

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

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Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 1(1)

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Publication Date

2009-02-16

DOI

10.5070/T811006972

Peer reviewed

“The War-Prayer”: Samuel Clemens and 9/11

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During the summer of 2001 I agreed to prepare a lecture for the coming fall semester on the Enlightenment and its effect on the development of liberal thought. Since my specialty is American literature, I decided that I would focus on various trends in American writing that contributed to a tradition of liberalism in its purest sense—an openness to ways of thinking and a break from fundamentalist religious or social faith. The talk would be a long sweep and take its motto from John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*:

But the peculiar evil in silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation: those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error. (Mill 20)

The collision seemed most important, and I set about lining up writers and examples from their writings that helped to underscore the passage from fundamentalism to liberalism, a passage that would offer a look at John Winthrop, Mary Rowlandson, Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. At the end, I would jump to the 20th century for Kurt Vonnegut’s commencement address to the graduating class of Bennington College. Vonnegut’s simple comment: “We don’t need more information. We don’t need bigger brains. All that is required is that we become less selfish than we are” (168).

In the fall, I lectured to an audience of roughly 150 junior and senior level students at Elmira College who were then enrolled in COR 3000: *The Evolution of Modern Times*. I had given such a lecture before; however, the events of September 11, 2001, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, pushed me to revise my talk. I decided to end my formal presentation by discussing Samuel Clemens’ (Mark Twain’s) brief “As Regards Patriotism” and “Corn-pone Opinions,” and by reading the entire text of “The War-Prayer.” Two weeks after the attacks, a numb reality had set in on campus. The College had held a memorial service; students were closing themselves in the cocoon of studying and campus events. I hoped to use the opportunity to offer a lesson in reading both to

find solace and to frame (personal and national) political reactions. I wanted students at least to question unabashed calls for swift and often unfocused retribution. Clemens' voice seemed to me exactly right. Both "As Regards Patriotism" and "The War-Prayer" offer an important counter to what Clemens identified as "Corn-Pone Opinion" in a post-9/11 United States.

As Clemens set aside the debilitating grief sparked by Susy Clemens' death in 1896, he began to think globally. Writing *Following the Equator* (1897) marked Clemens' embrace of a decidedly activist agenda, one that attracted more of Clemens' attention as he became involved in the American Anti-Imperialist League and as he shifted to polemics and political essays during his final decade. His major writings through the 1890s reflected his interest in both the cultural dimensions of race and the twin worries of psychic and emotional pain, most notably in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, "Which was the Dream?," and "The Great Dark." By the late 1890s, however, Clemens' attention shifted to the darkness of spiritual and political intention and behavior; for example, "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," "Concerning the Jews," and chapters of *Following the Equator*: "A Salutation-Speech from the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth, Taken Down in Short-Hand by Mark Twain" highlights a concentrated and deliberate turn to polemic that cut off the possibility of ambiguity. No longer interested in masking a political or social issue in fiction, Clemens turned his energy to crafting an unambiguous and direct a message as possible. There is no room for ambiguity, no opportunity to doubt his intention.

In "As Regards Patriotism" and "Corn-Pone Opinion," Clemens blasts a complacent and often duplicitous public. Reactions to the United States' increasing militant reach into the Pacific, both essays make clear the reason for the lack of protest: people are just not willing to risk their own peace of mind, their own status within society. Individual thought is relinquished, replaced by corporate interest and the security of group identity. Appeals to patriotism, manufactured by political leaders and opinion makers, used a public allegiance to community to cover selfish thoughts and actions inspired by narrow, corporate, and party interests: a decidedly oligarchic creation, patriotism makes use of human weakness and stupidity. Clemens' main point, in fact, is not to argue for a higher calling, not, in short, to define patriotism as standing up to wrong or to wrongly instituted policies in order to cleanse and make noble national interest. Rather, Clemens calls into question the very notion of patriotism: he suggests that the very idea is tainted and dirty because there is nothing real or altruistic in its intention or result. He writes, "The Patriot did not know just how or when or where he got his opinions, neither did he care, so long as he was with what seemed the majority—which was the main thing, the safe thing, the comfortable

thing” (“As Regards Patriotism” 477). Later he writes:

A political emergency brings out the corn-pone opinion in fine forces in its two chief varieties—the pocket-book variety, which has its origin in self-interest, and the bigger variety, the sentimental variety—the one which can’t bear to be outside the pale; can’t bear to be in disfavor; can’t endure the averted face and the cold shoulder; wants to stand well with the friends, wants to be smiled upon, wants to be welcome, wants to hear the precious words, “*he’s* on the right track!” Uttered, perhaps by an ass, but still an ass of high degree, an ass whose approval is gold and diamonds to a smaller ass, and confers glory, and honor and happiness, and membership in the herd. For these gauds many a man will dump his life-long principles into the street, and his conscience along with them. We have seen it happen. In some millions of instances. (“Corn-Pone Opinions” 511)

The congregation in “The War-Prayer” is a collection of smaller asses seeking the approval of the minister leading them in prayer. Dissenters from the national parade to war are intimidated; they also have no interest in pushing their dissent. In short, they are influenced by their own need of corn-pone: “It was indeed a glad and gracious time, and the half dozen rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness straightaway got such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety’s sake they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way” (652). In “Resistance to Civil Government,” Henry David Thoreau points out that “under the name of order and civil government we all made at least to pay homage to and support our own meanness” (234). That is why an outsider is the only successful spokesman for God. Any member of the community, of the congregation, will necessarily suppress personal uncertainty about the path to war because of a need to keep the good favor of the group. Only someone who stands outside the toxic environment is able to criticize, is able to identify the implications of actions and prayers.

In this way, the word prayer offers two meanings: it is the petition to god, but it is also the stranger who is praying the full message—the pray-er. That second meaning spotlights the person at the center of the tale and sets him against the self-righteous patriots that form the congregation. Thoreau believed that “Action from principle—the perception and performance of right—changes things and relations” (233-34). Samuel Clemens too believed in action from principle; however, he was more and more convinced that dissent, however noble and right, was doomed to be ignored. Pretending to be a cynic, he was more clearly a realist. A cynic refuses to engage; Clemens made an effort. “The War-Prayer” is Samuel Clemens’ direct attack on human folly. It not only questions the fundamental belief that God supports a single (and supposedly, or reader-inferred, Christian) side but also un-

masks the foundation of brutality at the heart of the patriotic impulse. It links the ideas of the earlier essays, "As Regards Patriotism" and "Corn-Pone Opinions," to push farther the reality of violence stoked by appeals to national unity.

All of this, however, was lost on my student audience. Instead, they were, I believe, seduced by Clemens' language, language that demands attention especially when it is read aloud, amplified, though in a quiet and restrained voice. The room was eerily silent as I moved through the final moments of the stranger's prayer:

. . . for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen." ("The War Prayer" 655)

The snapper at the end of the essay, of course, is the point. Everything leads to that single sentence: "It was believed afterwards, that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said" (655). Ending there and allowing Clemens to have that very last word shook up, perhaps defeated, expectations. There was no grand conclusion, no rhetorical crash. There was a strong and undiminished voice. There was sadness. The voice was Samuel Clemens' testifying to the violence done in a god's name. The sadness—his blending into ours—spread from the early years of the twentieth century to the first year of the twenty-first.

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