

LAWRENCE I. BERKOVE and JOSEPH CSICSILA, *Heretical Fictions: Religion in the Literature of Mark Twain* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2010), 271 pp.

For many people, the name “Mark Twain” is synonymous with American humor. Therefore, it is worth noting that this book says very little about humor, in fact the term’s entry in the index is shorter than that on “hell.” Berkove and Csicsila regard Twain’s gift of narrative and humor as simply a surface feature that served to establish and maintain his popular appeal, but does not have enough weight to justify Twain’s status as “one of literature’s most accomplished writers” (xiv). Similarly, the authors pay virtually no attention to the regional and historical dimensions of Twain’s work that are a mainstay of traditional scholarship. Instead, it is their ambition to identify the fundamental values, convictions, and the literary strategies which establish the unifying bond that connects all of Twain’s writings and thus provides a consistency to his work that is the true hallmark of the literary artist. In this endeavor, entertaining episodes of life in the West, adventures along the Mississippi River, the pranks of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, and imaginary excursions into the world of King Arthur are nothing more than means to an end. Twain’s main purpose, the authors contend, is to “expose life as a cruel hoax” (136) and to identify “an ingenious, deceptive, and malevolent” (11) God as its cause.

To substantiate their ideas, Berkove and Csicsila take on the task of explaining how religion, and more specifically Calvinism, served as a powerful, if painful, catalyst for Twain’s literary imagination. The authors’ approach is plausible and promising. In his noteworthy observation about the role of religion in the United States, Tocqueville stated that “there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.”¹ The statement appeared in the American translation of Tocqueville’s book in 1838, three years after the birth of Mark Twain, or rather Samuel Langhorne Clemens, and may serve as a

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America. With an Original Preface and Notes by John C. Spencer* (New York: George Dearborn & Co., 1838) 285. *Internet Archive*. Web. <https://archive.org/stream/democracy_inamer08tocqoog#page/n331/mode/2up>

reminder that nineteenth-century American culture in general, and American literature in particular, unfolded under the influence of a powerful belief system.

In view of this situation it may be surprising to see that, as Berkove and Csicsila note in their introductory chapter, the topic of religion has been “mentioned in Twain studies” (3), but has rarely been pursued with sufficient intensity.² It is perhaps a telling sign that even *A Companion to Mark Twain*, a standard reference book from 2005, does not feature an essay on the topic.³ That the authors of the present volume felt the need to supplement the existing literature with their own critical observations has nothing to do with the quality of the previous publications which they, in fact, acknowledge as valuable sources of inspiration. It is in the approach to the topic that separates them from their predecessors. Whereas previous studies tended to emphasize historical and biographical aspects, Berkove and Csicsila choose to focus their attention and their interpretive skills on Twain’s literary texts. Convinced that Twain manipulated biographical materials in an attempt to conceal those of his views that might have offended his reading public, they believe that only a thorough and informed analysis of Twain’s fiction can provide the key to his hidden beliefs and thus shed light on the foundations of his literary art (8).

Their endeavor is further motivated by a situation which they experience as unsatisfac-

² The list of in-depth studies of the role of religion in the works of Mark Twain includes the following titles: Harold K. Bush, *Mark Twain and the Spiritual Crisis of His Age* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2007); Cyril Clemens, *Mark Twain’s Religion* (Webster Groves Mo: International Mark Twain Society, 1935); Allison Ensor, *Mark Twain & the Bible* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1969); Joe B. Fulton, *The Reverend Mark Twain: Theological Burlesque, Form, and Content* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006); John Q. Hays, *Mark Twain and Religion: A Mirror of American Eclecticism* (New York: P. Lang, 1989); William C.S. Pellowe, *Mark Twain, Pilgrim from Hannibal* (Philadelphia: R. West, 1945); William E. Phipps, *Mark Twain’s Religion* (Macon GA: Mercer UP, 2003).

³ Peter B. Messent and Louis J. Budd (eds.), *A Companion to Mark Twain* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005).

tory: In the history of Twain scholarship, critics have given divided testimony on the merits of Twain's books. Although some of his works have received praise for their narrative power and topical relevance, they have also been criticized for supposed technical defects. Secondly, Berkove and Csicsila take issue with the fragmentary and contradictory nature of Twain criticism. The existence of multiple interpretations means that "they cannot all be true" and they also make it impossible to see that "Twain's artistry was somehow more sophisticated and integrated than the constantly changing state of biography suggested" (xiv). Based on the contention that "religion was a main concern of Twain's during his entire life" (1), they proceed to reveal to the reader that there is "unity of purpose and consistency in Twain's literature" (xv). This unity, they claim, is provided by a "sense of the *ultimate* relationship of humanity and God to each other." According to the two authors, this is "the common theme of all his literature" (2). More specifically, the keystone to Twain's writings is his conviction "that *because of God's malice* life is deceitful and humans are not meant to achieve in it their dearest goals of freedom, happiness, and fulfillment" (2). It is the essence of what the two authors call his "countertheology" (a term they borrow from Stanley Brodwin),⁴ the personal creed that emerged from Twain's antagonism to the theology which had dominated his life since his boyhood days.

To argue their case, Berkove and Csicsila first lay out their premises, define their terms, and supply the necessary background information for an understanding of the Calvinism that was the driving force for Twain's intellectual and moral struggle. In chapter one, the reader learns that Calvinist dogma was imposed on him during his childhood in Hannibal, Missouri, and that it stayed with him throughout his entire life. "The religious folly you are born in you will *die* in," Twain explained in an 1884 letter to William Dean Howells (9). Nevertheless, Twain resented Calvinism—he regarded its rules as unfair, deceptive, and cruel. He could never understand why and how a supposedly benevolent God

⁴ Stanley Brodwin, "Mark Twain's Theology: The Gods of a Brevet Presbyterian," *Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain*, ed. Forrest G. Robinson (New York: Cambridge UP) 233.

would punish his creation for committing acts which resulted not from free will, but were preordained. Despite his resentment of Calvinist thought, he was never able to free himself from its impact and it manifested itself in the following tenets of his countertheology: (1) God exists, but He is malevolent; (2) human existence is an evanescent phenomenon, a dream; (3) the "Moral Sense" is an agent of human degradation; (4) the human race is inherently corrupt; (5) virtue is impossible, therefore humans cannot be saved; (6) predestination makes human freedom impossible; (7) most humans are so depraved that they deserve to go to hell; (8) there is no escape from predestination, God will never change His mind; and (9) human conscience serves only as a device to create inner turmoil and suffering.

In the following six chapters, *Heretical Fictions* turns to the texts which the authors selected as their primary sources to support and illustrate their ambitious claims. Berkove and Csicsila focus on Twain's major fiction; they leave travel books and minor writings aside (6-7).

Chapter two, on *Roughing It* (1872), makes the case that the book has been misunderstood and underestimated as an entertaining but insufficiently organized travel book. In reality, the authors argue, it is an "artful work of fiction" (35) whose intricate structure, intellectual power, and central theme justify calling it a "novel" (38). In their intensive analysis of the book, the authors identify and draw attention to previously overlooked literary techniques such as the use of "detached sketches" (29), the "misleading past tense" (31), the "layered style" (55) and the "diverted target" (56). Most importantly, under the influence of the "Sagebrush School" Twain becomes a master of the literary hoax and develops it to a new level of artistry (28). As a matter of fact, the hoax constitutes the central element in *Roughing It* because it also serves to trick his readers into accepting the illusory attractions of travel and life in the Far West. In the final analysis, the book is revealed to be "a work which bleakly surveys life as rigged by predestination and the vain dream of evading God's doom" (30). As such, it can be regarded as the early entry point into the distinctive thematic pattern that became characteristic for the fiction of Twain's most creative period.

The chapter devoted to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) continues and advances

previous critical attempts to move the book away from its reputation as simply an entertaining boys book and to establish it as a serious work of fiction. This is achieved by an intensive and detailed analysis of illustrative textual examples which highlight patterns of violence, horror, and despair, culminating in a portrait of life in a repressive small town. In contrast to the predominant readings of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as a nostalgic depiction of a boyhood idyll, the present interpretation suggests an unsettling vision of human life that is brought about by a religious creed that denies the possibility of escape from a hopeless destiny (79).

Like its two preceding chapters, the chapter on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) seeks to distance itself from most of the traditional readings of the novel. While Berkove and Csicsila acknowledge that the book is concerned with freedom, they reject the notion, originally advanced by Leo Marx, that it affirms freedom and claim that the last ten chapters fail to adequately sustain the main theme (83). By way of a systematic and cogent argumentation the two authors explain why, at the end of the book, neither Huck nor Jim are truly free. Their reading shows that Huck is “steadily debased and forced to relinquish the maturity, humanity, and independent personality he had begun to achieve” (103). “Lighting out for the Territory,” that is, escaping to the American West to find freedom, was a romantic idea but definitely not a solution that could provide a convincing conclusion to the problems and dilemmas Huck had encountered throughout the narrative. The section that explains why the idea of Jim’s freedom was equally misleading is perhaps even more important for contradicting the claim that the book illustrates a road to freedom. With reference to the historical facts, the authors point out that Jim was not a free man, but a free man of color—an important distinction which meant that Jim was still vulnerable to all kinds of white aggression (103). As a consequence, Berkove and Csicsila propose that the book “is best read as a novel which depicts the impossibility of any meaningful measure of freedom for any of its characters” (84). Once this realization has sunk in, the supposed thematic inconsistencies are resolved and reveal themselves as features of a coherent, if tragic vision of human existence. Like in the previous examples, the authors insist that Twain, through his use of humor and entertaining de-

tail, hampered the audience’s ability to grasp the true essence of his narrative. Although Twain provided them with a sufficient amount of clues to understand that there was no way for a happy ending, his readers tended to cling to the romantic surface level of the text.

The discussion of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) in chapter 5 constitutes the next exhibit in the endeavor to illustrate the impact of Twain’s countertheology on his writing. Crediting the novel with a “deeper organizing design than has been noticed” (110) and an effective technique of “narrative indirection” (111), Berkove and Csicsila dispense with unfavorable evaluations of the novel that have been directed against its alleged disjunctive structure. Similarly, they oppose the frequently held belief that the protagonist, Hank Morgan, represents Twain’s values and his attitudes toward progress. Supported by their intensive reading of relevant passages, the authors build a case for their argument that the novel is “constructed around a tragic vision of universal damnation” (125) and that the hellish environment depicted in the book “is the common lot of humanity” (136). They argue that there was never a chance for Hank Morgan to actually succeed in reforming and improving the medieval world with the help of his supposedly more advanced and superior knowledge and skills from the nineteenth century. By extension and in complete agreement with the bleak convictions deriving from his brand of Calvinist thinking, Twain presented his readers with a view of life as a cruel deception and a “grim and mirthless hoax contrived of false hopes” (151).

The discussion of *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* (composed between 1902-1908 and published posthumously) in chapter 6 shows a temporary diminution of Twain’s gloomy outlook on life. The chapter draws on the work of William James to argue that Twain’s interest in the emerging science of psychology offered a temporary alternative to the writer’s adherence to a Calvinist-inspired world-view. As is evidenced in the final chapter, in which the two authors engage with a selection of his late writings, Twain ultimately returned to his Calvinist countertheology. In their analysis of “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg,” “The Second Advent,” “The Great Dark,” a collection of texts based on Adam and Eve, *What is Man?*, and “Letters from the Earth,” Berkove and Csicsila bring their project to a conclusion. Although they identify “The Man

That Corrupted Hadleyburg” as “the high water-mark for Twain antipathy for humankind” (196), they also notice that the writer’s view of humanity now made room for a slightly more compassionate attitude. As “Letters from the Earth” dwells upon the actions of an unjust and cruel God, humans appeared as helpless victims who deserved pity and sympathy.

In their final paragraph, the authors conclude that Twain was neither an atheist nor a misanthrope. They see him as an individual entrapped by a powerful religious creed, one that had terrible implications for the notions of human freedom and happiness. As he witnessed the clash between human hopes and ideals, on the one hand, and a reality dominated by injustice and undeserved suffering caused by a pitiless divine scheme on the other, Twain felt compelled to “describe reality as he saw it in practice” (213). It was a desperate attempt to “[bring] light to humankind” (214) and relieve his fellow humans from their mistaken notions of what life was about. It is here that Berkove and Csicsila locate the central key for an understanding of Twain’s work and an adequate appreciation of his art.

Based on the most thorough acquaintance with a large body of primary material, supported by a deep familiarity with the significant scholarship in the field, aware of the relevant contextual factors, and sustained by solid evidence and convincing arguments, *Heretical Fictions* is a major addition to Mark Twain studies. Students will appreciate the rigorous textual work and the jargon-free language; scholars will be rewarded by the challenging insights and the ambitious claims set forth by two experts with an impeccable reputation in their field. Although the chapters are designed to build up and support the overarching argument of the book, they will also provide illuminating insights and supplement more traditional readings when they are read individually. As one of the rare attempts to undertake the ambitious endeavor to reveal the intellectual and ideological core that lends unity and substance to Mark Twain’s writings, *Heretical Fictions* clearly deserves a place on the shelves of academic and private libraries alike.

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