

American innocence

Samuel Clemens: Mark Twain. The quintessential American writer, sketching the bildungsroman of the young nation in *Tom Sawyer* (1876), taking on issues of slavery and injustice in *Huck Finn* (1885), debunking myth and reverence for antiquity in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Yet in his own lifetime, Twain's bestselling book was none of the above but rather a loose collection of newspaper travel writing gathered together under the title *The Innocents Abroad; or, The New Pilgrims' Progress* (1869). *Innocents Abroad* was published in 1869, the same year as Thomas Cook's first tour to Egypt and Palestine, and Twain's writing simultaneously mocks and exploits the contemporary vogue in oriental travel. While the title signals something like a conflation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Bunyan's far more earnest *Pilgrim's Progress*, the overall tone of the collection is most consistently that of Chaucer's comically, almost aggressively naïve narrator. That aggressive naïveté distinguishes the American traveler from the Moroccan "natives" he views en masse while exposing both the narrator and the objects of his vision to the laughter of his audience.

In "chapter VII" of this cobbled-together book, Twain arrives in Tangier from Gibraltar on his voyage to the Holy Land. His reflections focus appropriately on history and religion, but his opening impressions engage and consciously intensify the visual stereotypes of the orient.

Twain starts with comic exaggeration of the tourist's desire for grandeur and novelty. The chapter opens with approval ("This is royal!") of "these dominions of the Emperor of Morocco," though that doubled insistence on royal or imperial splendor quickly degenerates into a fatuous desire for the foreign:

We wanted something thoroughly and uncompromisingly foreign—foreign from top to bottom—foreign from center to circumference—foreign inside and outside and all around—nothing anywhere about it to dilute its foreignness—nothing to remind us of any other people or any other land under the sun. And lo! In Tangier we have found it.

Foreign, foreign, foreign, foreign: the repetition, tied to a cliché (top to bottom) comically elaborated through multiple references to space and volume, rapidly becomes meaningless. The desire of the traveler is for a world beyond the reach of analogy: "nothing to remind us of any people or any other land under the sun." But without analogy, what can we comprehend or remember?

Twain, having established the inadequacy of any place that might be encompassed by analogy, promptly reaches out for visual and verbal analogies.

Here is not the slightest thing that ever we have seen save in pictures—and we always mistrusted the pictures before. We cannot anymore. The pictures used to seem exaggerations—they seemed too weird and fanciful for reality. But behold, they were not wild enough—they were not fanciful enough—they have not told half the story.

The other half of the story remains to be told by Twain, but the story he has in mind comes from a familiar source: “Tangier is a foreign land if ever there was one, and the true spirit of it can never be found in any book save *The Arabian Nights*.” Twain is clearly aware of his references and their effects: his introductory paragraph ends with a demand for readerly recognition. “Isn't it an oriental picture?”

By that point, however, Tangier's satisfyingly undiluted foreignness has already palled. Twain's visual survey of the city offers an analogy not to the *Arabian Nights*, but rather to a cemetery:

Here are no white men visible, yet swarms of humanity are all about us. Here is a packed and jammed city enclosed in a massive stone wall which is more than a thousand years old. All the houses nearly are one-and two-story, made of thick walls of stone, plastered outside, square as a dry-goods box, flat as a floor on top, no cornices, whitewashed all over—a crowded city of snowy tombs!

Later writers such as Edith Wharton will also equate Moroccan architecture with death, but it's interesting to see the trope already established in 1869. Twain also touches on the “mystery” of Muslim society, contrasting what one can learn of Jewish houses with the unknowability of Muslim décor: “there is no furniture in the rooms (of Jewish dwellings) save divans—what there is in Moorish ones no man may know; within their sacred walls no Christian dog can enter.” The forbidden quality of Tanger is clearly an important part of its intrigue and appeal.

Twain's account of Tangier's diverse inhabitants highlights the early cosmopolitan nature of the city, though “cosmopolitan” is not a word we would expect Twain himself to apply:

There are stalwart Bedouins of the desert here, and stately Moors proud of a history that goes back to the night of time; and Jews whose fathers fled hither centuries upon centuries ago; and swarthy Riffians from the mountains—born cut-throats—and original, genuine Negroes as black as Moses; and howling dervishes and a hundred breeds of Arabs—all sorts and descriptions of people that are foreign and curious to look upon.

Compare Wordsworth's portrait of London in *The Prelude* (1805/1850), where the cosmopolitan diversity of the city is more clearly at stake:

Now homeward through the thickening hubbub, where
See, among less distinguishable shapes,
The begging scavenger, with hat in hand;
The Italian, as he thrids his way with care,
Steadying, far-seen, a frame of images
Upon his head; with basket at his breast
The Jew; the stately and slow-moving Turk,
With freight of slippers piled beneath his arm!

Enough;--the mighty concourse I surveyed
With no unthinking mind, well pleased to note

Among the crowd all specimens of man,
Through all the colours which the sun bestows,
And every character of form and face:
The Swede, the Russian; from the genial south,
The Frenchman and the Spaniard; from remote
America, the Hunter-Indian; Moors,
Malays, Lascars, the Tartar, the Chinese,
And Negro Ladies in white muslin gowns. (Book 7, 211-228)

Both writers stress variety and display, but where Wordsworth emphasizes nationalities and the remoteness of the periphery which has sent its representatives to the metropole, Twain stresses the incoherence of the periphery itself. Moorish history goes back not to the dawn of time, but to its night; Jews are here as a result of ancient flight; Riffians are born cutthroats; in an interesting twist on Biblical history, Africans are “black as Moses.” The “oriental” nature of streets in Tangier seems to derive from the ease with which they can be blockaded. Twain is intent on difference, on “foreignness,” and the threat of danger seems to add spice to that foreignness.

Twain’s descriptions continue to emphasize visual interest and extremity (“their dresses are strange beyond all description”) in a way that levels classes and non-American ethnicities; his architectural remarks highlight a deep history of war and conquest; and his analogies maintain comedy through a strategy of travesty. Thus, the narrator pretends to mistake a common soldier for the Emperor given the magnificence of his dress, but he sees in a wall the more persistent remains of antiquity:

Here is a crumbling wall that was old when Columbus discovered America; was old when Peter the Hermit roused the knightly men of the Middle Ages to arm for the first Crusade; was old when Charlemagne and his paladins beleaguered enchanted castles and battled with giants and genii in the fabled days of the olden time; was old when Christ and his disciples walked the earth; stood where it stands today when the lips of Memnon were vocal and men bought and sold in the streets of ancient Thebes!

It’s not entirely clear whether or not Twain intends the parallel syntax to hold in the last clause, whether the buying and selling in Thebes is of goods or indeed of men. Regardless, the turn from Columbus’ discovery of America to a lengthy engagement with the Crusades (from Peter the Hermit through Charlemagne and his paladins) seems not quite accidental; Christ appears only briefly between the Crusades and the markets of Thebes.

The next paragraph more clearly identifies Tangier with a history of conquest and decay:

The Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, the English, Moors, Romans, all have battled for Tangier—all have won it and lost it. Here is a ragged, oriental-looking Negro from some desert place in interior Africa, filling his goatskin with water from a stained and battered fountain built by the Romans twelve hundred years ago.

Raggedness, dark skin, and oriental appearance are invoked as apparent opposites to

the Romans who fashioned fountains that still function after 1200 years. But Twain also invokes the vanished presence of a monument to Canaanites—a stone which complained, in Roman times, of Canaanites being driven to Tangier “by the Jewish Robber, Joshua.” This imagined monument is given as much apparent presence as the actual fountains and walls of the city, undercutting the material authority attributed to the stone and providing a fine segue into Twain’s more mythical history of Hercules in Tingis (Tangier). Twain grants Hercules a semi-historical status, not unlike the almost-presence of the Canaanite monument: “Antiquarians concede that such a personage as Hercules did exist in ancient times and agree that he was an enterprising and energetic man, but decline to believe him a good, bona-fide god, because that would be unconstitutional.” American constitutional judgment appears not quite out of the blue here: gentlemanly mores have already marked the boundary between ancient and present days. “In these streets [Hercules] met Anitus [Antaeus], the king of the country, and brained him with his club, which was the fashion among gentlemen in those days.” The long-ago gentlemen of Tanger “were as savage as the wild beasts they were constantly obliged to war with. But they were a gentlemanly race and did no work. They lived on the natural products of the land.” Gentlemen are thus defined as men who brain one another with clubs, while doing no work, just as the relevance of the constitution is limited to determining the (non)existence of Greek gods. Twain’s humor cuts in both directions here.

Comments on the economy echo this double-edged humor. Shops are compared to shower-baths in size, and the coin of the realm shows a massive devaluing of the antiquity Twain earlier admired. “I saw none but what was dated four or five hundred years back, and was badly worn and battered.” The coin is so worthless that the most appropriate measure seems to be volume rather than monetary worth: “I bought nearly half a pint of their money for a shilling myself.”