

## Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the Editor, and the authors of the articles discussed will be invited to reply.

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### The Mysterious Stranger

To the Editor:

Dorys C. Grover's letter in the October 1980 Forum on Jeffrey L. Duncan's essay "The Empirical and the Ideal in Mark Twain" (*PMLA*, 95 [1980], 201–12) and Duncan's reply help set the record straight, though the reply perpetuates one error of the original while other misstatements remain to be corrected. Duncan speaks of the "Gibson edition of *The Mysterious Stranger*," but Gibson's volume is entitled *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*; it contains three works, whereas Duncan persists in conflating two of them.

Duncan's statement in his essay that "We may not agree with Theodore and Satan, but Twain did" is misleading. In the evidence Duncan cites, Clemens' letter to Joseph Twichell, the writer carefully and emphatically qualifies his position. The passage in Clemens' letter begins: "(A part of each day—or night) as they have been looking to me the past 7 years. . . ." Clemens begins his next paragraph with a similar qualification: "By this light. . . ."

Duncan confuses Mark Twain's Theodor, the narrator of "The Chronicle of Young Satan," with August Feldner, the narrator of "No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger," and this confusion, which he augments in his letter of clarification, apparently stems from his failure to distinguish the two stories and their significantly different themes. The later story, written several years after the earlier, is far from being the pessimistic work Duncan finds. In the context of this story about multiple personalities or selves, No. 44 vanishes when he finally does because he was one side of August's personality, which is at last unified.

I thought that the earlier pages of Duncan's essay were brilliant.

EVERETT EMERSON

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

*Mr. Duncan replies:*

I see that I am going to have to admit it. When textual affairs get complicated, I get confused. I cannot keep up with my checking account either or do my income tax. In all such endeavors I tend to make a mess. And the various manuals for helping to straighten matters out—Tuckey's, Gibson's, Kahn's, the United States government's—tend to sink me farther in. The errors that Emerson cites are proof positive.

I should like to say that Gibson's edition comes in two forms: one a hardback with the title Emerson cites, the other a paperback with the simpler title I imply—*The Mysterious Stranger*, period. The only difference between the two is that the hardback has a section, Textual Apparatus, that the paperback lacks. Thus, though the paperback has the singular title, it contains the three fragments, and no one, I think, is bothered by the small discrepancy. I insist, by the way, on calling them fragments, not works. "Works" implies completion, finish, and none of them is finished.

My conflation of two of the manuscripts, moreover, was not the result of confusion. It may have been a mistake, but it was a deliberate mistake. I did not want to deal with three fragments. "No. 44" is not so pessimistic as "The Chronicle," as Emerson says, but it is just as incomplete. In his last years Twain could take his more benign view of reality no more seriously than he could his despair. He did not have a consistent view of reality. As Emerson points out—and as I should have pointed out—Twain carefully and emphatically qualified the life-is-but-a-dream statement in his letter. The statement was a mood more than a philosophical stand, and having no philosophical stand, Twain became a victim of his moods. Hence he could not finish anything, could not take anything he did seriously enough to finish. But that inability in and of itself is adequate cause for despair on Twain's part and for regret on ours, and to me it is an aspect of his nihilism. I simply cannot see any happiness in the ending of Twain's career, not so far as his art is concerned.