ABSTRACT
This paper argues that Mark Twain’s under-studied final work No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger – left incomplete upon his death – is an exploration of the author’s engagement with the question of the relationship between individual intelligence, brain science, and the emerging, Progressive Era discourse of ‘merit’. I show how Twain’s novel critiques ‘merit’ and the political structures of ‘meritocracy’ by presenting the reader with two characters who are in fact the same person (August and Forty-Four) to expose different facets of the meritocratic personality. These facets (a belief in innate ability and a commitment to impressibility and growth) might seem contradictory, but Twain’s novel demonstrates how in a moment of advanced capitalism and industrialism that predicts our own both are deployed consciously by the meritocrat in the transfer of power from the collective to the bourgeois individual. With No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, Twain refines his vision of American social values into a critique of the Enlightenment more broadly, abandoning his earlier reformist impulses to imagine more radical challenges to American power.

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Yesterday I had a message for Andrew Carnegie, who has just been celebrating his seventieth birthday with the help of friends, and I went to town to deliver it … If I were going to describe him in a phrase I think I should call him the Human Being Unconcealed. He is just like the rest of the human race, but with this difference, that the rest of the race try to conceal what they are, and succeed, whereas Andrew tries to conceal what he is, but doesn’t succeed. Yesterday he was at his best; he went on exposing himself all the time, yet seemed to be unaware of it. I cannot go as far as to say he was unaware of it – seemed is the safer word to use, perhaps. He never has any but one theme – himself.¹

Mark Twain, ‘Autobiographical Dictation December 2, 1907’

It is true, that which I revealed to you: there is no God, no universe, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream.
Nothing exists but You. And You are but a Thought – a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!

He vanished, and left me appalled; for I knew, and realized, that all he has said was true.  

A growing body of recent work in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literary studies has begun to explore the extent to which the rise of ‘hard’ biophysical descriptions of the social world in the later nineteenth century – understood collectively as a consequence of the Darwinian revolution –, did not come necessarily at the expense, or through the usurpation of, extant traditions of sentimentalism, sympathy, and the impressible body commonly associated with an earlier nineteenth century Romanticism. Rather, critics working at the intersection of turn-of-the-century literature and the history of science, such as Erica Fretwell and Kyla Schuller, have shown the extent which literary sentiment and affect were central to the development of modern scientific systems of social organisation in the twentieth century.  

These biophysical conceptions of human behaviour (Fretwell uses the term ‘psychophysics’ gleaned from work between 1840 and 1880 by E.H. Weber, Gustav Fechner, and Herman von Helmholtz) led, by degrees, to the reification of ‘intelligence’ as a discrete and measurable human aptitude and the elevation of ‘merit’ as a principal value system in Progressive Era culture, inextricable from race, class and gender concerns. While considerations of sentiment and ‘general intelligence’ as being part and parcel of the same object of study might have receded over subsequent years (to the extent that they are from time to time evoked as if they were opposites), in our present moment the normalisation of assessments of ‘intelligence’ (whether understood in terms of I.Q., g. or by means of some more expansive definition) within institutions have called for comparable attention to be paid to the question of emotion and feeling as necessary attributes for effective capitalist governance. As Merve Emre has noted in a recent article in The New Yorker concerning the pop-psychology work of Daniel Goleman on ‘emotional intelligence’, with the rise of I.Q. as a normative metric of human merit (especially in the period after the 1950s that saw the solidification of corporate systems of governance worldwide and economic shifts in the West towards service and care economies), capitalist organisations have increasingly demanded that affective sensitivity, charisma, and other forms of emotional labour be assessed and captured as individual aptitudes possessed by employees and managers that can increase the efficiency, effectiveness, and power of the organisation.  

Under late capitalism smartness needs sentiment and vice-versa to shore up Capital’s claim to total command over the operations of work and everyday life. The figure who wields both these attributes with equal potency is The Meritocrat, who
emerges most completely on the social scene with the expansion of corporate
corporate power and embodies fully the affordances and contradictions of twentieth-
century American capitalism.

To understand fully how a key facet of twentieth-century-American
power after the Civil War depended in large degree upon widespread
influence of ‘meritocratic’ systems of governance and ‘merit’ as discourse,
we must theorise how the language of merit exploits an ontological space
of uncertainty between innate, biophysical ‘general intelligence’ and an indi-
nual’s capacity for emotional impressibility. Importantly, this protean, con-
ceptual zone of indistinction is utilised and deployed by managers,
industrialists, and bureaucrats to exert increasing amounts of individual
power, even in the presence of significant countervailing forces of democra-
tisation. In this article, I propose that Mark Twain’s final work, No. 44, The
Mysterious Stranger advances such a theory, predicting how twentieth-
century capitalist dominance in the U.S. would come to rely upon the
figure of the meritocrat, whose command of a set of aesthetico-political prac-
tices permitted them to exploited the perceived instability between the forms
of ‘merit’ that were coming to be known scientifically in his lifetime (codified
as ‘general intelligence’) and the emotionality that was a dominant feature of
a supposedly earlier sentimental culture. The effective meritocratic manager,
for Twain, was an individual involved in the artful deployment of a kind of
trick, or aesthetic deception, through which they might variously perform a
skill or superiority coded as ‘natural’, or, in the face of a rejection of this pre-
sumably innate ability as mere luck or ‘privilege’, evoke ‘hard work’, bildung,
and a sentimental impressibility. In the terms Sianne Ngai has proposed, the
meritocrat governs via the aesthetic ambiguity of ‘the gimmick’, in some
senses embodying it: ‘a compromised form bound to an ambivalent judg-
ment that its perception spontaneously elicits’. Moreover the gimmick is
de
defined by a certain fungible and exploitable temporal instability that ‘con-
fronts us with a mode of bad contemporaneity’, much as the meritocrat,
by Twain’s reckoning, exists in an uneasy and unsettled relationship to the
present. In this sense, Twain renders meritocracy as a form of governance
as heavily reliant upon the development of contemporary regimes of bio-
power as it is upon residual forms of sentimental culture; a discourse of
control that exploits self-consciously and openly a temporal disjunction
between forms of narrative within capitalist culture.

Through this reading, I offer insights into how Twain’s novel helps us to
understand our contemporary moment, by projecting the Progressive-Era
development of ‘meritocracy’ into a dystopian future of rampant inequality,
bourgeois capitalist governance, automation, and social collapse (a future
that, of course, resembles the Progressive Era as much as it does our own).
I propose that the temporal instability of meritocracy (its existence
between modern biopower and sentimental bildung) is dramatized by the
aesthetic of the novel, which takes the form of an account of the past (feudal Europe) that reflects on Twain’s present (the rise of Gilded Age and Progressive Era capitalism) so as to predict our future.

It is worth beginning with an account of the novel’s plot. Mark Twain’s final work, No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger is the most complete of a variety of manuscripts he worked on under that title from around 1897 to 1908 when deteriorating health left him unable to compose. The text went unpublished in his lifetime and is quite unloved within his oeuvre by readers and critics alike. A description of the conclusion [quoted above as my second epigraph] would go something like this: Forty-Four, eponymous time-travelling ‘stranger’ of the novel, who appeared randomly in 1490s Austria is revealed in fact to be one element of the mind of the protagonist, August Feldner. This makes his final account of the emptiness of the universe actually August’s own vision of the world, asking the reader to reflect back on what has really happened up to that point.\(^7\) Often considered in Twain biographies as characteristic of a final phase marked by what Bernard DeVoto called personal and politically nihilistic ‘Symbols of Despair’, and an unaccountable oscillation between esoteric mysticism and speculative fiction, the novel has seldom been seen as the important work it undoubtedly is. Since the end of the book marks the effective end of Mark Twain’s writing life its despairing solipsism has been read as a retreat from the various socially-progressive positions he held throughout his career, including the anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and socialist causes to which he was, at certain times, actively committed.

Critics have found it hard to parse Twain’s conclusion to No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, which ends on a narrative inconsistency or contradiction that is the subject of ongoing debate. This is because few of the critics who have written on No. 44 have noticed the extent to which the novel is a meditation on meritocracy as a social system, and the aesthetic priorities that attend it. The dominant tendencies that have developed in relation to the novel have tended to focus on the idea that August is either ‘defeated’ by No. 44 somehow, or attains a religious state of consciousness that transcends capitalism. First, the novel has been seen as a wholly nihilistic dismissal of human achievement (DeVoto). Second, as a proto-Futurist, fascist ‘expression of a desire for personal transcendence, into a condition of immortality and endless energy like ... hardy machines, taking their hold on modernity’\(^8\). Third, as Dwayne Eutsey argues, in a ‘theologically positive light ... in the context of religious liberalism during Twain’s era’, as a dramatization of the achievement of Hindu moksha.\(^9\) However, I suggest that Mark Twain’s rendering of August’s mind in No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger as split between an organic, grounded entity shaped environmental, material influence, affective responses and training, \textit{and} as a transcendent, untouchable and innate power, do not reflect a conservatism, solipsism or apolitical
nihilism. The novel is best read as a critique of the emerging twentieth
century capitalist social system and the Progressive-Era discourse of
‘merit’ that can serve as a model for our own project of theorising ‘neoliberal’
capitalist governance. This discourse of ‘merit’, Twain reasons in No. 44, was
being used to justify the entrenchment of a new meritocracy of industrial
leaders and elite, unaccountable, and bureaucratic systems of governance
that relied structurally upon an ontological instability, fissure or paradox.
This paradox was a simultaneous belief in liberal self-fashioning, hard
work and self-control and a comparable faith in the luminosity of innate
talent. The novel renders this fissure in the logic of meritocracy through
the person of August Feldner, who is oscillating wildly between two tempor-
alities: the narrative present of his labour and a deterministic future made in
his image by virtue of his innate talents alone. No. 44, then, places pressure
on a longstanding critical tradition of regarding biological essentialism as the
functional opposite of social-construction, by demonstrating that both are
actively required by meritocratic social systems to maintain elite power
and control.\textsuperscript{10}

As Randall Knoper shows in \textit{Acting Naturally: Mark Twain in the Culture
of Performance} the question of merit was personal to Twain. In his late life,
he was very concerned with the origins of his ideas, a preoccupation that
went hand in hand with continual ruminations on the roots of his success
and long life [literary and physical], over and above those of his friends,
fellow writers, and family — especially his daughter Susy who died in 1896.
In short, his ‘privilege’ relative to others. \textsuperscript{11} Moreover, the period of the com-
position of the Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts coincided also with the
years of his friendship with the wealthy industrialist and self-proclaimed
meritocrat Andrew Carnegie, who he teased in private (and often too in
public) for his rigid belief in individual innate merit (mostly his own). The
strikingly narrative-less and random quality of Twain’s autobiographical dic-
tations over this period (stretching to 2500 pages) capture a mind unable to
sort out the origins of his current position and esteem. Indeed, Twain had
become a member of William James’s Society for Psychical Research as
early as 1884, in part to receive new knowledge on the origin of creativity,
noting, ‘that [I] felt “like a mere amanuensis when I sit down to write,” his
“powerful impulses” coming from “somebody else,” so that it was like ‘that
other person is supplying the thoughts to me, and that I am merely
writing from dictation’.\textsuperscript{11} Moreover, Twain began writing The Mysterious
Stranger Manuscripts at the height of political disputes around the question
of merit in social and civic life when, as Jason Potts has argued, ‘the politics of
civil service reform [which Twain considered a politically significant topic]
and Roosevelt’s ‘New Nationalism’ ha[d] helped fund many American’s will-
ingness to accept economic inequalities so long as they ha[d] the opportunity
to prove their character’.\textsuperscript{12} Twain’s investigation into the historical origins of
his ideas and ‘intelligence’ had a distinctly political dimension. If ‘character’ and ‘talent’ were innate, and elite rule merely an unfolding of natural laws, what would become of the liberal self and, indeed, democracy?

In the split personage of August/Forty-Four we see Twain’s negotiation of the complex territories of post-Darwinian science and capitalist visions of progress by means of his observation that naturalistic determinism (the idea of reified, innate intelligence) and liberal subjecthood (the self-asserting and self-determining individual shaped by impressions from the world around them) do not function under capitalism as mutually exclusive entities, but are instead alternately *performed* to serve the ideology of merit-based advancement – what we call now following the work of the British social scientist Michael Young ‘meritocracy’ and attribute to the formula ‘Intelligence combined with Effort equals Merit’. In Twain’s novel, splitting the individual between *effort* and *essence* functions to expose what I call the ‘meritocratic aesthetic’, a capitalist performance that appears in light of post-Darwinian brain science and is characterised by the expectation of the exposure of one’s feelings and trials to justify one’s condition of comparative privilege. It is both a personal strategy for living and a structure for maintaining capitalist power in a world shaped by the notable democratising movements of Twain’s era: Communism, ascendant trade unionisms, and the challenge to the orthodoxy of the Democratic Party represented by the rise of People’s Party, civil service reform, and the Mugwump political agenda.

In Twain’s novel ‘meritocracy’ is not captured in the present through a joyful affect one might imagine attributing to success, but in a paranoiac aesthetic of repeated return to the past of one’s suffering so as to justify one’s privileged position in the present as something won through trial and effort – even if it was, in fact, a product of mere luck. As I show more fully in the third section of this article, ‘Summoning the Suppressed’, I consider this ‘meritocratic aesthetic’ as a gesture that demands the summoning of historical trauma in public less as a means to move past it in any therapeutic sense, than to permit the subject to live in the present of their privilege. Meritocratic power is, in the terms of Lauren Berlant, experienced as a kind of affective instability that is also a temporal one; a ‘Cruel Optimism’ that does not permit the subject to feel justified in their own present position without inventing or performing a past of struggle. It is a traumatised aesthetic that is self-conscious and unguarded about that historical trauma. By highlighting at the beginning of his novel how medieval Europe is characterised by high suicide rates and paranoiac era of witch-burning, Twain mimics the logic of the meritocratic aesthetic by performing the horror of the past world so as to create narrative empathy with the mind of the meritocrat August Feldner, who justifies his own elevated position in the present – won, of course, by structural violence – by evoking the brutality of history.
The final fusion of August and Forty-Four at the novel’s conclusion reveals less its nihilism than the final reconciliation of the twin poles of intelligence and effort, which Twain’s narrative reveals to be neither opposites, nor even in active competition. No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger* brings together August and Forty-Four (Medieval Apprentice and Modern Industrialist) and posits them as expressions of a common ideological imperative, locating the confluence of their intellects in the late fifteenth century, the ostensible ‘birth’ of Atlantic modernity. The novel is therefore a rumination on the impulses to individual power and entitlement that lie within the democratic superstructure of Enlightenment modernity. Reflecting the curatorial power of the meritocratic individual, August acquires through Forty-Four the ability to become invisible and visible at will. Eventually he is even able to summon the past when required for his purposes. This has two effects. First, the novel shows that the meritocratic capitalist does not always ‘hide’ their history. Indeed, their power might rely on their exposure of it. Second, it allows Twain as author to deploy the very fungibility with history that he attributes to the meritocrat, suggesting that Mark Twain himself might be ironically a practitioner of the very meritocratic practices he calls attention to as hazards when performed by Forty-Four. As Twain said in his *Autobiography* of Andrew Carnegie, the meritocrat is the ‘Human Being Unconcealed’, satirically remarking

[N]ot that he tells you about his brave struggles for a livelihood as a friendless poor boy in a strange land; not that he tells you how he advanced his fortunes steadily and successfully against obstructions that would have defeated almost any other human being similarly placed; not that he tells you how he finally reached the summit of his ambition and became lord over twenty-two thousand men … no … [he] seldom makes even a fleeting reference to them ….

My argument will proceed in three sections called: (1) Mind Machines: Or,Merit Without Merit, (2) Bleeding Heart Bosses, (3) Summoning the Suppressed.

**Mind machines: or, merit without merit**

*No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* captures the dialectical nature of Twain’s thought; a tendency that has been noticed in his frequent commitment to ‘paired’ or doubled characters in his fiction. As Joseph Csicsila and Chad Rohman remark in their introduction to the *Centenary Reflections on the Mark Twain’s No. 44, Mysterious Stranger*:

Twain’s interest in paired characters grew out of his notions of the “divided self,” the belief that the human psyche is driven by competing impulses, comprises dialectical personalities – or perhaps exists as the battleground of opposing identities. … August and Forty-Four are, as Twain reveals in the closing chapter of the novel, quite literally, parts of the same individual.
The fact that August and Forty-Four are revealed to be part of the same person has been taken as evidence of the novel’s engagement with the idea of a meaningless, deterministic universe. That is to say that nothing August does to counter Forty-Four’s plans have any effect. The principle described here is one in which the ‘battleground of opposing identities’ results in the domination of one by the other: August by Forty-Four. However, I would argue that August’s actions and suffering are an element of the novel’s engagement with the performative strategies of meritocratic power and that Forty-Four’s domination relies on August’s performance of suffering and is driven forward by it. The minds are not competing precisely, but working in tandem. The end, then, is a dark prediction of a future of meritocratic capitalism. This is not to be taken as a sign of solipsistic narcissism or wholesale defeat though, since it means that Twain can imagine a space of resistance to apocalyptic free market futures in opposition to, and exposure of, the meritocrat’s strategies of power. Once his future status as world-destroying industrialist is revealed in the final pages of the novel, August is no longer the hero. The reader is asked to perform a somersault and reject their own assumed preference for seeing sentimentality, organicism, and liberal self-fashioning as a natural counter to rigid determinism. It follows that in presenting our own critique of meritocratic governance in the form of neoliberalism, left theory might pause before assuming that social constructivism is the natural foil to deterministic visions of human biological futurity. Twain’s attention to capitalist governance as a mode of aesthetic practice helps us see the moments when both determinism and constructivism might be working in tandem, and that dialectical tension and uncertainties might not result in progressive futures so much as advance a condition of cultural confusion that can enable meritocratic dominance. Twain’s novel impeaches sentimental bildung from a position as the antidote to machinic industrialism – rendering both as embedded inexorably within one another by the meritocratic discourse that lies as the core of Enlightenment modernity. The novel’s revelation of August’s parity with Forty-Four demonstrates the essentially catastrophic nature of the Enlightenment and the consolidations, amplifications, and concentrations of power that are permitted in its name, which constitute Modernity as a state of perpetual crisis.

On an initial reading, No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger is a bildungsroman narrated by ‘August Feldner, 16, ‘prentice’ (p. 819), whose training, emotional struggles, and political awakening happen in parallel to an historical narrative of modernisation. As a printer in Central Europe in 1490 August is (at least according to a technological/teleological narrative of Enlightenment) present at the birth of the modern world. He is only a year or so from Columbus’s origination of New World imperial modernity and the instantiation of the Atlantic slave and world systems (‘[…]America … it’s a country … away off … [i]t hasn’t been discovered yet … [n]ot quite
... [n]ext fall’) (p. 896). He is involved directly in the development of the most significant technological innovation of the modern era (the printing press). He is also wrestling continuously against superstition and feudalism. Austria may have been, according to the narrator, ‘far away from the world, and asleep … by the mental and spiritual clock … still [in] the Age of Faith’ (p. 807), but in the hands of the young protoindustrialist August Feldner it will not remain so. Twain’s use of the historical novel is significant here; far more than just an exercise in fetishism or mere style. Through August’s staging of his ascent to authority as an historical struggle against feudalism, Twain dramatizes meritocracy’s peculiarly disorienting temporal effects that stem from a cultivated confusion about the relationship between capital, revolution, and democracy. The novel shows how through aesthetic and narratorial techniques industrialists might obscure their suppression of Labour and their own will to power in the narrative of their battle against the entrenched interests of a backward feudalism (the Guild, the Crown, the Church), which can allow the capitalist to justify their position by means of a narrative of care for the future and as an expression of an individual merit that feudalism would only suppress. This is, in Ngai’s language, a ‘gimmicky’ version of historical consciousness; an operational aesthetic deployed by the meritocrat that misdirects to enable capitalist governance in the present by means of the exploitation of an infinitely fungible mode of narrativization – at one moment one thing, at another moment wholly another.

Franco Moretti remarks in *The Way of the World* that ‘the Bildungsroman [is] the symbolic form of modernity … a specific image of modernity … the image conveyed precisely by the youthful attributes of mobility and inner restlessness’. Yet we find ourselves at the conclusion of Twain’s text in the presence of a new mind and a new symbolic order: a deterministic sensibility that better describes a blighted phase of global, post-Fordist capitalism and automation than the restlessness and possibility of an emerging, modern, world market. If Moretti’s account of *bildungsromane* tracks individual progress to social progress, Twain’s novel obliterates all life and sutures individual ‘progress’ to dark, posthuman futurities. Indeed, Forty-Four and August operate as an anachronistic, late-capitalist vanguard; one whose Faustian pact to achieve advancement goes wholly unpunished. Across the novel they institute industrialisation and alienated labour in their Medieval workplace by magically birthing an untiring mechanical workforce called ‘The Duplicates’, brutally put down a strike by the displaced human Guild workers in the interests of efficiency (‘44 sprang forward and gripped their necks with his small hands and they sank to the floor limp and gasping’) (p. 862), introduce professional examinations for advancement, crush the state church, and take Taylorite control over the very concept of time.
The gesture Twain performs in quashing a narrative of the revolutionary and progressive nature of modernity as embodied in the *bildung* of the young man – transforming it by the end into something meaninglessly destructive and nihilistic – is a reflection of his interests during the late-1890s and early 1900s in the modern brain and its positioning as a central component in the capitalist language of ‘merit’. To Twain, the notion of ‘merit’ instantiated a condition of perpetual crisis and ontological instability within capitalist culture. In the 1906 short story ‘What is Man?’ Twain satirised the possibility and value of ‘Personal Merit’, claiming, through the figure of the ‘Old Man’, that the natural superiority of certain individuals means that in performing any positive action in the world a superior individual is actually ‘entitled to no personal credit … It is born to him’ (p. 4). Personal achievements should not be celebrated because they are the product of natural processes and ‘due to his make, and to the influences brought to bear upon it by his heredities, his habitat, his associations … He originates nothing’ (p. 3). This idea is spoken almost verbatim by Forty-Four in Twain’s novel:

A man originates nothing in his head, he merely observes exterior things, and combines them in his head – puts several observed things together and draws a conclusion. His mind is merely a machine, that is all – an automatic one, and he has no control over it; it cannot conceive of a new thing, an original thing, it can only gather material from the outside and combine it into new forms and patterns. (p. 915)

It is worth comparing this description of the modern brain to the narrator’s account of an actual mechanical process that also generates nothing new, but *combines, grafts* and *reproduces* with great efficiency – Forty-Four’s fully-automated print shop.

[T]he … printing-shop work was going briskly on – yet nobody there, not a living thing to be seen! You would see a sponge get up and dip itself in a basin of water; see it sail along through the air; see it halt an inch above a galley of dead matter and squeeze itself and drench the galley, then toss itself aside; then an invisible expert would flirt the leads out of that matter so fast they fairly seemed to rain onto the imposing-stone, and you would see the matter contract and shrink together under the process … in … a minute or two there would be a mountain of wet type in every box and the job finished. (p. 865)

Between these two quotes we see that the post-Civil War and post-Darwinian turn to ‘natural’, biological determinism as a description of mental processes (a logic that has its apotheosis in the principle of innate, fixed intelligence or I.Q), for Twain, ironically generates an image of the artificial. That is to say, an individual’s proximity to the ‘natural’ renders them equally proximate to the ‘artificial’, the robotic, the automated; something that cannot claim personal responsibility or ‘merit’. In one sense, August is an exceptional force and intellect, driving modern revolutions, yet the ending leaves the
possibility that he is actually completely unexceptional because he is, in a sense, automated – not even fully agential in his own shaping of history. That power is handed to Forty-Four who for the majority of the text August follows without knowing he is a part of his own mind. Indeed, by the end of the novel there are at least three individuals who can claim to be August (The Duplicate Emil Swartz, Forty-Four, and August himself), implying that his ‘intelligence’ is reproducible and generic. Furthermore, August’s mental processes are unwilled and his actions effected without ‘work’, leaving him in the ironic position of being as alienated from his own achievements as his workers become earlier under his industrial reforms from the products of their labour: ‘I don’t understand it, I can’t explain it. I realize that no man here could carry one of those boxes; and yet as sure as I am alive I saw it done … We were awake, and not dreaming’ (p. 877).

It is not without consequence that Forty-Four’s behaviour and actions are highly robotic (‘artificially intelligent’ you might say). His name (the full version of which is ‘Number 44, New Series 864,962’) and time-travelling abilities point to an uncanny, future, cyborg humanity. Possessing superhuman strength, agility, calmness of temper, and immunity to pain of any kind, Forty-Four is an in-, or might be better to say un-human force. It is this automatic mind that gives birth to an automated order and the conclusion’s nightmarishly apocalyptic ending. As Forty-Four remarks chillingly at an earlier point in the novel: ‘Your automatic mind has performed its function – and without the help of you’ (p. 916). In other words, Twain’s rendering of Forty-Four as a robotic ‘artificial intelligence’ allows him to explore what we mean when we talk about ‘natural’ or innate human intelligence.

Catherine Malabou has suggested that in some respects the A.I. version of intelligence that followed historically from the development of the I.Q. or g factor definition helps us understand I.Q.’s real meaning and purpose. She writes

One way or another, the intelligence of psychologists will always refer both to the gift of birth and to a certain form of mechanism. A single word, “intelligence”, characterizes both genius – natural intelligence – and machines – artificial intelligence. A gift is like a motor: it works by itself and does not come of itself. In this sense, then, it is stupid.18

The ‘stupidity’ of intelligence is another paradox, of course, yet it is also the term August uses to describe the particularly intractable, mechanical, and unimpressible form of mind Forty-Four possesses, remarking that ‘As usual, he did not seem to know he was being so scowled at and hated. He certainly could be inconceivably stupid at times, for all he was so capable at others’ (p. 872). Malabou has noted that from Henri Bergson onwards ‘intelligence’ in the psychological sense has often been understood in
terms of its ‘stupidity’: its deadness to intuition, experience and the necessities of the social world. As Bergson states in *Creative Evolution* intelligence as a purely psychological object is threatening to life because it ‘is life looking outward, putting itself outside itself, adopting the ways of unorganized nature in principle in order to direct them in fact’ (in Malabou, 5). August’s description of the brilliant, forward-thinking mind of Forty-Four as ‘stupid’ captures how his intelligence ‘does nothing but look straight ahead’ and away from human life to abstract principles and cosmic temporalities, ‘solidifying and stabilizing everything it touches’ (Malabou, 5). The innatist form of intelligence, then, abstracts life from experience and feeling and drives towards totalities, combining objects in unidirectional ways towards distant ends. Innate mental talent is in this way inherently authoritarian.

Twain would have encountered ideas of the mechanical nature of human thought and action through his late-life studies in psychology, especially in works that sought to probe, and often undermine, a crucial distinction between what is called ‘instinct’ and ‘intelligence’ in animals and humans. Randall Knoper has listed his reading through the late 1890s, noting that ‘Twain knew quite a bit about turn-of-the-century ‘mental science’ (Knoper, 145), having read William James’s *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, and Jean-Martin Charcot, Johann Friedrich Herbart and James Mark Baldwin as he composed *No. 44*. Moreover, Knoper notes that ‘Twain embraced this psychology as he thought about his own psychic life – his unconscious mental processes, his wild and unwilled creativity, his sense of other persons living in himself, and his grim notions of humans as machines …’ (p. 145). As John Carson ably shows in *The Measure of Merit: Talent, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Repub- lics, 1750–1940*, the boom of new psychological studies in the late nineteenth century was driven by the rise of a conception of ‘intelligence’ as the central feature of ‘mind’ and a ‘common [measurable] attribute … understood as a singular faculty whose power varied across the animal kingdom by degrees’ (p. 81) but not, crucially, by kind. Moreover,

> [t]he attraction of this metric version of intelligence for so many American psychologists lay in its potential … to accomplish the very practical task of differentiating human beings on ... scientific grounds … ‘[I]ntelligence had narrowed, as certain senses (‘news’, ‘knowledge’, ‘divine being’) dropped out of common parlance, and intelligence as ‘ability’ rose.”

The unitary model of intelligence was rooted initially in a work by Francis Galton in Britain on *Hereditary Genius*. It was a loosely-confederated episteme that is often understood as uncoupling modern mental merit from the growth and development discourse of romantic *Bildung*, so rendering achievement, including in Twain’s texts the innovations that drove the
unfolding of modernity itself, as an inevitable, automatic, consequence of innate virtues. Yet there remains a contradiction in the fact that even as brain science was beginning to consider ‘intelligence’ as a natural fact and its attributes as relatively fixed at birth, the liberal social order and the early-twentieth century economy demanded a belief in meritocratic advancement that was willed by the individual (embodied most famously in the Horatio Alger narrative of rags to riches) to sustain a national mythos that conflated capitalism with individual liberty. The drive towards what Michel Foucault called ‘biopolitics’ (*The History of Sexuality*), referring to the manner by which life sciences became tools to foster and regulate the health of the body politic, threatened to overturn an entire liberal social order based on facilitating the self-discipline of the subject. Foucault did not speak significantly to this question, but it follows that that answer to this inherent crisis of power came with the development and popularisation of ‘meritocracy’ as a preferred twentieth century model of elite, capitalist power that could reconcile biopolitics to liberalism. In *No. 44*, Twain captures this crisis of power in the scenes of Forty-Four’s early appearance to the community. Forty-Four’s innate abilities and intrinsic grasp on knowledge (also, therefore, August’s) are an object of wonder for the higher-ranking printers in the novel, permitting his admittance through the door of the castle and his ultimate acceptance into its community, in what Thomas Peyser has seen as a clear reference to American immigration. However, they also upend the Bourdieuan structures of prestige upon which the old power is based and effectively ‘automate’ revolution and technological development. August states that the institution of examinations as a means of advancement in the print shop, which is installed by the other printers so as to assess the merit of Forty-Four, backfires spectacularly, effectively eroding their agency. August states, ‘The examination-scheme was a bad failure – a regular collapse, in fact – and the men hated the boy for being the cause of it, whereas they had brought it upon themselves. That is just like human beings’ (p. 843).

**Bleeding heart bosses**

The biopower Forty-Four represents does not simply overturn the medieval body politic’s sentimental narrative of *bildung*; it hijacks it like a virus does an immune system. Indeed, this is the very purpose meritocratic discourse serves for the capitalist social order. It justifies inequality by generating an uncertainty about the relationship between individual talent, hard work and personal advancement. Tom Quirk has suggested that Forty-Four’s position as ‘a wise sage who will instruct August in the nature of human existence’, threatens to ‘destroy[...] the boy’s faith and idealism’. However, I would suggest that through his aesthetic of the split-self Twain reveals
within capitalist culture a set of contradictions that inhere in what Jo Littler has usefully termed in relation to a later ‘neoliberal’ phase of development ‘meritocratic feeling’: an affect that sutures the deterministic to the plastic (I.Q. and ‘hard work’) and the natural to the artificial (man and machine) so as to legitimate the unfolding of a narrative of modernity that produces greater inequalities while being able to outwardly proclaim its commitment to a modern, democratic vision of fairness and justice.²⁴ Drawing on the work of the sociologist Valerie Gilles on how parents of different class positions speak about their children’s ‘ability’, Littler has noted that ‘meritocratic feeling’ operates across classes and maintains power in a capitalist society by mobilising multiple, even paradoxical, classed, raced and gendered visions of aspiration and ‘ability’:

[F]or working-class parents, the attributes most likely to be proudly described were children’s ability to stay out of trouble, get on with others and work hard, which inculcates strength to struggle and defend scant resources; whereas middle-class parents foster ‘the right to be bright’ and code problematic behaviour in the classroom in terms of intelligence and the needs the classroom should be able to accommodate, which helps reproduce middle-class success.²⁵

For Littler, the power of ‘meritocratic feeling’ lies in how both the middle and lower classes can feel as if they are achieving the necessary conditions of meritocracy, even while it unfairly benefits those already in power. Indeed, August/Forty-Four’s dominion, presented as the unfolding of modern ‘progress’, is as blighted and destructive as the medieval world of the novel’s opening. Whatever concentrations of power were represented by aristocracy are ultimately reproduced in August’s meritocracy.

Whilst it may seem anachronistic to attribute to Twain a ‘neoliberal’ sensibility, his version of meritocracy speaks powerfully to our own era. Specifically, rather than imagining ‘meritocracy’ in terms of its initial use by Michael Young as a state-sponsored and controlled exercise, Twain’s version occurs in the absence of the modern state. Indeed, the novel structurally bypasses the very specific nineteenth-century history that gives rise to the liberal, Benthamite mechanisms of control, organisation, and discipline diagnosed by Michel Foucault in The Birth of the Clinic and Discipline and Punish prior to his late turn to the topic of ‘biopower’. Twain’s novel leapfrogs from the protectionism of the Medieval Guild apprenticeship system to a stateless, cosmic, ‘free market’ space. As Ansgar Allan has noted, when ‘meritocracy’ was used by Michael Young in the 1950s it spoke to a statist fantasy of ‘a perfect distribution of abilities’,²⁶ established without the need of continuous assessment and competition, whereas in neoliberal societies ‘individuals are made responsible for their own meritocratic positioning’²⁷ in a space in which aggressive competition ‘now operates at an individual as well as institutional level’.²⁸ The shift from postwar meritocracy
to neoliberal meritocracy is a ‘switch from the administration of movement to a belief in movement’.\textsuperscript{29}

This brings us to the knotty issue of faith and its peculiar compatibility with capitalism in its guise of meritocracy, particularly in the U.S. In Twain’s U.S.A this conflation of merit and belief was inculcated in the work of figures such as his friend Andrew Carnegie, whose Progressive Era adoption of the language of evangelical religion as a necessary component in individual advancement can be seen clearly in works such as \textit{The Gospel of Wealth} and the reformist logics of the Social Gospel Movement. In No. 44, \textit{The Mysterious Stranger} practically every incident functions as a test of faith for August Feldner, that is, of ‘belief’. This is ironic because Forty-Four and August actually perform a very brutal destruction of the state church, suggesting that the question of faith has transmogrified from a pattern of social ritual into a practice of self-belief in the doctrine of individual growth and advancement. Chapter 15 begins with a long deliberation by August on how he should best approach Forty-Four’s apparent atheism. ‘I felt rising in me with urgency a suspicion which had troubled me several times before’ says August,

but which I had ungently put from me each time – that he was indifferent to religion. I questioned him – he confessed it! I leave my distress and consternation to be imagined, I cannot describe them … In that paralysing moment my life changed, and I was a different being; I resolved to devote my life, with all the affections and forces and talents which God had given me to the rescuing of this endangered soul. Then all my spirit was invaded and suffused with a blessed feeling, a divine sensation, which I recognized as the approval of God … (p. 881)

August’s religiosity does not divert Forty-Four from his aims of mechanisation and automation so much as imbue with spiritual ‘aura’ the work of his genocidal mind.\textsuperscript{30} Indeed, Forty-Four realises the uses to which August’s godfearing nature might be put in enacting his aims. August’s attempts to convert Forty-Four lead him to recognise that August possesses a ‘quality which I do not possess – fear’ (p. 885) and inaugurate a process whereby Forty-Four teaches August to ‘become invisible, whenever you please … I will give you a magic word … Say it when you wish to disappear, and say it again when you wish to be visible again’ (p. 885). This performative act permits August privileged access to areas previously forbidden or inaccessible to him; the intensity of his emotions a crucial requirement for effecting his social movement and uplift. For Twain, the capacity of an individual to control their visibility and invisibility is a peculiarly modern version of power. He reveals the meritocratic aesthetic to be a self-engendering practice crucial to maintaining power in the era after ‘intelligence’ becomes reified as a fixed and immutable attribute. By revealing their suffering and their struggles in the past at will the meritocrat can legitimate their
present privilege. It is useful to think of the ‘meritocratic aesthetic’ as a counterpoint to Thorstein Veblen’s famous ‘Gilded Age’ categories of ‘conspicuous consumption’ and ‘conspicuous leisure’. The meritocrat is not just engaged in publicising their wealth and power, they are also engaged in conspicuous suffering through the publication of moments of powerlessness that justify their ultimate achievement of power and influence within an ostensibly democratic social order.31

Twain’s pairing of August and Forty-Four is coded in class terms in the way that parallels Jo Littler’s conception of meritocratic feeling, with innateness coded as a middle-class virtue and hard work a working-class one even though they are products of the same mind and social system. This apparent contradiction does not forestall the march of industrialisation, automation, and the consolidation of wealth and power, but is, rather, relied upon to create it. Forty-Four, whose mind is transcendental and unbounded by time (is innately ‘intelligent’) frequently appears to August bearing the outward signs of opulent consumption (‘Hot corn-pone from Arkansas … Fried spring chicken – milk and flour gravy … Cream-smothered strawberries … Coffee from Vienna’ (p. 912)) and the symbols of upper-middle class cultural achievement, eating off plates embossed with ‘New York Yacht Club, 1903’ and drinking from the Americas Cup sailing trophy. Conversely, August often speaks of struggling under conditions of ‘mental limitation […] and the general meanness and poverty of my construction and qualities’ (p. 913), bemoaning a fate in which he is only able to ‘wander aimlessly about and be unhappy’ (p. 917). Yet by the end we come to know they are really one and same individual, oscillating relentlessly between determinism and determinism; fixity and mutability. ‘Meritocratic feeling’ is not wholly consistent with a bildung narrative of modernity (whose values are rooted in a collective, social, project of Enlightenment), nor does it fit within a wholly deterministic naturalism, but maintains its control by deploying the idea of both at different times, thereby building its ideological power upon a foundation of uncertainty. To attain one’s elevated position in the world without effort would be mere privilege, synonymous in the novel with the divinely ordained ‘Monarch’ who the boys are taught to hold ‘in awful reverence’ (p. 807) and the religious order in which ‘the priests said that knowledge was not good for the common people … God would not endure discontentment with His Plans’ (p. 808). This would be perceived in the capitalist U.S.A of the novel’s readers (and in which it is implied Forty-Four commonly resides) as wholly incompatible with the aims of their anti-aristocratic revolution. For this reason, ‘meritocracy’ must also ‘perform’ the conditions of historical belief and self-fashioning. Forty-Four comes to understand this throughout the novel so that at almost exactly the mid-point of the text he stages a performance of religious self-flagellation in which he appears to immolate himself in a witch burning: ‘For one moment a blot of black darkness fell
upon the place and extinguished us all; the next moment in our midst stood 
that slender figure transformed to a core of dazzling white fi-
re; in the suc-
ceeding moment it crumbled to ashes…’ (p. 892). What follows this 
moment is a chapter concerning August and Katrina’s grief and suffering 
at the loss of Forty-Four, couched in the most satirically sentimental 
terms: ‘now and then, with a new outburst of love and grief she would 
paint the graces of his form, and the beauty of his young face, and his tender-
ness for her … a new heartbreak with each’ (pp. 893–4). The aftermath of the 
immolation scene characterises a larger pattern of the novel where success – 
the suppression of the strike, Forty-Four’s achievement of the status of ‘gen-
tleman’ and so forth – are not followed by happiness, but by August’s sullen 
performance of despair. It is also August’s performance of helplessness and 
struggle that permits him to manipulate characters such as Katrina and 
Doandgiveadam to assist in his suppression of the union strike and his estab-
ishment of power. ‘I am the new apprentice’, says August, ‘Out of unmerited 
[my italics] disapproval of me, and for no other or honorable reason, these 
cowardly men conspired to ruin the master’ (p. 862). August’s appeal weap-
onises the language of ‘merit’ to associate it with an individual who is 
opposed to the collective yet dutiful to the Establishment. It also transforms 
the ultimate winner into the one who lays claim to a special condition of 
suffering. In conflating the actions of the strikers with unmerit he establishes 
his own position as the individual in possession of a merit that society has 
refused to allow to express itself. This consequently transforms the strikers’ 
oppositions to excessive work demands into the special pleading of the nati-
rally untalented. August registers his merit as a feeling of entrapment, stasis, 
or blockage. It is a feeling of personal trauma that serves to propel an auto-
mated modern system of production forward. Furthermore, August evokes 
loyalty to the master as his primary goal even though his automation of 
the factory serves to accelerate history towards a modernity that will even-
tually obliterate the feudal class system.

The affective response of the reader by the end, captured well by the extent 
of criticism that testifies to a range of responses to Forty-Four’s revelation – 
uplifted or saddened, hopeful or despairing – are complicit with the very 
‘meritocratic’ structure of feeling the novel explores. If we are depressed 
by the removal of agency then we are suggesting August deserves to 
possess power because of his suffering, yet this elides or obscures that 
Forty-Four’s murderous brutality is part of August’s own mind. If we are 
hopeful and read as Dwayne Eutsey does, seeing the ending as an expression 
of August’s attainment of Hindu moksha or Buddhist nirvana, then we have 
also, effectively, vindicated Forty-Four’s process of genocidal industrialis-
atation in the service of August’s individual, spiritual, self-actualisation. 
August’s frequent bouts of tearfulness and moral cowardice (the record of 
his ‘Struggle’) are a form of emotional labour that serves to justify in the
minds of readers Forty-Four’s relentless drive towards a fully-automated regime of industrial power. By focusing on the individual we are also forced to obscure the collective suffering of the workers upon which that individual advancement depends. Bildungsroman is used in Twain’s novel as a bait and switch. A key character in the novel that is an idealised, performative modern subject by August, entering the plot at a moment where Forty-Four and he are most in need of protection against the union workers, is named Doandgiveadam – Do and ‘Give a Damn’ – being an exhortation to perform activity in the world and also to perform the gestures of sentiment.

One of the great successes of Twain’s novel is in how he renders the meritocrat as a paranoid individual that implicitly and continuously recognises the instability of their social position. Twain’s novel captures this in the affective taxonomy of August’s narrative. He speaks regularly of his envy (‘to be envied is the secret longing of pretty much all human beings … he was being envied himself’ (p. 831)), suspicion (‘I felt rising in me with urgency a suspicion’ (p. 881)), ‘depressions’ (p. 917), and anxieties over the possibility of ‘conspiracy’ (p. 863). These are all feelings that speak of suspended action, a failure to inhabit a position for which he feels suited and a concern with imposture and deception. When the social world appears to August Feldner – the young man we learn will destroy that world – it does so only as an impediment, and he registers its presence with a paranoiac sensibility. In Twain’s novel, the meritocratic aesthetic does not reconcile the individual to the social world as does the ideal Bildungsroman plot, but characterises the social world as something to be appeased through stories of struggle and hardship, holding the meritocrat in a state of suspension from the status they seek and may feel they deserve by right of natural gift.

No. 44 differs from Twain’s earlier time-travelling medieval romance The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court in the sense in which the divide between modernity and the old world is not truly a divide at all. While Hank Morgan in The Connecticut Yankee behaves like an American invader from the outside imposing his will on a precapitalist world, No. 44 explores the individual whose destructive will resides always already within the logic of homeground capitalism. In No. 44, a medieval temporality dwells within and alongside the modern as a precondition of its expression. Consequently, for Twain, under the conditions of meritocratic capitalism the performance of affect and the need for ‘belief’ intensifies in the presence of automation. Twain’s vision does not regard capitalism and rationalisation as forms of disenchantment, so much as expressions of an increasingly inauthentic performance of faith and struggle. What is more, Twain’s meritocracy demands the perpetuation of inequality and the transfer of the burden of suffering from the underclass to the privileged [from workers to meritocrats] in order that the privileged individual may lay claim to achievement based on
the principle of their ‘merit’. This leads me to a discussion of one of the more critically controversial aspects of the novel, its use of the trope of the black-face minstrel.

**Summoning the suppressed**

At a crucial moment in the novel, after a farcical scene involving misrecognitions in bedchambers that leads to his being rejected by the object of his affection Marget and learning she is engaged to Martin von Giesbach, August retreats to his room to commiserate only to be interrupted by ‘a dry, bony noise, such a kl-lackety, klackclack kl-lackety klackclack’ that turns out to be ‘a tall man, clothed in the loudest and most clownish and outlandish costume, with a vast white collar ... [a] mouth that reached clear across his face and was unnaturally red ... extraordinarily thick lips ... and [a] face [that] was as black as midnight’ (p. 936). The figure then begins to sing ‘Buffalo Gals’ and ‘Swanee River’ while playing a banjo. What turns out to be the re-entry of Forty-Four into the narrative in the anachronistic guise of an American blackface minstrel is a controversial moment in criticism on the novel, not least because the figure serves solely to cheer up August without any acknowledgment of its history or significance. This has led critics to ask if we as readers are also meant to be cheered up by the minstrel? Moreover, the atemporality of the minstrel serves to imbue the figure with a kind of aura of heightened reality against the anachronistic backdrop of Austria in 1490 that accentuates the humour and ‘otherness’ of the character. As Henry B. Wonham asks in ‘Mark Twain’s Last Cakewalk’ ‘Why does Forty-Four do the cakewalk? Why does he dance a breakdown and transform himself into a minstrel character?’ (pp. 47–8). For Wonham the answer lies in how the figure serves as yet another image in the novel of ‘the idea of identity figured as an unstable compound, rather than as an imagined ‘authentic’ otherness or ‘noble pathos’ (pp. 47–8). Wonham’s ‘answer’ is structural, pointing to the minstrel figure’s ‘otherness’ as an alienation effect that compounds August’s inability to unite or unify aspects of his own consciousness. Yet, I would highlight that the minstrel figure represents the inverse of the meritocrat in relation to questions of affect and labour. While minstrelsy is a performance of paradoxical happiness in stasis and unfreedom, singing songs of ‘home ... a cabin of logs nestled under spreading trees, a soft vision steeped in mellow summer twilight’ (p. 938) that obscure the real history of plantation brutality, the meritocrat must perform paradoxical unhappiness to be ‘at home’ in his privilege.

This is why August laughs when Forty-Four does the cakewalk. It is the irony of self-recognition in the condition of the minstrel. For Eric Lott black-face functions by releasing the energies of the ‘stereotyped emotionality of the black slave’ as a foil to the presumed rationalism of the white
citizen-subject. Lott’s reading goes further to note that the minstrel’s emotionality limns the borders of the rational not through its absolute otherness but because it appears as a stage tradition during the height of sentimental and romantic fervour in America in which emotionality among whites was not prohibited but encouraged up to a point. For Twain, the emotionality of the minstrel – his affective excess – reflects, rather than deflects, the emotionality of the meritocrat. The longing for ‘Home’ (which is, of course, the plantation and its traumas) that suffuse songs such as ‘Swanee River’ are synonymous with the alienation of the meritocrat from a sense of ‘home’ in the past, because their feeling of exceptionality divorces them from the condition of being part of a class collective, and also from the future of their success, where they cannot reside in complete emotional ease.

It is not just the minstrel that appears in Twain’s novel to register this affect. Twain runs a full gamut of subalterns; the ‘vagrant’, the ‘immigrant’, the ‘freed slave’, the reforming ‘Jail-Bird’ (p. 824), the trans person. August repeatedly calls himself a ‘girlboy’ and displays a queer attention to Doangiveadam’s physicality: ‘he marched among us, gay and jovial, plummed and gorgeous’ (p. 861). When he first appears Forty-Four takes on the guise of the poor immigrant or vagrant. His entrance is described thus:

One cold day, when the noon meal was about finished, a most forlorn looking youth, apparently sixteen or seventeen years old, appeared in the door, and stopped there, timid and humble, venturing no further. His clothes were coarse and old, ragged, and lightly powdered with snow, and for shoes he had nothing but some old serge remnants wrapped about his feet and ankles and tied with strings. The war of talk stopped at once and all eyes were turned upon the apparition; those of the master, and Marget, and Gustav Fischer, and Barty Langbein, in pity and kindness, those of Frau Stein and the rest in varying shades of contempt and hostility. (p. 820)

Twain shows how this ur-figure of American immigrant, settler culture provokes confused and contentious sentiments. The book’s ‘liberals’ (to use an anachronistic phrase for 1490) treat Forty-Four with kindness and generosity, smoothing his transition into the castle (or nation’s) social structure. Inversely, the conservatives seek only to reject him. What follows is a deep parody of Progressive-Era American culture’s fixations on the ‘immigrant’ work ethic that Twain parodied repeatedly in his accounts of the Scottish immigrant Andrew Carnegie. To justify his place in the print-shop community Forty-Four becomes a super-refugee, performing feats of labour that are entirely beyond the potential of the existing workers. ‘What a devil to work the boy was!’ says August, ‘The earliest person up found him at it by lantern-light, the latest person up found him still at it long past midnight. It was the heaviest manual labour, but if he ever tired it was not perceptible … [h]e always moved with energy, and seemed to find high joy in putting forth his strange and enduring strength’ (p. 830). Yet in doing the work in
excess that he deems necessary to permit his inclusion he becomes subjected to the ire of the other workers; his very productivity simultaneously a feather in his cap for the liberals and a black mark against him for conservatives.

As I suggested earlier, the novel is engaged with the concept of how one goes about ‘summoning’ the suppressed subaltern. Indeed, ‘summoning’ is a crucial term in the text that connotes a calling to mind within the present of that which one might otherwise choose to suppress or elide, namely, the abject Other. When Forty-Four describes the powers of his intelligence to August in Chapter 22 he states ‘The past is always present when I want it – the real past, not an image of it; I can summon it, and there it is’ (p. 915). Twain’s text functions by laying out the terms of its own analysis. That is to say that Twain develops a space where it becomes possible to observe how the ‘meritocratic aesthetic’ that exists as a dominant form within modern capitalism, even driving it, relates consciously to history as something that can be ‘summoned’ or called to mind effortlessly to serve ‘political’ purposes. Like Andrew Carnegie, who Twain thought of as the ultimate ‘Human Being Unconcealed’, there is nothing ‘concealed’ about August Feldner, Indeed, his position relies upon the perception of transparency and the absence of repression. Twain’s novel, then, as an account of August’s advancement, conceals nothing, and suppresses nothing within itself. For contemporary readers, it serves as a useful reminder that the Enlightenment’s utopian image of an era of abundant knowledge, in which history is confronted, and psychological repression addressed, does not of itself mean the end of capitalism or other exploitative systems of control. Indeed, Twain’s vision of the meritocracy to come speculates on how autocratic power might operate, even expand, in such a moment of comparative social openness through the utilisation of aesthetic practices that curate or manipulate an abundance of available narratives, histories, forms of difference, and scientific ‘truths’.

Notes

1. Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain* Vol. 3, ‘Dictated December 2 1907’ (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), p. 181.
2. Mark Twain, *The Gilded Age and Later Novels* (New York: Library of America, 2002), p. 986.
3. See Erica Fretwell, *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020) and Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
4. Merve Emre, ‘The Repressive Politics of Emotional Intelligence’, *The New Yorker* (April 19, 2021 issue). https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/19/the-repressive-politics-of-emotional-intelligence.
5. Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2020), p. 53.
6. Ibid., p. 64.
7. Forty-Four is one of a number of variants of the ‘mysterious stranger’ throughout the manuscripts. In the other versions the ‘Stranger’ is more overtly described as ‘Satan’. In No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger there is more ambiguity. Nevertheless, ‘Satan’ or ‘Mephistopheles’ are frequently depicted in Western literature from The Bible, through Marlowe’s Dr Faustus and Milton’s Paradise Lost to the poetry of Blake as figures associated with ‘intelligence’, cunning, and the liberation of forbidden knowledge.

8. Bruce Michelson, ‘Mysterious Strangers and the Motions of the Mind’, in Joseph Csicsila and Chad Rohman (eds), Centenary Reflections on Mark Twain’s No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2009), p. 230.

9. Dwayne Eutsey, ‘Waking from this Dream of Separateness: “Hinduism and the Ending of No. 44”, The Mysterious Stranger’, The Mark Twain Annual, 7 (2009), pp. 66–77.

10. For more on the problems of seeing social construction as the functional opposite of biological determinism see Schuller.

11. Randall Knoper, Acting Naturally: Mark Twain and the Culture of Performance (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), p. 187. Twain’s concept of thought as ‘mental telegraphy’ derive from this same period. Twain noted that his creativity seemed like something unconscious to him, a communication from another world or mind. In No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger this is literalised as Forty-Four who communicates as it were telepathically with August, revealed by the conclusion not to be ‘mental telegraphy’ so much as the internal operations of August’s own mind.

12. Jason Potts, ‘Quality Inequality: The Virginian and the Invention of Meritocracy’, Studies in American Fiction, 4.2 (Fall 2013), p. 234. Potts notes that our current, dominant critical orientations have resulted in a neglect of the centrality of civil service reform debates – and their impact on our current political structures of meritocracy. He writes: ‘[a]lthough more recent accounts of American literary nationalism have ignored civil service reform and the debates it generated about opportunity, merit, and class, their centrality to the period’s politics is incontestable. As William Boyd wrote in the Cambridge History of American Literature (1917), the principle behind civil service reform – ‘that efficiency and merit rather than party loyalty should be the standard for public office – aroused the intellectual class as had no issue except that of slavery’. That this fact has been subsequently eclipsed by concerns about race, gender, and identity in Americanist criticism is largely a consequence of the reform movement’s success’ (p. 232).

13. The ‘meritocrat’ inevitably invokes precursors such as ‘the self-made man’. Unlike the ‘self-made man’, the meritocratic aesthetic is an anxious, even paranoid one, rooted less in questions of the choices that were taken and more in whether an individual even has the biological ‘merit’ to make those choices. It is, therefore, an aesthetic appropriate to the age of an emerging biopolitics of intelligence.

14. Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

15. Twain, Autobiography, p. 181.

16. Joseph Csicsila and Chad Rohman, ‘Introduction’, Centenary Reflections on Mark Twain’s No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2009), pp. 2–3.
17. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 2000), p. 5.

18. Catherine Malabou, *Morphing Intelligence: From IQ Measurement to Artificial Brains*, trans. Carolyn Stead (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 8.

19. Tom Quirk has also drawn a parallel between Twain and Bergson when he remarks in *Mark Twain and Human Nature* that “Twain follows in superficial ways one of Henri Bergson’s general laws for the comic: “Any incident is comic that calls attention to the physical in the person, when it is the moral side that is concerned”” (p. 35).

20. It is not without significance here that a significant portion of the novel involves August’s discussions about Forty-Four with a talking cat, since early descriptions of ‘intelligence’ as a psychological object from George Romanes to Darwin and Huxley turned on human-animal distinctions.

21. John Carson, *The Measure of Merit: Talent, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750–1940* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 160.

22. See Thomas Peyser, ‘Mark Twain, Immigration, and the American Narrative’, *ELH*, 79.4 (Winter 2012).

23. Tom Quirk, *Mark Twain and Human Nature* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 273.

24. Referring to ethnographic research conducted at an elite fee-paying school in Concord, New Hampshire in 2011 by Shamus Kahn and Colin Jerolmack [published in 2011 under the title *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School*], Jo Littler has shown how central the rhetoric of hard work is central to presenting oneself as a meritocrat. Littler has argued that this busyness is part of the performative sensibility of an upper-middle-class elite, who do not value leisure so much as the appearance of constant labour. In reality, Littler notes, this work is an illusion, even an outright lie, but it nonetheless represents the nominal meritocracy’s affective distance from their ‘leisure class’ status. This means that under the conditions of automated and alienated capital the meritocrat cannot successfully and wholly occupy the status to which the social order has ‘fitted’ them and must reside instead in a performative space of perpetual uncertainty that both justifies and excludes the individual from what is theirs, according to the symbolic order, by *right*.

25. Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 91.

26. See Ansgar Allan, ‘Michael Young’s *The Rise of the Meritocracy*: A Philosophical Critique’, *British Journal of Education Studies*, 59.4 (December 2011), p. 379.

27. Allan, ‘Meritocracy: A Philosophical Critique’, p. 379.

28. Ibid., p. 378.

29. Ibid., p. 376.

30. The term ‘aura’ here is quite deliberate, and differs significantly from the sense in which it was most famously used by Walter Benjamin to describe something lost to ‘The Work of Art in Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936). In Twain’s text, mechanical reproduction may render the individual art work less filled with the ‘aura’ of production, but the intensity of emotion felt by the worker actually increases as the printing press automates their work.
Twain’s interest in bringing medieval romance to bear on modern conditions speaks to an intensification of the discourse of ‘belief’ at the beginning of the twentieth century.

31. It is beyond the scope of this paper, of course, but it is worth noting how increasing automation and the consolidations of power and wealth in hands of a meritocracy in our own era has come with an increasing aesthetic attention to the impression of ‘humanness’ and the logic of ‘the journey’ – something we see played out daily in T.V talent competitions where the generic, marketised nature of the final product is justified by an aesthetic of suffering, work, and ‘the dream’.

32. Genocide has often been justified on the basis of the ‘struggles’ of the figure seeking to bring it about. Consider that Adolf Hitler referred to his own will to power as ‘mein Kampf’, the annexation of Texas was based around a mythology of the struggle of white settlers at The Alamo, neo-Confederate white nationalist Presidents complain endlessly of their persecution at the hands of ‘witch hunts’, and so forth.

33. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 32.

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