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MARK HARRIS

Theodor's Imperfection Creation: A New Reading of Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*

Analysts of Mark Twain's *Mysterious Stranger*[1] have often assumed that the "unfallen angel" Satan is Twain's mouthpiece (e.g. Gargano 2, Parsons 592), and thus if Satan says all is a dream, that must also be Twain's belief, but that assumption is attacked rather than supported by the text. As John Tuckey aptly observes, Twain's "authorial view is more comprehensive, more complex, and less direct than that of the character to whom he gives the role of an earnest expositor of deterministic concepts" (1). The *story* is Theodor's dream, but Satan's final assertion that *all* is a dream is on shaky ground. Many of Satan's assessments of man's illusions are supported in the text, but that does not necessarily make Satan a reliable voice. Though Satan points out mankind's flaws and illusions, like Hank Morgan he is not free of such weaknesses himself. In many instances, Satan's words and actions are inconsistent and contradictory, suggesting that hs is not a perfect angel but rather the imperfect product of Theodor's dreams.

To determine whether *The Mysterious Stranger* is in fact Theodor's dream, we can examine reasons why he might dream the experiences he relates to us. In the first two paragraphs of his story, Theodor emphasizes the dream-like isolation of Eseldorf: the town "was in the middle of...sleep,...drowsed in peace...and...solitude" (631). Eseldorf is a village of dreams and illusions not only because it's "asleep" but also because it is a society that values, trusts in, and judges by appearances. Eseldorf lives in fear of the Church and even more in awe of the supernatural; and though Theodor claims that for him and the other boys, Eseldorf is "a paradise" (632), he is acutely aware of the rampant paranoia and suspicion. The people fear their own priest, Father Adolf, since he does not fear the Devil—not because that makes him godly, but because they think "there must be something supernatural about him" (632); he is seen as being able to do things others cannot do and as possessing power, knowledge, and courage, which most Eseldorfers think of themselves as without. Father Adolf is revered and envied because he has great freedom of action and word, in contrast to the lowly villagers who are constantly watching and being watched by one another for a slip of the tongue or an act of heresy. Second only to Father Adolf in the people's reverence, the astrologer also has power, knowledge, and courage. Reputedly, he can "read any man's life through the stars in a big book he had, and find lost property" (633). Father Peter also has knowledge, courage, and power—he alone is not afraid of the astrologer and openly defies him, just as Father Adolf defies the Devil. But Father Peter does not flaunt his spiritual power or otherwise play upon the people's fears; rather, he is "good and gentle and truthful" (633) and thus does not command the respect and envy that Father Adolf and the astrologer do.

The people's fear of witchcraft, bad reputations, and the Church manifests itself

everywhere: the astrologer has Father Peter suspended from the priesthood because Peter threatens his reputation; Father Peter's niece Marget and her household, because of their poverty and Father Peter's suspension, are shunned by the village; "the witch-terror" is at an all-time high, and even Theodor believes that witchcraft is hereditary ("When that kind of a malady is in the blood it does not always come out with just one burning") (675); the town comes to Marget's party and partakes of her hospitality for the purpose of proving her to be a witch; Lisa Brandt's mother is burned at the stake for blaming God for her daughter's drowning; another woman, under suspicion of being a witch because of her progressive medical techniques (e.g. bathing), is hanged and then stoned by the entire village, including Theodor. Theodor rationalizes: "in my heart I was sorry for her, but all were throwing stones and each was watching his neighbor, and if I had not done as the others did it would have been noticed and spoken of" (722-723). Seppi's father fears for his livelihood: "'our village will be shunned as being under the displeasure of God. The Golden Stag [the village inn] will know hard times'" (689). And witchcraft is not the only powerful and frightening force over which the villagers have no control. There is also the Church; people fear that chaos caused by the witchcraft outbreaks will bring on "'The Interdict!'" (689).

One other villager does not fear the supernatural; he is "the oldest servingman in the [prince's] castle, Felix Brandt" (635). He entertains Theodor and his friends by telling them tales of the supernatural, which are not ghost stories to the boys, but truth; Brandt "told these things from his own experience, largely" Theodor says (636). The boys eventually learn from Brandt "not to fear supernatural things" (636). What most impresses Theodor is that Brandt

> had seen angels—actual angels out of heaven—and had talked with them. They had not wings, and wore clothes, and talked and looked and acted just like any natural person, and you would never know them for angels except for the wonderful things they did which a mortal could not do. (636-637)

"It was after that kind of a talk," Theodor tells us (637), that the boys, resting on a secluded hilltop, are suddenly joined by an angel that fits Brandt's description exactly.

The power of suggestion makes it seem likely that the angel, Satan (nephew of the Devil but unfallen), is dreamt of by Theodor. So also do the angel's acts, for he fulfills Theodor's particular desires and aspirations: Satan "enters the sleepy village to inject a sense of excitement and glamor into the lives of the bored boys who live there. [He is] the dream of possibility long since surrendered by the adults yet still visible to the children" (Cox 275).

The "possibility" Theodor dreams of is transcending the restrictions imposed by his boyhood and by the paranoid suspicion pervading Eseldorf. Satan, that possibility incarnate, is all that the boys would like to be: well-dressed; strikingly attractive; "easy and graceful and unembarrassed, not slouchy and awkward and diffident, like other boys" (637); and, most importantly, powerful. After meeting Satan, Theodor and the other boys want to impress everyone else be telling them what he has done. He is for Theodor and his friends an all-powerful being who is their friend, about whom only

they know the truth, who does magic at their bidding, who puts them thus above other people, and who relieves the inevitable boredom that besets teenage boys: "We hadn't any interest in the other boys any more and wouldn't take part in their games and enterprises. They seemed so tame, after Satan" (655). Satan even outshines the astrologer and Father Adolf; the former is envious of Satan's witchcraft (683), and the latter's efforts to denounce it fail. But Theodor's hyperbolic descriptions suggest that Satan is too good to be true: "The Stranger had seen everything, he had been everywhere, he knew everything, and he forgot nothing" (643).

Satan creates, for an audience of boys who have little or no control over the world they inhabit, a world just for them, of "toy people" (640), over which he and they have complete control. The selective attention usually given this episode invariably cites only Satan's indifferent "killing" of the toy people when they begin to irritate him, but the boys are the first to "kill" the "people," by dropping several of them when the angel tells them his name. In spite of their hypocritical horror at Satan's "murder" of the toy people, the boys show no regret when they cause some "deaths" or when they later "kill" more "people" by ill-fashioning the toy village's cannons "so badly...that they all burst when they went off, and killed some of the gunners and crippled the others" (645). The boys enjoy having control over this society.

As an inhabitant of Eseldorf, Theodor is aware of the witchcraft, fear, and feelings of helplessness; as a boy, he is also *intrigued* by magic and the supernatural; as a human being in a Twain novel, he has a tendency toward invidious comparison. Thus, it is natural that he dreams up Satan, an outsider who, although he avers again and again that man is nothing to him (which is, no doubt, Theodor's true conception of what Superior Beings think of man), not only takes an interest in but even grows fond of Theodor, Nikolaus, and Seppi, and because of this fondness makes several excursions thorugh Eseldorf to show off his powers for the boys and to teach them what man's illusions are.

Satan's view of humankind is mostly negative, but he keeps the boys happy by doing things (just for them) that no one else can do. Satan's philosophy, however, is inconsistent and often illogical, because it is really Theodor's inner dialectic between the ideas that have been imposed upon him all his life (which usually appear in the story as Theodor's words) and the secret, rebellious thoughts Theodor is beginning to acknowledge and confront (which usually appear as Satan's words). The latter are not categorical attacks on man's illusions; they are often idealistic laments:

> "the vast majority of the race, whether savage or civilized, are secretly kind-hearted and shrink from inflicting pain, but in the presence of the aggressive and pitiless minority they don't care to assert themselves....[However,] some day a handful will rise up on the other side." (725-726)

In a society oppressed by forces beyond its control, the ultimate dream (as Hank Morgan demonstrated by trying to realize it) is to control not only one's own life but also the lives of others. Satan can do even this, by altering people's futures. Theodor is fascinated by this power; after initially balking at Satan's plan to " 'do generously by' " Nikolaus (697) via getting him killed (so that he can avoid a lifetime as an invalid),

Theodor comes to condone Satan's shortening of both Nikolaus's and Lisa Brandt's lives and asks him to "improve" others' futures (those of Frau Brandt and Fischer the Weaver) as well. Theodor does not really want to wield such awful power *himself*, and thus it is that he creates Satan instead of dreaming himself as the agent of Satan's acts.

Theodor's desire for and fascination with the powers with which he invests Satan are countered by his trepidation (and often remorse) at seeing the results of Satan's acts. Theodor vacillates between repulsion at and fascination with Satan's life-altering power:

> A moment before we were bitterly making up our minds that we would ask no more favors of Satan *for friends of ours*, for he did not seem to know any way to do a person a kindness but by killing him, but the whole aspect of the case was changed now and we were glad of what we had done and full of happiness in the thought of it. (713) (emphasis mine)

Satan's rationalizations of killing kindness allow Theodor to wield power over his environment without feeling guilty about it. In fact, by creating an omniscient supernatural being like Satan, Theodor can name and confront all of his reservations about God, life, and man without the fear of reprisal that haunts every Eseldorfer all the time.

Because he is the product of Theodor's questioning and rebelling imagination, Satan presents a mixture of correct and incorrect, contradictory thoughts and actions. For example, Satan seems omniscient regarding man's flaws and illusions, the chief of which is man's enslavement to the Moral Sense, the conscience. As an unfallen angel, Satan claims that he does not have it, that right and wrong don't really exist, and that man's Moral Sense is an illusion with which man unnecessarily burdens himself and unjustly condemns his fellow. But there are inconsistencies among Satan's pronouncements on the Moral Sense. He says that his uncle has " 'sinned' " (641), but unless Satan is stating God's view—which does not seem to be the case—then he is admitting that sin exists beyond the conceptual realm. And the fact that Satan continually accuses man of wrongdoing shows that Satan both knows wrong exists and has ideas about what it is. As David Karnath rhetorically observes, "how, indeed can one condemn without [the Moral Sense]?" (4).

Satan claims that man's illusory Moral Sense makes man the only creature that hurts and kills for entertainment or pride, but Satan creates 500 toy-people and then kills them in order to entertain the boys; he apparently puts the astrologer " 'on the cold side of [the moon]' " (699-700) and does not refute Theodor's accusation of cruelty for his doing so; and he acts similarly against the three villagers who accuse him of failing to help stone the hanged woman and against the landowner on whose property Satan creates a magic tree. Thus, either man is not the only creature who " 'inflict[s] pain for the pleasure of inflicting it' " (669), or Satan is not who he claims to be.

To support his claims about humanity and the Moral Sense, Satan invokes an anachronistic French factory and another set of contradictory ideas: "Satan said: 'It

is some more Moral Sense. The proprietors are rich and very holy, but the wage they pay to these poor brothers and sisters of theirs is only enough to keep them from dropping dead with hunger.' " (670). Here Satan, the "unfallen angel," admits that wrongs exist, identifies them, and is conscious of human suffering! There are other problems within Satan's example: his implication that the factory proprietors would treat the workers better if there were no Moral Sense is fallacious. Satan claims that the Moral Sense makes the proprietors " 'think themselves better than dogs,' " i.e., than the workers, and thus the proprietors feel justified in letting the workers suffer; but of course the proprietors may need no such justification.

Theodor himself voices a different view; his conscience once made him do what he thought was right though he didn't want to (he remembers knowingly trading Nikolaus a bad fish-hook, and when it broke, Theodor's conscience "forced" him to offer Nikolaus a good hook as a replacement [703]). The idea that comes out of all this is not so much that one should have no conscience as that one *does* have it and that it can sometimes override one's innate selfishness. But the conscience is not to be used for selfish gain or to be dictated to us by others. When it is, it becomes the corrupted Moral Sense.

One can see how readers may be tempted to interchange Mark Twain and Satan, for, in his diatribes against man and the Moral Sense, Satan certainly doesn't sound like the innocent, knowing, superior being he claims to be; he often sounds more like Mark Twain—or Theodor Fischer, a boy with a young mind that is not always logical, an imperfect boy who fantasizes about wielding power in his oppressive society, a boy who is just starting to really think about what is true and what is false in all he has been taught to believe.

For all his claims of sinlessness, Satan displays a very human tendency, one with which Theodor struggles in his quest to discover for himself what is "right" and "wrong": the illusion of knowing what is best for everyone else. If someone's " 'suffering-machine' " dominates too much (692), *Satan* decides that that person would like something done about it, and *he* decides what that something is—usually, death, or in Father Peter's case, insanity. Satan rationalizes, " 'To that kind of a person life is not an advantage, is it?' " (692). Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't. Satan observes in his somewhat sketchy suffering-machine/happiness-machine argument that one may go " 'through life almost ignorant of what happiness is' " (692), but of course what Satan misses is that such a one may not miss what he does not know, at least not enough to want to escape life altogether.

Albert Stone is correct in saying that there are contradictions within *The Mysterious Stranger*, but they do not have to "be regarded only as the end-product of a tired mind [Twain's] grappling with ideas foreign or inaccessible to it" (244). None of Satan's apparent inconsistencies comes to his or anyone else's attention, nor should they, because they are all part of Theodor's dream, and one doesn't question one's dreams. The dreaming Theodor is simply working out ideas; he is not developing logical arguments.

As his dream progresses, Theodor retains some of his old knowledge but alters much of it, accepting (after questioning and debating) some of "Satan" 's view of man,

ideas that Theodor has semi-consciously and somewhat fearfully entertained for a long time. He comes to realize that one does have the ability to sift the truth out of the lies and illusions others try to impose upon one; he knows that Frau Brandt, after her unjust execution, is "in heaven, notwithstanding the excommunication" (716). And, in fact, most inhabitants of Eseldorf use a pragmatic, selective code of ethics: "Like the rest of the village, [Ursula] could tell every-day lies fast enough and without taking any precautions against fire and brimstone on their account" (660).

Theodor also comes to realize that we cannot know the future, as Frau Bauman laments upon Nikolaus's death: " 'Dear, dear, if we could only know! Then we shouldn't ever go wrong, but we are only poor, dumb beasts groping around and making mistakes' " (707). We should not, then, live in the past, whether in the dreaming death-in-life that characterizes isolated Eseldorf or in despair over our past mistakes. As Theodor counsels, "how foolish people are when they blame themselves for anything they have done" (710). Of course, Theodor is responding to Satan's theory of determinism, that man has no control over his present or future. In contrast, what Theodor's dream as a whole bears out is that since man cannot know the future or change the past, he should not be ruled by Moral Sense-generated guilt over previous mistakes or helpless paranoia about the uncertain future.

In the end, Theodor concludes that we cannot alter other's lives and should not think it our prerogative to try. In spite of Satan's diatribes on man's insignificance and his own greatness, there is no magic stranger; there are only human beings with a limited amount of control over their lives. Satan's comparison of the elephant with the red spider as analogous to a comparison of himself with man is just another illusion. True, as Satan says, we cannot " 'imagine an elephant being interested in [a red spider],' " but neither can we imagine an elephant judging or condemning a red spider, as Satan does man, or an elephant befriending three red spiders and consequently trying to help the rest of their community as well, as Satan does. Satan's dimunition of man has some validity—man is beset by real limitations and stuck in reality. But not having Satan's illusory powers does not make man vile or pathetic.

To see *The Mysterious Stranger* as Smith and DeVoto (and other critics taking a biographical perspective) may, as being for Twain a work of therapy because it "gathers all the unbearable scenes of man's meanness and cowardice and cruelty, the whole bloodstained panorama of history, into a single vision which then is declared to be but a dream" (Smith 185) is tempting, but this view ignores the mass of material that contradicts Satan's final solipsistic assertion. Since Satan is a product of Theodor's dreaming imagination, we need not accept any of Satan's pronouncements as necessarily convincing, including his final one that nothing exists but the " 'thought' " that has dreamt not only Theodor's story but the universe and everything and everyone in it (742). Satan's words make much more sense and follow the preceding chapters much more coherently when seen as simply the culminating thoughts of the dreaming Theodor.

But one wonders whether a boy could think up the advanced concepts of solipsism, existentialism, and nihilism that Satan puts forth throughout the story. The story of *The Mysterious Stranger*, however, is not told by a boy; it's recounted by Theodor

as an old man, "with a lifetime stretching back between today and then" (705). And Theodor has perhaps embellished, over the span of years, what he originally dreamt (as Hank Morgan does with his manuscript in *A Connecticut Yankee*); the boy Theodor sometimes says things that seem beyond a boy's scope: " 'One cannot compare things which by their nature and by the interval between them are not comparable' " (649). It is possible, then, that Theodor appends the final chapter of this story to his dream, **post-facto**. Still not fully free from the paranoia he's grown up in, Theodor may feel it necessary to include this final "disclaimer" so that he cannot be held responsible for the criticisms of God and man that "Satan" makes.

Near the end of Theodor's dream, Satan spirits him to China, and Theodor says this about it: "It was a tranquil and dreamy picture, beautiful to the eye and restful to the spirit" (691). But then Theodor switches from the past tense to the present conditional, speaking as an older man: "If we could only make a change like that whenever we wanted to, the world would be easier to live in than it is, for change of scene shifts the mind's burdens to the other shoulder and banishes old, shop-worn wearinesses from mind and body both" (691). Theodor knows that man's limits cease in the world of dreams: "It was wonderful, the mastery Satan had over time and distance. *For him* they did not exist" (722) (emphasis mine). But Theodor has also come to realize that "a real world created out of thought is limited by the scope of man's imagination" (Johnson 91). Theodor had a dream, and that dream ended; a frail, human man who gets tired and who knows his limitations, he is back in reality now, and both he and the world exist.

Theodor writes the story of *The Mysterious Stranger* in order to try to recapture his dream; he "should not be able to make any one understand how exciting it all was" (641), but he's tried. He also writes the story to persuade the rest of us to " 'Dream other dreams, and better' " (742). Like the forests and fairy lands of Shakespearean comedy, the dream world in Twain is viable only as a temporary escape from reality, never as a permanent one, and *The Mysterious Stranger* begins where it ends, in a dream state that nevertheless contradicts Satan's final solipsistic assertion.

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NOTES

1.) Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger. The Portable Mark Twain.* Ed. Bernard DeVoto. NY: Penguin, 1987, 631-744.

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