

From Captain Stormfield to Captain Kirk Two 20th century representations of Heaven

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Abstract

This article examines two expressions of popular entertainment, nearly a century apart, that take the form of a traveller's yarn about a journey to the ultimate destination: Heaven itself. One is a story by Mark Twain, the other one of the many Star Trek films. Although both share a broadly optimistic viewpoint, there are profound differences between them, the treatment of Heaven within the two reflecting the kind of notion of Heaven that audiences at respectively the beginning and end of the twentieth century were prepared to accept, or, more precisely, what the respective authors felt they could get away with.

For centuries now, the traveller's yarn has been a staple of popular literature. The traveller tells us of exotic places we have never seen ourselves, of strange people with strange customs. His adventures turn us all into vicarious travellers. It has turned out to be an enduring genre: if we can regard Marco Polo as producing its first best-seller (though Chinese readers may rightly object and point out their rich heritage of pilgrims' tales of travels to India), we can see an unbroken line from him to the widely published and televised travel tales of our own time, from the unabashed self-promotion of the late Thor Heyerdahl, Tim Severin and Ranulf Fiennes to the more low-key (and certainly more comfortable) peregrinations of Michael Palin.

But a traveller's yarn need not be true to be effective. As Aldiss and Wingrove (1986: 192) have observed, the relationship between travel literature and the novel is an intimate one, and an intermediate genre of fantasy travel has flourished since Classical times. A fictional tale can, in fact, be more enduring than than a real one. Polo's contemporaries regarded his writings as precisely such fabrications. They were not, of course, but fictional traveller's yarns did appear and some of them are still widely read. By 1650, Cyrano de Bergerac (the real one, not Rostand's fictional creation) described his voyage to the moon (Aldiss & Wingrove 1986:92-94). Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* took the basic form of the traveller's yarn and used it to shape a scathing satire of contemporary European society. More's *Utopia* and Butler's *Erewhon* may be seen in the same light. H G Wells and Jules Verne picked up the genre and turned it into a standard plot device for generations of science fiction writers after them.

Even when fictional travel stories were consciously passed off as true ones by confidence tricksters (Olfert Dapper and George Psalmanaazaar, to name but two of the best known examples), the basic shape of the genre remained the same: the traveller undergoes a troubling journey, describes the land and its inhabitants, with perhaps an aside for the hardships they cause the intrepid traveller, and returns to his (rarely her) native country to tell the tale. The return is an integral part of the structure: the traveller may have been inwardly changed by his adventures (as Gulliver was changed by his encounter with the Houyhnhnms), but he does not remain in the foreign lands he has explored. The return allows the traveller's

yarn to be related in the first person singular, adding immediacy and a personal touch to the story.

As time went on, unexplored lands became fewer and farther between, and scientific knowledge made fanciful accounts even of other planets seem quaint. In retrospect, it was probably inevitable that someone would sooner or later write a traveller's yarn about a voyage to the ultimate destination: Heaven. In this article we will encounter two such attempts, spanning almost a century. The first is a literary work, a story by Mark Twain called "Captain Stormfield's visit to Heaven", first published in 1907. The second is the 1989 film "Star Trek V: The final frontier". Both are commercial, popular-culture works, written with a close attention to what the (mainly American) reading or viewing public of the time would accept, or, to be more precise, with a view to how radical a deviation from the normative view of heaven contemporary audiences would accept. The differences between them show a clear change in attitudes towards religion generally and the idea of Heaven in particular.

Mark Twain's "Captain Stormfield's visit to Heaven"

Few literary creations can have had as long a process of gestation as Mark Twain's "Captain Stormfield's visit to Heaven". From initial rough notes to its final published version it kept Twain busy for almost forty years, from 1869 to its publication, in two parts, in *Harper's Monthly* of December 1907 and January 1908.¹In 1909, he again revised the story and published it in book form.²

"Stormfield", in all its versions, gives us a profoundly humorous account of the death of our hero, sea captain Eli Stormfield of San Francisco. Immediately after his death he becomes a ghost and starts on his journey to Heaven. He is unaware of his destination, however, and fancies that he is headed for Hell instead. The fact that almost his first experience as a ghost involves plunging straight through the sun probably does little to change his mind on this score!

Indeed, it appears that Heaven is not a spiritualised realm, but firmly part of the physical universe. Stormfield reports that he took about thirty years to get there, travelling at (or slightly over) the speed of light. We know this because he tells us, with a sailor's precision:

Do you know where I was? In the sun. That was my guess and it turned out afterwards that I was right. Eight minutes out from port. It gave me my

¹The long process of creating this story is fully discussed by Baetzhald & McCullough (1995:129-138). The story itself can be read, along with some parts found in the original manuscript but absent from the printed version, in Baetzhald & McCullough (1995:139-188, 299-305). See also the review of Baetzhald & McCullough by Tomlinson, available online at <http://www.yorku.ca/twainweb/reviews/bible.html>

²An alternative version of the textual history of "Stormfield" states that it was originally written as a novel, and that *Harper's* only published extracts from an extant longer text. For our present purposes, the difference between these versions is not really relevant and may be ignored. Our discussion in this article will be based on the version presented by Baetzhald & McCullough (1995), which gathers all known versions and previously unpublished fragments into a single volume. The abridged *Harper's* version of the story is also available online on a variety of sites, for instance at http://www.boondocksnet.com/twaintexts/twain_stormfield.html

gait - exactly the speed of light, 186, 000 miles per second" (Baetzhold & McCullough 1995:141).³

Later, Stormfield's ghost starts to speed up, to over 200,000 miles per second. Along the way, he has the companionship of other ghosts and tries, unsuccessfully, to race against a giant comet on its way to Hell. This turns out to be a bad decision: Although Stormfield, to his own surprise, reaches the gates of Heaven and is allowed, after some bureaucratic muddling, to enter, it turns out that his comet-racing activities have sent him off course. He has arrived at the wrong gate! Indeed, this particular gate is meant for the sky-blue, seven-headed and one-legged inhabitants of another planet. It takes some time for Stormfield to find the proper entrance to Heaven, the one primarily reserved for humans. But the diversion has served its purpose: it has alerted the reader to the fact that Twain's Heaven is not the exclusive destination for humans only. Soon it will become clear that not only aliens, but all kinds of human believers are allowed in.

It is at this point that Twain starts his humorous deconstruction of all popular conceptions of Heaven. Right next to the gate is a cloud-bank, where newly-arrived angels (with easily detachable wings) play the harp (badly) and sing hosannas. Few can abide this kind of boring activity for more than a day or so, and most find a way to get rid of harp, halo and wings. Heaven, it appears, is not primarily a place of worship, but one of work, much like the Earth. With one major exception: "The shoemaker on earth that had the soul of a poet in him won't have to make shoes here". Later, it is described how a bricklayer from Boston, who would have been the greatest military genius of all time, had he not been refused entry into the army, is now the commander of the Heavenly militia: "Caesar, and Hannibal, and Alexander, and Napoleon are all on his staff...". We are not informed against whom this militia is expected to fight.

In Twain's "Letters from the Earth", supposedly a series of letters from Satan addressed to the angels Michael and Gabriel (Baetzhold & McCullough 1995:213-260), the popular concept of Heaven is subjected to a far more scathing analysis than in "Stormfield". In this case, the satire is used to show the contradictions of the idea: For example, in "Letters" it is explicitly pointed out that few men can sing well or play musical instruments, yet the generally-held conception of Heaven involves endless harp-playing and praise-singing. The same theme in "Stormfield" is treated with a far gentler sort of humour. There is, however, one major difference: in "Letters", Twain stresses the foolishness of humans imagining a sex-less Heaven when sexual intercourse is one of humanity's major preoccupations on Earth. This theme is almost completely absent from "Stormfield", although in a section that was removed from the version published in *Harper's* it is described how a girl who died in childhood had grown up in Heaven and eventually had children of her own - and since Twain declines to specify parthenogenesis, those children must have come from *somewhere*.⁴ But

³Strangely, a few pages later (Baetzhold & McCullough 1995:180) the captain turns out to be quite ignorant of the speed of light and needs to be taught the concept by his companion Sandy McWilliams.

⁴In this respect, Twain displays what Lang (1987) has typified as a gradual shift from a theocentric, sexless Heaven to an anthropocentric and sexualised concept of Heaven that had developed in roughly the century before him, starting with Swedenborg and continued by figures like Blake, Kingsley and Yeats. Indeed, many aspects of Twain's Heaven are distinctly Swedenborgian, for example the emphasis on work.

"Letters from the Earth" was not originally considered by Twain as a serious work to be submitted for publication (in fact, it was first published posthumously, and then only in 1962); if, as seems likely,⁵ he had written it mainly for his own pleasure and that of a select group of friends, this might explain the difference.

But let us return to the adventures of the good captain. After a few months, Stormfield strikes up a friendship with Sandy McWilliams, "an old bald-headed angel ... from somewheres in New Jersey" who runs a cranberry farm. From this point on, the story takes on the form of a dialogue, with Stormfield as the questioner and Sandy acting as guide and, we may say, as Twain's alter ego.

The logical consequences of the existence of Heaven are spelled out and this, in fact, takes up most of the remainder of the story. Heaven, it turns out, can be quite a lonely place: the North American district is mainly populated by Native Americans (Twain's Heaven is not restricted to Christians)⁶ and even the British district is full of people who speak unintelligible archaic forms of English: "the minute you get back of Elizabeth's time the language begins to fog up and the further back you go the foggier it gets". Finding someone who speaks your language is a major problem in Heaven.

People in Twain's Heaven can choose their apparent age and alter it after the fact. But apart from those who died in infancy, who always choose to grow up, most eventually choose to be about the age they were on Earth when they died.

Twain emphasises how *big* Heaven is: even though it is supposedly just over thirty light-years from Earth, when he describes the dimensions of the place itself he piles up the billions of light-years in a way that involuntarily makes the modern reader think of Carl Sagan's florid descriptions of the known universe. It is also stressed that Heaven is in no way a democracy: it is an absolute monarchy with power devolving through many different ranks of archangels, prophets, and patriarchs. God himself is present mostly by his absence: a rank-and-file angel like captain Stormfield has practically no chance even of meeting a patriarch, never mind the Creator himself.

At this point, we must ask whether Twain was lampooning the Christianity of Middle America with a view to making it seem ridiculous, that is, as an atheist and nihilist project of destruction, or whether he still harboured religious sentiments himself. Here, it seems that Twain scholarship is undergoing a sea-change. From an earlier view that emphasised Twain as anti-God and anti-Christianity, more recent writings have stressed the religious influences

⁵See Twain's letter to Elizabeth Wallace in Baetzhald & McCullough (1995:213).

⁶The same theme recurs in Twain's story "Captain Simon Wheeler's dream visit to Heaven" (Baetzhald & McCullough 1995:189-194), where pious people from different religions are assigned to various sections of Heaven and warned not to stray from there, but the run of the place is given to a man who "... didn't know the right way, and ... went a-blundering along and loving everybody just alike, ... Injuns and Presbyterians and Irish ...". This may reflect an influence from 19th and early 20th century Spiritualism. In "Stormfield" we see that even our conventional understanding of who is to be regarded as a saint or patriarch may be wrong. When a converted sinner is welcomed into Heaven, for example, he is granted the rare privilege of being greeted by two patriarchs: Moses and Esau. The first one might be expected, but the second?

on his work and the sophistication of his private beliefs. As Phipps (1994:420) remarks:

["Stormfield" is] Twain's rollicking treatment of the traditional provincial and literal notions of heaven. His God is too grand to be comprehended by the puny cosmic conceptions of earthlings.

Naturally, this immediately raises the question of how Twain, as an earthling himself, can display the temerity of describing either God or Heaven. And the answer is that he uses humour to deconstruct existing conceptions of the Ultimate, while never for a moment suggesting that his own descriptions should be taken more literally. It is, after all, only humour! But for a long time, critics have tended to take his criticisms at face value. Only now, it appears, are theologians ready to see the deep and sophisticated faith underlying the buffoonery.⁷ Twain, it now seems, deeply believed in God, and perhaps in Heaven.

But he did not have much faith in the church. In both "Letters from the Earth" and in yet another story "A singular episode: the reception of Rev. Sam Jones in Heaven" (Baetzhold & McCullough 1995:198-202) we can see him displaying a thoroughgoing anticlericalism, one that included hellfire-and-brimstone preachers as well as cassocked priests. It should be said, though, that little of this anticlericalism surfaces in "Stormfield".

Although "Stormfield", after having been written and rewritten for forty years, was eventually published, it still comes across as an unfinished work. We are never informed how or why captain Stormfield returned to Earth, for example. While Twain is careful, in an introduction, to attribute the whole thing to a dream, the realistic, matter-of-fact tone of the whole story belies this. Captain Stormfield is as serious in his tale-telling as Lemuel Gulliver is in his. This is not just a yarn spun together for the sake of entertaining passengers on a long sea voyage. Nor does it have the surrealistically "logical" nature of a dream. The whole thing is structured like a classical traveller's yarn that happens to stop halfway. Did the old sea dog get kicked out of Heaven for trying to do some smuggling on the side? Did he accidentally get blown off course again while looking for the other side? We are not told. His return is implied by the first person singular narrative, but not set out clearly.

Since "Stormfield", there have been many other depictions of the Heavenly realms in popular literature, film and other forms of entertainment. One thinks here of Rodger and Hammerstein's "Carousel", of Heinlein's "Stranger in a strange land" and many others. But these do not fall into the category of the traveller's yarn: in most cases Heaven serves only as an exotic backdrop from which angels may descend down to earth to fulfill whatever tasks they need to do. If, as Twain keeps reminding us, a celestial day is as a thousand earthly years, we need to move forward a few hours. In the twenty-fourth century⁸ we again

⁷Besides Phipps' (1994) characterisation of Twain as a Calvinist in all but the most conventional sense, there is also Eutsey's (1999) in-depth examination of Twain's *The mysterious stranger* as an example of this growing appreciation for Twain's religious side. As Eutsey (p 45) puts it, "Beneath Mark Twain's irreverent veneer may actually have existed a more profound sense of God than either the prevailing Victorian religiosity of his time or modern scholarship has been willing to acknowledge."

⁸In fact, the Star Trek saga, including all its TV series and films, straddles the 23rd and 24th centuries, especially with the latest prequel series "Enterprise". There have also been time-travel episodes ranging from the 19th to the 29th centuries. Here we shall use "24th

encounter a traveller's yarn that involves a visit to Heaven.

Star Trek V: The Final Frontier

The title of the film, of course, comes from the famous opening sequence of the original Star Trek TV series, where Captain Kirk (William Shatner)'s voice says "Space ... the final frontier..." As it turned out, it was to be neither the final Star Trek film nor even the last one to feature the cast of the original series.⁹

"Final Frontier" is hardly the only reference to religion or divinity in the ongoing development of the Star Trek universe. Indeed, the TV series and its various spin-offs have long been renowned among fans for touching on religious and metaphysical questions. In both the "Next Generation" and "Voyager" series, we have seen frequent appearances by "Q", a being of godlike power and caprice who, when not annoying spaceship captains, lives in another dimension called the Continuum. In the "Deep Space Nine" series, commander Sisko is himself assigned the role of a prophet by the Bajorans,¹⁰ and in many other of the films and TV episodes, the idea of a soul (Vulcan: *katra*) is central to the plot in one way or another. But only "Final Frontier" takes us to Heaven. Or what the characters mistakenly believe to be Heaven.¹¹

The plot of "Final Frontier" involves a renegade Vulcan named Sybok who is not only in touch with his emotions, but is able to take away the pain of others. Sybok uses these powers

century" to denote the fictional period as a whole, without concerning ourselves with precisely where in it the events in "Star Trek V: the Final Frontier" takes place.

⁹There are a number of plot synopses and reviews of the film available online, readily available by typing the film's title into a search engine. See also the description and discussion in Maher (199:171-172). This being the case, our discussion will be more cursory than in the case of the more difficult to locate "Stormfield". The online reviews of "Final Frontier" seem to be unanimous in deriding this as the worst of the Star Trek films. While I would concur with their evaluation, this does not in itself invalidate it as an interesting parallel to Twain's "Stormfield", which in the same way is hardly the best of its creator's many literary outputs.

¹⁰Indeed, while most of the TV series maintain at best an agnostic view of reality, "Deep Space Nine" is the one series that deals sympathetically with religion in general, and theism in particular (Barad & Robertson 2001). In this sense, "Final Frontier" is typical of most of Star Trek: it is never quite made clear whether or not the entity it discovers is supernatural, but severe doubts are put in play. As both Kirk and Spock ask: "What does God need with a starship?" ("Final Frontier" does not suffer from the language problem encountered in "Stormfield": in the Star Trek universe, every intelligent being is fitted at birth with a gadget called a Universal Translator that fits inside the inner ear).

¹¹It should be noted, though, that the Star Trek universe often confronts us with pseudo-paradises like the vacation planet Risa, "the Club Med of the 24th century" (Barad & Robertson 2001:136) or Omicron Ceti II, where hallucinogenic spores leave people in ecstatic delirium. Sisko, in an early episode of "Deep Space Nine" also visits the Bajoran deities inside a wormhole, perhaps the closest that any TV episode has come to the plot of "Final Frontier". In each case, however, the apparent Eden is shown to be, at best, an artefact of 24th century technology, or, at worst, a trap for the unwary interstellar traveller. In this sense, "Final Frontier" is true to Star Trek mythology in general.

to gain disciples on a distant planet, and then to hijack a spaceship. Naturally, the ship in question is the USS Enterprise, to which Kirk, Spock and McCoy, as always the heroes of the plot, have been hastily recalled from a furlough in Yosemite National Park. A large section of the film revolves around captain Kirk's attempts to recapture his ship, but before he can be successful, we arrive at the centre of the galaxy, which is where Sybok has intended to get all along.

It turns out that there is an impenetrable barrier around the centre of the galaxy: a kind of energy-ring that destroys starships. To all the various species involved (human, Vulcan, Romulan and Klingon) it seems obvious that within this barrier must lie the Heaven promised by each one's respective religion. In the Vulcan language, for example, it is called Sha Ka Ree.¹² Like "Stormfield" then, at this stage of the plot's development, "Final Frontier" proposes that Heaven is part of the physical universe.

Our heroes manage to reach the barrier and penetrate it¹³ and find a solitary planet inhabited only by a being of immense, indeed godlike power. But as it turns out, this being has been trapped inside the barrier for uncounted ages. The barrier (a variation of that stalwart science fiction standby, the force-field) was constructed to keep him in, not to keep others out. He is not God, but a kind of evil demi-urge, an analogue of the Devil.

The heroes now need to stop the being from escaping to the outer universe and wreaking all sorts of implied havoc there. They also need to escape themselves. The details of their actions need not be recounted here: suffice it to say that it involves a combination of Kirk's usual derring-do, Sybok's ability to share in another being's mental anguish, and a convenient *deus ex machina* in the shape of a Klingon starship.

Conclusion

Like "Stormfield", then, "Final Frontier" involves a perilous journey to a place of divine origin. But there the similarity ends. Stormfield's Heaven may not be quite what the average early 20th century churchgoer expected, but it indisputably *is* Heaven. In "Final Frontier", we are led to believe that we are entering Heaven, but it turns out to be a prison, a solitary Hell built to contain a being whose crimes have long been forgotten by the rest of the universe. In a way, this reverses what we see in "Stormfield"; one recalls that the captain fully expected to go to Hell, and was surprised to find himself in better circumstances.

Both "Stormfield" and "Final Frontier" reflect their times. "Stormfield" is a product of late

¹² It is widely believed among Star Trek fans that this name is a pun on Sean Connery, the actor originally approached for the part of Sybok (Barad & Roberston 2001:147, n 1). This is quite possible: apart from Klingon, Star Trek's various fictional languages never achieved the internal consistency one finds, for instance, in the works of J R R Tolkien.

¹³The Star Trek universe is not always internally consistent, and this is one of the most glaring examples of it. Kirk and the Enterprise reach the centre of the galaxy in time for supper, yet the basic premiss of the later TV series "Star Trek: Voyager" is that even with 24th-century technology it still takes over seventy years to cross the galaxy from one side to the other. Perhaps this is one reason why mention of the film is studiously avoided in the various spin-off series we have seen since, while cross-references between the various TV series abound.

Victorian and early twentieth century Anglo-American society: it shows the boundless optimism, the belief in progress, the insistence on explaining everything rationally that typified the era. An old sea dog can believe himself hell-bound yet find himself welcomed into Heaven, and it soon becomes clear that Heaven is not restricted to Bible-punchers of the conventional sort, but is available to all halfway decent people regardless of their religious affiliation. And anything that is unfamiliar is explained at length, to the point of being pedantic. It might as well have been written by a Vulcan.

A century later, "Final Frontier" shows us a distinctly darker vision. Starry-eyed explorers thinking themselves on their way to Heaven find themselves in a hellish situation, confronted by a malevolent being of immense power. They manage to fight their way out, yes, but there is no divine assistance in the process. The message is clear: we are alone in the universe and we will have to rely on our own abilities to pull through. Omnipotent, and possibly divine, beings are not to be trusted. Even the Klingons make better allies in a pinch.

And nothing is explained. Whereas in "Stormfield" the project, even if couched in humorous terms, seems to be to explain Heaven in rational terms, answering such questions as how big the place needs to be to accommodate the billions of souls yet to be born and die, in "Final Frontier" we are told nothing. It may take place in the 24th century, but this film is about emotions, not answers and arguments.¹⁴ From Sybok's ability to draw painful emotions out of another's consciousness, to the gasps of awe from the representatives of various species when they think they are approaching Heaven, to the expressions of disappointment and betrayal when "God" turns out to be evil, it is emotion that is explored in "Final Frontier". But who created the barrier? Was it an even mightier being than the one imprisoned behind it? Why put the prison in the middle of the galaxy? What kind of energy source powers the barrier? We are not told. The 24th century may be the time of the eminently rational, scientifically advanced and agnostic United Federation of Planets, but there is little evidence of it in "Final Frontier"

The late 20th century audience at whom the film is aimed has lost Twain's confidence (and by implication, that of his audience) that everything can be explained, even Heaven. The traveller's yarn has finally been transmuted into something else: from being a (supposedly) factual account of exotic peoples and places it has drawn on other literary roots and now reflects themes like that of Orpheus' descent into the underworld.

Heaven itself may be everlasting, as various religions hold. But from these two examples it is clear that the concept of Heaven in popular culture, the presentations of it that mass audiences are prepared to accept, has undergone a drastic revision during the last hundred years. What does remain is a sense of optimism, though in the case of "Final Frontier" we have to wait a while to see it. In Twain's story, the optimism is directed at Heaven itself, which admits a much larger range of people than the conventional wisdom of the time would allow. In "Final Frontier", Heaven turns out to be Hell: the optimism is deferred until the heroes have returned to the man-made heaven of the United Federation of Planets. The film ends where it began:

¹⁴As Amis (1974:20) points out, this is a traditional shortcoming of science fiction generally: "But most commonly, the (science fiction) author will fabricate a way of getting around Einstein, or even of sailing straight through him: a device known typically as the space-warp or the hyper-drive will make its appearance, though without any more ceremony than 'He applied the space-warp' or 'He threw the ship into hyper-drive'."

with Spock, Kirk and McCoy on furlough in a thoroughly tamed Earth wilderness. This, the film tells us, is the true Heaven, the secular New Jerusalem that humans, Vulcans and a smattering of other species will build for themselves in the 24th century¹⁵, a world in which the outward heavenly conditions reflect the true Heaven that resides in the human heart. One imagines that Mark Twain would have felt at home there.¹⁶

NOTES

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¹⁵Although, as Weaver (2001:257) has remarked, one should be wary of ascribing a unitary viewpoint to a cultural phenomenon spanning nearly forty years and involving a variety of writers, editors and producers, it seems safe to say that this kind of optimism is typical of Star Trek generally. As Roos (1991:44), referring mainly to the original TV series, puts it, "It saw a hopeful future for the human race. ... Star Trek's spirit was not cynical. It portrayed a way out for us ... We could get through our problems and survive. Life in the 23rd century was a possibility". What is interesting in "Final Frontier" is the way this optimism is deferred, how it is deflected from a religious hope to a secular one. In other subsets of the Star Trek phenomenon, most notably the series "Deep Space Nine", the optimism is couched in far more explicitly religious terms.

¹⁶Indeed, Mark Twain appears in two consecutive episodes of "Star Trek: The Next Generation", not, as one might think, as a holodeck character, but in a plot involving time-travel. Twain, portrayed as a crotchety old man, thanks Data the android for showing him that the future "turned out alright". See the synopsis and discussion at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/projects/tysse/DTthings.htm>, and also Fulton's (1994) article, available online at <http://iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.594/fulton-v.594>.

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