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MARK TWAIN'S USES OF THE MASK

Mark Twain was born in Florida, Missouri in 1835. His career, besides including the writing of fiction, also included work as a printer and journalist with various newspapers. In his early youth he worked for Hannibal Newspapers and later moved alternately between St. Louis and New York. He finally settled in Buffalo on his job as editor of "Express" after his marriage to Olivia Langdon. A few years before his marriage, he also worked as cub-pilot and pilot on Mississippi boats. However a large part of Twain's career was associated with journalism and printing which took him to Europe in his later life. While in Europe on business he lectured in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Austria and England. Unfortunately in the last few years of his life he met with mishaps and difficulties, amongst which was the collapse of his investment in the Paige typesetting machine in 1895. He tried a lecturing tour to Europe to raise funds to pay off his creditors but while he was still in Europe with his wife, their youngest daughter Suzy died of meningitis. A few months later his wife got a stroke which rendered her invalid through the remaining eight years of her life. To his horror Twain also discovered that their daughter Jean was an epileptic. And last but not the least his own health suffered from rheumatism. All his misfortunes however, do not cast a shadow on the books Twain wrote before 1894. It was only in 1895 that the Paige type-setting machine was pronounced a failure and this set in motion a whole chain of misfortunes for Twain.

Twain's success lies in his ability to recapture visual and auditory sensations in his works. By doing this, he creates drama. As will be discussed later in this essay Twain depends on the reader's ear, to achieve the effect of drama and make the reader visualize a scene or event whose appeal has been made through the auditory sensations. Twain benefited, to a large extent, in his use of material and style from the American folk tradition, its use of the vernacular and above all the use of the narrator whose monologue in the vernacular is not only an extension of

speech but includes the life of the whole community. His monologue is not a soliloquy about himself but is a masquerade in that he repeats the mannerisms of several people and sometimes satirizes political institutions by personifying them. Twain absorbed enough facts from his own observation of people in the communities of the South and the mining communities of California and New Mexico and the stories commonly going round. Most of these stories were about current events or based on folklore, told in the vernacular speech. The fact that these stories are told in the vernacular dialect even by Mark Twain's narrator is ironic. The conscious use of vernacular speech is a mask concealing the author's sharper observation but such a mask is for an ironic purpose making it possible for the author to comment on people and institutions without overtly asserting his presence or sounding like a moralist. The moral purpose is still there, but pretending to be naive, the author's narrator can say or indicate more than just the surface reality. For instance the narrator in "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras" is both the "actor and the troupe". He is the substitute for the different characters in the story and he has to make-believe that he is acting for the different characters of the story. He has to concentrate all these in his use of the monologue, relying considerably on his gift for mimicry. This extended speech by one person, or the monologue, covers the behaviour of a number of people and the narrator has to impersonate every one of these people; he assumes various identities pretending to be this, that and the other character and with every character he impersonates, he assumes a new mask. For instance Simon Wheeler alone, in "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras" creates a drama based on two people. He achieves this by frequently masquerading Jim Smiley and the other character in the story, all through the monologue. Besides, his other mask in his feigned innocence:

He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to which he tuned the initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm; but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed me plainly that, so far from his imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about this story, he regarded it as a really important matter, and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in finesse.¹

Far from being innocent Simon Wheeler is making fun of the narrator by making him feel superior to Simon Wheeler; his pretended innocence and naivety is to see through this mask the self-opinionated glee of the narrator who prides himself on his better urban breeding of the East compared to Simon Wheeler's provinciality. The narrator is part of the joke too because he is not aware of the mask Simon Wheeler has assumed, and ironically, he is not aware of it, insisting all the while on Simon Wheeler's

"spectacle of a man drifting serenely along without every smiling"² and thinking how "exquisitely absurd" he is. Simon Wheeler's other mask is his gift of understatement. By "ironic praise" of the pup called Andrew Jackson and Jim Smiley's frog called Daniel Webster he is ridiculing both Andrew Jackson's type of democracy and Daniel Webster's oratory—this being equated in the story with the polished tactics of the jumping frog Daniel Webster. But he is out done by the new frog, Simon Wheeler here, making an understatement of the author's own political bias which was liberal. He also wanted Andrew Jackson and Daniel Webster to be replaced by someone more genuine and forthright. Simon Wheeler's monologue is more complex than it appears, and with the help of the narrator Twain can say all that he has to "in scorn or in pity" to borrow a phrase from Conrad. The use of the mask here gives the author greater latitude enabling him, to speak about institutions and people in the same breath. It is an economy of words and serves for efficiency of style. For instance Simon Wheeler creates the whole drama of Jim Smiley through his use of words, appealing to the reader through the ear and creating a drama of two people whom the reader has never met and all that he knows of Jim Smiley and the other participant is through Simon Wheeler.

The monologue thus becomes an artistic device or the persona the author assumes through a character like Simon Wheeler or the narrator of, for example, "The £1,000,000 Bank Note". Since the monologue is a one-man narrative, it has to use a variation on the rhythm and pitch of the narrator's speech. This speech-drama, as Lowell has pointed out, depends on the Yankee speech which is not so much a dialect but a "lingo" which means that its oddities are consciously assumed

and it is also a form of the masquerade. It would perhaps be something which Twain himself did in his reading of "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras", a manner of narration using:

his slow deliberate drawl, the anxious and perturbed expression of his visage, the apparently painful effort with which he framed his sentences, and above all, the surprise that spread over his face when the audience roared with delight or rapturously applauded the finer passages.

This is another masquerade using the facetiousness of the narrator which is a combination of the Yankee clown or the Yankee pedlar of the folk tradition and the Gentleman. Such a combination of the traditional clown of the folk tradition and the Gentleman is the narrator of "The £1,000,000 Bank Note". There is a yawning gap between the actual facts of the narrator's life and the heights to which he is raised. The narrative has undertones of irony all along, about a young American raised to an unimaginably high position by two English gentlemen. But it is the clown in the narrator who makes the whole spectacle look like a farce in which he uses his native American tradition of the tell-tale. To begin with the existence of the £1,000,000 note is incredible. Of course this is all to point out the absurdity of the Englishman's myth of the American as a hard-working materialist who can make a fortune by sheer dint of his business-like mind and training. And sure enough the narrator-hero of the story does it by trading in the £1,000,000 bank note, without having any cash. However, according to Twain's bias even the English are not free of their social weaknesses. It is believed that when he was young Twain read Paine and Voltaire and grew up with the bias that Europe is decadent. This being proven by the publicity the hero of "The £1,000,000 Bank Note" gets by PUNCH, the minute he is declared rich by the English gentlemen. The narrator-hero who arrives in London almost a pauper dragging himself along Portland Place fastening his desiring eye on the muddy treasure of a luscious big pear, minus one bite into the gutter, is still very democratic in his outlook, refusing to let:

The Duke of Shore-ditch take precedence, and sit at the head of the table, holding that he outranked a minister who represented merely a nation and not a monarch; but I stood for my rights, and refused to yield.³

By caricaturing himself, the narrator is caricaturing the society too and this caricature of himself is again a mask or persona for satirizing.

The other form of mask which Twain assumes in his works is that of the Yankee Clown. The Yankee Clown in other stories of Twain also acts as the Gentleman who is perennially occupied in the American fashion with "number, size and quantity." An example of this is the hero of "The £1,000,000 Bank Note." The hero narrates his experience of falling in love with Portia Langham who he says:

I fell in love within two minutes,
and she with me—I could see it
without glasses.⁴

The humour of this story focuses around, what the author considers are the weaknesses of the English society. It also builds around on instances of the English people's prejudices about the American.

This, incidentally, may be linked with Twain's dislike of Jane Austen, because to him Jane Austen accepted all that was part of the upper middle class English society and its superficial attitudes. She only talked about "marriageableness" and was "sterile in invention". It appears that what Twain dislikes in Jane Austen's works was that she always stands above her character's mind or behaviour. She is eternally present and the consciousness of her presence, the knowledge that she controls every movement of her characters, makes her world view narrow and rather unsympathetic. Twain was very uninhibited in his dislike of Jane Austen and in a letter to Howells he said:

It seems a great pity that they allowed her to die a natural death.

These are of course differences of artistic approach. One must not forget that Twain was a Liberal in politics and a Romantic in art and one of the main reasons for his using the mask is that it is a democratic method which gives the

writer more freedom to dissociate himself from his character and to leave the written material open to interpretation. In his essay on "How to Tell a Story" Twain says that the humorous story, which is the type that the American short-story is, depends on the *manner* of narration while the comic story, the type that the English story is, depends on the *matter*. The humorous story "bubbles gently along." As the language used by the narrator of the humorous story is the language of the ordinary man, he is immediately able to establish a rapport with the reader. The writer of the humorous story projects himself through the narrator who speaks in the vernacular speech. The bond therefore established between the writer and the reader through the medium of the narrator, speaking a colloquial speech, is human and democratic; the experience told by the narrator in ordinary, colloquial speech is understood by more people and the quality of experience is a mutually shared one. Twain, masking himself in the narrator, establishes an effective communication with his readers. The argument can be demonstrated from "Roughing It" and "The Story of the Old Ram", where Mark Twain is the narrator "Mark Twain". Jim Blaine begins to tell the story of the Old Ram to "Mark Twain" and the others. The story is told in the native dialect and whatever the audience receive is from Blaine's memory. There is in fact no story of the Old Ram but disconnected incidents in the mind of Blaine, all humorous in themselves "bubbling gently" as the story moves along. The situation becomes hilarious for the reader the minute he realizes that Jim Blaine is fooling the narrator "Mark Twain" and the others pretending that he is "symmetrically drunk". Assuming further the drunkard's insanity, he begins to tell a number of disconnected stories laying emphasis on the individual characters and not on how these stories are linked. Jim Blaine's pretence of unsoundness of mind is a mask for him to laugh at others ironically. Jim Blaine creates a world of "willing suspension of disbelief" in which he secretly laughs at the miners and they laugh at him. Psychologically they all laugh together.

According to Twain all the characteristics of a humorous story are not to be found in Jane Austen's comic story. Jane Austen bases the structure of her comic story with the intent to ridicule. The technique, therefore, which is employed is that of concentration of language which is sharp and which stings. To under-

stand the meaning of Jane Austen's subtle comicality requires a fine degree of intellect, which in Twain's world, few people have. And to understand the comicality of Jane Austen's stories, the reader has to have deep insight into the life of the upper class English gentry.

Twain's most effective use of the mask has been in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*. *Huckleberry Finn*, which is written in the first person narrative, is an account of Twain's own pursuit of freedom. In both these works he is expressing his own childhood experiences, in trying to escape from the social and religious bondage of the community in which he was being brought up in childhood. The pressures of public opinion which in a closed community dictate the lives of people—as experienced by Twain, in the Southern States of the Mississippi, became a significant theme in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*. The efforts to escape from the strong pressures that Twain suffered in his childhood, are told with sincerity in the adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

The reader gets to know about the community of Missouri entirely from the accounts of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. The minutest details, which these characters give, reflect their claustrophobia. The reader's knowledge of Aunt Polly, Miss Watson, Widow Douglas and Jim the Black slave, all comes through Huckleberry Finn's view of them.

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Huckleberry is the conductor of the masquerade like the early Yankee pedlar. Huckleberry Finn is only a child and therefore his perspective is limited. He will only tell what he sees, which is perhaps the surface reality. For him "telling the truth" is not the same as sincerity, rather it is consistency. Being a child he does not have the maturity to be objective about his own motives nor those of the adults around him. As such he only narrates from a single point of view, which is his own. However, being intelligent, he reproduces the account of surface realities with absolute precision. The mimicry of people's manner of speech, or the description of a landscape is done with perfection by both Huckleberry and Tom Sawyer. Sometimes, Huckleberry exaggerates incidents or relationships to an extent that the reader has to use his judgement to separate the fact from the fiction. An example of it is Huckleberry's account of his Pap and Miss Watson.

In the narrative technique of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, Twain purposely intends his reader to see only half the reality, which is that told by the two boys. The other half of the reality which is the adults point of view is perhaps deliberately withheld because Twain himself seems to concentrate on the theme of childhood, its enthusiasm and naivety expressed in Tom's belief that:

if they lived and were good, God would permit them to become pirates.⁵

In their imprisoned world, the only time Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer retreat to a heaven of idyllic freedom is when they are on the island or when Huckleberry Finn is on the raft on the river with Jim. These are some of the moments when they are free from the pressures of civilization, "Moses and Bulrushes", its masks of inhibitions and suppression. Society, Twain believes, with its taboos and restrictions veils the personality too much—so much so that even clothes become for Huckleberry Finn the trappings holding the real self beneath. The story of *Huckleberry Finn* begins metaphorically with Widow Douglas putting Huckleberry Finn in a garish outfit:

She put me in them new clothes again, and I couldn't do nothing but *sweat* and *sweat* and feel all cramped up.⁶

The book, likewise ends with Huckleberry Finn returning to the same routine, the same place where the Self is screened behind convention:

Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and civilize me, and I can't stand it, I been here before.⁷

In a wider context, Huckleberry Finn's first person narrative and his use of the "I" is to convey, his sharing his experience with a much wider world, that of the Missouri community. And, all the people he met on his voyage up North on the Mississippi, are part of the American consciousness. His "I" is perhaps, as C. Rourke has suggested of Whitman's use of the "I", a disguise which is more than personal. The "I" has the "urgency of many people" the generic quest, if one may say, of the American for freedom and democracy.

End Notes

1. Twain, Mark, "Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County", *American Poetry and Prose*, (Houghton, Mifflin and Co., Boston 1962), p. 681.
2. *Ibid*, p. 681.
3. Twain, Mark, "The £ 1,000,000 Bank Note", *The Mysterious Stranger and Other Stories*, (Signet Classic, 1964), p. 81.
4. *Ibid*, p. 79.
5. Twain, Mark, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, (Charles L. Webster & Co., New York, 1885), p. 66.
6. *Ibid*, p. 18.
7. *Ibid*, p. 366.

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