A Tale never loses in the telling.

--James Kelley: Complete Collections of Scottish Proverbs (1791)

I

THE ORAL TRADITION

The truth that literature is the expression of the creative urge in man is universally accepted. The term literature, of course, does not lend itself to any precise definition. One is, however, inclined to agree with the dictum of Paul Redin that, "literature is the formal communication, through language, of an aesthetic experience. . . ." 1

There is a kind of literature that is oral. It was originally possessed by people who could neither read nor write and who passed on their aesthetic communication by word of mouth. With the spread of the printed word, oral literature gradually lost its significance. But that heritage is too valuable to be neglected. It is a bridge to written literature. It is unfortunate that for a long time
critics and writers did not pay due attention to oral literature. It is one of the most reliable sources of information about our pre-historic heritage. Writing about heathen Arabs of the times when the art of writing was neither understood nor practised by them, R.A. Nicholson remarks:

We find elements of history and romance in the prose narratives used by the rhapsodists to introduce and set forth plainly the matter of their songs, and in the legends which recounted the glorious deeds of tribes and individuals.  

It is this branch of literature which gives us a glimpse into the roots of the glorious cultures of ancient India and Greece. A.J. MacKenzie in The Evolution of Literature (1911), treats the literary mentality of the pre-historic people, though many of his theses are now considered outdated. The best approach to oral literature can be found in the valuable work of H. Munroe Chadwick and N. Kreshaw Chadwick, The Growth of Literature. The Chadwicks have rendered valuable service to literature by clearly pin-pointing the significance of oral literature of the great historic civilizations. They have, however, treated people with highly special problems like Tartars, Polynesians, Northern Bantu, Gala, Tuareg, and Yoruba. The Chadwicks have, of course, pointed out the very relevant fact that oral literature can exist even in communities,
"where written literature is also current," though it may not be equally cultivated by all. Even a work prepared under the auspices of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), while dealing with the literature of the ancient world, rather sadly neglects the tradition of oral and anonymous literature. It is, therefore, imperative to make an acquaintance with the oral literature that consists mostly of folk-songs, ballads, and folktales or tall tales in a country like the United States of America.

II

AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITIONS

Two modern American critics have given three traditions of literature that have been flourishing in their country. First, there is a "Literary tradition" representing the material enjoyed by persons of some education. In this category fall novels like Melville's *Moby Dick*, stories like Twain's "Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," and poems like "The Courtship of Miles Standish" by H.W. Longfellow. At the other end is the "oral or folklore tradition," of literature passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. In between these two traditions, a new tradition has cropped up in modern times. This tradition has been termed by Coffin as the "popular tradition," including all
sorts of magazines and newspapers and also what is disseminated through mass media like radio and television.

Turning to the oral or folklore tradition in literature, it may be noted that the oral narrative is the earliest form of composition that served as the natural vehicle of folklore and fable. When Kipling received a Gold Medal from the Royal Society of Literature, he is reported to have remarked that "the first short story teller must have flourished in a cave dwelling." Walter Blair has given an admirable account of oral storytelling in Southwestern United States of America. He has shown that much of the literature of that country had its origin in what he terms as the greatest American art—the art of oral storytelling. This, in his opinion, is an important fact as the oral yarn had no little influence upon the subject-matter of most western tall-tales and upon the manner of many of them.

Andrew Lang, an English critic, in 1889 had a clearer insight than many Americans of the value of the oral yarn. "All over the Land" (In America), he said, "men are eternally swooping stories at bars and in long endless journeys by railway and steamer. How little did the English swoop stories!" The importance of the oral story-telling has also been emphasized by Bernard DeVoto. In Mark Twain's America, DeVoto shows that the oral stories were one of the
richest folk arts developed by the frontier and that the oral stories change their character when set down in print. He regarded Mark Twain as a story-teller fully alive to the traditions of the frontier. Twain, in DeVoto's view, was a story-teller "in the manner and idiom of the frontier." 8

On the whole, the Oral Yarn of America affords a fuller view of the diversity of American life. The tales which circulated among the lumberjacks from Civil War onwards are typically American. They are of course narrated with mock solemnity, yet they betray a comic sense of absurdity of exaggeration to a ridiculous extent so that even the dullest listener can catch the point of fun. 9

The American pioneers specially told oral tales loosely-linked because the structure of the oral story was more in the nature of an anecdote rather than a well integrated plot. The tales of the "Pioneers West" invariably retained their oral character even when transferred to the page. In print, these American tales were, what Blair states, "Mock oral tales." 10 Mock oral tales are the reproduction on the printed page of stories in vernacular of the type who might have regaled a fireside circle. This form of the "raconteur" departed from the mannerisms and ornamentation of the sophisticated short story. It
encouraged, among other things, a sort of directness or plainness and simplicity. The main aim of the story-teller was to give delight to his audience. Under these conditions it was difficult for him to adopt either leisureliness or the euphuistic style. Therefore he was forced to prefer lively phrases instead of long drawn out descriptions. His words had to be well chosen to register the impressions quickly and to maintain the movement of the narrative. Thus in a mock oral tale the approach of the narrator may be a green horn one but only plausibly. He has in fact to keep his eyes and ears open behind a mask of innocence.

The folk-culture of the Old Southwest frontier in America, represents the story-teller as an artist, as a character coming into relation with a community. When outsiders to the frontier community let the frontierman know how uncouth he was, the story-teller defended his community by creating a fantastic, brutish, self-caricature to gull the self-righteous intruder. Mark Twain began his career thoroughly imbued with the South-western folk tradition which he adopted and ennobled into literature in his maturest short stories like "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Mark Twain did in America what Bishop Percy had already done in England. Like Bishop Percy, Mark Twain evinced interest in the folklore and also showed
that so long as a folk tale goes back into the oral tradition it is still a folktale.

III
THE ORAL TALE

The greatest service of Mark Twain was to develop this oral story in the native American humorous fashion. "He possessed an active interest in folklore," says Robert E. Bell, "as is seen in his use of folk legends as themes of stories or as whole passages in his longer works." His writings are frequently sprinkled with short anecdotes. Even his professional lectures are a string of stories. Hellenbach has pointed out that Mark Twain's speeches were many times told improptu. They never had a preliminary "paper" stage. In fact, some of them had an oral existence only. They never reached the paper.12 Apart from being a marvellous story-teller, Mark Twain had the knack of conveying the oral effect even on paper. His written short stories throb with a sense of "stimulated speech."

In his well known essay, "How To Tell A Story," Mark Twain divides, stories told by word of mouth, into three types:

1) The humorous Story,
ii) The Comic Story,
iii) The Witty Story.
This division seems to have been contrived intelligently and perceptively.

Out of the entire tradition of folk literature, Mark Twain drew upon the short story to evolve his technique. Originating in the days of the caveman, the short story continued to develop. By the end of the fourteenth century, the short story took four main channels: the realistic, the humorous, the romantic, and the allegorical. There has always been an affinity between humour and realism. In Mark Twain the affiliation reaches its climax.

At the outset Mark Twain, with characteristic naivety, declares that he does not profess to have the capacity to tell a story as it ought to be told. What he claims is merely that he knows how a story ought to be told as he had the opportunity to be in the company of "the most expert story-tellers for many years." 

Mark Twain further states that out of the various kinds of stories, only one is difficult—"the humorous." Then he also makes a rather bold claim that the humorous story is entirely American. What he calls the comic story is attributed to England, and the witty, to France. This claim of Twain needs some examination. Perhaps he means to suggest that American short story is humorous in its own way. This was later corroborated in 1899, by no less a person than Bret Harte in his essay "The Rise of the Short
While agreeing that Americans by and large were playing second fiddle to European influences, Bret Harte says that the American quality of humor was "at first noticeable in the anecdote or 'story', and, after the fashion of such beginnings, was orally transmitted."

Twain shows a fine sense of discrimination in drawing subtle lines of distinction between the humorous, the comic, and the witty in the field of oral story-telling. In humor there is the element of spontaneity; the intention is hidden, and the tone is suggestive. It aims at correction of weakness but with sympathy. The Comic in the Twainian sense will have the element of wit and intellect. Witty story will of course be brief and pointed, pithy and funny, the combination of an agile mind and a facility with words.

The distinction between humorous, comic, and witty expression drawn briefly by Twain, was later treated in greater detail by Freud, in his book, Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious (1912). Freud regrets that the role wit plays in our mental life has not been accorded the recognition it deserves. Only a few scholars like poet Jean Paul (Richeter, 1763-1825) and philosophers like Th. Vischer, Kuno Fischer (Über den Witz, 1889), and Theodore Lipps (Komik Und Humor, 1898) have written on wit; but even among them the main interest centers on the comic. Freud holds that humor, comic, and wit, like dreams, are means of
releasing suppressed energies of our psyche. He agrees with Lipps that wit depends upon a verbal expression produced by a process of condensation. It depends for its effect on brevity. The comic lies in a deviation from the norm. In the comic there is no scope for the tragic element, hence it cannot release a painful emotion. Humour, on the other hand, is the most self-sufficient of all comic forms. It gives pleasure despite painful effects that disturb it. Freud's formulae for these three different means to euphoria are that "... the pleasure of wit originates from an economy of expenditure in inhibition, of the comic from an economy of expenditure in thought, and of humor from an economy of expenditure in feeling."  

After regarding the humorous oral story as the most difficult one, Mark Twain further emphasizes that it depends for its effect upon the manner of telling, the comic and the witty stories upon the matter.

The United States of America shows a conglomeration of races and ideas, so their arts are naturally variegated. Amongst the story-tellers of the nineteenth century America there were two schools, one that of New England and Virginia associated with decency, delicacy, and decorum, and the other of the pioneers of the West who reflected the adventurous life they led. The former school is best represented by Henry James and the latter by Mark Twain.
Twain gives a broad canvas to the humorous story-teller:

The humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular; but the comic and the witty stories must be brief and end with a point. The humorous story bubbles gently along, the others burst (WMT, 7).

Even in this sentence the author implicitly gives the impression that the humorous story has an edge.

The implicit indication becomes explicit in the very next paragraph, as he comes out with the assertion that the humorous story is the work of high and delicate art and only an artist can tell it, while, according to Twain, no art is needed in telling what he classifies as the comic and the witty story which anybody can tell. Mark Twain makes a rather startling declaration that the art of humorous story-telling (though not story writing) is uniquely American. This remark, as has been said above, is having two opinions. Jessie Bier wonders whether Mark Twain did not read or "conveniently forgot" the interesting and wandering English novel Tristram Shandy. Though the objection of Bier can be replied to by observing that Mark Twain is here only speaking about the oral story, yet the fact remains that every land has its lore, which is reflected in the oral yarn. This remark was made perhaps out of his love for his native land.
Elaborating the manner of humorous story-telling, Mark Twain says that the humorous story is told in a staid and sober mien. The teller of the humorous story remains deliberately unaware of anything humorous in it. He assumes, for the purposes of humour, the character of what Twain called "an inspired idiot." The teller of the comic story, on the other hand, like Mark Twain's "European Guides," takes delight in exciting admiration. Contrary to the humorous story-teller, the comic story-teller is full of impatience, and is the first to laugh as soon as he has finished. The Dog "Aileen's" mother in "A Dog's Tale," "when she delivered the nub, she fell over and rolled on the floor and laughed and barked in the most insane way..." Thus the comic story-teller would even repeat the nub pathetically in the hope of throwing the hearers into ecstasies.

Mark Twain acknowledges that a "nub", "point" or "snapper" may sometimes be there even in a humorous story, but there it is evasive. The listener must be alert or he would miss it. The listener Mr. Lykins misses the "nub" in "The Man Who Put Up At Gadsby's," and asks the narrator Riley; "Well, where's the point of it?" Riley retorts "oh, nothing in particular" (152). The story-teller would never harp upon it, he would simply drop it "in a carefully casual and indifferent way, with the pretence that he does
not know it is a nub" (WMT, 8).

He mentions some of the expert story-tellers alluded to in the beginning of the essay. He cites Artemus Ward as a great artist in "the dropping of a studied remark apparently without knowing it, as if one were thinking aloud" (WMT, 11), and also in the handling of the pause. He also mentions Den Setchell, Edgar W. Nye ("Bill Nye"), and James Whitcomb Riley. Twain's essay under discussion itself indicates his debt to Artemus Ward. Artemus Ward's "A Romance--William Barker, the Young Patriot," and Twain's "Legend of cajitoline Venus" show close parallels. Mark Twain often liked to use the rambling manner of Ward's platform technique. He was also attracted by Ward's comic pose. Artemus introduced the pose of innocence to the lecture platform, the genius of Mark Twain enriched it and applied it to writing.21

Mark Twain repudiates the comic method of giving prominence to the "nub," whether in the oral tale or in print. He says that all this becomes very depressing and makes one feel like renouncing the joke ad-infinitum.

He now sets down an instance of the comic method by citing an anecdote, "the Wounded Soldier." A soldier had his leg shot off during a battle. His comrade was carrying him on his back to a place of safety but then his head was taken off by a cannon ball. His rescuer did not get to
know it and he innocently reported to the officer that the man had lost a leg. On being admonished that he meant head, the rescuer became amazed and said that his (dead) friend only said that it was "HIS LEG!!!!" Mark Twain shows how the same story was told by Riley in the character of "a dull-witted old farmer," in a purely humorous manner. He points out that "the simplicity and innocence and unconsciousness of the old farmer are perfectly simulated and the result is a performance which is thoroughly charming and delicious" (11).

Summing up the main features of oral story-telling, Twain recounts that in the first place, the oral-story-teller must be an adept in stringing "incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way. . . ." Secondly, the point of the story must be effectively and properly concealed. Thirdly, "the studied remark" should be dropped in a seemingly casual manner, and finally the teller should dexterously handle the pause, it should be dropped in what is called "a soliloquizing way." The "pause" in his opinion is a very important feature in any kind of story, and a frequently recurring feature too. The pause should be a carefully measured one, without haste and without waste. Even a slight mistake in its timing will not only ruin the desired effect but may also be a source of trouble.
At the end of the essay, Mark Twain illustrates his point of handling the "pause" by reproducing a negro ghost story "The Golden Arm" in which the pause is exceedingly important. Twain had already written in 1881 for the benefit of Joel Chandler Harris "De Woman Wid de Golden Arm." He is here giving another version of the same story. When the golden armed wife of a stingy, mean man died, he buried the body in the prairie but later exhumed it to chop off the valuable golden arm. Returning home, through the snow, he heard a howl in the wind asking over and over, "who got my golden arm?" Twain leaves it to the readers to practise this story and try to get the pause right, in order to have the desired capper or climax. He says that while narrating this story he used to get the pause right and then would shout at the most frightened girl in his audience, "You've got it!"

IV
RECAPITULATION

Retracing the main points of the essay, one can say that Mark Twain is here championing the cause of the wandering, non-climactic type of humorous tale as the superior one. This class of humorous oral story depends for its effect on the way of presentation. In his opinion the "principles of compression, totality, suspense
and climax" are not essential. Twain wanted the story to have immediacy. He makes the listener feel, that he is living in a story and not simply listening to it. Here, of course, we have to remember that writing stories and speaking to an audience are two different things. "The narrators pay attention to the needs and desires and also to the immediate mood of the listeners. Creative personalities, wanting to innovate, are generally restrained by their more conservative public. Less skilful narrators are corrected and encouraged to improve the story." With the spoken word, much depends on how the teller is able to coax and tempt his listeners by arousing their curiosity through an appeal to their emotions primarily, and to their intellect only secondarily.

Secondly, there is the stress on the emphatic treatment of the "nub" in the story. Here perhaps it will be proper to recall a British critic's words: "... there is a definite moment of climax in the story. More often than not it comes as a sudden and unexpected shock. A word, a phrase may produce it. ..." Bernard DeVoto has pointed out that in the speaking ability of Mark Twain himself, the use of the pause was most effective and important. He quotes Mark Twain as saying that he got much pleasure when in his recitations the pause was accurately measured and, a certain discomfort, when it was not. The essential point
here, according to Twain, is that the humorist will underplay and often pretend ignorance of the nub.

Mark Twain's comments on Europe, after his trips abroad, are marked by a sense of national pride. He was defending America against such critics as Matthew Arnold and Paul Bourget. Mark Twain found that the native folk tale or oral tale was not being given due recognition. The American Folklore Society was established in 1888. The society started publishing folktales and legends prevalent in America in a "Memoir" series. Volume I in 1894 was a small monograph of folktales from Angola. The second volume published in 1895 was a collection of some old world magic tales from France, and the third, also issued in 1895, was an anthology of English and African songs and stories from Bahama negroes. Mark Twain composed "How To Tell A Story" in 1895. It is clear that he wanted to impress upon the Americans and the American Folklore Society that the American folktale or oral tale has its own place though the earliest carriers of tales to America may be the Spanish, the French, or the British.

His claim about the prominence of the American humorous story is supported by some other developments also. It is a fact that with the founding in 1634 of the French Academy, the French turned more towards the intellect. Crudeness now gave way to polish and, uncertainty, to decision in literary
works, sculpture and painting. "... it is the fashion in French to make every old woman sparkle with wit," complained George Sand in the story "The Marquise." J.A. Hammerton in his editorial comments endorses the claim of the superiority of the American short story when he declares:

only in the art of short story has the American mind displayed an originality and creativeness of a dominating quality. It has surpassed even the French mind in the intellectual energy with which it has studied all the possibilities of the last new literary form and it has composed a glorious number of masterpieces of fiction with manifold excellences.

Hence it is seen that Mark Twain's comments on French wit have some support. They should not be taken as the outcome of his antipathy towards French civilization or to his supposed antagonism towards an individual critic like Madame Blanc.

Mark Twain could also note the general decline of humour in England during the nineteenth century. Clarence Gohdes has shown how even the British critics and journalists were acknowledging the superiority of American humour. Andrew Lang exclaimed, "The Americans are of our own stock, yet in their treatment of the ludicrous how unlike us they are!" The Illustrated London News, in its issue of September 28, 1944, acknowledged the "keen relish" of the British for the American humour of the day. James Muirhead, in his book
The Land of Contrasts (1898), maintained that England did not have a popular humorist of the level of Artemus Ward, IK Marvel, H.C. Dunning, Frank Stockton and Mark Twain. A reputed author like Thomas Hardy could see that "Mark Twain was more than the chief buffoon of the English speaking world." As the English were largely dealing with common-sense, there was a general decline of humour. One finds the National Observer, in 1891, gloomily wailing: "Fun we must have, of course. If we cannot import it, duty free and carriage paid, in bulk from America, it must be brought (O the pity of it!) from France."

The above facts show that Mark Twain's claim of the superiority of the American humorous oral story is not entirely without basis. The sense of national pride has, of course, played some part in making Twain a little over-enthusiastic. Still one has to say that he has only exaggerated a vital truth. The critical views of Mark Twain have also to be given due weightage in the context of the testimony of Sydney J. Krause that he always remained balanced while expressing his views in print and was very much embarrassed when something of his rage slipped out.

The conception of the great humorist regarding storytelling is given, in a nutshell, in a passage from his great short story "The Jumping Frog" which is so representative that it can be quoted at some length:
He never smiled, he never frowned, he
never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing
key to which he tuned his initial sentence, he
never betrayed the slightest suspicion of
enthusiasm; but all through the interminable
narrative there ran a vein of impressive
earnestness and sincerity, which showed me
plainly that, so far from imagining that there
was anything ridiculous or funny about his
story, he regarded it as a really important
matter, and admired its two heroes as men of
transcendent genius in finesse (1-2).

Mark Twain describes above the character of the
story-teller, a person who always maintained an even tone,
who never showed any excitement at any stage in the story,
and who himself remained throughout dead-serious. Story-
tellers of China and Japan have similar views on the milieu
of recitation and the reactions of audience. The story-tellers
there, cannot think of a real story in isolation from the
raconteur. "For them it is often more important how a story
is told than what a story relates." Chinese story-tellers
believe that a good story-teller can present even a bad
story in a charming manner; while a novice in the art can
"kill a good story." Japanese story-tellers hold that a
person can never become a good story-teller simply by
reading stories. He has to listen to great masters in the
art. He has to study the rhythm and nuances of the spoken
word, to be able to relate the story orally.37

Finally, it is seen that Mark Twain's favourite type
was the humorous short story. He had a great fancy for
oral story-telling and even his stories in print are inspired by the spirit of oral stories. His stories may have been extempore but through frequent repetition they have become polished and artful. He chose native themes endowed with native humour of his land and narrated them like tall tales. Twain recommends various techniques of the tall tales for the oral narrative—the grave expression, the slurring of the nub, apparently irrelevant remarks, the focal pause etc.

Walter Blair has pointed out that in the humorous oral story, American humour not only perpetuated itself but also became richer. These humorous oral stories, with their distinctive content, and presentation were promoting the thriving of American humour. American humorists often strove to impart the quality of oral story even to the written ones. This trend has been continuous in the literary development of America. It can be seen in the typical passages of George Washington Harris (1814-69), Mark Twain (1835-1910), and William Faulkner (1897-1962). They all share stylistic devices modelled upon oral stories. In the hands of Mark Twain, of course, his favourite humorous story reached its peak. We have in it a record of the American art which is now almost fading.
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29 Hammerton, XIV, 2.


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34 Ibid., p. 129.

35 Ibid., p. 93.


CHAPTER II

PERVADING OF THE RAINBOW

'Twas the saying of an ancient sage that humour was the only test of gravity, and gravity of humor. For a subject which would not bear raillery was suspicious; and a jest which would not bear a serious examination was certainly false wit.

-- Anthony A. Cooper
(Earl of Shaftesbury)

Essays on Freedom of Wit and Humour Sec. I.

I

HUMOUR

The great master of Long story, William Makepeace Thackeray, has symbolically illustrated the relation of the story-teller to society with the help of a picture in his "Roundabout Paper on a Lazy Idle Boy." The picture depicts a handful of warriors and grave elders of the city, seated at the gates of Jaffa or Beirut, listening to the story-teller reciting the wonderful and cajoling fairy-tales of The Arabian Nights. This is not a bad picture, in miniature, of the story-teller's role in the community. One of the main aims of the story-teller is to endear himself to the people. This he achieves with the help of humour, as humour appeals to the heart.