feet throughout the narrative, both literally and symbolically, because he is also aware of the means by which to do it, and acts on that awareness. He is the only one of Dwayne Hoover's targets to escape injury because of his own vigilance and agility in the face of physical assault. Even more so than Trout, Wayne is shown to be on an even keel, in fact to an impressive extent. Although doomed to a life of frustration he asserts his resilience and humanity like the Sisyphus of Camus, by refusing to give in and be exterminated. A life of action is given as an alternative to extinction. In spite of the frustration of all Wayne's efforts at preserving his comfort and dignity in the world, there is victory in his ability to adapt -- not by escape into art or transcendental meditation, but by remaining vigilant and on his toes, ready to dodge the 'kicks, slaps, and punches' thrown at him not only by Dwayne, but by an indifferent or hostile universe. Dwayne is forced to conclude that Wayne is 'a perfect dodging machine' (p. 241), the attributes of which -- vigilance and action -- Vonnegut sees as the only means by which humanity can be preserved to its natural life expectancy. Wayne's vigilance and agility are complimented by the forecasted epitaph on his neglected tombstone:
Vonnegut suggests that he would wish Wayne’s resilience and adaptability on all people, notably Kilgore Trout and, it is assumed, himself. Confronting the embittered Trout as his Creator at the end of the book, Vonnegut offers comfort and release: "Mr Trout, I love you", I said gently. "I have broken your mind to pieces. I want you to feel a wholeness and inner harmony such as I have never allowed you to feel before" (p. 268). Yet Vonnegut actually plays a mean trick on Trout in an attempt to con him, as he suggests that any person is conned who seeks permanent health and comfort from art. He makes Trout think he is offering a symbolic apple, describing it with the saccharine eloquence of a veritable Karabekian:

'I hold in my hand a symbol of wholeness and harmony and nourishment. It is Oriental in its simplicity, but we are Americans, Kilgore, and not Chinnamens. We Americans require symbols which are richly colored and three dimensional and juicy. Most of all, we hunger for symbols which have not been poisoned by great sins our nation has committed, such as slavery and genocide and criminal neglect, or by tinhorn commercial greed and cunning' (p. 268.)

With this, not only does Vonnegut condemn all those who allow their attention to be diverted from effective action by artistic seduction, but he also condemns himself and all artists who, through their creativity and impressions of its significance, are embarked on a monstrous confidence game. The Vonnegut depicted in the book is as oily, devious, flattering, and two-faced as Mephistopheles or Tartuffe — and cruel as well. Although making Trout see a mouth-watering symbol, he complacently admits to sheer trickery in an aside to the reader: 'I had nothing in my
hand, but such was my power over Trout that he would see in it whatever I wished him to see' (p. 268). He hints at such trickery earlier in the book, describing literary symbolism with the fast-talking mumbo-jumbo of a third-rate party magician:

Ask me a question, any question. How old is the Universe? It is only one half-second old, but that half-second has lasted one quintillion years so far....
What is time? It is a serpent which eats its tail....
What was the apple which Eve and Adam ate? It was the Creator of the Universe.
And so on.
Symbols can be so beautiful, sometimes.
(pp. 186-87.)

However beautiful, comforting, entertaining, and disarming symbols are, Vonnegut suggests, they are in the end only symbols, and the means of escapism to people without a sense of reality or duty to action. By calling attention to his own confidence game as an artist, he warns that escapism into art is not adaptation, but dangerous self-deception and voluntary blinding. He offers Kilgore Trout his symbol, his apple, his nothingness, and disappears, leaving the writer a dupe of his own confidence game, wishing for the impossible and crying into a void, "Make me young, make me young, make me young!" (p. 270).

* * *

Thus at the end of the book Vonnegut pits the artist against himself, demanding that the artist warn society of all dangers, including that of taking himself too seriously and to such an extent that action is avoided. As a confrontation with the self, Breakfast of Champions must have been an exorcism of bitterness, an effort to accept and adapt to the notion of not only the artist's limited usefulness in utilitarian terms, but of his dangerously seductive power as well; for although Dwayne's actions are deplorable, he takes them precisely because of his encounter
with art. Vonnegut affects disgust that he should have such deceptive and unhelpful power; 'I'm not going to put on any more puppet shows', he declares (p. 14).

Yet the declaration and the book itself must be taken as exorcisms, for however limited the benefit of the work Vonnegut would give to society, there is no question of its necessary part in his own well being, in the losing and regaining of his equilibrium. He continues to put on puppet shows, calling attention to the fact that he is doing so, thereby facing and continually adapting to the conflict of conscience between the entertainer and the social alarm device -- between the agent of escapism and the agent of awakening.

With the book's completion, Vonnegut thought that it would be the last of his 'therapeutic books', it having allowed him to bring his anger to the surface, to be confronted and cast over his shoulder. But there have been to date three novels and two collections of essays and autobiographical works following Breakfast of Champions, with each one showing itself as an instrument of therapy in a process that cannot be satisfied with the writing of a single book. Each book is evidence of a continuous process of recognition and exorcism, making both adaptation and the comic approach possible. This process allows the comedian to adopt the façade of composure betrayed in a conversation between Kilgore Trout and the truck driver taking him across the American wasteland:

'I can't tell if you're serious or not', said the driver. 'I won't know myself until I find out whether life is serious or not', said Trout. 'It's dangerous, I know, and it can hurt a lot. That doesn't necessarily mean it's serious, too'.

(p. 85.)

The ongoing nature of the process of exorcism and adaptation can be described in terms of Vonnegut's decision to end Breakfast of Champions.
with 'ETC.' representing life as a continuous polymer. 'And it is in order to acknowledge the continuity of this polymer that I begin so many sentences with "And" and "So", and end so many paragraphs with "... and so on" (p. 211). Like their creator, Vonnegut's characters are given as examples of people wrestling doggedly with the elements that threaten to disrupt the polymer. The unbroken chain evidences a tenuous success, though not without painful alternations; the characters survive because of their ability to adapt, yet they must consistently fight to retain that ability, which is constantly under threat. As Billy Pilgrim, Kilgore Trout, and Wayne Hoobler show, survivors must adapt through vigilance, the small favours of temporary release, and an ultimate sense of reality that allows them to act when the means of release have outlived their usefulness. As the differences in health between them show, they are imbued with varying degrees of ability and agility in remaining on their feet.

One other character who accumulates considerable practice in the art of remaining on his feet is Walter F. Starbuck in Jailbird. Though without the butterfly agility of Wayne Hoobler, Starbuck adapts to the vicissitudes of fortune with an increasingly honed sense of perception based on an ability to ultimately determine where false comfort ends and reality begins. Jailbird again confronts the comedian with the canary in a coal mine, like Slaughterhouse-Five resorting to a sweep of time that shows the process of adaptation as alternating and continuous. In spite of the presence of Kilgore Trout, Jailbird does not rely on science-fiction to bring the contingencies of time to the foreground, but rather it depends on the recollections of Starbuck, who, more readily than Billy Pilgrim, is prepared to confront the realities of his anguish through his
own memory. This is not to say that Starbuck does not resort to periodic self-deception and escapism through courtesy of the Fourth Dimension, but he is more prepared to accept and label them as such. In this respect he avoids the extent of bitterness that infects Trout, who refuses all comfort, and the extent of neurosis that cripples Billy Pilgrim, who practically destroys himself in the quest for comfort. Starbuck faces his apocalypse head on, narrating, to repeat Glenn Meeter's phrase, with 'the voice of a man recollecting emotion in tranquillity'. Thus does he begin the book with an outright sweeping chronology of life on a helter-skelter of good and ill fortune, both public and private:


Nineteen-hundred and Seventy gave me a job in the Nixon White House. Nineteen-hundred and Seventy-five sent me to prison for my own preposterous contributions to the American political scandals known collectively as 'Watergate'.

(Jonnegut, Jailbird (St Albans, 1981), p. 37.)

Jailbird is the story of Starbuck's attempts, through all his changes of fortune, to find the tranquillity evidenced in his narrative voice. As the book shows, the wise reader will be suspicious of taking the voice as indication of complete underlying serenity. Just as do the narrative voices of Slaughterhouse-Five and Breakfast of Champions, the deadpan of Jailbird threatens to detract from the senses of urgency and desperation of its characters.

But the narrative voice is not the only deceptive element in Jailbird; the entire book amounts to a massive, self-conscious deception in which fact and fiction overlap, calling attention to, and straining the credibility of, each other. Whole sections of the book take on the
misty unreality of dream, while at the end there lies an index whose thoroughness would satisfy the requirements of any historical monograph. The fictional Cuyahoga Massacre described early on is in Vonnegut's words 'an invention, a mosaic composed of bits taken from tales of many such riots in not such olden times' (p. 17). The historical Powers Hapgood becomes the fictional Kenneth Whistler, who along with Starbuck, Kilgore Trout, and other fictional characters shares the pages with Sacco and Vanzetti, Roy M. Cohn, and Richard Nixon. The personal fairy-tale history of Walter Starbuck is mirrored by the factual history of America, which becomes mythified through the eyes and voice of the narrator: the Labour movement, the Depression, Nuremberg, the McCarthy hearings, Watergate -- all seem to take on the unbelievable scope of legend as Starbuck recounts his impressions.

Blasting the quiet drone of his narrative with historical ironies that after fifty years still bring bile to his throat, Starbuck relates an American history which has shattered his respect for his country, and has been instrumental in shattering his respect for himself. He exemplifies the devotion of Vonnegut, whose task, in the words of Albert Hunt, is to make historical events 'real again -- imaginatively real.' Vonnegut faces the same problem in *Jailbird* as he did in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, that of defamiliarizing aspects of history so familiar that our reactions have been leveled -- defamiliarizing it, then refamiliarizing it with the seductive power of forgotten myth. Thus does Starbuck explain his own retelling of the history of Sacco and Vanzetti:

> When I was a young man, I expected the story of Sacco and Vanzetti to be retold as often and as movingly, to be as irresistible, as the story of Jesus Christ some day. Weren't modern people, if they were to marvel creatively at their own lifetimes, I thought, entitled to a Passion like Sacco and Vanzetti’s, which ended in an electric chair? (p. 178.)
Starbuck recounts his Passion with an undiminished sense of wonder, somewhat like that of Thoreau at Concord, marveling 'creatively' at history as Vonnegut hopes the reader will do. To this end, he attempts to infect the reader with Starbuck's incredulity over the conviction of Vanzetti for a petty larceny offence as part of his overall persecution. Recalling to mind the pain of Vonnegut's betrayal by his 'religion', technology, Starbuck reveals the pain of a betrayed public servant and patriot, as he fires dead history with rejuvenated implications stemming from the impact upon himself:

Was Vanzetti guilty of this lesser crime? Possibly so, but it did not matter much. Who said it did not matter much? The judge who tried the case said it did not matter much.... He told the jury, 'This man, although he may not have actually committed the crime attributed to him, is nevertheless morally culpable, because he is the enemy of our existing institutions'.

Word of honor: This was said by a judge in an American court of law.
(p. 183.)

Thus by virtue of Starbuck's incredulity does a true chapter in American history become as unbelievable as the fantasies of Kilgore Trout. The reader is disposed to marvel again at the unfurling of a banner above the coffins of Sacco and Vanzetti, bearing the words spoken by the same judge to a friend, after pronouncing the death sentence: "DID YOU SEE WHAT I DID TO THOSE ANARCHIST BASTARDS THE OTHER DAY?" (p. 186). Prepared to confront the unbelief of the American reader, Starbuck cites his references as from a factual source, giving all the relevant bibliographical data.

Starbuck's reactions to other chapters of American history also stretch the credibility of history to the point of its seeming improbability. The reader is forced to ask just how impossible is the riches-to-rags-to-riches-to-rags story of Walter Starbuck, when the remarkable changes of American fortune are revealed with such incredulity
as to demand the suspension of disbelief. It takes the knowledge and experience of an old man, coupled with a childlike sense of awe, to equate the American financial recovery to a swindle which in any other case would be punishable by law:

How else am I to explain to my polyglot grandchildren what the United States was like in the nineteen-thirties, when its owners and politicians could not find ways for so many of its people to earn even the most basic necessities, like food and clothes and fuel. It was pure hell to get shoes!

And then, suddenly, there were formerly poor people in officer's clubs, beautifully costumed and ordering filets mignon and champagne. There were formerly poor people in enlisted men's clubs, serviceably clad and ordering hamburgers and beer. A man who two years before had patched the soles of his shoes with cardboard suddenly had a jeep or a truck or an airplane or a boat, and unlimited supplies of fuel and ammunition. He was given glasses and bridgework, if he needed them, and he was immunized against every imaginable disease. No matter where he was on the planet, a way was found to get hot turkey and cranberry sauce to him on Thanksgiving and Christmas.

What had happened?

What could have happened but a Ponzi scheme?

(p. 77.)

Starbuck's sense of the unbelievably American extends from the historical to the current, during which existence seems to depend on one's ability to drift through a void, unmoored to any real base. On his first day out of prison, wandering through New York at dawn, he 'sees all around him Americans who can find no footing in the real and certain. He finds himself awake in a city 'stunned by its own innocence' and uncertainty:

I encountered a baby-faced policeman. He was as uncertain about his role in the city as I was. He looked at me sheepishly, as though there were every chance that I was the policeman and he was the old bum. Who could be sure of anything that early in the day?

(pp. 135-36.)

Further on in his wanderings he encounters a Puerto Rican youth with a huge portable radio blaring out the news, which further impresses upon
him the sheer illogic of events that had brought American life to its present delineations:

The newscaster said that the air quality that day was unacceptable.
Imagine that unacceptable air.
The young man did not appear to be listening to his own radio. He may not even have understood English. The newscaster spoke with a barking sort of hilarity, as though life were a comical steeplechase, with unconventional steeds and hazards and vehicles involved. He made me feel that even I was a contestant -- in a bathtub drawn by three aardvarks, perhaps. I had as good a chance as anybody to win.

(p. 140.)

* * *

The unreality of the American experience is mirrored by the unreal fairy-tale of Walter Starbuck. Just as Vonnegut strained the credibility of historical American events through the eyes of Starbuck, he portrays Starbuck as much a victim of incredible circumstance as of his own unwitting blunders. The fairy-tale begins with his birth to the immigrant chauffeur of millionaire industrialist Alexander Hamilton McCone. In return for devoting his childhood to playing chess with McCone, he is sent to Harvard, after which his already unbelievably good fortune continues through a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford and influential positions in wartime and peacetime government. The McCarthy hearings bring about the first reversal of his fortune, as he inadvertently ruins his friend Leland Clewes with his mistaken testimony: 'All I had ever accused him of was membership in the Communist Party before the war, which I would have thought was about as damning for a member of the Depression generation as having stood in a breadline' (p. 91). Unaware then of the ferocity of McCarthy's intent, Starbuck sees his best friend go to prison, and is soon elbowed out of government and ostracized publicly and privately as a Judas. Rescued from poverty seventeen years
later by the Nixon administration, he is given an obscure position in a
White House basement office. The Watergate conspirators hide their
illegal funds there and are caught, but rather than send anyone to prison
again through his testimony, Starbuck remains silent and goes to prison
himself.

At this point his fortunes are at their lowest. He is released from
prison two years later, a broken old man, widowed and penniless. But his
wanderings through the streets of New York bring him to the most
incredible encounters: not only does he bump into Leland Clewes on a
street corner and renew a painfully broken friendship, but at the exact
same time he is latched onto by a shopping-bag lady who is in fact a
former sweetheart of his, Mary Kathleen O'Looney. As if this were not
fairy-tale enough, unbeknownst to Starbuck, Mary Kathleen is in reality
Mrs Jack Graham, major stockholder and head of the all-powerful RAMJAC
corporation.

Vonnegut heightens the unreal aura of Starbuck's simultaneous
encounter with the instruments of his ill and good fortune with a
theatrical description:

Clewes was facing me. Plainly, he had not yet come up
with a name for me. He pointed at me with his free hand,
indicating that he knew I had figured in his life in some
way. And then he made that finger twitch like a
metronome, ticking off possible names for me....

I was hypnotized.

As luck would have it, there were religious fanatics
behind him, barefoot and chanting and dancing in saffron
robes. Thus did he appear to be a leading man in a
musical comedy.

Nor was I without my own supporting cast. Willy-nilly,
I had placed myself between a man wearing sandwich boards
and a top hat, and a little old woman who had no home, who
carried all her possessions in shopping bags. She wore
enormous purple-and-black basketball shoes. They were so
out of scale with the rest of her that she looked like a
kangaroo.

(pp. 142-43.)

It is as though Vonnegut dares the reader to express disbelief as
Starbuck drops into his retrospective narrative, 'And in the toe of one of her capacious basketball shoes, among other things, were hypocritical love letters from me. Small world!' (p. 143). As this unknown shopping-bag lady fights for Starbuck's attention amid a gathering crowd on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street, reminding him in a loud, piercing voice of their romance, even Starbuck must admit to the unreality of it all: 'Nowhere in the world was this sort of theatre being done anymore' (p. 151).

The willingness to believe is strained even further as Starbuck, finally convinced of her identity as Mary Kathleen, renews his acquaintanceship. As a young, fiery, idealistic radical, she had loved him when he was a Harvard student dabbling in labour politics and the socialist revolution. But a sustained case of amnesia prevents Mary Kathleen from knowing about his later changes of political allegiance, so that as she hides from thieves and murderers with a conglomerate fortune on her hands, she remembers Starbuck as the only man she could trust. Hoping to return the RAMJAC fortune to the American people in the cause of the revolution, she informs Starbuck of her plans, adopting him as a protege, revealing to him her secret headquarters in its incredible location amid the toilet stalls beneath Grand Central Station. But Starbuck is so dazed and flabbergasted by his sudden encounters that he actually does not hear Mary Kathleen's explanations of who she really is, how she married a millionaire, and what her powers and plans are. Consequently, he can only view the unfolding events as a dream, unaware that his miraculous good fortune comes from the hand of Mary Kathleen, a.k.a. Mrs Jack Graham of RAMJAC.

His recollections then take on an even more bizarre aura. First, he finds himself in prison again for a night, due to a drawerful of stolen clarinet parts in his hotel room. Rescued from a padded cell through...
unknown influence of Mary Kathleen, he is astounded to see that the
lawyer who springs him is none other than Roy M. Cohn, McCarthy's 'appallingly effective' committee counsel. Starbuck marvels, 'During the
McCarthy Era, which came after Leland Clewes and I had made such fools of
ourselves, I had hated and feared this man. He was on my side now' (p.
194).

Yet Starbuck must be even further prepared to cope with
astonishment, as the president of RAMJAC, Arpad Leen, acts on Mary
Kathleen's orders to round up Starbuck and six people who had shown him
kindness and courtesy. As dazed and unaware as Starbuck of the source of
their fortune, they are driven in a limousine to Leen's apartment, where
they will be made wealthy vice-presidents of various RAMJAC subsidiaries.
Starbuck attempts to keep a grip on reality with the comic
rationalization, "This is just the dream of a jailbird. It's not
supposed to make sense" (p. 195). He repeats this over and over until
he reaches Leen's penthouse, the description of which only reinforces the
unreality of the narrative: there is a swimming pool in the living room;
Arpad Leen stands in a striped silk dressing gown, offering pousse-café
and promises of immense fortune at the hands of his elusive boss, the
unknown Mrs Jack Graham.

* * *

Lurking beneath the often hilarious, dreamlike sequence of events,
however, is Vonnegut's habitual suggestion that the dream can only be
taken so far. Unreal as it is, Starbuck's history is full of dire
implications, just as is the dreamlike, unimaginable history of America
as told by Starbuck. Although he acts offhand throughout the whole
experience with Leen, he reveals that the 'dream' borders on the
unbearable:
I was going to blow this dream wide open by absolutely refusing to take it seriously. I was damn well going to get back to my bed at the Arapahoe or my cot in prison. I didn't care which. Maybe I could even wake up in the bedroom of my little brick bungalow in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and my wife would still be alive.

(p. 196.)

Thus does Vonnegut present dream as a mirror image of reality, with both images containing elements of the real and the unreal, and both with situations from which escape is desired. With the aborted attention that Starbuck pays to the unreal, Vonnegut again undermines the suggestion that one can escape from reality into the Fourth Dimension. The dreams with which he 'contaminates reality' are often nightmares as terrifying as reality itself. Starbuck shows that he indeed has his little dreams, but that they never obscure the reality from which he unsuccessfully, or at best momentarily, tries to avert his gaze. In moments of utter desolation he half consoles himself with reminders of his own self-respect, such as his frequent repetitions of 'At least I don't smoke anymore'. Yet this dream of his own dignity is shattered by a greater, more horrifying nightmare that forces him to see the fragility of his consolation. Asleep in the seedy hotel on his first evening of freedom, he dreams of himself as a prosperous graduate and guest of the Harvard Club of New York:

One detail from real life carried over into the dream: I was proud that I did not smoke anymore.

But then I absent-mindedly accepted a cigarette. It was simply one more civilized satisfaction to go with the good talk and my warm belly and all. 'Yes, yes --' I said, recalling some youthful shenanigans. I chuckled, eyes twinkling. I put the cigarette to my lips. A friend held a match to it. I inhaled the smoke right down to the soles of my feet.

In the dream I collapsed to the floor in convulsions. In real life I fell out of my bed at the Hotel Arapahoe. In the dream my damp, innocent pink lungs shrivelled into two black raisins. Bitter brown tar seeped from my ears and nostrils.

But worst of all was the shame....
I had just squandered the very last thing I had to be proud of in life: the fact that I did not smoke anymore. (p. 133)

Although Starbuck awakens panting, "Thank God ... that cigarette was only a dream", he is forced to conclude that it is no more a dream than his own satisfaction in himself for not smoking. His abstention from cigarettes in the end does not preserve his self-respect, as he admits at the start of the narrative: 'Life goes on, yes -- and a fool and his self-respect are soon parted, perhaps never to be reunited even on Judgement Day' (p. 37).

* * *

Not only is Starbuck's self-respect in fact crippled; so are his serenity and sanity, although, importantly, not to the evidently permanent extent of Billy Pilgrim's. Like Billy, he resorts to desperate attempts and divorces from reality to preserve his health and peace of mind, although unlike Billy he is willing to admit what he does, at least in the retrospect of the narrative. This is shown at the beginning of the book, which opens with a description of him sitting on a prison cot, waiting to be released penniless and friendless into a hostile, unfamiliar world. He sits in silence, and for no immediately apparent reason, rhythmically claps his hands three times. After some repetition of this, he explains:

Those three claps completed a rowdy song I had never liked, and which I had not thought about for thirty years or more. I was making my mind as blank as possible, you see, since the past was so embarrassing and the future so terrifying. I had made so many enemies over the years that I doubted that I could even get a job as a bartender somewhere. I would simply get dirtier and raggedier, I thought, since I would have no money coming in from anywhere. I would wind up on Skid Row and learn to keep the cold out by drinking wine, I thought, although I had never liked alcohol.

The worst thing, I thought, was that I would be asleep
In an alley in the Bowery, say, and juvenile delinquents who loathed dirty old men would come along with a can of gasoline. They would soak me in it, and they would touch me off. And the worst thing about it, I thought, would be having my eyeballs lapped by flames.

No wonder I craved an empty mind!

(PP. 42-43.)

Thus admitting to his desperation and lack of success in hiding from the ultimate possibilities, Starbuck recalls his clapping and singing of 'Sally in the Garden', failing to distance his thoughts from the time and place where the flames might leap at him. Singing a rowdy song in the face of death is akin to the little phrases with which he confronts much of his distress: 'Life goes on', 'Life is strange', 'Live and learn', 'Times change', 'Fair is fair', 'Calm down', 'Too bad', 'Sorry about that', and 'Peace'. They in turn are equivalents of the impossible 'so it goes'; and even as he employs them in the narrative, Starbuck is aware of their limitations.

Another consolation with which he feebly hopes to deceive himself is the thought of his finding a modest bartending job. He finally admits to the thought as only a stop-gap for despair, describing the conditions that would produce the job as improbable as the job itself:

I imagined that if I were to prowl midtown Manhattan day after day, from the theatre district on the west to the United Nations on the east, and from the Public Library on the south to the Plaza Hotel on the north, and past all the foundations and publishing houses and bookstores and clothiers for gentlemen and expensive hotels and restaurants in between, I would surely meet somebody who knew me, who remembered what a good man I used to be, who did not especially despise me -- who would use his influence to get me job tending bar somewhere.

I would plead with him shamelessly, and rub his nose in my Doctor of Mixology degree.

(P. 68.)

However much he fixes on the comfort of a projected dream, Starbuck is forced to conclude that there are no nirvanas; and his success in surmounting the obstacle of that knowledge is evident not only in the
tranquillity of his recollection, but also in his readiness to dismiss his dreams and focus a vigilant eye on the possibilities of the worst kind. At the time of writing his narrative, he is due to begin another prison term as a septuagenarian for having concealed Mary Kathleen's will after her death. Without the false consolation of a bartending dream, he prepares himself for the same fate he hid from upon his first release from prison:

I singlehandedly extended the life of RAMJAC by two years and a little more. If I had not concealed the will of Mary Kathleen, those at the party would have never become vice-presidents of RAMJAC. I myself would have been thrown out on my ear -- to become what I expect to be anyway, if I survive my new prison term, which is a shopping-bag man.

(p. 228.)

Starbuck shows that the task of looking into the eyes of fate may be lightened by the temporary adoption of a time or distance factor, but he also shows that such an adoption must only come after the effort of shedding the extraneous and facing the real. As he sits in prison he recollects himself as a man of many façades: he had been wealthy, a distinguished graduate, a patriot, a radical, an unwitting turncoat, a husband, a father, in love, out of love, a free man, a jailbird -- he was in fact without consistency of character or psychology, an open field of human potential. He is finally made to confront himself with all the façades and partial façades stripped away, as he does when facing his own crippled mirror image in prison. Necessarily having to begin life anew, he performs what he calls 'the most obscenely intimate physical act of my life': he views himself in the mirror as he really is, 'a broken, querulous little old man', with no trappings but his civilian clothes:

Here is who I saw reflected: a scrawny old janitor of Slavic extraction. He was unused to wearing a suit and tie. His shirt collar was much too large for him, and so was his suit, which fit him like a circus tent. He looked
unhappy -- on his way to a relative's funeral, perhaps.
At no point was there any harmony between himself and the suit. He may have found his clothes in a rich man's ash can.

Peace.
(pp. 89-90.)

The little flag of acceptance -- 'peace' -- is hard come by, and the reader is justified in asking how effective and settling it really is to Starbuck. It is an attempt on his part to adopt what Raymond Olderman calls the 'cosmic cool', an artificial state of mind which one charges into oneself periodically. Olderman has assigned the great effort of attaining the 'cosmic cool' to other Vonnegut characters, noting that without it we commit personal suicide like Howard W. Campbell, Jr, in Mother Night, public suicide like the cataclysm at the end of Cat's Cradle, spiritual suicide like Billy Pilgrim in Slaughterhouse-Five, or we tear out our guts with the extraordinary efforts of learning to care, as Eliot Rosewater does in God Bless You, Mr Rosewater.

(Raymond Olderman, Beyond the Wasteland (London, 1972), p. 200.)

The primary comic voice in Jailbird comes from Starbuck's ability to comment on the most horrible matters with seeming placid objectivity; yet equally crucial to both the comic and tragic effect, as well as the book's premise, is the fact that he cannot ever fully hide his suffering. It is not his attainment of the 'cosmic cool' that demands our attention, but rather his monumental effort, and uncertain success, in attaining it. For even at the close of the narrative, when he views impending doom with seeming tranquillity, one is obliged to ask whether the tranquillity is another façade. Vonnegut suggests that in a man of conscience the tranquillity cannot run very deep, however much his instinct for survival and natural abhorrence of pain leads him to search for it. Starbuck in fact shows his contempt for the man who goes so far beyond tranquillity as to become blind to the ills of reality, saying of fellow jailbird Emil
Larkin, the born-again Nixon hatchetman, 'He had so opened himself to the consolations of religion that he had become an imbecile' (p. 63). Like Billy Pilgrim, Starbuck is aware that he cannot change 'the past, the present, and the future', but neither is he so detached as to be unmoved by them. In presenting the Passion of Walter Starbuck with the same resolve as Starbuck in presenting the Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti, Vonnegut pays due attention to the sufferings of his subject, showing that they remain in spite of all the rationalizations and protestations of serenity.

In both Slaughterhouse-Five and Breakfast of Champions Vonnegut linked the illusion of complacent tranquillity to Famous Last Words, assigning its catch phrases to epitaphs on tombstones. He does the same in Jailbird, presenting Starbuck in a dialogue with his prison guard just prior to his release:

> And Clyde said to me, 'Maybe I ain't supposed to say this, but that son of yours ought to be shot for not coming down after his daddy'.
> 'It's all right', I said.
> 'That's what you say about everything', Clyde complained. 'No matter what it is, you say "It's all right"'.
> 'It usually is', I said.
> 'Them was the last words of Caryl Chessman', he said. 'I guess they'll be your last words, too'.
> (p. 75.)

And in his own heart, Starbuck is forced to agree that these indeed were the last words of a man exterminated under circumstances which were clearly not 'all right'. In spite of his efforts at acceptance, Starbuck is doomed to suffer; he is a ruined man, desolate, fighting to retain his sanity. Instinct may force him to adapt to his situation, but one is never convinced of his spirit of acceptance. There is no indication that he is at home with the fact of his being both the victim and unwitting agent of his own misfortune. Saddled with his own ineptness, he suggests
that nothing has assuaged the pain of being despised by his son because of it, in spite of years of having adapted to it:

I set fire to eleven hundred dollars' worth of blue velvet draperies one time. No wonder my son never respected me.

When did he ever have a chance to?

My God -- there his mother was, trying to support the family and scrimping and saving to get by. And there his unemployed father was, always in the way and helpless, and finally setting fire to a fortune in draperies with a cigarette!

Hooray for a Harvard education! Oh, to be the proud son of a Harvard man!

(pp. 50-51.)

Neither is Starbuck fully immune to the consequences of the innocent blunder that sent Leland Clewes to prison. His suffering because of it is real and poignant, not only on Clewes's behalf but also on his own. Faced with intense ostracization after his inadvertent ruining of Clewes, he is subjected to the abuse of former friends, causing an undiminished pain that qualifies him for his own Passion:

I passed the Century Association of West Forty-third Street, a gentlemen's club where, shortly after the Second World War, I had once been the luncheon guest of Peter Gibney, the composer, a Harvard classmate of mine. I was never invited back. I would have given anything now to be a bartender in there, but Gibney was still alive and probably still a member. We had a falling out, you might say, after I testified against Leland Clewes. Gibney sent me a picture postcard, so that my wife and the postman could read the message, too.

'Dear Shithead', it said, 'why don't you crawl back under a damp rock somewhere?' The picture was of the Mona Lisa, with that strange smile of hers.

(pp. 136-37.)

Not only does Starbuck lose his self-respect, job, friends, and son due to one unforeseen blunder, but his Passion is intensified by the knowledge that more blunders must be forthcoming; it is inevitable, due to his overall inability to see a full picture of life and truth. He is bound to make mistakes with the most dire consequences, if not for others.
then for himself. Due to one mistake, his friend goes to prison; due to a refusal to repeat that mistake, he himself goes to prison. His great blunder, and the source of his ostracism, was that he told what he had thought was the truth, namely that Clewes, a promising New Dealer, had proved himself a patriot during World War Two in spite of Communist leanings. As Starbuck is informed in an abusive tirade from an irate Roosevelt protege:

"You told a fragmentary truth ... which has now been allowed to represent the whole! "Educated and compassionate public servants are almost certainly Russian spies". That's all you are going to hear from the semi-literate old-time crooks and spellbinders who want the government back, who think it's rightly theirs. Without the symbiotic idiocies of you and Leland Clewes they could never have made the connection between treason and pity and brains. Now get out of my sight!"

"Sir", I said. I would have fled if I could, but I was paralysed.

"You are yet another nincompoop who, by being at the wrong place at the wrong time", he said, "was able to set humanitarianism back a full century! Begone!"

Strong stuff.

(p. 98.)

Thus as Starbuck is so rudely advised, even what one thinks of as true can never be certainly considered as the Whole Truth. As an embodiment of all victims of multiple verities, Starbuck demonstrates the inability to accurately tell the truth, resulting in a permanent, potentially crippling insecurity. His situation is representative of the general condition of chaos engulfing humanity, an apocalypse of uncertainty through which survival depends as much upon luck as upon vigilance. Starbuck faces the enigma of multiple truths in settings equally as deplorable as those in *Mother Night* or *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as he strives against the prevailing will of cosmic indifference and illogic. After a life of inexplicable comic and tragic reversals, he attempts in retrospect to view life from a variety of viewpoints. His conceptions of justice, God, himself, the value of knowledge, and culture
are all placed in variously contrasting stances, any one seemingly as valid or invalid as another. It is a brave, dogged attempt on the part of Starbuck, an old man doddering across a battleground on which contradictory truths clamour for position. The question of fallible viewpoint is revealed in one instance as Starbuck explains about an innocuous cigarette burn on his trousers:

A newspaper photograph was taken of me as I sat in the back of the federal marshal's green sedan, right after I was sentenced to prison. It was widely interpreted as showing how ashamed I was, haggard, horrified, unable to look anyone in the eye. It was in fact a photograph of a man who had just set his pants on fire.

(p. 42.)

This exemplifies a comic tone running throughout the book, with a punchline containing the essence of the entire passage's inference that what one sees is not necessarily what is. All impressions and versions are suspect, Vonnegut suggests, because as far as he or anybody can tell, they are the products of helplessly limited viewpoints. Thus does he present Jailbird as a modern tragi-comedy of errors, giving Starbuck as an example of the necessary struggle for resilience and adaptation. The prevailing conditions determine that the struggle cannot amount to a voluntary donning of blinders or an easy grab at nirvana or tranquillity. Thus on the one hand does Starbuck engage in rationalization, as when discussing his dog:

I observe how profoundly serious Nature has made her about a rubber ice-cream cone -- brown rubber cone, pink rubber ice-cream. I have to wonder what equally ridiculous commitments to bits of trash I myself have made. Not that it matters at all. We are here for no purpose, unless we can invent one. Of that I am sure. The human condition in an exploding universe would not have been altered one iota if, rather than live as I have, I had done nothing but carry a rubber ice-cream cone from closet to closet for sixty years.

(p. 232.)
Yet on the other hand, for all his rationalizations, flags of "peace" and "fair is fair", and viewings of life as a dream, Starbuck finds himself seriously debilitated by the traumas of adapting to chaos and uncertain fortune. As though tied to the tail of a runaway stallion, he attempts to negotiate his changes of direction, the ups and downs of personal and public history—until at one point he is forced to confess, "Sacco and Vanzetti never lost their dignity — never cracked up. Walter F. Starbuck finally did" (p. 187). Hence an evening of very bizarre behaviour in a padded cell. As in the case of Billy Pilgrim, his quest for solace and pretensions of serenity do not ward off breakdown and madness, however temporary.

* * *

Like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Jailbird* is very much concerned with time as a means of both escaping reality and eventually facing it. As it has been seen, Starbuck's recounting of the American past is enlivened with the powerful human dimension of incredulity. As an old man reviewing the sweep of his American life, he is met with pain and betrayal rather than a sweet patriotic nostalgia. Wrongly imprisoned for a crime ostensibly committed in the name of America, his escape into the recesses of his memory is halted by recollections of other American crimes, some of which he had benefitted from. The source of his fortune at the hands of McCone is tainted by murder, rioting, and the exploitation of the American worker. His revered alma mater, Harvard, is not only America's highest seat of learning, but debased as the seat of American duplicity and corruption. Solely because he was a Harvard man, Starbuck profits at Nuremberg by the black-market operations of other Harvard men, and later winds up sharing prison facilities with shoals of formerly distinguished Harvard men. And to his permanent chagrin, he must admit that Harvard
committee members put the final stamp of civilian approval on the
decision to execute Sacco and Vanzetti. In the end, Starbuck's voyages
to the American past reveal little with which the national conscience can
be soothed.

Again, the public memory is mirrored by the private: at the lowest
point of his personal fortune, Starbuck looks to the past for a
comforting recollection of his private life -- and, in the Vonnegut
tradition, he finds his comfort undermined. Fresh out of prison, old and
nearly penniless, he returns to a New York hotel in a moment of
reminiscence, recalling it as the site of one of his few youthful
romantic encounters. He remembers how McCone had loaded him with a
bankroll -- in the midst of the Depression -- ordering him to have a good
time with the girl of his dreams, Sarah Wyatt, at the then posh hotel
restaurant. Starbuck remembers that evening as a journey through time,
for as a youth peering through the windows into the nearly deserted,
ornate dining room, he had seen a ghostly vision of former prosperity: 'I
might have been peering into the twinkling prisms of a time machine' (p.
122). But old Starbuck's recollection becomes a nightmarish
confrontation with truth, as he is forced to recall another
characteristic blunder occurring that evening, again with dire personal
consequences: 'Never have I been loathed so much' (p. 127). He had
accidentally over-tipped a Gypsy violinist with a twenty-dollar bill,
utterly offending Sarah with the impression that he wanted to impress
her, with money so scarce. The evening had turned into a disaster, with
Sarah demanding to be taken home:

This was the lowest point in my life, possibly. I felt
worse then than I did when I was put in prison -- worse,
even, than when I was turned loose again. I may have felt
worse then, even, than when I set fire to the drapes my
wife was about to deliver to a client in Chevy Chase.
(p. 127.)
Crying all the way home, young Starbuck had found himself stripped of all façade, much as he was to do in front of the prison mirror four decades later. Old Starbuck recalls how, even then, he was forced to admit the reality of his own being:

I told her brokenly in the taxicab that nothing about the evening had been my idea, that I was a robot invented and controlled by Alexander Hamilton McCone. I confessed to being half-Polish and half-Lithuanian and nothing but a chauffeur's son who had been ordered to put on the clothing and airs of a gentleman. I said I wasn't going back to Harvard, and that I wasn't sure I wanted to live anymore. (p. 127.)

Thus is Starbuck forced to admit through his own escape into the past that there is no escape; his reminiscence draws him to the most painful confrontation of his life. Moreover, his grab at nostalgia only serves to heighten the brutality of the present, as he returns to the hotel where waiters had once told Sarah and him, 'Bon appetit.' He finds it reduced to a 'catch-as-catch-can lazaret and bagnio one minute from Times Square' (p. 110). Nothing can prepare him for the blow he receives upon asking the hotel attendant what has replaced the elegant French restaurant:

His reply, which he himself considered a bland statement of fact, fell so harshly on my ears that he might as well have slapped me hard in the face. He said this: 'Fist-fucking films.' I had never heard of such things. I gropingly asked what they were.

It woke him up a little, that I should be so surprised and appalled. He was sorry, as he would tell me later, to have brought a sweet little old man such ghastly news....

So he explained slowly and patiently, and most reluctantly, that there was a motion-picture theatre where the restaurant used to be. It specialized in films of male homosexual acts of love, and that their climaxes commonly consisted of one actor's thrusting his fist up the fundament of another actor.

I was speechless. Never had I dreamed that the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America and the enchanting technology of the motion picture camera would be combined to form such an
atrocity....
I passed the brutal wall where the French doors had been
— on my way to the elevator. I paused there for a
moment. My lips mouthed something that I myself did not
understand for a moment. And then I realized what my lips
must have said, what they had to say.
It was this, of course: 'Bon appetit'.
(pp. 130-31.)

Starbuck's journeys through time, then, not only reveal the
harshness of the past, but they also draw him back to, and magnify, the
harshness of the present, both public and private. He is prepared to
admit to the seductiveness of time, but at the point of his writing he no
longer harbours expectations of effective solace through it. He knows
what he will find: painful reminders. There are few recollections in his
narrative that do not have the potential of torturing him psychologically
and emotionally; and even among his few harmless recollections lies
Vonnegut's own dismissal of the ultimate comforts of time -- especially
as it involves humour.

* * *

Time and humour are entwined most notably in Starbuck's
recollections of Sarah Wyatt, which reveal Vonnegut's contention that
humour, like nostalgia, can only be a temporary diversion, impotent in
fully removing the pain that inspires it. By thus calling attention to
his own limitations as a comedian, he again suggests that comic relief,
like that in time, may be temporarily beneficial, but permanently and
ultimately self-deceptive and unhelpful. Starbuck remembers how Sarah
sought to alleviate the suffering she witnessed and felt as a nurse,
admitting her humour to be the stop-gap it can only be:

What tender memories do I have of Sarah? Much talk
about human suffering and what could be done about it --
and then infantile silliness for relief. We collected
jokes for each other, to use when it was time for relief.
We became addicted to talking to each other on the
telephone for hours. Those talks were the most agreeable narcotic I have ever known. If there was a long silence, one or the other of us would end it with the start of a joke.

'What is the difference between an enzyme and a hormone?' she might ask me.

'I don't know', I would say.

'You can't hear an enzyme', she would say, and the silly jokes would go on and on -- even though she had probably seen something horrible at the hospital that day.

(pp. 144-45.)

As Starbuck sits in the penthouse of Arpad Leen, having spent the night in a padded cell, and with the unbearable weight of inexplicable good and ill fortune pressing on him, he is deservedly relieved to find himself on the phone again with Sarah Wyatt, now Sarah Clewes. He finds momentary bliss in the telling of jokes as in the old days, but is in retrospect, at least, fully aware of it as escapism: 'the telephone became a time machine for me. It allowed me to escape from Nineteen-hundred and Seventy-seven and into the fourth dimension' (p. 203). In spite of his having been in 'such an ecstasy of timelessness and placelessness' while running through four pages of a straight man - funny man routine with Sarah, he responsibly admits:

She, too, had reason to escape into the fourth dimension. As I would find out later, her patient had died that night. Sarah had liked her a lot. The patient was only thirty-six, but she had a congenitally defective heart....

(pp. 203-04.)

Sarah is aware that she will have to return to work the next day, just as Starbuck must be prepared for more unforeseen changes of fortune. In the end, Vonnegut infers, salvation cannot be found in the misty realm of the Fourth Dimension, with its dreams, time warps, and laughter; one must look elsewhere for it, if it is to be found at all. This is one warning he gives in his role as a canary in a coal mine; but in Jailbird he suggests that even warning is not enough, that there must be effective
alternatives at the disposal of mankind.

Here, as in his other books, the alternatives given are markedly few in number, yet lie within the capabilities of all responsible human beings. Vonnegut is in fact willing to give due credit to awareness, but only inasmuch as through it the worthwhile can be isolated from the meaningless, to be grasped and put into action if at all possible -- a tall enough order in itself, but a necessary one. As he calls for the awareness of human potential, he calls for the awareness of human limitations; and with his warning thus couched, he calls for action; awareness is not enough, just as laughter, dreams, warnings, and art are not enough. The alternatives often seem modest, but as John May notes, Vonnegut's tendency to so severely limit the humanly possible is in fact 'a plea to the reader to avoid the destructively quixotic'. May refers to William Lynch's *Images and Hope* in saying that 'genuine hope depends precisely on our capacity to limit realistically the imagined future'.

* * *

The modest alternative that Vonnegut gives in *Jailbird* is that of simple courtesy, something in our power, that justifies humanitarian service of even the most seemingly inconsequential kind. He places such importance on courtesy and the recognition of its possibilities that in the prologue of *Jailbird* he sees fit to quote and endorse a letter from a young boy, in spite of its almost recklessly sweeping analysis:

> John Figler is a law-abiding high-school student. He says in his letter that he has read almost everything of mine and is now prepared to state the single idea that lies at the core of my life's work so far. The words are his: 'Love may fail, but courtesy will prevail.' This seems true to me -- and complete. So I am now in the abashed condition, five days after my fifty-sixth birthday, of realizing that I needn't have bothered to write several books. A seven-word telegram would have done the job.
Vonnegut's books suggest that courtesy includes not only a refusal to drop bombs on people, or to cheat them or poison their lives with lies, malicious hypocrisy, and evil deeds, but also the simple willingness to extend oneself on the behalf of others. He goes so far as to admit that such decent behaviour may even be artificial, dishonest, or calculated, but the implication is that we will establish our worth by helping others to establish theirs, and that while we may be deceiving others with our kindnesses, we are in turn gratefully deceived by those of others. Vonnegut admits to no harm in such dishonesty; as he says in *Cat's Cradle*, 'Live by the foma that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy'. In a small footnote, 'foma' are described as 'harmless untruths'. In *Jailbird*, as in other books, he suggests that these kindly acts of deception are more honourable than the self-absorption into a theoretical religious piety, as in the example of Emil Larkin. Crippled in both legs with housemaid's knee from kneeling on hard prison floors, praying 'all day long to what he believed to be Jesus Christ' (p. 63), Larkin is an example of a man sunk totally into useless, self-righteous self-deception. Contrasting with him is the anonymous waitress Starbuck meets at dawn in a New York coffee shop. The kindness that so overwhelms him there is the one barrier between himself and utter despair:

It was as though I had died and gone to heaven! A waitress said to me, 'Honeybunch, you sit right down and I'll bring you your coffee right away'. I hadn't said anything to her.

So I did sit down, and everywhere I looked I saw customers of every description being received with love. To the waitress everybody was 'honeybunch' and 'darling' and 'dear'. It was like an emergency ward after a great catastrophe. It did not matter what race or class the victims belonged to. They were all given the same miracle drug, which was coffee. The catastrophe, of course, was
that the sun had come up again.... I had the feeling that if Frankenstein's monster crashed into the coffee shop through a brick wall, all anybody would say to him was, 'You sit down here, Lambchop, and I'll bring you your coffee right away'. (pp. 137-38.)

Throughout the novel it is courtesy that gives the characters reasons for hope or rejoicing. Starbuck's humanity towards Mary Kathleen brings him inconceivable fortune from her unknown alter-ego. Her last words to Starbuck reveal her awareness of his kindness as deception, yet she condones it and rewards it all the same, saying, "You couldn't help it that you were born without a heart. At least you tried to believe what the people with hearts believed -- so you were a good man just the same" (p. 218). Similarly, the six of Starbuck's friends and acquaintances who receive lucrative positions at RAMJAC do so simply because they had shown him small kindnesses and courtesy when he was down and out; and it is inferred that he will depend on the same courtesy he showed Mary Kathleen as he projects himself as a shopping-bag man upon his second release from prison. Simple courtesy prevails even over the grandest dreams of Mary Kathleen, whose hope of returning the wealth of RAMJAC to the American people crumbles into a quixotic, bureaucratic failure. In the end, all anybody has to be proud of and thankful for are acts of courtesy, kindness, and humanity.

Thus does Vonnegut show not only in *Jailbird* but all his books the necessity of walking a straight line between complacency and overreaction, between the selfish retreat into art, time, laughter, or nirvana, and self-destruction through the hopelessly quixotic. As his characters show, it is not an easy task to maintain balance along this tightrope, to constantly lose and regain one's equilibrium. It is a task
Vonnegut carries out as a writer juggling with the trappings of two potentially mutually exclusive roles, the canary at warning and the comedian at play. He wrote in the introduction to *Welcome to the Monkey House*, 'And I realize now that the two main themes of my novels were stated by my siblings: "Here I am cleaning shit off of everything" and "No pain".' The first was stated by a brother who had just brought home a newborn son, and the second by a sister about to die of cancer. These are the parameters within which Vonnegut attempts to operate as a socially motivated writer and comedian, and within which he suggests all people attempt to operate as responsible human beings. His themes reveal that from birth to death human responsibility lies in being sensitive and compassionate enough to recognize the crises outside ourselves and to alleviate what we can, while not turning them into crises within us.
Notes, Chapter IV


4. Joe David Bellamy, 'Kurt Vonnegut for President', in The Vonnegut Statement, edited by Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (St Albans, 1975), 77-93 (p. 85).


22. Palm Sunday, pp. xv, xvi.

24. Klinkowitz, 'Why They Read Vonnegut', in *The Vonnegut Statement*, 27-38 (p. 27).
27. *Palm Sunday*, p. 103.
36. Meeter, p. 201.
38. Meeter, p. 199.
42. *Palm Sunday*, p. 114.
43. *Palm Sunday*, p. 182.
44. Scholes, 'A Talk With Kurt Vonnegut, Jr', pp. 102, 109-10.
53. Vonnegut, Palm Sunday, p. 177.
54. Vonnegut, Palm Sunday, p. 189.
56. Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 9.
57. Bellamy, 'Kurt Vonnegut for President', p. 77.
59. Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 11.
60. Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 10.
63. Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons, p. 281.
64. Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 22.
70. Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 6.
71. Vonnegut, Welcome to the Monkey House (St Albans, 1979), p. 11.
CONCLUSION

The attempt of this thesis has been to establish three American artists, in their simultaneous roles as comedians and social critics, as confidence men -- creators and manipulators of illusion and belief. Their goal has been to unite pain, in the form of warning and criticism, with pleasure, in the form of entertainment and laughter. As comedians, they have been obliged to effect this unification by convincing their audience of their sense of play; this is their confidence game. In employing trickery to unite pain and pleasure, they have followed in the traditions of the earliest comic figures, the Trickster and his classical, European, and American descendants.

The deceptive comic response is particularly suited to the demands of the American culture, which has so depended historically on the exchange of confidence, for good or ill. The careers of Mark Twain, Lenny Bruce, and Kurt Vonnegut reveal implications not only for the artist in a confidence culture, but also for the society that gave birth to, and is born of, that culture. One is forced to ask what is lost as well as gained through the demands of a society that turns artists and social critics into confidence men; for although Duyckinck could exalt the trust revealed in a confidence culture when declaring, 'It is a good thing, and speaks well for human nature, that ... men can be swindled', one must question whether it is good that men demand to be swindled. For in doing so, they not only shed light on the fragility of their own psyches, they also place extraordinary demands on those who would serve them by awakening them.

The careers of Mark Twain, Lenny Bruce, and Kurt Vonnegut reveal the extent to which the public they serve can be outraged and shaken by well-meant criticism and warning. The inability to withstand criticism may
pervade all human nature to some degree, but the inability seems most apparent when humans are insecure. At these times they demand most fervently that confidence men be convincing, as the course of American history has shown from the first protestation of faith in New England to the outrage of the public over Watergate. One must ask what are the implications for a society that demands the success of confidence games; to what abuses of confidence are they vulnerable, and to what realities are they blinded through their voluntary dependence on illusion? Plato's Republic asks these questions, as do Melville's The Confidence-Man and Mark Twain's Pudd'nhed Wilson. As the latter two books reveal, the questions can indeed be asked, though the answers may be painful -- if they can be found at all.

Artistically, the demands of the confidence culture have produced some of the most convincing, beautiful, and comforting illusions ever conjured up by man. Among them are those created by comedians who through them deceive humans into laughing over the otherwise unbearable ills of reality. Kurt Vonnegut once described the benefits of those illusions:

Culturally, American men aren't supposed to cry. So I don't cry much -- but I do laugh a lot. When I think about a stupid, uneducated black junkie in this city, and then I run into some optimist who feels that any man can lift himself above his origins if he's any good -- that's something to cry or laugh about. A sort of braying, donkeylike laugh. But every laugh counts, because every laugh feels like a laugh.

(Vonnegut, Wampeters, Foma, and Granfaloon, p. 258.)

As Vonnegut warns, there is danger for the society whose quest for the comforting illusion blinds them to the real. There is also danger for the artist who would provide both the illusion and a glimpse at the real; he is obliged to become a master confidence man. The demands on him are then extraordinary; hence the torture of Samuel Clemens in
maintaining the illusion of Mark Twain in the face of his own despair. Hence the tragedy of Lenny Bruce, who so misjudged the receptivity of his society that he thought he might drop the confidence game and be frank with them; one might ask whether his honesty -- his refusal to be a con man -- brought him to the point of artistic and physical destruction. One might also ask what price Kurt Vonnegut pays in being such a master of deception, having to adopt so many disguises and stances that the whole of him seems to shatter into schism. One might ask how necessary was Vonnegut's promise that he was beyond suicide.

Sam Slick declared, 'IT IS GOOD TO BE SHIFTY IN A NEW COUNTRY'. The demands placed on Mark Twain, Lenny Bruce, and Kurt Vonnegut reveal that it is not only good to be shifty, but necessary -- even in a country no longer new. Their careers echo the revelations of Melville's Confidence-Man, that incipient danger lurks behind manipulations of confidence, but that such a condition is seemingly inescapable. The nature of this social condition is thus as paradoxical as the unification of pain and pleasure in comedy.
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