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MARK TWAIN AND THE MAGAZINE WORLD

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We literary scholars have our opportunistic streak. For the Anglo-Saxon period we study any scrap of writing on any subject; if carbon dating gets more precise we will explicate the rocks. For the eighteenth century we revel in political or religious pamphlets and welcome any sort of newspaper or magazine that we can dredge up. For the nineteenth century, though, we can find enough "serious," that is, esthetically self-conscious, literature so that we take only minor interest in popular fiction and then only if published or reprinted in hard covers. For Mark Twain we generally stick to his books written once he achieved that stage in his career, and we keep trying to minimize the fact that he was incorrigibly a humorist.

Many a literary scholar underestimates the unique cultural function that current magazines serve, even for himself or herself today. All but the sternly specialized magazines cross-section the enveloping culture; through them an intellectualized reader reaches far down the range of subject matter while assuming or even insisting that he or she consumes only high culture; for instance our typical colleague picks up Playboy for a short story by or an interview with an established author but, while at it, browses most of the other contents. In Twain’s day the choice among magazines that a respectable citizen could read openly was much skimpier near the raunchy extreme; in the main, middle range, the parlor table magazines, more diligently than today, tried hard to function as an educative digest for readers who had graduated above the tabloid newspapers. For Twain the magazine world had three lines of importance that nobody has looked at intensively. One of those lines, the development of his critical reputation, has been examined unimaginatively and therefore misleadingly. Second, nobody has paid close attention to Twain’s reading in periodicals; again, we primarily focus on his reading of books though, as Alan Gribben’s recent, massive study Mark Twain’s Library (1980) proves, he was a steady, rapt consumer of the leading magazines. Third, Twain wrote regularly and painstakingly for the magazines. Yet, revealingly, we don’t even have a finding list of his contributions, a list that would pose few problems for anybody who thought it worth the trouble of compiling it. Though I don’t predict any startling discoveries, there are sound reasons for looking closely into
Twain’s relationship with the magazine world of his time.

He explicitly distinguished that world as occupying the middle steps of a status ladder between newspapers and the realm of books, which held the upside of course. In the early stage of his career he had been highly conscious of his first step above the bottom rungs. With a relaxed self-irony validated by success he recalled in 1899 his eagerness to break into *Harper’s Monthly*: “In my view, a person who published things in a mere newspaper could not properly claim recognition as a Literary Person: he must rise away above that; he must appear in a magazine. He would then be a Literary Person; also, he would be famous — right away.” Earlier in the 1890’s, undeniably famous but desperate for ready cash, Twain decided that he would rather appear in magazines though the press syndicates were offering him twice as much pay. In one instance he was willing to take less even from the awkwardly named *Ladies’ Home Journal* than from a newspaper.

Unsurprisingly he also made qualitative distinctions among magazines. In the postbellum decades the question of relative status among them not only had sharper cultural import than today but involved a much greater variety of general-interest monthlies. Available studies of Twain’s critical reputation have not tried to determine who read what magazines for what purposes — essentially an intractable problem, I must admit. In 1864 Twain was gleeful that, from a San Francisco magazine that wasn’t “high-toned enough,” he had moved up to the *Californian*, which circulated “among the highest class in the community” and had an “exalted reputation in the east.” In 1867 he regretted the need to earn publicity through the New York *Weekly Review*, which dealt in pulp fiction: “Like all other papers that pay one splendidly it circulates among stupid people and the *canaille*.” This arrogance was soon matched with a humility toward the “awful respectability” of the *Atlantic Monthly*, which “goes to only ... the select high few.” Throughout Twain’s career he never ridiculed either the quality or the cultural mission of the triumvirate that dominated literate households — the *Atlantic, Harper’s Monthly*, and the *Century*. In 1884 he assured an interviewer: “The literary productions which fill the pages of the magazines now-a-days are greatly superior to those of former years.”

Twain took seriously the challenge to sustain the “wonderful advance” in quality. Having negotiated a contract in 1870 to contribute to the then respected *Galaxy*, he explained: “I just came to the

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conclusion that I would quit turning my attention to making money especially & go to writing for enjoyment as well as profit. I needed a *Magazine* wherein to shovel any fine-spun stuff that might accumulate in my head, & which isn’t entirely suited to either a daily, weekly, or *any* kind of newspaper.” The *Galaxy*, it turned out, insisted on billing him on its front cover as the Great Humorist, although he was determined to establish a wider scale of notes. In spite of a tug of war with the editor’s plans for him he bubbled a few months later that he “would rather write for a magazine for $2 a page than for a newspaper at $10.” He insisted: “I *would*. One takes more pains, the ‘truck’ looks nicer in print, & one has a pleasanter audience.” A reverse case of taking pains is exhibited in a letter of 1873 explaining why a projected piece could not appear as a magazine article: “I wanted to seem deeply in earnest & greatly concerned, & one can’t pretend all that with grace in a magazine when it is plain a writer has a month in which to chaw over.”

That last figure leads to a letter of March 1895 in which Twain, still hard up for money after his recent bankruptcy, refused a commission from the *North American Review*, protesting he “couldn’t undertake an article at ten day’s limit. That’s for [Max] O’Rell’s kind — the kind that *puke* an article & think it’s literature.” Slapdash Twain may have been, but he didn’t think he was, once he liberated himself from the revolving deadline of a daily newspaper. Nor did he take so portentous a view as we do of the pile of manuscripts he left behind. In 1902 he advised a beginner that in writing for periodicals it is necessary to reject four out of five of one’s own articles, and he went on: “... there is a ton of ms. in my study, to show how many times I got ahead of the magazine editors without their knowing it.” Twain’s insistence on quality in his magazine writings strengthens the still disputed case for the craftsmanship of his books.

Yet, as elsewhere with Twain, his standards had to make peace with his practical sense. In 1898 he lectured Edward Bok of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* on why the part of his autobiography completed so far “would not answer for your *Magazine*. Indeed a good deal of it is written in too independent a fashion for a magazine. One may publish a book & print whatever his family shall approve & allow to pass, but it is the Public that edit a *Magazine*, & so by the sheer necessities of the case a magazine’s liberties are rather limited.” The distinction here probably distorted and certainly oversimplified the realities of marketing his own books, but at least it restated his ponderous regard for
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the world of periodicals. His practice indicates that he thought broad humor more suitable for either newspapers or hard covers. Determined to have his article “Mental Telegraphy” received solemnly he tried to persuade the sober North American Review to accept it; next he offered it to the Century signed simply by S. Langhorne, with pay no object. At a lower level of practicality, during his whole career but especially during the 1870's and the 1890's he followed the principle of, as he put it, not appearing in the “full glare of the big magazines too often.” He suggested this principle to Joel Chandler Harris in 1881: “My idea would be to print one yarn in the magazine every 3 months & thus keep before the public & at the same time keep the public unsatisfied; but I wouldn’t let them have such generous meals as you have been giving them. — For the ficklest people in the world are the public.”

The mildest surprise I can spring is that, on the most practical level, Twain bargained hard for his pay, measuring himself competitively against Bret Harte in the 1870's and Charles Dudley Warner in the 1890's. Feeling flush in 1882, he could brag casually that James Osgood “sells my occasional magazine rubbish at figures which make me blush, they are so atrocious.” Actually Twain was a far less embarrassed haggler than Osgood. Of course he got paid so well because he was a star, proclaimed as such by the response of readers. John Brisben Walker, owner of the Cosmopolitan, so appreciated the two such rounds of response as to add hefty bonuses to the contracted price. By the 1890's the big magazines considered Henry James a sort of loss leader — to use department store or supermarket language —but perhaps the phrase is misleading because he made the circulation department nervous; though James recognized that his highbrow prestige was the key item being bought, he awkwardly tried to adjust his stories to a changing market. During the same years Twain did much of his finest writing for the magazines while also conducting his hardest bargaining — a connection that felt natural to him.

In 1893 he maneuvered against the editor of the Century: “You do not suggest a price. I do not venture to suggest prices any more, because on the three occasions when I made the attempt the editors were shocked. They gave me to understand that I was degrading my art to a trade.” The business manager of the Century undoubtedly encouraged paying premium rates for the right pieces. Not only did a Twain story or essay boom any issue, but he enthusiastically accepted the imperatives of promotion, the ads loaded with superlatives and
—as was the practice then — the striking posters. Accepted is an understatement. To encourage still lustier publicity, in January 1893 he wrote to the Century about its posters for “The £1,000,000 Bank-Note”: “It is the most variegated and extraordinary explosion of advertising I have encountered in my lifetime. Yes, and the most ingenious and seductive and beguiling, too — for it made me go and get that article and read it myself, it so inflamed my curiosity to know what it was all about.”12 After he had negotiated hefty prices, his notebooks kept track of payment received, and an editor’s cashflow problems simply moved Twain to dun for his money.

It was inevitable that some magazine would want to pay him well as a figurehead. After all, in 1898 he was offered ten thousand dollars to endorse a tobacco. Given his success it was also reasonable to assume he had a great editorial touch. Between 1885 and 1893, that is, up until his bankruptcy, he looked like a genius as a publisher of books sold by subscription. As early as 1886 (details are vague) he may have been offered some connection with a projected British magazine that would publish here also — the transatlantic angle seemed a natural to several entrepeneurs between 1880 and World War I. In 1892 the two journalists starting up the Idler magazine approached him, but “his idea of the proper division of the profits left absolutely nothing for anyone else.”

By the late 1890’s he had such eminence that nobody with common sense expected to put him in harness. The American comic weekly Puck made an offer of $10,000 a year for not more than an hour of work each week. There is more comedy than we have time to elicit in the fact that the erratic, self-assured, and impulsive S. S. McClure opened negotiations in 1899 about editing a monthly to be named first The Universal and then, more modestly, The American. After McClure aroused Twain by talking big money, the deal was slowly defused by skeptical advisers on both sides until McClure, who had dangled an accelerating salary from the profits for practically no work, set down a dismaying list of duties of editing a bigtime monthly. Twain had gone so far as to send McClure his editorial philosophy in a statement which sounds as if he intended it to serve as a press release. Its operative message was, “This is not to be a comic magazine. It is to be simply a good, clean, wholesome collection of well-written & enticing literary products ... not setting itself to please but one of man’s moods, but all of them.”13 Though going on to reach for the levy just renounced, Twain also probably spoke from the heart in declaring
that in the course of being “edited by all kinds of people for more than thirty-eight years” he had “often longed to move up from the dock to the bench.”

Only unintended comedy enters Twain’s single attempt to found a periodical on his own. His special angle seems so dull that I can’t comprehend why he was positive it would sell. To penetrate his reasons we would have to discuss him as a lifelong devotee of newspapers and as a homegrown intellectual who insisted that he enjoyed books on history of any period. Right now we have to settle for registering that in 1899 he observed: “by some subtle law all tragic human experiences gain in pathos by the perspective of time.”

Astonishingly, while his publishing firm was collapsing in 1893 he confided to his assistant that just as soon as its income improved, “we will start a magazine — inexpensive,” and he added the favorite note of founders of periodicals, namely, that it would be “of an entirely unique sort.” He may have been right this time. The J. Pierpont Morgan Library holds the holograph manuscript of his prospectus, with a formal covering page, for The Back Number. A monthly, it would gamble on his conviction that “news is news, and that dates have little or nothing to do with its interest.” Therefore The Back Number would commit itself entirely to “news of irresistible interest and vitality” culled from the “immemorial yesterdays of all time,” though the Chicago fire of 1873 served as his example. He had in mind such catastrophes, battles, and other gripping events. He claimed to have been nursing the idea impatiently for twenty-five years. Experience has taught me to mistrust my sense of which new magazine will flourish, but so far as I know, nobody has even tried out Twain’s idea, much less made it work.

Somewhat guiltily he waited for an auspicious moment to spring it on H. H. Rogers, his financial adviser who was struggling to stave off his bankruptcy. But he actively tried to find a backer. Also, after first intending to serve as editor, he decided to line up his nephew Samuel E. Moffett. Financial pressure soon canceled his plans, but not for good. In January 1902, his solvency and self-confidence restored, he informed Moffett that after a “searching meditation” he had “absolutely decided to start the magazine” and that he wanted Moffett, by then a topflight New York City journalist, to keep himself available. He closed, “I have perfected my scheme now, & I shan’t have to put up any capital myself.” Yet nobody else put it up either, and by August he wrote to Moffett much more meekly, “No, I don’t think I shall ever give
up the 'Stale News' till I'm obliged to."15 That Twain should invent or repeat the sound parody of his original title is defiant but intriguing. We have to wonder why Twain, a modernist go-getter and a seismograph for public ridicule, had stuck to the title of Back Number, a colloquial slur. Still it soon truly fitted a dead idea, which he memorialized in his autobiographical dictations of January 1906. Once more he insisted (with a somewhat new focus) on the fascination of eyewitness accounts, which can a century later engross the reader as much as "any news he will find in the newspapers of his day."

As an investor, Twain was a notorious optimist, a both dangerous and necessary posture for anybody in the publishing business. The strength of the human instinct to hope is regularly demonstrated by a decision to found still another magazine. Is the fact that Twain never proposed to start up a humorous magazine surprising or is it proof that even his optimism as entrepreneur had more balance than we commonly recognize? In 1903 Twain and a British humorist drolled about a magazine to be called The Obituary — the scheme was to show dignitaries how their final sendoff would read and blackmail them into paying for a kinder one. This angle was more practical than The Back Number at least.

Nevertheless, ridicule of Twain as a publisher can easily go too far. Overall he made a triumphant career of gauging public taste. He was typically early to encourage the idea of a digest or, in this case, a "review of reviews," observing in 1890 that with so many new periodicals "some swift way of getting at their nuggets without having to pan out their whole mass has become a kind of necessity."16 The Reader's Digest, if not its predecessors, validates that judgment financially. Twain's spirit might also draw consolation from the fact that today a bimonthly and a quarterly newsletter and a small quarterly journal are devoted to him. The bad news, he might add, is that none of them looks like a moneymaker.

NOTES

1 "My Debut as a Literary Person," Century Magazine, 59(1899), 76.


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4 Mark Twain to Mrs. Fairbanks, ed. Dixon Wecter (San Marino, 1949), pp. 128, 132.

5 Letter of 12 June 1873 to G. Fitzgibbon, in Mark Twain Papers. Previously unpublished materials by Mark Twain are © 1981 by Edward J. Willi and Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company as trustees of the Mark Twain Foundation, and are published with the permission of the University of California Press and Robert H. Hirst, General Editor of the Mark Twain Project in Berkeley, California. All citations of such material are identified by the following symbol: (†).

6 Letter of 9 March (1895) to (Lloyd) Brice, in MTP (†).

7 Letter of 14 November 1902 to Emily G. Hutchings, in MTP (†).

8 Letter of 10 October 1898 to Edward Bok, in MTP (†).

9 Mark Twain to Uncle Remus, ed. Thomas H. English (Atlanta, [1935]), p. 11.

10 Greville MacDonald, George MacDonald and His Wife (New York, 1924), p. 458.

11 Letter of 6 November 1893 to Richard Watson Gilder, PH in MTP (†).

12 Quoted in William W. Ellsworth, A Golden Age of Authors (Boston, 1919), pp. 229-230.

13 Quoted in A. B. Paine, Mark Twain: A Biography (New York 1912), II, 1100-1101.


15 Letters of 31 January and 26 August 1902 to Samuel E. Moffett, in MTP (†).

16 Letter of 17 March 1890 to William T. Stead, in MTP (†).