

THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER

Some years ago the Vanderbilt University Press published an anthology under the title *Reality and Myth*. A young critic, Ashley Brown, contributed an essay to the anthology called "The Novel as Christian Comedy." Very little notice has been taken of this essay but I think it is based on an insight which is of great importance to all fiction writers and serious readers of fiction.

In his essay Mr. Brown maintained – what is no news to scholars of Dante – that in *The Divine Comedy* Dante was the first writer to synthesize certain fictional techniques which were, so to speak, in the air. Dante was, indeed, the first writer of his time to combine these techniques in order to achieve effects he desired. But he was not the first writer to use them. For us of the western world they were first used (in a way that approaches perfection) by the Greek tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Their plays survive because their characters are archetypal. There may be at this moment in Detroit or San Francisco or Norfolk, Virginia, a young woman who hates her husband enough to conspire with her lover to murder him. But she cannot claim to be original. In our western world Clytemnestra, the wife of the Greek hero, Agamemnon, was the first woman to commit a crime that so fired the imagination of a whole race that to this day she remains the archetype – that is to say, "the first model for such a character."

I cite the great tragedians to make *my* point. But Mr. Brown illustrated *his* point by reference to characters in a novel I had just published, *The Malefactors*. A psychiatrist in that novel, he reasoned, played the same archetypal role that Virgil plays in *The Divine Comedy*. A woman in the book was, he felt, a Matilda who, in *The Divine Comedy*, goes singing and plucking "the flowers by which her path was painted everywhere." I was delighted to hear this – the vanity of authors (as you may have

observed) is insatiable—but in this case delight soon yielded to astonishment. Honesty compelled me to inform this critic that I had never really read *The Divine Comedy*. Like most half-educated persons, I had read all of *The Inferno* and half of *The Purgatorio*. But I had never read a word of *The Paradiso*. My young friend—he was younger then than he is now—did not seem surprised. He said only, “Well, you’d better read all three of them!”

I followed his advice and have been reading all three of them ever since. And on this occasion I am going to try to talk about one fictional technique which is used in *The Divine Comedy*: the Cosmic Metaphor. The metaphor antedates literature; it is a part of the furnishings of the memory of every one of us. The metaphor is also my title: “The Shape of the River.” Man had a voyage down a great uncharted river in mind as a figure for the journey every human soul makes from birth to death long before he learned to make letters. Dante uses this metaphor in a two-fold way and in a way that is primarily fictional. He uses it not only as a figure of the progress of any human soul but also as a figure for the creation of the poem in which he portrays that progress. Francis Fergusson, in his study of *The Divine Comedy*, has pointed out that in this respect Dante anticipated our own great novelist, Henry James, in what James called “a Central Intelligence.”

The metaphor of the river as a figure for the conduct of a human life underlies the “plot” of *The Divine Comedy*—if I may use this term in connection with the poem. But Dante, being a very great poet, subsumes other cosmic metaphors to his action. I will ask your indulgence long enough to abstract from the plot incidents that will serve my purpose. I hasten to add that I will cite only a few incidents. There is nothing more boring than to have some one *tell* you the plot—of anything. When I was trying to teach that unteachable subject, “Creative Writing,” at Columbia I would not permit my students to tell me the plots of their novels or short stories. I could not stand the boredom. At the time I justified this high-handed procedure (to myself, at least) by reasoning that the prohibition was for their own good. Looking back, I believe I was right. But we must get back to Dante.

Dante, soon after he comes to himself “in the dark wood,” which is his metaphor for our mortal life, looks up and sees before him “The Mount of Perfection.” He imagines himself as starting to climb it, but his progress is slowed by a fear that he holds in “the lake of his heart.”

And as he, who with panting breath has escaped from the deep sea to the shore, turns to the dangerous waters and gazes:
 so my mind, which still was fleeing, turned back to see the pass that no one ever left alive.

He has no sooner started up the desert slope than he encounters three beasts: a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf. He is rescued from them by the poet, Virgil, whom he acknowledged as his master in the world. Dante asks him, "Art thou then that Virgil, and that fountain which pours abroad so rich a stream of speech?"

Here we get our second water image. Of a spring that instead of threatening death, promises life, since it flows over a whole countryside. And it is a stream of *speech*. The image is prophetic of Dante's future fame. The poem he has set about writing—*his* stream of speech—will flow, has, indeed, flowed—as widely as Virgil's stream of speech.

Virgil tells Dante that he has been sent to guide him up the Mount of Perfection by Beatrice, the lady Dante loved in life. But Beatrice was impelled to send Virgil to Dante's rescue by St. Lucy, who, in turn, came to Beatrice at the bidding of the Blessed Virgin. To persuade Beatrice to leave the Mount of Perfection and descend into Hell and then to Limbo, where Virgil reposed with other great pagans, St. Lucy says:

Beatrice, true praise of God; why helpst thou not him who loved thee so, that for thee he left the vulgar crowd?

Hearst thou not the misery of his plaint? Seest thou not the death which combats him upon the river over which the sea has no boast?

Beatrice is so moved by the thought of Dante's plight that she makes the dreadful journey to the underworld, and Virgil, at her request, leaves Limbo and comes to Dante on the slope of the Mount of Perfection. Dante and Virgil then make their way to the shores of Acheron, the river which runs through the underworld. Charon, "the demon with the eyes of coal," who ferries condemned souls across this river, recognizes that Dante is not yet dead and so cannot be his passenger. He says:

"... thou who are there, alive, depart thee from these who are dead." But when he saw that I departed not,

He said, "By other ways, by other ferries, not here, shalt thou pass over: a lighter boat must carry thee. . . ."

The "lighter boat," figuratively speaking is, of course, the poem in which Dante will portray what he sees in Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, "the little bark of my wit" he calls it, in which he will "hoist sail to course o'er better waters."

Dante and Virgil stand and watch until Charon has loaded his boat with his sad passengers. Virgil explains to Dante that Charon's passengers are all of Adam's seed who perished in the wrath of God. But Dante has been called upon to sing of that second realm where the human spirit is purged and becomes worthy to ascend to Heaven, so he and Virgil leave the shores of the "dusky river." As they turn away the whole plain quivers as if from an earthquake. Dante, like our Father Abraham, in a similar situation, loses consciousness. When he comes to himself he is on the brink of the "dolorous Valley of the Abyss, which gathers thunder of endless wailings."

But he still has Virgil for his guide. Virgil, his face pale with apprehension, then conducts Dante down into Hell and up through Purgatory to a certain point on the Mount of Perfection. Here I will interrupt our tour of these shadowy realms and call your attention to another work of fiction. Not a poem, though it is deeply poetical in conception, not a novel, though it is intimately concerned with the conduct of life. It is hard to classify Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. However, it is certainly one of the most exciting and original works of the imagination that have been produced in this country. As I have said, it is deeply poetical in conception and in execution, too—at least as far as the first half of the book goes. The last half of the book seems almost as if it had been written by another man. I want to talk about that later. But let us first consider the plan or plot of the whole work.

In conceiving the book Mark Twain seems to have had in mind or imagination the same cosmic metaphor which Dante bases his poem on: a voyage down a vast river as a figure for man's life. Both authors are at once narrators and actors in their respective dramas. And Mark Twain, like Dante, plays the part of a "Central Intelligence." Like Dante, he is at once narrator and protagonist.

I hope that I am not wholly motivated by patriotic ardor when I say that the Missouri boy seems to have "come to himself," as Dante puts it, earlier than the Florentine. Mark Twain's longing to become a steamboatman crystallized into one burning ambition long before he was twenty-one years old. He wanted to become a steamboat pilot—to become "master of the marvelous science of piloting." "I believe," he said, "that there has been nothing like it elsewhere in the world." In his book he says that he is trying

. . . to carry the reader step by step to a comprehension of what the science consists of; and at the same time I have tried to show that it is a curious and wonderful science, too, and very worthy of his attention. If I have seemed to love my subject, it is no surprising thing, for I loved the profession far better than any I have followed since. . . .

For him there was only one river, the river the Indians called "the Father of Waters." He calls it "the majestic, magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun, the dense forest away on the other side; the point above the town and the point below, bounding the river-glimpse and turning into a sort of sea, and withal a very brilliant and lonely one."

But since the boy, Samuel Clemens, was to turn into the novelist, Mark Twain, the river is seen in a fictional context, in the conduct of a life. Or in the conduct of lives.

Dante covers a good deal of history, as well as Hell and Purgatory and parts of Heaven, in his great work. Mark Twain gets over a good deal of ground, too. The action of *Life on the Mississippi* begins (long before either Samuel Clemens or Mark Twain was born) in 1542, according to Mark Twain's reckoning, when the river was first viewed by a white man, the Spanish explorer, De Soto. At that time, Mark Twain reminds us, ". . . the order of the Jesuits was not yet a year old; Michelangelo's paint was not yet dry on his 'Last Judgment' in the Sistine chapel. . . . Elizabeth of England was not yet in her teens. . . . Shakespeare was not yet born; a hundred years must elapse before Englishmen would hear the name of Oliver Cromwell. . . ."

Francis Parkman tells us that the merchant, Joliet, and the Jesuit, Father Marquette, reached the banks of the Mississippi in 1673 and "turning southward, paddled down the stream, through a solitude unrelieved by the faintest trace of man. . . ."

They did this day after day and night after night; and at the end of two weeks they had not seen a human being. The river was an awful solitude then, and it is now.

Nevertheless, Mark Twain says that when he was a boy "there was but one permanent ambition among comrades in our village. That was to be a steamboatman. We had transient ambitions of other sorts. . . . These ambitions faded out, each in its turn; but the ambition to be a steamboatman remained." All steamboatmen seemed god-like to these boys but the most god-like of all was the pilot. Mark Twain says that

... a pilot in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth. Kings are but hampered servants of parliaments and the people; parliaments sit in chains forged by their constituency; the editor of a newspaper cannot be independent but must work with one hand tied behind him, and be content to utter only half or two-thirds of his mind; no clergyman is a free man and may speak the whole truth, regardless of his parish's opinions; writers of all kinds are manacled servants of the public. . . . In truth, every man, woman and child has a master and worries and frets in servitude; but in the day I write of the Mississippi pilot had *none*. . . . His movements were entirely free; he consulted no one, he received commands from nobody. . . .

The most dazzling of these embodiments of free will—if I may use the term in this connection—is Horace Bixby, who, when young Clemens first encounters him, is the pilot on the *Aleck Scott*. Mr. Bixby is finally persuaded to take young Clemens on as a pupil or apprentice. He does not undertake to make him a pilot. He says only that he will “learn him the river.”

I would like to make a brief digression here. After all, I am speaking metaphorically, for the most part. I am speaking metaphorically still, I suppose, when I say that when a young man or woman comes to me and says that he or she wants to *become* a novelist or short story writer, I find myself thinking of Mr. Bixby. He did not undertake to make his pupil a pilot but only to *learn him the river*. I could not undertake to do even that much for any young person who asked my advice. All I can ever undertake is to *try* to learn him as much of the river as I, myself, have learned. And since the river is the shape it is and, moreover, is always assuming different shapes, that undertaking is almost too much for me!

Mr. Bixby, however, is made of sterner stuff. His poor young cub pilot soon finds out that “the marvelous science of piloting” is quite different from what he had thought it was. For Mr. Bixby, learning the river means learning the *shape of the river* by day, by night, in fog, in mist, in flood tide or low tide, in every conceivable circumstance which the dedicated imagination and memory of Mr. Bixby can conceive of. He tells the cub:

My boy, you've got to know the *shape* of the river perfectly. It is all there is left to steer by on a very dark night. Everything else is blotted out and gone. But mind you, it hasn't the same shape in the night that it has in the daytime.

“How on earth am I going to learn it then?” the cub asks.

“How do you follow a hall at home in the dark?” Mr. Bixby says. “Because you know the shape of it. You can’t see it.”

The cub says, “I can follow the front hall in the dark if I know it *is* the front hall but suppose you set me down in the middle of it in the dark and not tell me which hall it is; how am I to know?”

Mr. Bixby says, “Well, you’ve got to, on the river.”

And so, Mark Twain tells us

I went to work . . . to learn the shape of the river; and of all the eluding and ungraspable objects that ever I tried to get mind or hand on, that was the chief. I would fasten my eye upon a sharp wooded point that projected far into the river some miles ahead of me, and go to laboriously photographing its shape upon my brain; and just as I was beginning to succeed to my satisfaction, we would draw up toward it and the exasperating thing would fold back into the bank. . . . Nothing ever had the same shape when I was coming down-stream that it had borne when I went up.

When he mentions these difficulties to Mr. Bixby, that dedicated soul says:

That’s the very virtue of the thing. If the shapes didn’t change every three seconds they wouldn’t be of any use. Take this place where we are now, for instance. As long as that hill over yonder is only one hill, I can boom right along the way I’m going; but the moment it splits at the top and forms a V, I know I’ve got to scratch to starboard in a hurry, or I’ll bang this boat’s brains out against a rock. . . .

There comes a time when the cub feels that the undertaking is too much for him. He tells Mr. Bixby that if he could learn all the things he says he has got to learn he would be able to raise the dead. “And then,” he says, “I won’t have to pilot a steamboat to make a living. I want to retire from this business. I haven’t got brains enough to be a pilot; and if I had I wouldn’t have strength enough to carry them around.”

Mr. Bixby says: “Now drop that. When I say I’ll learn a man the river, I mean it. And you can depend on that. I’ll learn you the river.”

He is as good as his word. Mark Twain learns to “read the face of the water,” as he puts it. He says:

The face of the water, in time became a wonderful book—a

book . . . which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as if it uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day . . . there was never a page that was void of interest, never one that you could leave unread without loss, never one that you would want to skip. . . . There never was so wonderful a book written by man. . . .

Literary critics agree, I believe, that the second half of the *Life on the Mississippi* is inferior to the first half. We sometimes speak of that part of the book as being “journalistic.” But that seems to me unfair to that profession. A competent reporter would be ashamed or afraid to turn in as poorly observed and as haphazardly organized a story as the second half of *Life on the Mississippi*. Some pages would not be out of place in a report from a Chamber of Commerce; for instance:

The scenery from St. Louis to Cairo—two hundred miles—is varied and beautiful. . . . Cairo is a brisk town now; and is substantially built and has a city look about it. . . . Cairo has a heavy railroad and river trade, and her situation at the junction of two great rivers is so advantageous that she cannot help prospering.

He no longer cares to read the face of the water, and the shape of the river itself is unfamiliar to him. He tells us that when he revisited it:

. . . there was nothing anywhere that I could remember having seen before. I was surprised, disappointed and annoyed. . . .

I do not believe that this change of attitude is wholly the result of the twenty years which intervened between his writing of the two halves of the book. It seems to me that this about-face of vision was foreshadowed in one of the early chapters—in Chapter IX, the same chapter in which Mark Twain tells us that Mr. Bixby finally succeeded in “learning” him the shape of the river. Almost immediately after learning to read this wonderful book—“the face of the water” as he calls it—Mark Twain begins to wish that he had not acquired this knowledge.

Now when I had mastered the language of this water, had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something too. I had lost something

which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river! . . . A day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and charms which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river! . . . A day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river's face; another day came when I ceased altogether to note them . . . the romance and beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it has had, for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat. . . .

Indeed, all he has to show for his apprenticeship "to the marvelous science" is a memory of the river,

. . . a certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steamboating was new to me. A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold. . . . The surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings that were as many tinted as an opal. . . . The shore on our left was densely wooded, and the somber shadow that fell from the forest was broken in one place by a long ruffled train that shone like silver. . . . I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture. The world was new to me, and I had never seen anything like this at home. But, as I have said, a day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the water's face; another day when I ceased altogether to note them. Then, if that sunset scene had been repeated, I should have looked upon it inwardly, after this fashion: 'This sun means that we are going to have wind tomorrow, that floating log means that the river is rising, small thanks to it'. . . .

He finishes by comparing himself to a doctor who cannot enjoy contemplating the beauty of a young woman who sits next to him at a dinner party because he could, if necessary, articulate her skeleton.

Mark Twain, like Dante, is both narrator and protagonist in the first half of *Life on the Mississippi*. Both authors employ the same figure: a book. Mark Twain sees the Mississippi river as a great book in which he no longer cares to read. Dante has a vision of God. He sees God as a great book in which all creatures and all the diverse modes of being are bound, like leaves in a volume. Then his vision fails him: He says

To the high fantasy here power failed; but already my desire and will were rolled—even as a wheel that moveth equally—by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

Dante, one of the most competent craftsmen who ever lived, has taken the measure of his own genius and even as he marks its limitations, he recognizes that he has achieved something that he could not have achieved if he had not “braved the watery deep” in his frail craft—if he had not tried to write the poem, which, it seemed, no man *could* write. As a result, he has had a vision which will stay with him all his life. He calls it

“the general sum of perfection”

and tells us that he has preserved the memory of his vision in the hope of helping his fellow man.

The young man or woman who aspires to write fiction professionally has a difficult and dangerous voyage before him. I believe, however, that if he has had a glimpse of what Dante calls “the general sum of perfection,” he has a tremendous advantage over navigators who have to discover “the shape of the river” for themselves. It may take him all his life to gain any understanding of what has been revealed to him, but at least he has discerned its outline and, like Dante, can keep it in memory if he tries hard enough. This knowledge—the knowledge of the *shape* of the river—will stand him in better stead on his voyage than any other knowledge he can acquire. Or shall I say that all the techniques of navigation are included in this “marvelous science”? Mr. Bixby found that knowledge enough to steer by on the darkest night!