

# The Notorious Jumping Reader of Calaveras County: Twain, Blanchot, and a Dialectic of Storytelling

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Boredom! He smokes his hookah, while he dreams  
Of gibbets, weeping tears he cannot smother.  
You know this dainty monster, too, it seems—  
Hypocrite reader!—You!—My twin!—My brother!  
— Charles Baudelaire, “Au Lecteur” (trans. Roy Cambell)

Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience.  
— Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”

**M**ARK TWAIN'S WELL-KNOWN STORY, “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” unfolds as its framing narrator's recollection of a time when he finds himself cornered and bored to death by a tedious storyteller: “and he would go to work and bore me to death with some exasperating reminiscence of him as long and as tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was his design, he succeeded” (589). “Death” by boredom, however, does not bring about the end of the narrator's life, and in fact, our narrator ultimately manages to escape from his storyteller and pass along the entire “exasperating reminiscence” to us, the readers of Twain's story. Readers have long recognized that Twain's presentation of a storyteller who is himself unaware of the “ridiculous and funny” nature of his story makes the narrative result all the more humorous, and that the “Jumping Frog” illustrates the technique of calmly passing along the story of someone being bored to death by a story in order to transform boredom into humor. In this essay, I address the specific stages of this narrative process: What sort of death is meant

by the phrase "bored to death," and what does the reframing of the original story do for readers of Twain's text?

Toward an answer, I argue that Twain's portrayal of humor-by-way-of-boredom suggests Maurice Blanchot's phenomenological view of freedom-by-way-of-death. As jokes may comprise the provocative object of Freud's investigation of the unconscious, so might Twain's popular, seemingly simple tale help to illuminate the subtle features of narrative theory. By reading Blanchot's essay, "Literature and the Right to Death," alongside Twain's "Jumping Frog," I trace the phenomenological nature of the story's humor as it dialectically encounters its negative other. This humorous experience of the negative, in turn, precipitates a "death" that stands between and defines the relationship of speaker and listener, or writer and reader. In short, this essay follows the experiences of a reader of Twain's story who discovers the implications of Blanchot's assertion that "speech is a warning that death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address" (43). For these two writers, death—the object of jokes and parody for as long as stories have been told—marks a narrative limit, the end of one state of consciousness and the beginning of another.

In "How to Tell a Story," Twain distinguishes the humorous American tale from both the comic English story and the witty French story: "The humorous story depends for its effect upon the *manner* of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the *matter*" (201). Specifically, while the comic and witty stories may feature a delighted storyteller with a clear punchline, "the humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it" (201). For such a story the audience plays an active, central role: "Very often, of course, the rambling and disjointed humorous story finishes with a nub, point, snapper, or whatever you like to call it. Then the listener must be alert, for in many cases the teller will divert attention from that nub by dropping it in a carefully

casual and indifferent way, with the pretence that he does not know it is a nub" (201-2).

The "Jumping Frog," with its story-within-a-story, foregrounds this concern for narrative agency and the alert, if captive audience. The tale's narrator meets "good natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler" and asks him about a third person, Leonidas W. Smiley. Wheeler tells the narrator that he doesn't know a *Leonidas W. Smiley*, but he does know of a *Jim Smiley*, and at this point Wheeler's own story begins, much to the dismay of the framing narrator: "Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair, and then sat down and reeled off the monotonous narrative which follows this paragraph" (589).

The *manner* in which Wheeler reels off his story is described in great detail by the framing narrator, and in his description of this manner, the peculiar conspiracy between humor and monotony begins to emerge:

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 his 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*. (589-90)

Wheeler seems sincerely interested in simply allowing the adventures of Jim Smiley and his challengers to flow freely and accurately to his listener. Yet, as he speaks, Wheeler cannot hide his own admiration for the cleverness of Calaveras County's foremost wagering man and the challenger who beat him, and indeed it seems that his admiration subsumes his enthusiasm. He is oblivious to the humor and silliness (to say nothing of the duration) of his own story, and generations of readers have responded by finding the story all the funnier because of this. Wheeler drones on and on while the narrator remains silent, growing weaker and weaker, and eventually "dying of boredom" before finding his release.

Maurice Blanchot warns that language corners us all into the "deceit and mystification" of discovering only those things that we already know, of knowing the world only by the names we give to it. Yet, he argues, literature aspires to more, even pretending at times to bring the night into the daylight without language's negative mediation, the "names already given." Language desires, in an image common to linguists, to know a "cat on a mat" without actually letting the (non-) cat of language out of the bag. But the endeavor is futile, since in the end, "literature is that experience through which the consciousness discovers its inability to lose consciousness" (50). In fact, we might imagine that as Twain's poor narrator sits condemned to listen to Wheeler's endlessly turning tale, we hear Blanchot's own jeremiad, reminding us that speaking is really nothing but the echoing of empty words that silence "real" consciousness:

this endless shifting of words without content, this continuousness of speech through an immense pillage of words, is precisely the profound nature of a silence that talks even in its dumbness, a silence that is speech empty of words, an echo speaking on and on in the midst of silence. And in the same way literature, a blind vigilance which in its attempt to escape from itself plunges deeper and deeper into its own obsession, is the only rendering of the obsession of existence. (50)

"Silence," that which would give to literature what it most wants—the "unknown, free" reality of things (49), only confirms literature's recurring obsession. Recounting Hegel's remarks on of Edenic linguistics, Blanchot explains, "man was condemned not to be able to approach anything or experience anything except through the meaning he had to create" (42). Still, literature stubbornly questions this condemnation, and in turn is questioned by it: can anything be written which is not already written in the very possibility of writing? Likewise, must it always be the case that literature, "by its very activity, denies the substance of what it represents?" (30) Blanchot's answer—in so many words, "yes and no"—leads us to the dual dialectical deaths of the revolutionary and the storyteller.

Simon Wheeler does not find his own story funny. Like a good comic "straight man," Wheeler delivers his monologue "gravely" and in admiration, not mirth. If, as Blanchot notes, one of the imperatives guiding (and troubling) the writer is to "obliterate yourself before the reader" (32), then Wheeler, as writer, abides by the corollary to suppress one's own sense of humor before the audience. Twain is well aware that his story's humorous "truth" depends upon Wheeler's effacement of any "humorous" self while telling *his* story. Note, however, that this humorous self-effacement is repeated in the framing narrator's own absence from the Wheeler narrative, which comprises most of the story. The narrator never interrupts Wheeler's story, and his absence ensures that whatever humor we derive from the story finds its "truth" in Wheeler's own words; that is, what is ultimately funny about the "Jumping Frog" is Wheeler's story "itself."

Hence, a "humorous dialectic": 1) The funny story 2) is negated by un/non-funny storyteller 3) and therefore appears funny to the reader whose appreciation of the humor takes into account both the story and its negative, "straight man" frame. Examined more closely, this process suggests the actual moments of negation or "death" that lie between the stages of the dialectic and allow it to advance. Such moments, Blanchot asserts, are moments of freedom.

What Blanchot recalls as that moment when "life endures death and maintains itself in it" in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking the truth of speech" becomes the obsessive question "that seeks to pose itself in literature" (41). Speech itself is "not sufficient for the truth it contains," so literature must attempt to speak the unspoken out of death, for only death refuses to let night (and death itself) pass into day: "But to die is to shatter the world; it is the loss of the person, the annihilation of being; and so it is also the loss of death, the loss of what in it and for me made it death" (45, 55).

The revolutionary, in turn, finds in this death a Nietzschean transvaluation of negation itself, discovering that "negation

that is not satisfied with the unreality in which it exists, because it wishes to realize itself and can only do so by negating something real, more real than words, more true than the isolated individual in control" (38). In this negation, in this single aspect of the dialectic, lies the revolutionary's freedom to affirm the "absolute as event" (38). That is, the revolutionary experiences "history as his own history and his own freedom as universal freedom" and encounters the "fabulous moment" of release from the cycle of knowing-doubting-dying.

Twain's re-turning Wheeler inspires the framing narrator's own "revolutionary" movement. After hearing as much as he could stand, the narrator flees:

At the door I met the sociable Wheeler returning, and he buttonholed me and recommenced:

"Well, thish-yer Smiley had a yaller one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail, only just a short stump like a bannanner, and - - -"

However, lacking both time and inclination, I did not wait to hear about the afflicted cow, but took my leave. (594)

The narrator's fatal boredom and subsequent leave-taking freedom literally enable the story to make its way to its readers. The humorous truth of Wheeler's story, therefore, reveals its own truth only through the demise and release of the narrator.

But does it?

Does the narrator transfer or (re) present a humorous story to us through his demise, or does the humor (as noted above) arise from the confusion of the "story" with Wheeler's deadpan and the narrator's exasperation? Blanchot calmly maintains, "an ambiguous answer is a question about ambiguity" (59). Both possibilities seem to have merit: Humor finds its truth through *representing* something funny or by *being* funny. The ambiguity is compelling because it is based in language itself: "It is not just that each moment of language can become ambiguous and say something different from what it is saying, but that the general meaning of language is unclear: We don't know if it is expressing or representing, if

it is a thing or means that thing; if it is there to be forgotten or if it only makes us forget it so we will see it. . ." (60). The essence of humor, like the "power of the negative" that aspires (in language, through death) to understand absence, is therefore trapped in an "irreducible double meaning" of ambiguity (61). To follow this ambiguity throughout Twain's story returns us to the story's beginning, and, finally introduces us to Smiley's celebrated frog.

"In compliance with the request of a good friend of mine, who wrote me from the East," begins the narrator, acknowledging the original facilitator of his meeting with Wheeler (1). The facilitating agent *writes*, sending Wheeler out to a practical joke: "I have a lurking suspicion that *Leonidas W. Smiley* is a myth; that my friend never knew such a personage; and that he only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him, it would remind him of his infamous *Jim Smiley*" (589). The writer sends the narrator *out to do something*. Blanchot asks, "if the work is already present in its entirety in his [the writer's] mind and if this presence is the essence of the work (taking the words for the time being to be inessential), why would he realize it any further?" The "essence" of the Eastern writer's own joke—to have his friend endure a boring story—will realize itself (and claim its truth) only as the joke is set in motion. Twain's Eastern writer knows the real joke is in the performance, and Blanchot concurs that "the writer only finds himself, only realizes himself, through his work," a work which "has value, truth and reality only through the words which unfold it in time and space" (24). Nevertheless, the result of the writer's agency actually disrupts the notion of faithfulness to its model, or essence, since the model itself must be seen as formed by the reproduction.

The completed and completing work is therefore "the perfect act through which what was nothing when it was inside emerges into the monumental reality of the outside as something which is necessarily true, as a translation which is necessarily faithful, since the person [or joke] it translates exists

only through and in it" (26). The work, then, is not simply (or no longer) an "inside joke," but an external "universal sentence" in which anyone who reads it will seem to have discovered its truth. The writer's effort is subsumed into a "vital contingency which he [the writer] cannot control or even observe. Yet his experiment is not worthless: in writing, he has put himself to the test as a nothingness at work . . . [and] the fact of disappearing remains and appears as the essential thing, the movement which allows the work to be realized as it enters the stream of history" (28).

Yet the singular, self-sufficient faith of this writer (or, for that matter, the reader who compares notes with other, differing, readers) is not without its anxiety. Each reader has his or her individual interest in the work, and this creates a "disconcerting ordeal": "the work has disappeared, it has become a work belonging to other people, a work which includes them and does not include him, a book which derives its value from other books, which is original if it does not resemble them, which is understood because it is a reflection of them" (26). And as the Eastern writer's joke develops first into the narrator's inquiry and then into Wheeler's story, its dual qualities of uniqueness and resemblance bring their paradoxical natures to center stage.

A distinction between two names and two dates, at once different and alike, inaugurates Wheeler's story: "Rev. Leonidas W. H'm, Reverend Le—well, there was a feller here once by the name of *Jim* Smiley, in the winter of '49—or maybe it was the spring of '50." Jim Smiley himself industriously negotiates differences as he leaps from one side of a bet to its opposite, "always betting on anything that turned up you ever see, if he could get anybody to bet on the other side; and if he couldn't he'd change sides." Obsessed with the distinction of similarity and difference, Smiley bets on "straddle bugs" heading to Mexico, birds flying off a "fence," and even the likelihood of Parson Walker's wife "crossing" to the other side of existence itself (590).

Distinction and similarity, then, are always in the service of *getting somewhere*, moving into the "stream of history" to encounter its truth. The "alien reality, made and unmade by colliding with other realities," of which Blanchot speaks, is here moving, walking, flying, rolling, and jumping (26). It is being pushed, prodded, and wheeled like a sack of ripening fruit to market. It takes on many forms in Twain's story, from the "fifteen-minute nag" kicking up dust and wildly winning a neck-and-neck race, "as near as you could cipher it down," to the bull-pup, Andrew Jackson, whose "pet holt" of biting the opposing dog's hind leg in a fight was frustrated by the fact that, in his final fight (in which bets were "doubled and doubled on the other side, till the money was all up"), the challenger appears *without* hind legs—an important dimension of difference, indeed (591).

Of course, Andrew Jackson's mortification (he is so disheartened that he actually passes away), foreshadows the fall of Smiley's champion frog, just as the pup's "disheartening" foreshadows Twain's own heartfelt demise, as discussed below. But what *is* Smiley's champion frog? Is its essence representative or generative? The frog is clearly introduced in an ambiguous way:

"What might it be that you've got in the box?"

"And Smiley says, sorter indifferent-like, 'It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, maybe, but it ain't—it's only just a frog.'" (592)

Once the frog is let out of the box (like the cat out of the bag), he *seems* perfectly ordinary. In fact, he *is* perfectly ordinary—until he jumps, and then his "truth" is revealed, since "jumping on a dead level was his strong suit, you understand" (592). Hence, a "dead level" sets up the frog's leap, even as a dialectical death establishes the revolutionary's freedom and absence affirms the writer's agency. The "literary history" of this story moves from the Eastern writer, who effaces himself before the playing out of his joke, to Twain's framing narrator, who effaces himself before Wheeler, to Wheeler, wheeling out his story without humor, to the frog, who, for his part,

keeps the story jumping, that is, makes the story work. Smiley sings out "Flies!" and the frog grabs for the flies; Smiley says "jump" and the frog jumps. The storyteller speaks, and his voice provokes the all-important leap from a dead level.

Blanchot notes that "the reader makes the work; as he reads it, he creates it; he is the real author; he is the consciousness and the living substance of the written thing" (27). Who is this frog named "Dan'l Webster" if not another symptom of the urge to fulfillment, a reflex-like attempt to make the word—and so much more boldly, the name—jump, compete, and win the wager for its "author"? Who else, but the "reader"?

"Dan'l Webster" is set before an impossible task. It is only a matter of time before the frog—as a reader—can no longer perform the familiar, circumscribed function, but finds himself faced with, in Blanchot's phrase, a truly "alien work in which he can discover something unknown, a different reality, a separate mind capable of transforming him and which he can transform into himself" (27). Dan'l is *defined by movement*—he is, after all, the notorious *jumping* frog of Calaveras County: we would expect his negative "different reality" would arise from immobility, groundedness, and a paralysis that both contains Dan'l and comprises him, or, if you will, fulfills him.

Following Dan'l's final, unsuccessful, jumping contest, Smiley is utterly baffled by the loss. He is unaware that his challenger—"the stranger," an alien reality who "collides" with Calaveras County—has fully filled Dan'l Webster with quail-shot, preventing the animal from moving: "The new frog hopped off lively, but Dan'l didn't give a heave, and hysted up his shoulders—so—like a Frenchman, but it warn't no use—he couldn't budge; he was planted as solid as a church. . ." (593). "Solid as a church": Blanchot, too, recognizes "whether the work is obscure or clear, poetry or prose, insignificant, important, whether it speaks of a pebble or of God, there is something in it . . . always in the process of changing the work from the ground up" (60). Mundane, the

word simply rests. Yet, in its way, Dan'l's divine, mute, "French" expression is not unlike Blanchot's own thematizing of language's relation to materiality: "A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. . ." (46). "Language is a thing," but one that is continually troubled by the ambiguity of its own fate. Can it remain what it is (a jumping frog or reader) without encountering what it is *not* (an immobile frog or inattentive reader) through the inevitable operation of that process (betting or reading) which calls forth and then questions the designation of what the agent itself is ("jumping frog" or "reader")? Jumping should set Dan'l free, yet it is this very skill that makes him valuable and keeps him bound to Smiley's service. Reading ought to release the reader into the reality beyond words, yet, as long as reading continues, it only binds the reader more firmly to endless promises of release.

Consequently, it is when Dan'l "dies" as a jumping frog that he is able to truly escape. Dan'l experiences what Blanchot calls "the rejection of existence, and the absolute concern for truth is expressed by an incapacity to act in any real way" (62). This death is also a necessary ambiguity, an "original double meaning, which lies deep inside every word like a condemnation that is still unknown and a happiness that is still invisible" (62). Double meaning lies deep inside Dan'l, too, and the invisible happiness follows as quickly as escape will allow it: "And he ketched Dan'l by the nap of the neck, and hefted him, and says, 'Why blame my cats if he don't weigh five pound!' and turned him upside down [Dan'l's penultimate 'negation'] and he belched out a double handful of shot. And then he see how it was, and he was the maddest man—he set the frog down and took off after the feller, but he never ketched him" (593-94). Dan'l's final negation, his release from the story, is in fact announced by the interruption of someone alien to the narrative calling Wheeler's own name. The following then ensues: Smiley doesn't catch the

stranger, Wheeler doesn't catch the narrator, and the story doesn't catch Dan'l. As it picks up again, the story instead enlists the not-so-notorious one-eyed cow with its "bannan-ner" tail. And as this new tale now threatens to be set into motion, to move along in its own endless continuation, we, the readers, escape, too, simply by finishing the story along with the framing narrator. Of course, in "taking our leave" we really do *take our leave*, and this is the story's final catch.

The leave was ours all along, it is always the reader's *leave* to conclude or foreclose on a story. This story, breaking off in the midst of what is said to be a *neverending* tale, releases several of its accomplices, including its readers, but the story has paradoxically served to initiate its own infinite trajectory. Our leave can be repeated over and over, but it always returns us to the *unfinished* text for its authorization to finish. The reader's revolution suggests, even insists on, a paradoxical, Baudelairean, "hypocritical" movement out of negation and death which jumps free of the wagering contest of language, while the story as literature forecloses on the possibility of finding ourselves behind the meaning we must constitute.

Like Rimbaud, Blanchot considers that the writer must ultimately address an intractable otherness: "in the presence of something other, I become other . . . this other thing—the book—of which I had only an idea and which I could not possibly have known in advance, is precisely myself become other" (34). It turns out that this confrontation with the other-as-self is just what Mark Twain himself encountered when his own "Jumping Frog" was translated into French. Explaining his reaction to reading the translation, Twain wrote that this "other" is hallucinatory and monstrous: "I claim that I never put together such an odious mixture of bad grammar and delirium tremens in my life" (603). Tongue-in-cheek, he explained that he felt "abused and misrepresented" and took no responsibility for this version of his work, although the presence and reality of the work could not be denied (since, as noted above, that which is translated exists only in the

translation). Of course, this predicament recalls the same inevitable travesty we have discussed, in which a work becomes the work "made public."

Twain explained that the translation of his story not only left the author appalled, but it inspired a strange effect in its French translator: "He says my Jumping Frog is a funny story, but still he can't see why it should ever really convulse anyone with laughter—and straightway proceeds to translate it into French in order to prove to his nation that there is nothing so very extravagantly funny about it" (588). In order to help clarify for American readers why the translated story "died," "fell flat," "bottomed out," and "just sat there," Twain published the French version together with his own re-translation of the French text into English. And with this publication the entire phenomenological dialectic I have described above repeats itself, and repeats itself *incomprehensibly* to the English-language consciousness of "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." The "original," "funny," and "American" sketch experiences its un/non-funny negative, only to emerge as Twain's retranslation, which derives its own humor from the process of negation itself, all of which calls into question the essential or exclusive role of the "original" story in the humor that results.

Twain himself, as a figure in the design, is then caught spinning the wheels of the dialectic cycle. As the author of the written story, he is confronted with his written other. And it is a battle to the death, which, as we have seen, spins the revolutionary out into a moment of freedom, a moment of non-being, which for Twain-as-writer spells the condition of non-writer, and he himself is silenced: "What has a poor foreigner like me done, to be abused and misrepresented like this? When I say, 'Well, I don't see no p'int about that frog that's any better'n any other frog,' is it kind, is it just, for this Frenchman to try to make it appear that I said, 'Eh bien! I no saw no that that frog had nothing of better than each frog'? I have no heart to write more. I never felt so about anything before" (603). Twain's leave-taking from the role of a writer

recording his own experiences as a reader—in fact, his experiences as a reader of what his work looks like from a “French” perspective—signals his own disappearance. Such a disappearance, in turn, prompts the arrival of Blanchot’s double meaning, in which “the way out becomes the disappearance of every way out” (62). In such a way, as I have argued in this essay, the dialectical nature of “literature and theory” continually insinuates itself into the reading experience as we return to our texts again and again.

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