



Assumption
University

Digital Commons @ Assumption University

Political Science Department Faculty Works

Political Science Department

2007

"We should see certain things yet, let us hope and believe": Technology, Sex, and Politics in Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*

Bernard J. Dobski
Assumption College, bdobski@assumption.edu

Benjamin A. Kleinerman
James Madison College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/political-science-faculty>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dobski, B. J.; and Kleinerman, B. A. (2007). "We should see certain things yet, let us hope and believe": Technology, Sex, and Politics in Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*. *The Review of Politics* 69(4): 599-624. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670507000976>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science Department at Digital Commons @ Assumption University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Department Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Assumption University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@assumption.edu.

“We should see certain things yet, let us hope and believe”: Technology, Sex, and Politics in Mark Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee*

Bernard J. Dobski, Jr. and Benjamin A. Kleinerman

Abstract: Through his modern “Yankee,” Mark Twain reveals to his readers the underlying desire to overcome the very material world he seems to want to instantiate. Although the Yankee seems a modern man who simply wants to create the conditions in Arthurian England by which his body will be most comfortable, both his zeal for this project and the trajectory of his soul’s course during the book betray an underlying hope to overcome his “mortal coil” through first technological and then political projects. In charting the impetus and evolution of the Yankee’s psychology for us, Twain teaches us much about the nature of the “modern project”—its underlying hopes and its potential for dangerous, even totalitarian, excesses. As appealing as the starkly contrasting Arthurians might be, given this insight, Twain does not ultimately endorse this position but shows that its explicit claim does not ultimately satisfy our desire for noninstrumental goods.

At the highest level, literature promises to political scientists the same thing for our understanding of politics as political philosophy. It promises to reveal not just *what* people do politically, but *why* they do what they do—the underlying motivations for their political opinions and their corresponding political actions. Although political science can, of course, speculate about such motivations, literature promises to show us what we might only really know through experience. Even political philosophy, insofar as it does not use the literary form, can only tell us from the outside, as it were, the underlying motivations for human behavior. So, for instance, Eric Voegelin and Raymond Aron have both argued that the massive violence of the twentieth century became possible in modernity because, at the bottom of modern philosophy and its politics, is an inversion of the Christian impulse. Where the Christian impulse sought salvation in the next world, this new inverted impulse seeks its salvation through this-worldly actualization—an achievement whose fundamental goodness is of such importance as to permit any and all means. Killing millions becomes acceptable if such deaths promise a this-worldly utopia that delivers salvation. But, as powerful as such an explanation might be of the motivations of modernity, we cannot *know* its truth unless we see it from the inside—see the power of the desire for this-worldly salvation playing itself out in the soul of an eminently modern

man such as the Connecticut Yankee, Hank Morgan.¹ Twain's novel reveals much of the same underlying motivation for the modern project as Aron and Voegelin document but does so in a manner such that his own modern readers can, by viewing and experiencing the Yankee's hopes, also see them in themselves.²

Through an examination of the hopes that fuel the Yankee's politics, we will first attempt to show the paradoxical character of the modern political project. Twain's presentation of the Yankee suggests that, although the modern project seems to aim to achieve only earthly comforts that make us feel fully at home in the world, its truer, although subconscious, aim is to overcome the very comforts to which it seems so dedicated. In other words, Twain's art reveals that the modern effort to undermine religion and to reduce man's horizon to the achievement of mere material comforts in this world ultimately stems from, but cannot satisfy, our desire to give to our bodies a truly permanent piece of, to use the Yankee's word, "clothing." That is, the Yankee's interest in material comforts stems from a desire to find a true permanence that material comforts can actually never deliver. Although the Yankee might find tremendously comfortable clothes, even the most comfortable clothes

¹For a similar statement of the benefits of studying literature for political scientists, see Catherine Zuckert, "Why Political Scientists Want to Study Literature," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28 (2):189–90 (1995).

²All references to *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* are from the Signet Classic edition with an "Afterword" by Edmund Reiss, published by Harper & Row. While Twain's literary genius has long been a source of study, his contributions to contemporary political philosophy have too rarely been appreciated. The most prominent exceptions to this are "'And In Its Wake We Followed': The Political Wisdom of Mark Twain" by Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *Interpretation* (Summer 1972): 59–93; a section entitled 'Connecticut Yankee: The Problem of Commercial Progress' (443–50) in the chapter "Mark Twain on the American Character" by David Foster in *History of American Political Thought*, ed. Bryan-Paul Frost and Jeffrey Sikkenga, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2003); Paul Cantor's "Yankee Go Home: Twain's Postcolonial Romance," in *Democracy's Literature: Politics and Fiction in America*, ed. Patrick J. Deneen and Joseph Romance (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005); and Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Poetry, Politics, and the Comic Spirit." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28 (2): 197–200 (1995). This paper differs from each of these studies by its particular focus on Twain's treatment of piety and the issue of divine right. Catherine and Michael Zuckert's early work proved especially fruitful. It provides a comprehensive treatment of the novel as a whole and has thus served as inspiration for many—including us—who treat Twain as a political philosopher. We contend, however, that their treatment of religion and divine right tends to get submerged. Subsequently, they do not draw out as clearly as we think they could the relationship between the Yankee's political character and the work's intent as laid out in the preface. For a defense of reading the novel as a work of political philosophy, see Deneen and Romance's introduction to *Democracy's Literature*.

cannot protect us from decay and death. So, the Yankee pursues his project to transform the Arthurian world into something much more like the technological nineteenth century with a zeal that, Twain implies, arises from his interest in overcoming the material world he aims to create. This underlying hope explains the Yankee's otherwise puzzling transformation over the course of the novel, something most scholars have, heretofore, attributed to Twain's inconsistency.³ The hope to overcome his "mortal coil" explains his transformation from a seemingly purely materialistic man seeking to maximize his bodily comfort, to his dedication to the national body with its promise of everlasting protection through participation in its immortality, to his dedication to his family and its promise of immortality through the production of a new body (his daughter, "Hello-Central"). At each stage, his subconscious hopes shape the content of his politics, and ultimately not only permit but encourage the violent holocaust with which the book concludes.

Appreciating the subconscious longings that shape the Yankee's politics, the reader might be tempted to conclude that Twain embraces the alternative position sketched throughout the novel, the fervent Christianity of the Arthurians. Although they do seem to possess what the Yankee does not, self-sufficiency and self-mastery, we argue that Twain does not simply embrace them as an alternative. Their religion points beyond itself: it ultimately cannot satisfy the very hopes that would have motivated the embrace of it. Where the Yankee's modern materialism focuses almost exclusively on the body and attempts to ignore the soul, the religion of the Arthurians focuses almost exclusively on the soul and attempts to ignore the body. In the first case, the needs of the ignored soul emerge in a radical politics that seeks permanence through a utopian transformation of the nation. In the second case, the needs of the ignored body emerge in either cruel policies, such as *prima nocta*, or in sexual politics, such as the destruction of the Arthurian world by the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere. Theoretically, the Arthurians' position also collapses as its trajectory leads to something either superhuman or subhuman. The neediness of the human condition causes the Arthurians to turn to a religion that sees the living world as a "vale of tears" and seems to allow them to transcend all such needs. We suggest that, just as the Yankee's exclusive focus on the body fails to satisfy his soul, the Arthurians' exclusive focus on the soul also fails to satisfy the soul—insofar as the ignored bodily urges, such as sex, express or indicate a deeper erotic or soul-desire. As the Yankee's own turn toward immortality offered by having had a child indicates—even as it seems to be a "mere" bodily need—the desire for sex stems from a deeper longing for bodily permanence. Twain wants to show us finally the very real limits on the human condition

³See, for example, Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress: Political and Economic Ideas in "A Connecticut Yankee"* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964).

and the insufficiency of any attempt to overcome them. Twain leads his readers to a sober awareness of these limits, an awareness in which we focus closely on the character of the human condition that gives rise to our very hopes to overcome it. In other words, we must learn to stop ignoring or attempting to overcome the strange mix of mortal body and soul that we are, and instead focus on, thus freeing ourselves from, the wide array of hopes that our strange condition creates. To state it is as clearly as possible: Twain does not endorse one kind of response to our bodily and spiritual needs over and against any other. Rather he tries to show us the mistake in thinking that we can fully escape or satisfy (and thus be done with) the needs of our bodies and souls if we only find the right technical or spiritual approach to them. Because such needs constitute a permanent part of the human condition, we must learn to live with them. By becoming aware of the hopes to which our needs give rise, we discover those hidden springs of political action that remain otherwise concealed. In doing so, we achieve sober wisdom, characterized by both self-understanding and political moderation.

The Preface: The Mocked-At Mocking Believers in Progress and the Problem of Divine Right

Our approach to *Connecticut Yankee* diverges from most scholarly efforts of the last century, which read the novel either as a satire of medieval chivalry (and thus a shot across the bow of contemporary England)⁴ or as a revision of American beliefs in the unqualified goodness of science and technological progress.⁵ Because the novel offers clear support for both positions, proponents of each side are forced to resort to Twain's external comments about

⁴See Bernard DeVoto's *Mark Twain's America* (Boston, 1932); John B. Hoben's "Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee*: A Genetic Study," *American Literature* 18 (Nov. 1946): 197–218; Louis Budd's *Mark Twain, Social Philosopher* (Bloomington, IN, 1962); Howard Baetzhold's "The Course of Composition of *A Connecticut Yankee*," *American Literature* 33, (Jan. 1961) and *Mark Twain and John Bull* (Bloomington, IN, 1970). For a more moderate view of the Yankee's criticism of England, see Everett Carter's "The Meaning of *A Connecticut Yankee*," *American Literature* 50 (1978): 418–40. Cantor in "Yankee Go Home" reads the work as a screed about British colonialism.

⁵See Alan Guttman's "Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*: Affirmation of the Vernacular Tradition?" *New England Quarterly* 33 (June 1960): 232–37; Henry Nash Smith *Mark Twain, the Development of a Writer* (Cambridge, MA, 1962) and *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1964); James M. Cox "A *Connecticut Yankee* in King Arthur's Court: The Machinery of Self-Preservation," *Yale Review* 50 (1960): 89–102; and Kenneth Lynn's *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (Boston, 1959). For a nonpolitical scientist who adopts a reading similar to ours, see Gladys Bellamy's *Mark Twain as a Literary Artist* (Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press, 1950).

the novel either to support their view or to explain away contrary evidence. Twain's external writing, however, offers no clear or consistent position on the novel.⁶ For instance, many scholars who claim Twain intends a satire and criticism of medieval England and its contemporary counterpart cite a passage from Twain's autobiography. There, Twain writes: "I think I was purposing to contrast that English life, not just the English life of Arthur's day but the English life of the whole of the Middle Ages, with the life of modern Christendom and modern civilization—to the advantage of the latter, of course." But, almost immediately after this passage, Twain discusses the current King of Belgium: "It is curious that the most advanced and most enlightened century of all the centuries the sun has looked upon should have the ghastly distinction of having produced this moldy and piety-mouthing hypocrite, this bloody monster whose mate is *not findable in human history anywhere*."⁷ After Twain claims that he will, "of course," show the superiority of modern civilization to earlier ages, he introduces a modern tyrant worse than any tyrant that might have been seen in those earlier ages. In doing so, he introduces the possibility that such tyranny is a product of modern civilization itself, thus casting into doubt his earlier claim that it is clearly superior.

Such a passage indicates the problem of depending too much on Twain's external commentary given his own claim that he exposes "to the world only my trimmed and perfumed and carefully barbered public opinions" and conceals "carefully, cautiously, wisely my private ones."⁸ Wilson Carey McWilliams makes a similar point about Twain's manner of writing: "Reading Mark Twain is easy, as smooth as oil and just as slippery; deciphering Twain

⁶On the problems with turning solely to Twain's external comments, see James D. Williams's "Revision and Intention in Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*," *American Literature* 36 (1964–1965): 288–97. Those who read *Connecticut Yankee* either in light of Twain's reading habits at the time or his prevailing political opinions or his ever-worsening economic circumstances (see most of the literature cited in footnotes 4 and 5), find themselves in the difficult position of arguing that Twain's work merely reflected his immediate surroundings (making him very much a prisoner to his times) and that Twain is a satirist (making him very much *not* a prisoner to his times). As for the impact of the Paige typesetter's failure on the novel's tone and mood (with the huge financial losses it inflicted for Twain), one should consider that despite the apparent despair in technological progress with which the novel concludes, Twain himself continued to work doggedly on (and invest heavily in) the Paige typesetter for *five years after* the novel was published. And while his economic situation fluctuated considerably over the rest of his life (bankrupt in 1894, dying a wealthy man in 1910), Twain's literary style remained largely unchanged. We are more persuaded by the Zuckerts's "In Its Wake" that the work's internal evidence suggests a unity of composition and intention that defies reducing the novel to changes in personal political views, reading habits, or economic standing.

⁷Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (New York, NY: Harper, 1959), 271–72 (emphasis added).

⁸Quoted in Zuckert and Zuckert, "In Its Wake," 77.

is difficult and calls for a special sort of cryptography.” His footnote then provides the textual evidence for this claim. Quoting Twain, McWilliams writes: “The ‘listener must be alert’ he said in ‘How to Tell a Story’ because the teller ‘will divert attention’ from the point ‘by dropping it in a casual or indifferent way.’ In any autobiographical writing, Twain said—and surely all writing is at least somewhat autobiographical—it is necessary to ‘read between the lines.’”⁹ Twain’s own understanding of his manner of writing indicates that we should not take him simply at his word; to understand him properly, we must devote considerable care and attention, avoiding being taken in by surface appearances.

In fact, in the preface of the book, Twain introduces a public opinion: he is a confident believer in progress who will contrast “the ungentle laws and customs” of historical Arthurian England with the humane achievements of nineteenth-century America. He appears so confident in historical progress that “whatever one of these laws or customs was lacking in that remote time, its place was competently filled by a worse one.” Twain proceeds, however, from his apparent belief in progress to a strikingly unprogressive deduction concerning the necessity that the divine right of kings exist—a deduction whose proof or refutation Twain found so difficult he could not settle it in this book. Twain juxtaposes a belief in the progressive character of history with the “unavoidable deduction” that only the deity could “unerringly” select the person “of lofty character and extraordinary ability” who is to be “the executive head of a nation.” But, if this deduction is as unavoidable and as unsusceptible of simple refutation as Twain claims, then his apparent belief in historical progress becomes nonsensical. If there is a deity who selects persons of lofty character and ability, why would there be historical progress? In Twain’s first formulation, the crucial question to ask of any given regime would be: where does it occur in history? In Twain’s second formulation, the crucial question would be: has the deity selected its ruler? Stated in this manner, each formulation rules out the other. A belief in historical progress makes a belief in divine right impossible, and a belief in divine right does the same to a belief in historical progress. While some scholars have also noted the equivocation between Twain’s nineteenth-century world and the world of the Arthurians, this analysis of the preface shows that they are not simply equivocal but mutually exclusive.

Does Twain mean us to see him as simply ironic in his “deduction” of divine right? Has the confident believer in progress created a grand joke for his modern readers whose own belief in progress would cause them to treat such “deductions” mockingly? This would be a perverse irony because he does take up the question in earnest in a second book: *Personal Recollections*

⁹Wilson Carey McWilliams, “Divine Right: Mark Twain’s *Joan of Arc*” (published in *The Review of Politics* 69, no. 3 [2007]: 329–52). We would like to thank Susan McWilliams for digging through her files and providing us with a copy of this paper.

of *Joan of Arc*.¹⁰ Instead, Twain's deeper irony appears to be on his mocking modern readers, who find him joking as he takes divine right seriously. Twain has implied that both the belief in divine right and the belief in progress amount to mere beliefs: one can either believe that God has chosen the ruler or believe that history inevitably progresses. The preface's deeper joke is on those whose mocking attitude toward the unquestioned belief in divine right stems from their own unquestioned belief in progress. They think themselves the paradigms of rationality whose progressive views allow them to mock ancient superstitions such as divine right. This joke on his readers extends to some of the scholars who have written about the book. About his surprising sympathy throughout the book toward the Arthurian world-view, one scholar writes: "He had not fully disengaged himself from conventional genteel attitudes toward Arthurian romance."¹¹ It is precisely those who believe sympathy toward the Arthurians "conventional" and the embrace of nineteenth-century views "progressive" and "liberated" that Twain mocks. The conventional theology of America claims liberation from convention, even as this claimed liberation is the most conventional attitude one can assume.

Following his "unavoidable deduction" that seems to prove the existence of divine right, he tells us that he found his encounter with "the Pompadour, and Lady Castlemaine, and some other executive heads of that kind," "so difficult to work into the scheme, that it was judged better to take the other tack in this book." Precisely those readers who come to see that both the belief in progress and the belief in divine right are mere beliefs may become attracted to the coherence and even the freedom of the Arthurians. Through their genuine devotion to Christianity, they believe that God would only select men of lofty character and extraordinary ability to rule a Christian nation. In an

¹⁰While Twain doesn't mention this book by name in his preface, the novel about this French saint is the next new book he published. Not only does this book examine the divine right of a single king—that tack seemingly abandoned by Twain in his preface—but its genre (historical romance) and its format (a journalistic account by Joan's oldest friend and constant companion) invite further comparisons with the *Yankee*. On *Joan of Arc* as the *Yankee's* "follow-up," see also Zuckert and Zuckert "In Its Wake." We understand these novels to form two sides of the same literary coin: to explore the claim that there is such a thing as a divine right of kings, and thus to explore the theological implications of what the affirmation or rejection of such a claim would mean. The *Yankee* addresses this question from the perspective of what is practically possible, exploring the political limits to divine intervention in human affairs. *Joan of Arc*, taking its cues from such limits, offers a more extensive spiritual meditation on the nature of divinity. The connection between the two books and the priority of the tack taken in the *Yankee* thus appears informed by the spirit of that Burkean insight that nothing which is practically false can be theoretically true.

¹¹See Henry Nash Smith's *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress: Political and Economic Ideas in "A Connecticut Yankee"* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964).

unavoidable deduction, the deity would only select those kings capable of helping human souls overcome their bodies through devotion to Christianity. Where the Yankee will be constantly troubled by his body's needs and wants—his experience in a suit of armor is the stuff of high comedy—the Arthurians seem genuinely free of those same bodily wants. If both positions stem from belief, why not choose the position free of internal contradiction—it is far more contradictory to have faith in rational progress than to have faith in faith—and seemingly free of the persistent needs of our bodies? One might suggest that it is showing this problem that is the main “tack” of the book.

But these two “executive heads” pose a problem for this tack. They actually were not kings at all but, instead, the extremely influential mistresses of Charles II and Louis XV. Lady Castlemaine's erotic spell over Charles II transformed him into a spineless lover, permitting her to scandalize the throne with her jealousies, humiliate the king with her infidelities, and discredit him in the eyes of his subjects. The Marquise du Pompadour was Louis XV's mistress for only five years, but remained influential by becoming the arbiter of the king's sexual taste, pimping out young girls to satisfy his appetite for flesh. Why do such mistresses raise questions about Twain's deduction? Kings demonstrate their lofty character and their extraordinary ability through their self-mastery. To us who want to master our bodies, but are troubled by our struggles to do so, their mastery of their bodies seems to testify to their divinity. Precisely as kings look like foolish and flesh-hungry lovers, they no longer demonstrate the same self-mastery. They no longer seem divine because they no longer promise the soul's complete control of the body. Perhaps, then, we could only have truly divine kings if they were no longer subject to the needs and desires that constitute our shared humanity, such as the “divine right of cats” proposed by the Yankee's charge, Clarence. But this invites the question: Would the ability of nonhuman cats to resist their human urges invite our admiration and cause us to call them divine?

The Yankee's Belief in Technology

During Twain's first conversation with the Yankee in nineteenth-century Warwick Castle, the Yankee tells him that he is a man “nearly barren of sentiment, I suppose—or poetry, in other words”; he is a man who knows how to make things, “guns, revolvers, cannon, boilers, engines, all sorts of labor-saving machinery.” The Yankee presents himself as an eminently practical man, capable of making anything *anybody* could want. In introducing him, Twain artfully indicates both the Yankee's self-understanding and his lack of understanding of himself. The Yankee invents whatever “a body” might want: his bodily concerns make him aim to save the body more labor than is necessary. Yet, Twain's presentation raises questions about this

self-understanding. After all, how do guns, revolvers, and cannon (the first things listed by the Yankee) save the body labor? Instead, they are necessary for the body only if, as the Yankee soon says, "a man that is full of fight" exists inside the body. Why would a man so concerned with saving bodies unnecessary exertion be so obviously full of fight that he claims it "goes without saying?"¹² For instance, his encounter with Hercules' crowbar was clearly not good for his body: it "made everything crack, and seemed to spring every joint in my skull and made it overlap its neighbor." While he understands himself as eminently practical and concerned with bodily goods, Twain's presentation points to his impracticality in protecting his body and thus his lack of self-understanding. We might conclude at this point that such practical men—including all those for whom the Yankee is making guns, revolvers, and cannons—by paying so much attention to what their body wants leave their soul angry and in search of a fight. By artfully questioning the Yankee's self-understanding, Twain has caused his readers to examine their own.

The Yankee's interest in technology appears to arise from his interest in bodily comfort. What he finds most lacking in Arthurian England are the "little conveniences" "that make the real comfort of life" (44).¹³ Through such comforts, the Yankee thinks a man can become comfortable in a world where he is otherwise not—they "make life bearable." To achieve such comforts, he must "invent, contrive, create, reorganize things; set brain and hand to work, and keep them busy" (45). And, although the Yankee must take his bearings from nature, to paraphrase Bacon, he seeks not to understand but to conquer it.¹⁴ As McWilliams writes, as an exemplar of modernity, the Yankee recognizes "no models or limits in nature."¹⁵

For the Yankee, the technological conquest of nature seems to stem purely from his bodily desire to be as comfortable as possible. In this desire to be comfortable, the Yankee ignores what is good for his soul: he attempts only to make his body as comfortable as possible. Even his discussion of religion treats it as "clothing" that a man simply chooses depending on what is comfortable;¹⁶ he cannot conceive that religion might demand something of the soul apart from or even in opposition to what is comfortable.

¹²For a similar argument connecting the "full of fight" passage to his practicality, see David R. Sewell, "Hank Morgan and the Colonization of Utopia," in *Mark Twain: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994).

¹³See Foster, "American Character," 444.

¹⁴For another modern political philosopher whose approach to the soul's longings the Yankee's project echoes and mirrors, see Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*, 25.12 ([1748] 1951). In *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Cailliois. 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie Gaillamard).

¹⁵See McWilliams, "Comic Spirit," 198.

¹⁶Twain suggests the Yankee's lack of seriousness about traditional religion by having him use a clothing metaphor to describe conventional religious belief.

That he remains “full of fight” indicates that the concerns of his soul do not simply recede with his singular focus on the body. Instead, below his level of consciousness, the soul’s longings still lead him to fail to be as “comfort-seeking” as he thinks himself. Even his very obsession with bodily goods stems from something more than what the body wants; instead, it is his soul that fuels the singular concern for the body or the soul itself that fuels the forgetfulness of the soul. Somehow, technological goods that protect the body promise ultimately to protect the soul by giving it sufficient “clothing” that it can overcome its susceptibility to nature, to the evils that otherwise afflict the body.

Although the world of comfort provides sufficient distraction for the body that life can become “bearable,” it fails completely when contrasted with the Arthurians. Though seemingly far more susceptible to nature because of their complete lack of conveniences, nearly all of them are peaceful and content. The Yankee encounters first a young girl walking “indolently along, with a mind at rest, its peace reflected in her innocent face” (17). They experience contentment the Yankee never knew even in the modern world of conveniences—content men are not typically “full of fight.” For him, unlike the Arthurians, “it is strange how little a while at a time a person can be contented” (76). Through the Yankee, Twain shows us that, in its attempt to make man’s body completely at home in nature by making man master of nature, technological progress actually leaves us that much more susceptible to nature. As such, our souls become that much more agitated and unsettled; we seek technology to overcome the evils we experience, and technology leads us to experience these evils that much more. To achieve for our souls freedom and rest from the vagaries of nature, we become so singularly focused on bodily comforts that we instead become the restless slaves of the very nature we intended to master.

As we will see, below his level of consciousness, the Yankee’s hopes for freedom migrate from the technological toward something more political.¹⁷ That being said, his attachment to technology does not simply disappear. He continues his project to “civilize” Arthurian England through industrialization and commercialization. The extent to which this truly improves their situation can be measured by the fact that the first tangible result is an

“Spiritual wants and instincts are as various in the human family as are physical appetites, complexions, and features, and a man is only at his best, morally, when he is equipped with the religious garment whose color and shape and size most nicely accommodate themselves to the spiritual complexion, angularities, and statue of the individual who wears it” (62). Such garments might appear nice on a man when he is healthy, but they do not protect from winter, disease, and death.

¹⁷That the Yankee’s psychology could transform without his own awareness is suggested when he says at one point, “I had undergone a considerable change without noticing it” (162).

"atmospheric result . . . so pronounced that the king went sort of fainting and gasping around, and Sir Lancelot got so that he did hardly anything but walk up and down the roof and swear" (97). And it is technology that makes possible the horrific mass-murder with which the book ends.

The Yankee's Politicization

Over the course of the novel, the relation between the Yankee's belief in technology and his politics shift. Whereas he first sees politics merely as the vehicle through which he can achieve his technological progress, he later claims: "[M]y kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country." He continues: "The country is the real thing, the substantial thing, the eternal thing; it is the thing to watch over, and care for, and be loyal to" (81–82). His attitude toward the political nation has transformed from that which he must use to achieve his progress and his ambition to something independently worthy of respect. Below his own level of consciousness, he thinks this devotion to country, over and above all else, will provide him the permanent protection he wants.¹⁸ He calls his country "eternal," that is, immortal or free from the bounds of natural death, then claims the country, rather than institutions, demands such devotion because "institutions are extraneous, they are its mere clothing, and clothing can wear out, become ragged, cease to be comfortable, cease to protect the *body*, from *winter*, *disease*, and *death*" (82; italics ours). That the Yankee's soul has migrated toward a new form of hope and away from technology is suggested by the very metaphor he uses in describing his new love of country. Even with all our technological progress, clothing, a human invention, still wears out and fails us: mere clothing cannot give us the lasting protection from nature's evils for which our souls long.¹⁹ So, the Yankee has "moved his stock" to politics and service to the country. Through virtuous devotion to something as eternal as country, the Yankee subconsciously hopes he can earn himself protection from the evils of the natural world. While technology merely promises that he will forget his susceptibility to such natural evils, devotion to country offers him the hope that he can overcome them.

Twain reveals that the Yankee in his depths is troubled not just by his mortality but by the constant struggle and defeat that life inevitably involves. Despite his apparent energetic embrace of technology and his concomitant "can-do" attitude, the Yankee seems to have an existentialist core, revealed by Twain most when the Yankee confronts serious religiosity. So, in the midst of a group of religious pilgrims, he "excused [him]self and dropped to the rear of the procession, sad at heart, willing to go hence from this

¹⁸It is surely part of Twain's irony that the *Yankee's* burgeoning nationalism directs itself toward the salvation of *England*.

¹⁹See footnote 13 above.

troubled life, this vale of tears, this brief day of broken rest, of cloud, and storm, of weary struggle and monotonous defeat" (135). Precisely because of his lack of belief in the real possibility of a Christian afterlife, the struggle and defeat he finds in this world are that much more troubling: "shrinking from the change, as remembering how long eternity is" (135). Again, McWilliams captures this aspect of the Yankee's character well: "Modernity is attracted to the romantic rebel who, sensing the failure of the modern project, but fearing the prosaic and comic aspect of human life, asserts a despairing mastery through self-destruction."²⁰ One might go further and suggest that the Yankee's existential despair and his technological belief are intrinsically connected; the Yankee creates to avoid thinking about his underlying despair, and his constant creating only makes his despair that much deeper. Needless to say, such a dynamic needs something more than technology. And, because the Yankee's technological viewpoint does not allow him to believe in the afterlife that gives clear comfort to the Arthurians, he turns to a search for comfort in this world by participating in the eternal through the political transformation of an immortal nation. He hopes for a manifestation of this transformation in his own lifetime: "[W]e should see certain things yet, let us hope and believe" (214). In the person of the Yankee, Twain has provided a compelling account of the appeal and the power of nationalism in the modern world.

Arthurian Piety vs. the Yankee's "Piety"

One scholar, T.J. Lustig, writes of the Yankee: "[His] problem is not that he can't feel poetry but that he doesn't know that he can feel it."²¹ The Yankee's soul-abstraction is such that even as his soul longs for something more, this longing takes place almost entirely below his own level of consciousness. In having such existential longings surface in the presence of pilgrims, who live their entire lives in service to their souls and disregard almost completely their bodies, Twain surely intends us to contrast these two types of souls. Monks, an extreme example of the type indicated by the pilgrims, "wore the same garment until it fell from their bodies through age and decay" (133). Again, we have this metaphor of clothing and our relation to it. The Yankee first searches for the most comfortable clothes, protecting his body through technological advance. Then he turns to the political nation, realizing that mere clothing cannot protect us from "winter, disease, and death." Devoting himself to the eternity of the nation promises him precisely such protection. Though the monks wear clothing, they are indifferent to it; their devotion to God makes them forget their very need for clothing.

²⁰"Comic Spirit," 198.

²¹T. J. Lustig, "Twain and Modernity," in *A Companion to Mark Twain*, ed. Peter Messent and Louis J. Budd (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

They protect themselves from evils like disease and death by apparently ceasing to concern themselves with them.

Clearly, literature can reveal the hidden springs within the human soul whose political manifestations have very real consequences. For the Yankee, the combination of his technological outlook and his existential core points to a radical embrace of political change so as to achieve the protection that technology on its own fails to provide. Unlike the monks whose extrawordly devotion seems to provide them the protection in this world they desire, the Yankee cannot simply participate in the nation and feel gratified by the thought of eternal rewards for such participation. The Yankee's technological viewpoint demands a material manifestation of his devotion through concrete political change in his own lifetime.

Thus, the book's ending is not simply precipitated by the clash of time periods, as Foster maintains.²² It follows naturally from the combination of the Yankee's political hopes and his technological outlook. The Yankee's this-worldly hopes permit, or more precisely encourage, an astonishing moral callousness. Precisely because he thinks his cause so intrinsically noble and worthy of devotion, he sees no limits upon those activities he finds necessary for the achievement of his "project" of revolutionizing Arthurian England. Moreover, because the Yankee's politics still remain eminently technological insofar as he aims only at the end of a republican England without regard to the means by which he achieves this end, there are no internal limits upon what he will do to achieve his political goals. In the same way that we moderns will do almost anything we think necessary for the scientific conquest of nature because the goodness of the relief of man's estate justifies the means by which we achieve it, our politics, as represented by the Yankee, potentially exhibits this same utilitarian calculus.

Of course, all of this violence motivated by "good intentions" might be said to be an inverted form of the same kind of pious cruelty Machiavelli blamed Christianity itself for having created. Of this argument, Leo Strauss writes: "From Machiavelli's point of view, the Biblical teaching regarding man's destiny appeared to lead to a more than Manlian severity, to pious cruelty, as a duty."²³ Such pious cruelty of the Christian variety is demonstrated in the book by Queen Morgan Le Fay who justifies the extreme torture of a suspected criminal by claiming "it were peril to my own soul to let him die unconfessed and unabsolved." It is her piety that demands the criminal's torture: "I were a fool to fling me into hell for his accommodation" (106). Yet Twain juxtaposes Le Fay's Christian cruelty with other examples that lead us to evaluate the consequence of Christian piety in a much better light than the consequences of the Yankee's this-worldly piety. In fact, a

²²See "American Character."

²³Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 186–87.

comparison of Le Fay's actions with the rest of the Arthurians' leads to the conclusion that her actions have more in common with the man whose name she shares, Hank Morgan, than those with whom she shares a time period.²⁴

Such is the case. Twain demonstrates that both the Arthurians' trust in the providence of God and the standards of piety and nobility demanded by their profound religiosity tend to moderate their behavior within this world. As the Yankee says: "More than once, I had seen a noble, after ambushing and dispatching his enemy, retire to the nearest wayside shrine and humbly give thanks, without even waiting to rob the enemy" (101). The Arthurians most often speak of God's will as "unknowable" and hold themselves only to a standard of nobility with which they hope God will be pleased.²⁵ As such, the Arthurians' beliefs about nobility and piety, rather than inviting limitless-ness, mark a limit on their actions. If we cannot know the will of God, then we must hold ourselves to some morally appropriate standards of which we think and hope God will approve. This is not to say that the Arthurians' aristocratic morality is not without its serious moral limitations, but, with the exception of Le Fay, Twain never shows them engaged in truly unrestrained, despicable behavior for the sake of piety.

By contrast, the Yankee's this-worldly hopes encourage—from the springs of his understanding of morality itself—what looks to be morally rotten behavior. For instance, in the meeting with Morgan Le Fay, even though he knows he has the power to save the composer whom the queen wishes to hang for a substandard performance, the Yankee "saw that she was right" and even gave "her permission to hang the whole band" (104). In one of Twain's most wicked ironies, the Yankee justifies and even celebrates his action by claiming that "a statesman gains little by the arbitrary exercise of iron-clad authority upon all occasions that offer . . . a little concession, now and then, *where it can do no harm*, is the wiser policy" (104; italics ours). In hanging the whole band, the Yankee is acting not immorally but as an admirable "statesman." His "pious" hopes for earthly political change have encouraged shockingly unlimited means for its achievement. Morgan Le Fay must believe that she knows the mind of God—why else would she think that torturing a criminal

²⁴David Ketterer makes a similar point: "The essential similarity between the sinister Morgan Le Fay and our hero, Hank Morgan, pointed to by their common name, becomes increasingly obvious as the book goes on." See "Epoch-Eclipse and Apocalypse: Special 'Effects' in a *Connecticut Yankee*," in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court: An Authoritative Text, Background and Sources, Composition and Publication, Criticism*, ed. Allison R. Ensor (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982), 429.

²⁵See, for instance, Sandy's extensive speech when the Yankee asks her about a map to the castle they must find (68) or the response of one of the noble's when asked a question during his examination: "[V]erily, in the all-wise and unknowable providence of God, who moveth in mysterious ways his wonders to perform" (173).

to elicit a confession important? Her belief invites similarly unlimited actions. Ultimately, it reveals more about the moral callousness invited by the presumption that we can control God's will, in this life or the next, than it does about the problems with the Christian God, especially insofar as the Christian God is considered unknowable.

As Tocqueville writes of democratic man in general, the Yankee is concerned for the common man in the abstract but not for any particular human being. So, when he sees real examples of Christian priests treating the common people quite humanely, he calls these instances "something of this *disagreeable* sort," characterizing them as "episodes that showed that . . . *the great majority* [of these priests] . . . were sincere and right-headed, and devoted to the alleviation of human troubles and suffering" (109–10; italics and brackets ours). In the Yankee's bizarre moral world, he acts as a statesman when he gives the order to hang the whole band, but the priests are "disagreeable" when they devote themselves to the alleviation of human troubles and sufferings. The Yankee's concern for human suffering is abstract and ultimately, Twain suggests, connected not to his real concern for these common people. Rather they are connected to his hopes that his apparent concern for them through revolutionary political change will earn him the protection from natural evils for which he so desperately longs.

Twain's depiction of the Yankee anticipates and cautions against the twentieth-century experience of "moral" totalitarianism. That is, Twain cautions against the experience of vast tyrannies predicated not on the oppression of the people but, instead, on a supposed utopian future the tyrant promises—tyrannies that will, as the Yankee does, mouth the words of republics even as they create technological totalitarianism. Such tyrannies will use technology, both its methods and its new antireligious worldview, to create vast killing machines that can remain wholly blind to their moral evils precisely because they promise such tremendous moral goods. Through seeing such evil in the Yankee's psychology, we can also see for ourselves the truly frightening forms that our pious impiety can take. If history promises a future utopia, however it is defined, then any and all actions that move us toward such a utopia is justified. The piety of the true believer, who thinks the future "unknowable" except to God, looks much more attractive because it is far more likely to view actions in light of their immediate moral consequences rather than their future moral benefits.

Arthurian Alternatives

Twain's novel, however, shows that even the piety of the true believer, as attractive an alternative as it may appear, falls short. And it does so because it fails to satisfy the hopes that originally invite one to embrace it. Twain's treatment of this pious alternative is best prepared by reflecting first on the work's presentation of the romantic chivalry of Arthur and his

knights. As Twain shows, the Arthurians' denial of bodily needs in the effort to perfect their souls is misguided precisely because it ignores the extent to which their spiritual longings are rooted in their own bodily desires. To ignore the body on behalf of the soul is also to ignore a crucial aspect or dimension of the soul's most deeply felt needs, an aspect or dimension that Twain's novel tries to address in part simply by bringing it to our attention. As we will see, this need is for something more than mere "clothing."

Across almost every page of his work, Twain splashes evidence of the Arthurians' mastery of those bodily desires that constantly nag the Yankee. Whether it is "Sandy's" ability to withstand hunger, heat, and cold; the knights' reckless pursuit of gory escapades; Lancelot's chivalry; or Arthur risking his own life to comfort one of his subjects, the members of the aristocracy consistently show themselves masters of their bodily passions. But reflection compels one to wonder if the Arthurians' moral virtue is rooted in a profound way in their bodily desires, and ultimately in the hope for bodily permanence. In other words, whereas the Yankee concerns himself with his body ultimately to achieve his soul's desire for bodily permanence, the Arthurians are recklessly indifferent to their bodies in order to achieve precisely that same permanence. The virtuous mastery of bodily desires, at its deepest level, results not from the soul's desire to transcend the body completely, as appears to be the case, but to give the body the same sort of permanent "clothing" for which the Yankee also longs.

The Yankee's first genuine encounter with the valor and chivalry of the Arthurians proves telling in this respect as it offers the first indication of a paradox at the heart of both their virtue and, ultimately, their piety. In his first foray into Arthurian "politics," the Yankee decides to observe their weekly jousting tournaments in the hope of "improving" them. The excerpt of this account focuses on the heroic exploits of Sir Gareth who risked life and limb in taking on and defeating thirteen knights. As evidenced by the report, Sir Gareth possessed a daring that required him to master his fear of grave bodily harm. But the excerpt also reveals to us (though not the Yankee who misses this point completely)²⁶ that Gareth did not do so simply to win glory for his martial valor. Rather, he sought to win the affections, and thus the romantic charms, of his beloved. His apparent disregard for bodily harm and even death—the precondition of his martial virtue—serves another desire rooted in the body he appears to disregard so bravely.

Of course, the careful reader, following Twain's own artistry here, will be tempted to contrast the example of Sir Gareth with that of Lancelot, *the* representative of Arthurian chivalry. Lancelot refused to give battle to his fellow

²⁶The Yankee is quick to note that the report lacked "the whoop and crash and lurid description" of the tournament's bloodier episodes. But the concluding reference to Lancelot makes no impression on him.

knight on the grounds that his certain victory would deprive Gareth of his beloved's attentions. That he makes his noble refusal in private, away from the approving eyes of his peers, suggests he does not seek the approbation of others for his self-restraint. The true models of Camelot appear to master their self-interests out of a love of virtue for its own sake, independent of any external goods they might win or bodily desires they might gratify. But Lancelot is also Queen Guinevere's lover. By informing us of his adultery, Twain darkens the picture of a purely virtuous Lancelot. He invites us to revisit the possibility that Lancelot's virtue derives from both his desire for the Queen's physical charms and from his own sense of what it would mean for him to be publicly "exposed" as much as from his attachment to virtue.

Despite the fact that, or precisely because, the examples of Gareth and Lancelot introduce us to Arthurian chivalry, they suggest that the self-control and virtue of the knights are predicated on an uneasy relation between the demands of the body and the demands of the soul. Focusing on the state of their souls, they appear indifferent and courageous in the face of bodily harm; but this very courage appears ultimately linked to the achievement of sexual, and thus bodily, goods. Insofar as the Arthurians are forced to choose the demands of virtue over the goods of this world, the novel suggests that the body, forced by moral virtue to oppose itself to the soul, seeks ways to satisfy its long-ignored desires. Thus, concessions to certain bodily desires account for both the pious cruelties supporting Arthur's rule, that is, *prima nocta*, and the war that brought that rule to its end, the adulterous affair between Lancelot and Guinevere.

Of course, the truest model of Arthurism is not Lancelot, but King Arthur himself. And Arthur appears in no way torn between the demands of the body and the demands of the soul; he places the interests of the soul firmly above the concerns and needs of the body. In what is perhaps the greatest act of selflessness in the work, Arthur and the Yankee, disguised as peasants, enter a peasant's hut ravaged by small-pox. There the King comforts a dying mother by affording her one last look at the body of her dead daughter. The Yankee begs the King to flee the home. Arthur rebukes him: "[I]t were shame that a king should know fear, and shame that belted knight should withhold his hand where be such as need succor" (200). Awe-struck by such self-mastery, the Yankee admiringly notes:

Here was heroism at its last and loftiest possibility, its utmost summit; this was challenging death in the open field unarmed, with all the odds against the challenger, no reward set upon the contest, and no admiring world in silks and cloth of gold to gaze and applaud . . . He was great now; sublimely great. (202)

Arthur's heroism suggests that he has, in fact, overcome, in favor of the soul, the competing demands of body and soul that plague the Yankee and the knights. If he has actually reconciled such demands, then Arthur appears

the work's real hero and the true alternative to the Yankee's technological excesses and political materialism. But Twain does not present this argument about the Arthurians' virtue and piety solely through the King and his knights. As both the fabric²⁷ and substance of the Yankee's manuscript tell us, the real power in Britain is not Arthur but the Church. The truth about the power behind Arthur's throne should, therefore, reflect the truth about the Arthurians themselves.

The Clergy, the Family, and the Hermetic Ideal

Taken to its logical extreme, the virtue of the Arthurian nobility seems to point to the complete mastery, and thereby total elimination, of one's bodily needs and desires. The clergy, through piety, lives dedicated to prayer and the alleviation of human suffering, and vows of poverty and chastity, seem to approach the "complete mastery" of bodily desires intimated in the Arthurians' chivalry. Just like the knights, however, a question remains as to the source of their dedication and attachment to others. Such a question is introduced most clearly by the revelation that there is an orphanage, overcrowded no less, located between the monastery and the convent in the Valley of Holiness. The apparent asceticism—the complete bodily mastery of the monks and nuns—is called into question by the presence in their midst of many children "without parents."

Such questions, however, force us to rethink once again not only the contradiction revealed by the presence of such children but the nature of the religious vocation itself. Although Twain's presentation does certainly invite us to wonder about the actual "bodily mastery" of the monks and nuns, at a deeper level it also asks us to reconsider the nature of their very piety. Were it not for the erotic impulse revealed by their sexual congress with each other, would their devout piety be possible? After all, as is finally revealed by the presence of these children—children who are never mentioned in the context of the knights' romantic transports—sex is never simply sex. However mysterious it might be, the bodily desire to "commune" with another human being promises much more than mere bodily satisfaction. Although not reducible in its promise to the children that may be produced, the production of such children—who live long after those who have created them—is certainly a sign of the bodily permanence promised by sex. The nuns' and priests' devotion to both God and to the suffering of other human beings stems from the same essential desire and expectation of the soul to transcend this "mortal coil" as transports the

²⁷The book itself is written over monkish legends; beneath—and perhaps between—the lines is a religious story.

soul, in contradistinction to the body, in sex. Although distinguishable from the body, however, in both cases the soul's transport is impossible without it.

This essential link between the divine, on one hand, and sex (in its most developed form, romantic love), on the other, is suggested by the effusive outburst of the Yankee about his newfound love for his wife, Sandy:

People talk about beautiful friendships between two persons of the same sex. What is the best of that sort, as compared with the friendship of man and wife, where the best impulses and highest ideals of both are the same? There is no place for comparison between the two friendship; the one is earthly, the other *divine*. (284–85; italics ours)

The narrative suggests that the Yankee has almost nothing in common with Sandy although he does have a fondness for her.²⁸ Furthermore, as we will soon see, he married her only because he thought their relationship inappropriate without marriage. Such "divinity" must have existed not so much in their friendship as in their bodily communion with one another, which resulted, on one occasion, in their daughter, "Hello-Central." For the Yankee, whose soul is especially stuck in the earth though it longs for more, such communions must have felt divine because they seemed to take him, if only temporarily, beyond his bodily concerns.

The clergy's communions with God have a similar effect on their bodies. We can recognize the happiness between man and wife as "divine" because we have similar hopes from what we actually recognize as divine. What we recognize as divine seems not to be some ethereally spiritual abstraction from the body, but the perfect union of the good of both body and soul. Thus, contrary to what we might have hoped for given the problems besetting the Yankee's singular focus on the body, the clergy have not truly transcended their bodies in their communion with God. Instead, insofar as the very feeling of transcendence remains intimately connected to their soul's existence within a body, their bodies remain the precondition for their devotion. So far from contradicting it, the clergy's active sex lives make possible their active lives of devotion to God and his work.

Twain's novel offers two alternatives to this dynamic: embrace fully those physical longings for some kind of permanence or practice asceticism more consistently than the clergy—either the Yankee's final embrace of family life or the hermits who dot the English countryside. In other words, if the question is between the embrace of the body's urges and the full and complete embrace of the soul, then the Yankee's family life and the presence of the hermits represent the two possibilities.

Our prior treatment of the Yankee's psychology neglected the last aspect of his transformation: his Rousseauian turn to the life of the nuclear family at the

²⁸After avoiding talking to her for most of the book, he finally seems interested in having long conversations with her only when she is not there to respond as he "talks" to her and his daughter while holed up in the cave.

conclusion of the novel.²⁹ Seemingly, the Yankee's exclusive focus on the body has finally found its fullest and healthiest manifestation in his love of both "the perfectest form of friendship" with his wife Sandy and his love of "the center of the universe" (285), his daughter "Hello-Central." His daughter's smile could "sweep night out of the world" and, when she falls ill, he claims his continued existence in "this world" hangs on her fate alone (286). The once selfish Yankee now selflessly dedicates himself to the welfare of the body he created; indeed, the action of the novel suggests that he does so at expense of the men he hoped to manufacture for his new politics. In fact, the Yankee's transformation into a family man seems so dramatic that, on his deathbed, the Yankee calls out to Sandy to dispel the awful remnants of his "modern nightmare"—Merlin had condemned him to return to the nineteenth century after the dramatic battle that ends his narrative in the sixth century.

Through his dedication to his family, the Yankee appears to achieve what neither the clergy nor the knights could: the consummation and completion of the soul's desire for bodily permanence intimated and promised by the soul's transport involved in sex. That is, by doing more than simply creating a body and then ignoring its care, as the clergy does, or participating in romance and then ignoring its consequences, as the knights seem to do, the Yankee, contrary to what had been his failure to attend properly to his soul in his technological and political hopes, seems to have achieved, in this brief moment of complete and selfless devotion to other bodies, the true desires of the soul. Does Twain, then, endorse finally the Yankee's brief, but seemingly profound, Rousseauian transformation into a man who has found his completion in the family?

Both the timing and the character of the Yankee's transformation belie this conclusion. It is only when it is clear that the Yankee's project has finally failed, though he will still make his last stand in the cave, that the Yankee realizes the extent of his attachment to the family. If his familial attachment follows subconsciously from his failure to realize the political transformation that had previously promised his soul so much, then it appears more a new strategy for fulfillment than fulfillment itself. If the appeal of the family is the fullness and self-sufficiency promised by a complete immersion in the bodily fulfillment promised by the sex that precedes it, then it cannot be a strategy concocted by the soul out of hope. Instead, it must simply be an actual self-sufficiency that the soul might simply observe has occurred. Moreover, the character of the Yankee's domestic bliss seems a little less blissful when we note what the Yankee says almost immediately before his effusive comments about the divinity of his and Sandy's love. He tells us that he originally married Sandy "for no particular reason" except out of custom. He was a

²⁹For more on the connection between Rousseau and this aspect of the novel, see Zuckert and Zuckert, "In Its Wake."

"New Englander, and in my opinion this sort of partnership would compromise her sooner or later" (284). And in the earlier part of the marriage, when domestic bliss is usually at its peak, the Yankee notes that "[i]n my dreams . . . I still wandered thirteen centuries away, and my *unsatisfied* spirit went calling and harking all up and down" (284; italics ours) for his fifteen year-old sweetheart, a telephone operator who, it seems, said little more than "hello" to the Yankee.³⁰ Again, given his real feelings for Sandy, the Yankee's transformation suggests not so much the completeness and self-sufficiency of the family experience as the incompleteness and inadequacy of his soul, searching now for a new solution to its dissatisfaction.

If the Yankee's soul remains dissatisfied even as it throws itself into the family, perhaps Twain endorses instead the solution offered by the religious hermits. In contrast to the clergy, whose continuing attachment to bodily goods is represented not only by their sexual activity but also by their continued service to the concerns of humanity at large—after all, what is such service but attention to the bodies that exist only in this "vale of tears"—the hermits seem to achieve a true freedom from all concerns of the body. The hermits leave behind entirely all attachment to humanity. They achieve a form of piety and self-mastery purer than the monks and nuns by completely degrading their bodies. Furthermore, unlike the clergy, the hermits actually perform miracles (57, 85, and 97). As such, their asceticism not only reveals an overcoming of their bodies, it also indicates a parallel movement toward greater holiness and divinity. Their devotion to God seems so complete that they are freed from any and all bodily concerns, becoming thus capable of bodily deeds of which everyone else can only stand in awe. But, even as we stand in awe of these hermits, we wonder if their holiness and divinity have not culminated in something that wholly abstracts from our humanity. In other words, though they seem to have perfected the Arthurian virtue of self-mastery insofar as one can no longer trace in them a remaining attachment to bodily goods, their very mastery strikes us as inhuman. Thus, although the Arthurians find them curious but impressive, few are inspired to their worship or utter devotion especially as compared to the worship and utter devotion that King Arthur inspires. The insufficiency of the hermits as ideals, insofar as they simply transcend rather than perfect our humanity, will only become clear once we return to a consideration of King Arthur.

The Divine Right of Kings and Cats

It would not be implausible to conclude that the true hero of the novel is King Arthur. After all, his heroism in the peasant's hut is without comparison in its

³⁰It is this telephone operator for whom the Yankee calls out for in his sleep, "Hello-Central," thus prompting Sandy, unaware of its significance but having heard it so often from her husband, to name their daughter "Hello-Central."

obvious freedom from any conception of bodily reward of any sort. Later, appearing as a slave and without any clothes, Arthur still regarded himself a king. In other words, his greatness appears to have been more than merely conventional; it seemed to radiate from the inside, from his soul.

It is precisely such greatness that inspired the devotion of Arthur's subjects. Moreover, in his "laying-of-hands," related to us by the Yankee, Arthur, like the hermits, appears truly capable of miracles. When pilgrims occasionally seek out the hermits, they do so to revere, to pray, and to receive or, most likely, to witness the occasional miracle. Arthur's subjects constantly seek him out to obey, worship, and be healed by him. The hermit's miracles are sources of wonder; Arthur's miracles are sources of salvation and hope. Thus, as the Yankee presents it, the ritual and frequent "laying-of-hands" by Arthur upon his sick subjects in order to cure them is essential to the success of his rule. If the "laying-of-hands" is no longer successful, the King's rule will not last.

Given our prior claim that Twain, in his preface, actually intends us to take divine right more seriously than his mocking "progressive" readers might have, the novel's account of Arthur and Arthur's rule provides us with even more grounds for this contention. For instance, insofar as the "laying-of-hands" seems capable of actually curing the sick, the joke seems to be, not on the Arthurians, but on the Yankee incapable of seeking such a cure for his ailing daughter because of his belief that it is mere "mummery." But, even as we are meant to take these things seriously, Twain's preface also cautions us against it—those previously discussed mistresses prevent Twain, at least, from embracing divine right unconditionally. To see what we should take seriously and why we should stop short of embracing it unconditionally, we must provide a fuller account of what exactly Arthur's subjects want from him. Twain leads us to such reflection by providing us with a strange, but telling, alternative proposal: the divine right of cats.

In Twain's presentation, Arthur's rule appears more attractive than the Yankee's republicanism because it seems capable of providing the people with divine intervention in their affairs—an intervention that would be impossible in the eminently earthly technological republic envisioned by the Yankee. The "laying-of-hands" is but one example of this intervention. At another point in the novel, the Yankee tells the wife of one of Morgan Le Fay's prisoners that her husband will be freed from the rack and spared the gallows. Hearing this news, she declares: "He is saved—for it is the King's word by the mouth of the king's servant—Arthur, the king whose word is gold!" (108). For this woman, Arthur's word can be trusted because he speaks for more than himself: he speaks for God. The rule of a prudent and caring king who represents God appears capable of righting earthly wrongs and liberating the people from a world beset with evils. A republic might give them self-governance, but it cannot give them the same grounds for hope.

It is precisely the attractiveness of Arthur's rule vis-à-vis republics that causes Clarence to propose his "divine right of cats." Cats would provide

the same benefits without the accompanying drawbacks: the susceptibility of kings to human excesses and emotions that make them the prey of mistresses or the instruments of torment used against the people. Thus Clarence says:

The character of these cats would be considerably above the average king, and this would be an immense moral advantage to the nation, for the reason that a nation always models its morals after its monarch's. The worship of royalty being founded in unreason, these graceful and harmless cats would easily become as sacred as any other royalties, and indeed more so, because it would be presently noticed that they hanged nobody, beheaded nobody, imprisoned nobody, inflicted no cruelties or injustices of any sort, and so must be worthy of a deeper love and reverence than the customary human king, and would certainly get it. (280)

While obviously irreverent and even absurd³¹—Clarence concludes his remarks by *meowing like a cat!*—this is also the lengthiest and most explicit treatment of divine right in a novel whose stated purpose is to explore that very theme. Cats can succeed where human beings fail because they eliminate the passionate attachment to other human beings that proves problematic for the novel's royalty, like Charles II and Louis XV of the preface, or even King Arthur.³² That is, because they truly are free of the bodily concerns that plague human beings, cats can fulfill what human beings want from their kings without falling prey to what human beings do not want from their kings.

Such a conclusion, however, fails to take into account the true grounds upon which Twain rejects divine right. As advanced here, the suggestion about cats offered by Clarence—the most enthusiastic supporter of the Yankee's reforms and perhaps the most consistently impious character in the novel—embodies not Twain's reasoning but the reasoning of the modern mockers Twain has already implicitly mocked in his preface. To them and to Clarence, all beliefs about kings and gods are utterly irrational, "founded in unreason," and point as much to cats running the government as to men like Arthur. But Twain does not endorse this view. Instead, his presentation of Arthur indicates his impressiveness rather than his ridiculousness. Therefore, besides its practical impossibility, why is it, in Twain's presentation, that cats would not fulfill what we want from kings? In seeing this, we will see that Twain rejects divine right not because of the persistent problem of the king's humanity but because it is, ultimately, an inadequate response to our humanity.

Truly, the people worship Arthur and merely gaze at the hermits because Arthur promises them salvation and redemption; the hermits merely deliver spectacle. Arthur promises the people worldly deliverance—the righting of

³¹It seems precisely the absurdity of this passage which justifies its neglect to so many scholars of Twain's work.

³²Queen Guinevere's affair with Lancelot not only made the King a cuckold, heaping shame onto his throne, but it also deprived Arthur of a legitimate heir (178, 288).

the wrongs and evils from which they suffer. One might think that if cats could deliver such redemption, the people would accept it. As shown through the hermits' bodily mastery, is not the direction of Arthurian virtue beyond humanity? This is Clarence's conclusion; this is the conclusion, ultimately, of the modern mocker. But such a conclusion remains inattentive to the true grounds for the people's obedience to Arthur, to any impressive king, and concomitantly, to the true grounds for the disappointment felt when kings behave like Charles II or Louis XV. The people are so impressed with Arthur because he remains human in that he remains an obvious mixture of soul and body, refusing to become either entirely one (the hermit) or entirely the other (the Yankee). He is impressive because one feels he still has bodily urges, but he has mastered them. The people worship him, in particular, because he promises them salvation for their souls *and* their bodies—the "laying of hands" promises bodily cures. The people could not hope or expect cats, however mysterious, that have not so mastered human urges to provide the same cures. The cure could only be provided by a human king. The divinity of the king only inspires the people to worship insofar as he remains human. For this reason, the people and Twain are troubled by kings, like Charles and Louis, who appear all-too-human.

Stated this way, the question now can become: How well does the Arthurian "solution" reconcile with our deepest human needs? If the true grounds of our belief in Arthur stem not from his divinity, as such, but from his "divine" humanity, then one is led back to the human. To return to the human, however, departs from the trajectory of Arthurian religiosity, whose exclusive focus on the soul does not allow us to wrestle with or accommodate our all-too-human needs. The uncovering of the grounds upon which the people respect and worship Arthur does not prove that the trajectory of their religion provides these grounds. This means that we, or Twain, as the observers of the novel, are left on our own to provide the account that none of these solutions have provided. In fact, perhaps Twain includes himself precisely to provide another "solution" beyond those presented by the novel.³³

But such talk of "solutions" obfuscates the essential insight that the contrast between our reaction to the hermits and Arthur truly teaches us. In Twain's presentation, the Arthurians' (and the reader's) appreciation of Arthur is not solely because of what he provides for us. We also appreciate Arthur because his type of virtue is understandable to us. As such, it is not simply a better or worse "solution" to the human problem and, for that matter, neither is our appreciation of Twain. In seeking human goods, we do not simply seek what will benefit us; we also seek what we can understand. This, perhaps more than any other reason, explains why neither we nor the Arthurians could ever submit to the rule of cats, no matter how beneficial

³³For another attempt to make sense of Twain's place in the novel's argument, see Foster, "American Character," 450. See also Zuckert and Zuckert, "In Its Wake," 66.

or free from injustice their governance might be.³⁴ Our desire to find a good that we understand betrays a concomitant desire to have a good worthwhile for its own sake, just as understanding seems worthwhile for its own sake. Even as we seek virtue as a "solution" to the human problem, we are attracted to it because it appears to be good for its own sake. If virtue is sought precisely as an instrumental good, it no longer seems appealing. If Sir Gareth behaves bravely only to win his love's respect, he no longer seems deserving of the very respect he seeks. Or, in his turn to the family, the Yankee can be successful in providing his soul with the satisfaction for which he longs only if he has not sought such success, instead merely observing his new and profound satisfaction. Such insights reveal the extent to which every "solution" in Twain's book fails precisely because they are "solutions." As such, they are merely an instrumental good that cannot fulfill our soul's deeper desire, however mysterious, for noninstrumental goods. The Yankee's deepest appreciation and reverence for Arthur stems from the noninstrumentality of his heroics in the peasant's hut—after all, if even the eminently instrumental Yankee most appreciates Arthur at his noninstrumental finest, we learn that much more about the character of all of our souls. As much as such reverence reveals both the kind of virtue we most want and the requirement that such virtue be understandable to us, we cannot then revere it for instrumental reasons—such a position would be contradictory to our desire for a coherent good. Given this additional requirement, it becomes impossible to continue to view Arthur as worthy of obedience and constituting the novel's true hero.

Thus Twain surfaces not so much as an alternative "solution" but as simply an alternative life entirely. His literary interests and even his very interest in the life of the Yankee seem to stem not from his desire for some superior solution but simply from his intellectual curiosity—a curiosity whose satisfaction is not instrumental to any more fundamental desire. The exploration of the variety of human "solutions" in the novel thus points to the need for us, if we truly want to achieve what our soul most wants, to think our way through the very search for solutions, learning instead to rest satisfied with the coherent and noninstrumental good that learning for its own sake can provide. Of course, such learning does provide a solution but a solution that does not rest on the same sorts of hopes on which all other solutions rest. By promoting a noninstrumental good, Twain suggests a posture that takes its point of departure from those limits to which we appear consigned, starting with our mortality. To adopt any other "tack" toward our mortality is

³⁴We are grateful to Zuckert and Zuckert "In Its Wake," 75–76 for bringing this particular dimension of the Yankee's problems to our attention. See also Catherine Zuckert's *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form*. (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1990), 152 and especially 34).

to begin the search for solutions again, bringing us right back to the problems just noted.

Such internal “attitudinal” insights need not only possess theoretical import. After all, they cultivate greater external prudence and moderation in his democratic readers since they, as Deneen and Romance write of the best of American literature, “point citizens to the best angels of their nature, even as they warn against the aspiration to make a heaven of earth.”³⁵ In cultivating this disposition, Mark Twain does not simply prepare his democratic audience philosophically for the forthcoming *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*. He prepares them politically to temper the ideological zeal that can be unleashed by blind faith in one’s divine cause and an equally blind faith in the scope and possibilities of progress.

³⁵Deneen and Romance, *Democracy and Literature*, 6.