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The Trans-Pacific Lesson of Mark Twain's "War-Prayer"

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Written in 1905 but unpublished until after his death, Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer" can be distilled to a very simple bit of wisdom: war might be a zero-sum contest, but prayer is not. Composed as a protest to American military intervention in the Philippines, "The War-Prayer" has remained an unresolved but eternally intriguing issue for Twain scholars. The piece was conceived during a lonesome and rather unstable period in his life marked by a "strong, persistent drive to answer large questions and to confront mammoth problems before his death" (Macnaughton 203). As biographer Albert Bigelow Paine observed, one of Twain's sole reprieves during this tumultuous stretch was writing "protests . . . against existing evils or unhappy conditions" (239). But despite its thematic similarity to his other anti-war or anti-imperialist protest writings, the form and unrelenting, humorless tone of "The War-Prayer" have always seemed peculiar. Its disdain for a nation "up in arms," frothing for war almost verges toward the surreal; it is an eminently transferable critique of jingoism, one that feels timeless and universal.

"The War-Prayer" maintains a certain amount of flexibility, more so than many of Twain's better-known works (Gribben 37-38). Free of any historicity within the text, the ideas and emotions of "The War-Prayer" can be deployed whenever, wherever. Only faintly regarded in Twain's life, it is rumored to have first circulated during World War I. (It was published in 1923 as part of a volume titled *Europe and Elsewhere*.) The Mark Twain Company renewed the copyright in 1951, during the Korean War. And a volume of "The War-Prayer" accompanied by illustrations from John Groth was published in 1968, perhaps offering an indirect commentary on the Vietnam War that then raged. Today, thanks largely to the Internet, "The War-Prayer" is more popular than ever, an oft-cited example of Twain's vigilance in the face of war and imperialism. A recent essay in *Harper's* magazine by Lewis Lapham that denounced the United States' military decisions in Iraq closed with an extended excerpt from "The War-Prayer."

The harm in applying "The War-Prayer" so loosely to so varied a range of uniquely American situations is that it threatens to obscure the setting and context that initially inspired these words. Through no malice of intent, those who view the prayer this way have obscured the moment of its creation, inadvertently eliding a key component of Twain's identity: his travels abroad. "The War-Prayer" is rooted in the lessons one learns look-

ing beyond borders, studying the dynamics of international power and politics and noting the hypocrisy of spreading ideas like freedom, liberty and salvation by force. It isn't merely the creation of a great humorist or social critic; it is the creation of one of American culture's great travelers. Roughing it on the road, Twain achieved insights into the human condition and the tenuousness of national affiliations that were unavailable to his more provincial peers. As Richard Bridgman observes, "Travel itself had powerful attractions for a skeptical intelligence like Twain's. Its formal displacements generated the very situations that produce humor: values clashed, perspectives underwent abrupt shifts, and around the next corner, surprise" (512).

The success of "The War-Prayer" as a cogent and prescient piece of criticism calls for a reappraisal of Twain as a trans-Pacific traveler, an American with a consciously *global* viewpoint. As an example, Fred Kaplan notes the importance of Twain's stint in Hawaii in the 1860s, when he first witnessed the subtle violence of colonialism. Kaplan explains that "the issue for Twain was never better or worse: human nature was essentially the same everywhere, and the difference that cultural difference made was part of the balance to be weighed on a larger scale" (9-10).

This issue of "a larger scale" underlies a series of tracts Twain wrote in the early 1900s, specifically his criticism of the American missionary enterprise in Asia. One especially senses a faint blueprint for "The War-Prayer" in "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," published in 1901 in the *North American Review*. The piece responds directly to the story of a missionary in China accused of extorting locals, fanning out to savage the phony benevolence and flimsy spiritualism of the United States' presence in Asia. "Is it, perhaps, possible that there are two kinds of Civilization—one for home consumption and one for the heathen market?" Twain wonders. It is the type of question posed by someone who has seen "the heathen market" firsthand. While the bulk of the piece focuses on a conflict in China, Twain also turns his attention to the situation in the Philippines, affirming that "Filipino ideas of fairness and justice" compare favorably to those that prevail in Europe or stateside.

"The War-Prayer" is a rewriting of these sentiments, yet it deviates in a crucial way—it is not as "direct" as past works (Krauth 252-53). Twain himself appears in this work, but only as a quiet character on the margin—one of the "half-dozen rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness." (The "rash spirits" soon relent to the imperious mob, fearful that a fellow citizen's protest will only invite sneers, or worse.) Instead, the crux of this protest is the "aged stranger" with white hair and a pale face—an outsider "free of communal illusions" (Baender 192). The stranger—"bear-

ing a message from Almighty God”—proceeds to describe the grim consequences of the nation’s prayers: the providential destruction of the enemy nation.

Liberated from the expectations of what it means to *be* Twain, what remains is the author’s pure and unembellished sentiment. This device certainly allowed for the identification of a higher hypocrisy, if not an assault on the larger idea of the Manichean divide. It was a more effective way of pointing out the plight of the subjugated—rather than merely placing the Filipino’s culture as equal to the American’s, or lodging a complaint as a disapproving citizen, “The War-Prayer” critiques from above. Perhaps, by conveying these views through the robed, ghostly figure rather than as a well-known American critic, Twain created an appeal that didn’t depend on his voice or his wit. While many of the other pieces of this time depended on a direct attack on public figures, “The War-Prayer” hinged on a vague, spectral presence rather than that of a human prophet. Even Twain himself realized the importance of displacing his words: “I have told the whole truth in that, and only dead men can tell the truth in this world. It can be published after I am dead” (Cited from Paine’s 1912 Biography as an epigraph to *The War-Prayer* n.p.). They may be a dead man’s words, but they represent the philosophy of someone whose life was spent in awe of the size of this world.

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