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A Review

Penance or Pedophilia: Mark Twain and the Aquarium

J. KENT CALDER

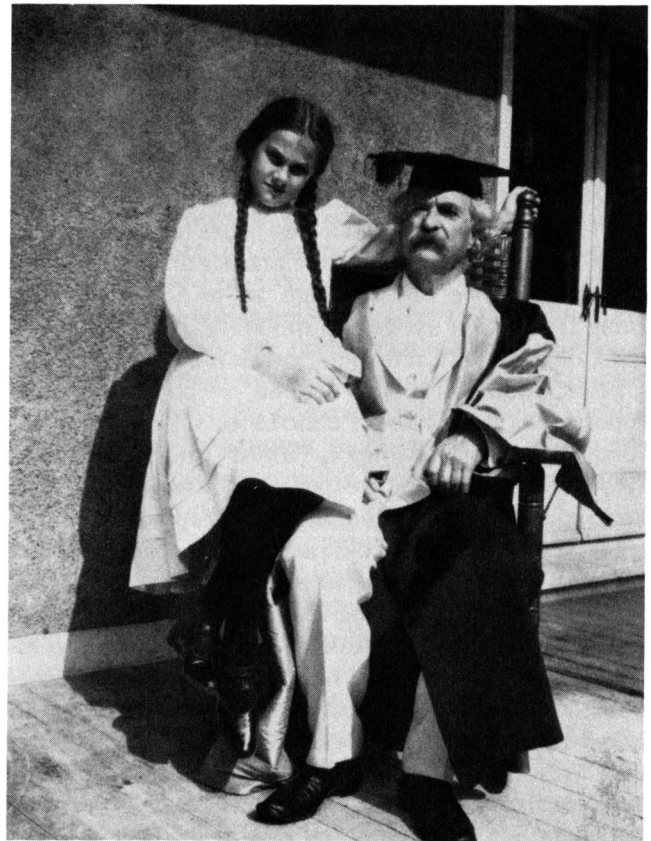
Mark Twain's Aquarium: The Samuel Clemens Angelfish Correspondence, 1905-1910. Edited by John Cooley. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1991. Pp. xxviii, 297. \$24.95.

In July of 1908 Samuel Clemens wrote to twelve-year-old Margaret Blackmer of New York:

I was wondering what was become of you, you dear little angel-fish, & was very glad to find out by your letter, which came an hour or two ago. I hoped and believed I should hear from you before very long. My fishes are good and faithful correspondents. There are 12 of them, & two days seldom go by without a letter from one or another of them. . . . My house is named "Innocence at Home" & it is the angel-fishes that are to furnish the innocence, though the public don't know that.

It isn't the public's affair. (185-86)

Innocence at Home was Clemens's sprawling new home, built in the style of an Italian villa by William Dean Howells's son, John, on 248 acres near Redding, Connecticut. The seventy-three-year-old author had originally intended to call it Autobiography House because he paid for it with royalties from the serial publication of his autobiography in George Harvey's *North American Review*, but he changed the name to account for his new hobby, which he described in an autobiographical dictation of 12 February 1908:



Dorothy Quick and Samuel Langhorne Clemens, Tuxedo Park, New York, August 1907. Clemens wears the scarlet robe of his honorary doctorate, which Oxford University had conferred upon him two months before this picture was taken. Photograph courtesy of the University of Georgia Press and the Mark Twain Project, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

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As for me, I collect pets: young girls—girls from ten to sixteen years old; girls who are pretty and sweet and naive and innocent—dear young creatures to whom life is a perfect joy and to whom it has brought no wounds, no bitterness, and few tears. My collection consists of gems of the first water. (xvii)

At the time of this dictation, Clemens had just returned from a trip to Bermuda, during which he had added Blackmer to a collection that already contained three. During his next trip to Bermuda in March, Clemens was awed by the beauty of the angelfish he found in a large aquarium on the island, and he decided to formalize his collecting efforts by creating the Aquarium Club and designating its members angelfish. By April the club had ten members, and by June it contained twelve. For the next two years, until his death on 21 April 1910, Clemens poured an extraordinary amount of energy and emotion into the numerous letters he wrote to the M.A.s (Members of the Aquarium). Indeed, these letters comprised more than half of Clemens's total correspondence for 1908. As he became increasingly pessimistic about the world of adults and as his relationships with his family crumbled, Clemens immersed himself in an artificial world of schoolgirl innocence and adulation.

This world comes to life in this useful new volume edited by John Cooley, a professor of English at Western Michigan University. Cooley learned of the Aquarium Club through letters in the possession of his second cousin, Marjorie Breckenridge, an M.A., and his ensuing fascination led him to the Mark Twain Papers at the University of California, Berkeley, and to other significant Twain collections around the country in such repositories as New York Public Library, Columbia University Library, Huntington Library, and Yale University Library. The resulting compilation of approximately three hundred entries represents "nearly every known written communication between Samuel Clemens and the young women who constituted his Aquarium Club, including letters, telegrams, personal notes, cards, and inscriptions" (xi). The editor also includes pertinent material on the angelfish from notebooks and autobiographical dictations. This book is an important addition to recent biographical studies that deal with Clemens's turbulent last decade. While the author's preoccupation with schoolgirls has been well documented, its biographical significance is still open to debate.¹ The orthodox view, first promulgated by authorized biographer Albert Bigelow Paine, is that the zealous pursuit of little girls by Clemens was "just another of the harmless and happy diversions of his gentler side." In *My Father Mark Twain*, Clara Clemens dodged the subject by writing that her father "loved almost all children and had a charming way with them that quickly won their affection in return. . . . This feel-

ing increased as he grew older." Later biographers followed this lead, explaining Clemens's interest in young girls as the means by which the aging author sought to recapture his youth or relieve the grief he felt from the death of his daughter Susy in 1896. John DeLancey Ferguson put it this way in *Mark Twain: Man and Legend*: "In his increasing loneliness he found the greatest happiness in the company of children, little girls for choice." Edward Wagenknecht offered this explanation in *Mark Twain: The Man and His Work*: "But after his own girls had grown up or died, he turned to other little girls for solace, as if through them he wished to recapture the past." None of these discussions dealt with even the implicit sexuality of such relationships.²

Hamlin Hill's *Mark Twain: God's Fool*, published in 1973, significantly altered these traditional interpretations of Clemens's last years. "Until Hill's biography appeared," writes John Cooley in his introduction to *Mark Twain's Aquarium*, "it was possible to believe that Clemens remained, until his final illness, the 'king' of American humor—a devoted family man and playful public cynic, passing gracefully into retirement and old age" (xvii). Hill chronicles the disintegration of the Clemens family after the death of wife and mother Olivia in 1904. Clemens's daughters, Clara and Jean, writes Hill, "both developed symptoms to fascinate a clinical psychiatrist, of which their estrangement from their father was only the most obvious and most enduring manifestation." He details the many business and literary disputes, the wild financial speculation, the unpredictable behavior, and the failing creative abilities that plagued Clemens at the end of his life. In so doing, he does not ignore the implications that Clemens's conduct with respect to the angelfish verged on the unseemly:

Although Clemens had said as early as 1866, "Young girls innocent & natural—I love 'em same as others love infants," his interest in the Angel Fish was more than avuncular, was even—in those final months when his mind tended to wander, his memory lapsed, and symptoms of senility became obvious—latently sexual.

Yet, in the same breath, Hill is also willing to ascribe Clemens's love of young girls to a need to recapture a more innocent time in the past when the author "was still an object of adoration and obedience" to his young daughters.³

More recent biographical criticism places Clemens's relationships with young girls and preoccupation with innocence in a harsher light. In *The Man Who Was Mark Twain: Images and Ideologies*, Guy Cardwell gives this behavior a name—pedophilia—and attributes it to Clemens's impotence and feelings of guilt:

That Clemens felt guilt because he masturbated as a boy (and possibly as a man) would seem to be certain; and it is probable that he became more

or less impotent at about the age of fifty, which, if true, may have heightened his guilt at having practiced masturbation. His fear of women's sexuality has seemed obvious to many; and it would relate to his stress on purity, his probable impotence, his pedophilia, his essentially misogynist tracts, and his fondness for jokes aggressing against women.

These assertions follow a series of compelling arguments involving Clemens's lifelong interest in virginal innocence, his association of adult sexuality with worldly corruption, and his conformity to a pattern in Victorian culture. According to Cardwell, Clemens formed clubs whose members consisted of young girls as early as 1877 and early on placed a value on sexual purity that was abnormal even by Victorian standards. His need to associate with adolescent girls became an obsession after the death of his wife and after his speculating was curtailed. "That it was indeed an obsession," says Cardwell, "was either concealed or went unrecognized until recently."⁴

Though Cooley prefaces his edition of angelfish correspondence with the statement that "readers unfamiliar with the angelfish period of Samuel Clemens's life may be surprised, perhaps even appalled, at the three hundred known letters Clemens wrote to or received from schoolgirls and the extent to which girls occupied his thoughts during the last five years of his life" (ix), and though the editor acknowledges his debt to Hamlin Hill for his unflinching portrait of Clemens's last decade, Cooley clearly falls within the category of sheltering commentators on this subject. Recognizing the bleakness of these final years for Clemens, brought about by the death of his daughter Susy in 1896, the diagnosis of daughter Jean's epilepsy in the same year, Olivia's death in 1904, and the general deterioration of his health and literary abilities, Cooley finds it "remarkable" that Clemens would have the wherewithal "to write hundreds of playful, loving letters to schoolgirls" (xviii). The angelfish represent the cheerful side of what Cooley calls Clemens's "polarized state of mind" (xxv). Aware of his own pessimism and rage, says Cooley, Clemens created an alternative environment of "happiness, innocence, and youthfulness, which he set against the ever painful reality of his life" (xix).

Grouped together in one volume as they are here, the letters to young girls do display an almost heroic effort to escape from reality. And though they may serve as a counterpoint to the misanthropy Clemens felt in these years by exhibiting, as Cooley says, "ample evidence of his love for certain individuals" (xxvi), the baby-talk letters pleading for visits and attention also reveal a man of colossal vanity whose actions are barely within the realm of acceptable behavior. Cooley provides a good deal of context for the letters in his introduction and afterword and in his introductions to

the five individual chapters, but he leaves out much that might place Clemens's actions in a negative light. All of the editor's explanations are in the vein of portraying the Aquarium Club as one of what A. B. Paine called the "harmless and happy diversions" of a kindly old literary man seeking to find lost youth.

In a number of places where speculation or elaboration seems to be appropriate, Cooley ignores the opportunity. Admitting that "Twain had difficulty with issues of sex and sexuality in his writing and generally avoided them" (xxiv), the editor goes on to discuss the author's creation of an image of perfect innocence in *Joan of Arc*. He offers nothing to the reader concerning the possible causes of this difficulty or its other manifestations. Also, the editor mentions that daughter Clara Clemens was obviously "no admirer" of the angelfish in order to explain why no letters exist from them after her return to the Redding house on 8 September 1908, but he does not examine the reasons for such feelings (177). Moreover, in his efforts to provide the reader with pertinent angelfish material in this volume, he does not see fit to include quotations from Isabel Lyon's diary and Elizabeth Wallace's *Mark Twain and the Happy Island* that have appeared in Hill and elsewhere in this context. In a diary entry of 28 February 1908, before her relations with the Clemens family soured and while she was still the patriarch's ardent admirer and protector, Lyon wrote provocatively of the collecting habits of Clemens: "His first interest when he goes to a new place is to find little girls. . . . Off he goes in a flash when he sees a new pair of slim little legs appear; and if the little girl wears butterfly bows of ribbon on the back of her head then his delirium is complete."⁵ Wallace's comment is similar: "If a child of ten or twelve happens to be anywhere within his glance he is inevitably sure of seeing her. Then begins the most delightful flirtation."⁶

Nevertheless, Cooley's edition is a valuable addition to Twain scholarship. At least those interested in the subject can read the correspondence and draw their own conclusions without waiting for the letters to appear sometime next century in the fully annotated Mark Twain edition, the third volume of which covers only the year 1869 and was published in July 1992. Also, the letters themselves, when collected and read in this way, lend credence to the argument that the Aquarium Club was the harmless pastime of a lonely old man who had spent the bulk of his life writing for and about children. Clemens's letters, especially during the height of the angelfish period in 1908, exude sheer delight and genuine playfulness, and the girls' letters to Clemens—especially those of Dorothy Quick, Margaret Blackmer, and Frances Nunnally—reveal sincere love for the old man and honest enjoyment of his company.

Cooley divides the letters into five chapters repre-

senting “distinct stages” in the development of the Aquarium Club:

Chapter 1 is devoted to the pre-angelfish friendship and correspondence between Clemens and Gertrude Natkin. Chapter 2 encompasses the period during which Clemens began “collecting” and corresponding with schoolgirls in earnest. Soon after meeting Dorothy Butes, he became friends with Carlotta Wells and Frances Nunnally while on shipboard en route to England. On the return voyage he met another future angelfish, Dorothy Quick. It is not until chapter 3 (12 January through 14 June 1908) that Clemens hits upon the idea of an aquarium club filled with a school of bright and lively angelfish. This idea became a reality during Clemens’s two winter retreats to Bermuda. While there he met and soon began corresponding with Margaret Blackmer, Irene Gerken, Dorothy Sturgis, Hellen Martin, and Helen Allen. Chapter 4 begins on 19 June 1908, the date Clemens moved into Innocence at Home. . . . New Aquarium arrivals during this period were Marjorie Breckenridge, Dorothy Harvey, and Louise Paine. Chapter 5, “Stormfield,” contains the correspondence between November 1908 and Clemens’s death in 1910. (x)

The introductions for each chapter are well written and provide much useful information, regardless of the omissions noted above. The transcriptions are from original letters when they exist, and the editorial method is clearly defined. The editing is generally straightforward and unobtrusive, and the volume is an easy and pleasant read.

The edition, however, contains a few instances in which information provided to the reader is confusing or contradictory. For example, the editor states in the preface that the volume “represents a continuous and nearly complete correspondence from December 1905 to the end of September 1908” and that from then until Clemens’s death in 1910 “only seven letters from angelfish survive for the eighty-seven letters Clemens wrote to them during this period” (ix). Yet, when one checks the calendar of letters at the back of the book, which “presents a complete list of the known correspondence” (xi), only sixty-five letters appear from Clemens for this period with only three letters from the angelfish. Also, the editor explains that “approximately fifteen items judged insignificant to the correspondence have not been included; most of these are inscriptions or brief telegrams” (xi). However, in the course of reading the edition one is struck by the number of such entries that are included and begins to wonder why these fifteen needed to be cut. Other confusing editorial matters involve a letter to Margaret Blackmer dated 14 November, at least a couple of

months before Clemens even met her; a letter, with no editorial explanation, from Clemens to Dorothy Quick dated 10 December 1908 that lists his address as 21 Fifth Avenue, months after he had left New York for Connecticut; and a couple of pictures that appear to be mislabeled. The picture on page 112 and the one on page 187 are obviously of the same girl, most likely Irene Gerken, but in one place she is identified as Gerkin and in the other she is called Dorothy Harvey. Also, the picture on page 114 of Clemens and Margaret Blackmer in Bermuda is dated March 1908, when the letters and the commentary make it clear that Blackmer was not in Bermuda for Clemens’s second trip that year.

These are minor objections, however, when considered in light of the handsome presentation of the volume and its overall importance in complementing the criticism that already exists for this period of Clemens’s life. The photographs of Clemens and his angelfish, long suppressed by Clara, are wonderful (though the inclusion of a list of illustrations would have made them easier to find), and Clemens’s humorous drawings are nicely integrated with the text. The editor provides illustrations of manuscript pages to show how the drawings actually fit on the page of correspondence. The serviceable index identifies illustration pages with italic type. Cooley’s edition should prove to be a fundamental source for the study of Clemens’s final years as well as for the examination of larger questions involving Victorian attitudes toward innocence and sexuality. In the end, it may be that the complexities of Clemens are too vast to be easily reduced to a theory of simple polarities. For now, despite Clemens’s claim that his angelfish activities were not “the public’s affair,” interested readers have another important clue to the mystery of the personality behind the myth of Mark Twain.

NOTES

1. The parameters of this critical debate are set forth in Guy Cardwell, *The Man Who Was Mark Twain: Images and Ideologies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 141–60.
2. Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Bros., 1912), 3:1440; Clara Clemens, *My Father Mark Twain* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1931), 274; John DeLancey Ferguson, *Mark Twain: Man and Legend* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943), 313; and Edward Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain: The Man and His Work* (New Haven, 1935; rev. ed., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 127.
3. Hamlin Hill, *Mark Twain: God’s Fool* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1973), xviii, xxvii.
4. Cardwell, *The Man Who Was Mark Twain*, 157, 150, 124, 144.
5. Quoted in Hill, *Mark Twain*, 195.
6. Elizabeth Wallace, *Mark Twain and the Happy Island* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1913), 76; quoted in Hill, *Mark Twain*, 203–4.