

Going East

Innocents Abroad

In June, 1867, Samuel Clemens was 31 years old, and the United States was 90. After years of uncertainty and struggle, the future was looking bright for both of them. America had come through the war between North and South that threatened its existence as a nation. It was finishing the railroad that would span the continent from east to west. It probably was already beginning to feel the summons to the central place on the international stage that it would claim by the end of the century.

America's rise to its role as world power occurred during the same years as Clemens' rise to the status of world celebrity. Clemens' struggle toward that place dated back to his childhood. The family he had been born into, like many on the country's southwestern frontier, was always rich in social pretensions and chronically strapped for cash. Before his death in 1847, John Clemens, Sam's father, store-keeper, sometime lawyer, land speculator, kept restlessly searching for success, which explains why in 1839, four years after Sam had been born in a cabin in Florida, Missouri, the family moved to the economically more promising river town of Hannibal. Unlike Tom Sawyer, however, John Clemens found no treasure in the village. When he died, Sam was 12; the loss forced him to work to help his mother make ends meet. He stayed in school long enough to complete nine years of education in a series of one-room schoolhouses, but by the time he was 15 he was working fulltime. For the next 15 years his employment history suggests he inherited both his father's restlessness and his economic bad luck. Sam's first association with words and writing came through a series of jobs in printing offices, first in Hannibal,

then in St Louis; at seventeen he ran off to see the World's Fair in New York, and worked in print shops there and in Philadelphia for about half a year before coming back to the Mississippi. In 1857 he apprenticed himself to Horace Bixby to become a riverboat pilot, gaining his license two years later. Piloting was a well-paying, prestigious job, but in 1861 the Civil War halted commerce on the river. After two weeks in an irregular Confederate militia unit, Sam ran off again: he lit out for the Territory of Nevada in company with his brother Orion, who had just been appointed territorial secretary. Safe from the War, he vowed to himself not to go home again until he had made a fortune. There were fortunes to be made on this frontier – in timber, in silver, in mining speculations – but Sam found no treasure either.

Intermittently during these years he had written and published a number of short pieces in various newspapers. In keeping with the journalistic conventions of the day, he signed these pieces with pseudonyms, including “W. Epaminondas Adrastus Perkins” and “Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass.” While looking for precious metals in the deserts of Nevada, he submitted several letters to the Virginia City (Nevada) *Territorial Enterprise* under the pen name “Josh,” and their popularity resulted in the offer of a position on the paper. With no prospects as a prospector, Clemens became a professional writer in September, 1862. As a frontier newspaperman, he wrote mostly news stories, though he first began to acquire a name for himself with some hoaxes published as news. In February, 1863, that name became “Mark Twain,” when for reasons that remain unknown he decided to sign three political reports from the territorial capital of Carson City with those two words.

“Mark Twain” was no overnight sensation, and the next several years display the same pattern of restlessness. By 1864 he was working as a reporter in San Francisco, and in 1866 became a traveling correspondent for two different California papers, traveling first westward to Hawaii (then called the Sandwich Islands) and next eastward, to New York. But he had found his calling: as he put it in a letter to Orion in the fall of 1865: “I *have* had a ‘call’ to literature, of a low order – *i.e.* humorous.”¹ His ambivalence about (to quote another phrase from that letter) “seriously scribbling to excite the laughter of God’s creatures” was real – “Poor, pitiful business!” is how the letter winds up – and would persist throughout his career. But by the time

“Mark Twain” was three years old – by June, 1867 – that persona had already brought Clemens two different kinds of national recognition. His humorous sketch, “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog,” had leaped from the pages of New York’s *Saturday Press* (where it first appeared in November, 1865) and into newspapers across the country, where it made a big splash with the American reading public. And less than a year later he proved he could excite their laughter by talking as well as scribbling when he revised his Hawaiian correspondence into a humorous lecture called “Our Fellow Savages of the Sandwich Islands”; he performed it first in San Francisco, then toured with it through a dozen Pacific slope mining towns, gave it again in St Louis and elsewhere when he revisited the Mississippi in early 1867, and then delighted two different audiences in New York City with it. At the end of April he even brought out a book: *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches*. It was not just the frog who was becoming a celebrity.

In June, 1867, Mark Twain (to use the name by which the country was beginning to know him) and America were ready to take on the world. At least, that is one way to understand the cruise of the *Quaker City*, the six-month trip to Europe and the Holy Land (as the Middle East was then called) that became the basis for the book with which Twain’s literary career was really launched. The trip itself was a first: by chartering a sea-going side-wheel steamship to take them to the Old World, the 60 *Quaker City* passengers became America’s first organized tour group. As American tourists heading east, however, they sailed on what Twain refers to as “the tide of a great popular movement.”² As Henry James’ tales of such “innocents abroad” as Daisy Miller affronting her destiny in Europe suggest, during the last third of the 19th century more and more Americans made pilgrimages to the cultural shrines of London, Paris, Rome and the other stops on the Grand Tour. Many went still further east, to Palestine, to visit the sites made sacred by their Biblical associations. Conceived by the fashionable Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, the *Quaker City* expedition advertised itself as an “Excursion to the Holy Land,” but on the way there were arranged stops at “Intermediate Points of Interest” across the Mediterranean, with plenty of time provided for junkets to places like Paris, where another World’s Fair was in progress.

People for whom the words “Mark Twain” conjure up the image of a poor white boy and an enslaved black man floating down a river on

a raft might have a hard time locating him on the *Quaker City* trip. Most of his fellow passengers were eminently respectable, genteel, devout and well-to-do. Samuel Clemens, for example, could not have afforded the trip: the \$1,250 cost of his passage and his expenses on land were paid by the *Alta California*, a San Francisco paper. But Clemens was a very ambitious man. He accepted without any conscious misgiving the advice he was given in the Sandwich Islands by diplomat Anson Burlingame: "Never affiliate with inferiors; always *climb*."³ The *Quaker City* trip gave him a chance to take two steps upward. He apprenticed himself to another passenger, a slightly older woman named Mary Fairbanks, wife of a wealthy Cleveland publisher. For the next several years, until his career was established, he called her "Mother" and referred to himself as her "Cub," and from her took lessons in navigating the tastes and proprieties of the middle class audience he knew he wanted to reach. And through his roommate on the cruise, a young man named Charley Langdon, the son of a rich coal dealer in Elmira, New York, he would meet the woman he married, Charley's sister Olivia. With that marriage the child from a cabin in the southwest would find entrance into the mansions of the east, where he spent the rest of his life.

The almost sixty reports he wrote for the *Alta* and several New York papers also attracted the attention of the publishing world. One publisher in particular, Elisha Bliss, head of the American Publishing Company in Hartford, was particularly attracted by one letter, the irascible "valedictory" to the trip Twain printed in the *New York Herald* the day after the *Quaker City* docked. There Twain calls the pilgrimage "a funeral excursion without a corpse" (644), and said that life with his fellow-passengers, whom he calls the "saints," consisted of "solemnity, decorum, dinner, dominoes, devotions, slander" (645). Some of those passengers publically took offense at Twain's satirical account, and in the controversy thus stirred up Bliss saw publicity, popularity and profits. His company published books "by subscription," which meant that customers bought them from door-to-door sales agents. Thick, well-illustrated travel books were a staple of the subscription book trade, but until Bliss wrote Twain to ask if he was interested in making a book out of his *Quaker City* experience, no one had tried selling a humorous text this way. Twain wrote back to ask "what amount of money" such a venture might earn, adding that that question "has a degree of importance for me which is almost beyond

my own comprehension.”⁴ There would be a lot of money for them both, Bliss assured him – and on that basis at the end of 1867 Twain committed himself to writing a book.

Published in 1869 as *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrims’ Progress*, the book was very successful. In its first year it sold 70,000 copies, and throughout Twain’s lifetime it remained the single best-selling of all his books. It established many of the patterns that recur throughout his career. All of his major books, for example, were published “by subscription,” even after Twain left Bliss to set up his own publishing firm. Four more of them were literally travel books: *Roughing It* (1872), *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), *Following the Equator* (1897). Traveling is an important motif in many of the others: the river trip in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), travel in time as well as space in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), even the balloon voyage in *Tom Sawyer, Abroad* (1894). As the first act in Mark Twain’s performance as a beloved popular author and entertainer, *Innocents Abroad* is the text with which an introduction to him should start. It is also a good place to begin appreciating his art as a humorist and his project as a realist.

The book followed the well-established formula for successful subscription publication. It was long, 651 pages long: subscription customers were often people who never went into bookstores, and who bought only a few books in a year; “the rural-district reader likes to see that he has got his money’s worth,” as a reviewer in *The Nation* put it, “and no man ever saw a book-agent with a small volume in his hand.”⁵ Subscription buyers also liked pictures: Bliss’ edition of *Innocents Abroad* contained, as it proclaims on the titlepage, “two hundred and thirty-four illustrations.” Like many passages in Twain’s text, many of the illustrations are serious, even solemn. His account is often saturated with facts (the cathedral in Milan is “five hundred feet long by one hundred and eighty wide” and has “7,148 marble statues” [180]), and his prose often self-consciously eloquent (the eyes of the Sphinx “look steadfastly back upon the things they knew before History was born – before Tradition had being,” and so on [629]), and the corresponding full-page illustrations of Cathedral and Sphinx are suitable for framing. Subscription customers who could only fantasize about being able to afford the Grand Tour expected travel books to provide in their words and pictures a vicarious chance to see the world. But the great virtue of *Innocents Abroad*, the feature that Bliss

emphasized in his advertising campaign, was the chance it gave readers to laugh at what they saw. As a narrative it goes to the same Old World sites as dozens of travelogues published in the decade after the Civil War, but what made it a hit was that its first-person narrator provides so much fun as a character and a guide.

In the book's protagonist American readers got their first full glimpse of "Mark Twain." He is the most innocent of the innocents abroad. If the typical travel book author sets himself up as an authority, "Mark Twain" is defined by his inexperience. This is the aesthetic or structural basis of his readers' pleasure: the way the book's "I" allows them to look down on his misadventures as a tenderfoot or naif. What Henry James' American pilgrims from Daisy to Christopher Newman to Isabel Archer don't know can have tragic consequences, but what happens to "Mark Twain" in the Old World is funny, and the comedy provides the reader with a superior position from which to enjoy the fate of innocence. The encounter with a Parisian barber is typical of the shtick. The narrator's naive expectations set up the joke: "from earliest infancy it had been a cherished ambition of mine to be shaved some day in a palatial barbershop in Paris" (113). The snapper is sprung a couple hundred words later when dream gives way to flesh-and-blood reality: the French barber "swooped down upon me like the genius of destruction. The first rake of his razor loosened the very hide from my face and lifted me out of the chair. I stormed and raved, and the other boys enjoyed it." The comedy here is very carefully stage managed: in the explicit laughter of "the other boys" – two traveling companions – readers are given all the permission they could want to enjoy the "I's" discomfiture. Similar scenes occur regularly throughout the book. Being shaved again by a barber in Venice, buying kid gloves from a pretty Spanish girl in Gibraltar, trying out the supposed delights of a Turkish bath in Constantinople – the narrative repeatedly makes its central character appear ridiculous. It is a pure pose, of course, as deliberately fashioned a comic persona as Charlie Chaplin's "Little Tramp." It is also, as Twain learned early in his career as a humorist, a very effective means to ingratiate himself with audiences expecting something to laugh at: publically, at least, he was always willing to let them laugh at him.

Naivete is a primary source of Twain's humor. Readers of the "Jumping Frog" are privileged to laugh at the ignorance of nearly everyone in the sketch: at Smiley, for the trick that the mysterious stranger

plays on him; at Simon Wheeler, for the deadpan seriousness with which he narrates the doings of dogs with names like “Andrew Jackson” and a frog named “Daniel Webster”; and at “Mark Twain,” who frames the tale as the aggrieved victim of a hoax that forces him to suffer through Wheeler’s interminable ramblings. Twain was a rhetorical opportunist, always looking for the best way to exploit the comic potential of a subject and so keep readers entertained. The “Mark Twain” he develops for the “Jumping Frog” is a fussy easterner, appalled rather than amused by the antics and idiom of the roughs in a mining camp – someone who would feel at home among the “saints” on the *Quaker City*. *Innocents Abroad* (including the scores of illustrations that feature images of him) casts him in a different role: rougher, more western. He gives few details about his background, but does brag about taking a glorious ride on the overland stage coach, building a Humbolt house in the Nevada deserts and being well acquainted with the beauty of Lake Tahoe. The promotional poster that Bliss designed to help his agents sell the book capitalizes on this western, unmistakably “new world” aspect of the narrator’s identity: on it the author appears as a kind of bourgeois savage, complete with tomahawk, bow and arrow, advancing with suspicious hostility on the Old World (see Figure 1). American readers are certainly invited to laugh at this caricature, but they are also encouraged to identify with it: on the carpet bag are two sets of initials – “M.T.” and “U.S.”

Hank Morgan begins his time-traveling account of King Arthur’s court by saying “I am an American . . . a Yankee of the Yankees.” The narrator of *Innocents Abroad* is not this explicit, but his American readers knew on every page that “M.T.” was one of “US.” Another target of his humor is the expatriate, the type of American who adopts European airs: people like “Lloyd B. Williams,” who signs the register of an Italian hotel as with “*et trois amis, ville de Boston*,” or Mr. Gordon, who does not recognize his name anymore, except as “M’sieu Gorrdong” (233–4). For his part, the narrator holds firmly to his American identity. “The boys” (as he calls himself and the two fellow Americans he usually travels with) rename the villages in the Middle East to make them easier to spell and pronounce: *Temnin-el-Foka*, for example, becomes “Jacksonville” (438). Like Robinson Crusoe, who immediately establishes his superiority to the native he saves by telling him his name is “Friday,” beginning in Paris “the boys” decide to call all

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FIGURE 1 Poster from the sales prospectus for *The Innocents Abroad* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869)

their hired guides "Ferguson" (120). Guide-baiting quickly becomes one of their chief sources of pleasure. While a guide points out all the historical, artistic or high cultural sights, they pretend indifference or even scorn. With one phrase in particular they find a fool-proof way to defend themselves against everything that the Old World has to offer, and also shatter each Ferguson's smugness – "Is he dead?" Whether they are supposed to be admiring a painting by Michaelangelo or an Egyptian mummy, repeatedly asking the "Is he dead?" is guaranteed to amuse them and distress the guide.

Twain seems serious about the moral he provides at the journey's end: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts" (650). As a sentiment, that is safely conventional. As a way to sum up the narrative, however, it is very misleading. The prejudices that *Innocents Abroad* most effectively subverts are not those that Americans, "our people," might have *against* the Old World, but rather the preconceptions they probably have *in its favor*. The presumption on which the Grand Tour was founded was the idea that only by going to Europe could an American acquire real "culture," a belief rooted in the country's neo-colonial inferiority complex. From James Fenimore Cooper onward many American writers complained that the nation had "listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." That was how Ralph Waldo Emerson put it in 1837 in his "American Scholar" oration, where he added: "The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame." There is a kind of pun in the way Twain treats the "Old Masters": his irreverence can liberate the enslaved minds of his readers. "I never felt so fervently thankful, so soothed, so tranquil, so filled with a blessed peace as I did yesterday when I learned that Michaelangelo was dead" (288). Even their laughter is liberating. In those scenes of his discomfiture, for instance, he is not the only one made to look ridiculous. The difference between what he expected from a Parisian barbershop and the reality exposes not just his innocence, but also the shabbiness of the Old World. As the narrative repeatedly depicts it, the Old World is the opposite of naive – it is, well, old. Adjectives like "dirty," "impoverished," "decrepit," "ruined," "decayed," and so on are deployed again and again. "Is it dead?" Maybe not, but it is clearly dying. Is "The Last Supper" really the greatest painting in the world? Maybe it was, "once. But it was three hundred years ago"; now it is "dimmed with age," "scaled and marred" (191–3).

In his Preface, Twain promises to show his American reader “Europe and the East” exactly as “*he*” would see them “if he looked at them with his own eyes instead of the eyes of those who traveled in those countries before him” (vi). Most contemporary travel writers, including Henry James in his international tales, exasperated the anxieties Americans already felt toward the Old World from which so much of their culture was derived. In the first scene of James’ novel *The American*, for example, the paintings in the Louvre inspire the title character “for the first time in his life, with a vague self-mistrust.” Travel books typically capitalize on such self-doubts by placing their expertise at the service of the sight-seer’s ignorance. Twain’s calculated naivete has just the opposite effect: rather than implying there is so much Americans need to learn from the museums and cathedrals of Europe, *Innocents Abroad* suggests that there is little of value Americans don’t already know; instead of submitting themselves humbly to the Old World as a kind of post-graduate education, they are given that world to enjoy as a diversion.

Rather than kneel before the cultural shrines he visits, Twain’s iconoclastic persona prefers to rock the pedestals on which the idols sit; their fall from greatness is an occasion for comedy, not tragedy; the high ground, culturally and aesthetically, is bestowed on the American reader who is privileged to look down on the process. If Europe had a great past, it’s clear that both the present and the future belong to the newer world.

American readers had good reasons for *wanting* to see the Old World this way – laughing at Europe helped them transform their national self-image from former colonial dependent to potential imperial power – but whether they *could* see the world with their own eyes is a question that the book takes seriously. Not too seriously, of course: Twain’s main purpose throughout is to keep his audience entertained. But at points the text betrays a different ambition: to enlighten its readers, by working to show them what they *should* see. One such point occurs in front of “The Last Supper,” as Twain listens to the other tourists “apostrophizing wonders and beauties . . . which had faded out of the picture and gone, a hundred years before they were born” (192). “How,” he wonders, “can they see what is not visible?” That is a question he knows the answer to. Essentially this same scene is enacted again in the Holy Land, at a landmark called “The Fountain of the Virgin,” where the object of attention is a young

Nazarene girl. To Twain's eyes she is pleasant enough, but short and homely; one by one, however, the other members of his party pronounce her "tall," and remark the "Madonna-like beauty of her countenance." What they "see" is not visible either. Instead, they take it directly from one of the guide books to the Holy Land they use as "authorities," and from which their ideas of reality are derived (531).

Books as pre-texts, as occasions for his own texts, play a crucial role in Twain's career. One of his basic tactics as a comic writer, for example, was to start with a well-known work or genre and write a burlesque or parody of it: his send up of didactic Sunday School tales, "The Story of the Bad Little Boy That Bore a Charmed Life," published in the same year as "The Jumping Frog," is an early example of this technique. *Innocents Abroad* contains two such burlesque tales within its narrative: an anti-sentimental account of Heloise and Abelard (chapter 15) and a slangy pseudo-Arabian Nights romance about the Seven Sleepers – Johannes, Trumps, Gift, High, Low, Jack and The Game (chapter 41). As a humorist, then, Mark Twain often practices the art of *re-writing* other books. Behind that, however, were his goals as a realist; for him, that project can be summed up as the art of *un-writing* other books. Like the other American realists of his generation, including his friend and sometime editor William Dean Howells, Twain's writing explores the way people's understanding of reality is often pre-determined by the books they read: their interpretations of the world are based not on their own experience, but instead on what the textual authorities tell them is "there." That conditioning is actually the source of his protagonist's misadventures with barbers and Turkish baths: he is not strictly speaking naive, but badly misinformed by the romantic stories he has read naively, believing their fictions. Late in the trip he acknowledges this in one of the book's most significant phrases: "I can see easily enough that if I wish to profit by this tour and come to a correct understanding of the matters of interest connected with it, I must studiously and faithfully unlearn a great many things I have somehow absorbed" (486). Many of the best moments in his books are scenes of "unlearning."

Thus *Innocents Abroad* is both a travel book and an anti-travel book. Just as Tom Sawyer will tell Huck that they must do exactly what the books say when they dig for treasure or organize a robber gang, the *Quaker City* tourists carry a lot of texts wherever they go: "were we not traveling by the guide-book?" (435) Just as Huck's illiteracy,

however, offers a kind of antidote to Tom's fatuous reliance on his "authorities," Mark Twain's narrative defines itself against the accounts of previous authors. One place where the act of un-writing becomes overt is at the Sea of Galilee. After describing the scenery himself as "expressionless and unpoetical (when we leave its sublime history out of the question)," he then quotes a 300-word extract from *Tent Life in the Holy Land*, by William C. Prime (whom Twain calls "Wm. G. Grimes") extoling "the beauty of the scene." In what amounts to a guide book for careful reading, Twain then proceeds to deconstruct Primes' prose, or, as he puts it, to "strip from it" the "paint and the ribbons and the flowers" of rhetoric that make the passage so deceptive (509). Having exposed Prime's "Holy Land" as an illusion, Twain's narrator leads *his* reader back to the world that, he claims, is really there. While seldom this overt elsewhere, *Innocents Abroad* is repeatedly engaged in acts of unmasking what it variously treats as the "illusions" or "romantic dreams" or "deceptions" or even "frauds" that have been created and sustained by other writers. In Venice, his "cherished dreams" left in ruins by the sight and the smell of the stagnant, polluted canals, Twain acknowledges this process as a "system of destruction" (218). At times he can even imagine making the destruction real too: "If all the poetry and nonsense that have been discharged upon the fountains and the bland scenery of this region were collected in a book," he writes just before reaching the Sea of Galilee, "it would make a most valuable volume to burn" (495).

Romantic fictions aren't the only things Twain fantasizes about destroying. More than once he imagines taking violent revenge against reality for its failure to live up to his expectations. At a sufficient distance, for example, a group of Arabs gathered at a well near Nain evokes the "grand Oriental picture which I had worshiped a thousand times in soft, steel engravings." A nearer view reveals all that the picture left out, a list that ends with a bang: "no desolation; no dirt; no rags; no fleas; no ugly features; . . . no disagreeable jabbering in unknown tongues; no stench of camel; no suggestion that a couple of tons of powder placed under the party and touched off would heighten the effect . . ." (543-4). With "Mark Twain" it is always hard to know what really matters, and what is simply part of his rhetorical performance. We know that it had not really been his "cherished ambition to be shaved some day in a palatial barbershop in Paris" *from earliest infancy* – the hyperbole is part of the set-up to the schtick. Phrases like

“which I had worshiped a thousand times” occur often in his account of visiting the biblical sites of the Holy Land. Throughout the trip he is devoutly cynical about Catholic and Muslim “superstitions,” such as “clap-trap side-shows and unseemly impostures of every kind” (573) as the hundreds of “pieces of the true cross” the pilgrims see in the cathedrals. But Twain never outgrew or finished coming to terms with his upbringing as a Protestant; among his late works are *Eve’s Diary*, [Satan’s] *Letters from the Earth*, and *Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven*. In Jerusalem he goes in person to the site of the crucifixion of Jesus, and describes his feelings this way: “I looked upon the place where the true cross once stood, with a far more absorbing interest than I had ever felt in any thing earthly before” (571).

In what could be read portentously as a very modern moment, Twain describes his “strange prospecting” at this site: what makes the deepest impression on him is the act of feeling around in the darkness of the “hole” in which the cross supposedly stood. Before the end of Twain’s career, the next generation of American writers, Naturalists like Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, would set their stories on the landscape adumbrated here, out of which the symbols that once gave meaning to life had vanished, leaving only the hole that their characters struggled to fill. The risk of the commitment that the Realists made to material circumstances, to what was “visible,” “really there,” was that actuality might not ultimately be able to satisfy the human need for larger meaning, for something to believe in. By setting themselves the project of un-writing romantic idealizations, they put themselves on a collision course with reality. There are other moments in Twain’s encounter with the Holy Land that bring him to the verge of this incipient “waste land.” At the scene of the Annunciation, for instance, he is shown the recess from which, according to the New Testament, the angel appeared to tell Mary she was pregnant with the savior of mankind; “I saw the little recess, . . . but could not fill its void” (527). In Bethlehem he confesses “I touch, with reverent finger, the actual spot where the infant Jesus lay, but I think – nothing” (601). Hole, void, nothing – it reads like a modern trinity. *Innocents Abroad* does not inhabit these moments for long, but even this first book of Twain’s anticipates the pervasive sense of unreality and futility that he would eventually explore obsessively in the hundreds of pages of unfinished tales like “The Great Dark” and “The Mysterious Stranger.”

More representative of *Innocents Abroad* as a whole, however, is the comic way he depicts his ostensible discovery of “the grave of Adam”: in the tears of “filial affection” he claims to have shed for this “poor dead relative” (567), Twain mocks the clichés of sentimental voyagers like “Grimes,” who “never bored but he struck water” (535), and makes the disparities between scriptural myths and concrete realities yield laughs instead of doubts. The scene of Twain crying at Adam’s grave struck reviewers and readers in 1869 as hilarious; for many it became the book’s signature moment, and Bliss shrewdly featured it in his advertising campaign. Modern readers, who do not share the cultural conditioning of the Americans in Twain’s audience, are much less likely to laugh at this scene, or to easily understand why this first book remained his most popular book throughout his lifetime. Much of the cultural work that it did in its time by adopting an unabashedly new world perspective on the larger world, especially that Old World that Americans felt culturally inferior to, has already been done; “Mark Twain,” for example, is now himself one of the world’s treasured “Old Masters.” And the book’s comedy largely depends on habits of mind that no longer pervade the middle class that made it a best-seller. As stand-up comics know, people are likeliest to laugh when they are uncomfortable, and they become uncomfortable when the comedian brings up topics they have deep feelings about. Twain’s irreverent behavior at Adam’s grave was hilarious because his readers were so well versed and psychically invested in the reverent discourses of sentimentality and Christian piety. What was sacred to them, modern readers are often completely unfamiliar with, and so few in our time will have the experience to which the reviewers repeatedly bear witness: “in every paragraph,” wrote *The Liberal Christian*, “you feel a giggle if you do not hear a laugh,” while the *Hartford Courant* promised that “very few will be able to read it without laughing at least half the time.”⁶

The book which another reviewer called “wickedly amusing” provoked surprisingly little negative criticism, but Twain knew there was a crucial difference between making his readers uneasy enough to laugh and shocking their sensibilities. As he revised his original travel letters for book publication, he worked hard to “weed” them, as he put it in a letter to Emily Severance, of elements which, while they may have amused the western audience for whom he originally wrote, might alienate the more refined or fastidious taste of the largely eastern

public he now saw himself performing for.⁷ He eliminated a number of scenes, like an account of watching a group of nude bathers in Odessa, and a number of jokes – “Is it any wonder Christ walked?” he had written in the letter noting how much boatmen on the Sea of Galilee charged for carrying passengers – that threatened to cross the line between giving pleasure and giving offense. He eliminated entirely the character “Mr. Brown,” a coarser vernacular figure who had been a kind of sidekick to “Mark Twain” in both the Sandwich Island and the *Quaker City* correspondence. He was careful to locate the “Mark Twain” persona itself inside the wider boundaries of middle class respectability as well as outside the narrow-minded priggishness of the “saints.” “Mark Twain” is a man made entirely out of words, and he was careful to associate his voice with a linguistically acceptable vocabulary. When he heard that the San Francisco paper that had sponsored his trip proposed to bring out its own volume of them, for example, he hastily went west to prevent it: “If the *Alta*’s book were to come out with those wretched, slangy letters unrevised,” he wrote Mrs. Fairbanks, “I should be utterly ruined.”⁸ The rhetorical anxiety displayed here led Twain to put all instances of slang or colloquial speech – words like “bully” and “cheek” – inside quotation marks, and often to add a remark in parentheses or a footnote to make sure his readers know he knows such language is frowned upon in respectable society.

For a writer, no question matters more than words, and as Twain’s career went on he kept coming back to the issues of voice and diction. But for his audience in 1869, the most potentially disturbing aspect of *Innocents Abroad* was its representation of the Holy Land. As Twain’s friend and one-time mentor Bret Harte put it in a review of the book: “There may be a question of taste in Mr. Clemens permitting such a man as ‘Mark Twain’ to go to the Holy Land at all.”⁹ Nearly everyone in his audience defined themselves as Christians, and would have rejected any attempt to see that land as anything *but* “Holy,” to “leave its sublime history [as Twain put it when describing the scenery at Galilee] out of the question.” In some respects, the ultimate “guide book” that is brought into question by Twain’s actual experiences in the “Holy Land” is the Bible itself. But if Twain’s greatest gift as a popular entertainer was exciting his audience’s laughter, just as vital to his success was the talent to know when to stop. Later in his career he would let Huck Finn dismiss the lesson that the Widow tries to

teach him out of “her book” (as Huck calls the Bible) once he finds out that Moses is dead: “I don’t take no stock in dead people.” Near the end of his career he found a way to rewrite one of the Bible’s most sacred passages when, based on their experience with reality, the people of Hadleyburg revise the town’s motto. But if *Innocents Abroad* continually challenges conventional proprieties, it seldom puts itself into radical opposition to them for long.

The recurring rhythm of the trip is to move from naive preconception to experiential disillusion to a form of recuperation. Venice, for example, seen from a distance, is “a great city, afloat on a placid sea, with its towers and domes and steeples drowsing in a golden mist of sunset” (216). Near at hand it is characterized by “poverty, neglect and melancholy decay,” and its representative symbol is the “real” gondolier, “a mangy, barefooted gutter-snipe with a portion of his raiment [i.e. his underwear] on exhibition which should have been sacred from public scrutiny” (217–18). But two paragraphs later the sun goes down, “and under the mellow moonlight the Venice of poetry and romance stood revealed. . . . It was a beautiful picture – very soft and dreamy and beautiful” (218–19). Similarly, the passage “stripping” Galilee of its spirituality is not Twain’s last word on that scene. Once again, “Night is the time to see Galilee”: “In the starlight, Galilee . . . is a theatre meet for great events; meet for the birth of a religion able to save a world . . .” (512–13). This pattern of subverting and reassuring the ideological status quo reaches a kind of climax in his final words on the Holy Land, the two paragraphs summing up his pilgrimage:

Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise?
Can the *curse* of a Deity beautify a land?

Palestine is no more of this work-day world. It is sacred to poetry and tradition – it is dream-land. (608)

Close readers might note the pervasive ambivalence: the first paragraph strips the poetical beauty out of the land, but retains “what is not visible,” God’s curse; the second seems to restore the ideal associations, but implies they are merely a hallucination. The book’s original readers, however, agreed with the reviewer for the *New Jersey National Standard*, who recommended it as both “the raciest book we have met with” and safe: “its morals are of a high tone, and cannot be impeached.”¹⁰

Because Twain's narrative ultimately allows its readers to hold on to their faiths, in Old World culture and in Christianity, the book's acts of irreverence are entertaining rather than revolutionary. When it comes to his audience's deepest ideological allegiances, Twain's narrator leaves no doubt that he is still one of "US"; he may disparage Catholicism and Islam as superstitions, but he overtly identifies himself with "the true religion – which is ours" (261). By "ours" he means the Protestant faith shared by over 90 percent of the United States at the time. He does not, however, go into more detail about this belief, and indeed the more he says, the more he is likely to estrange portions of his American audience. As it was, through the strategies he used to align "Mark Twain" with that audience, the book's irreverence becomes, as he wrote his publisher in early September, 1869, "a tip-top good feature of it <financially> diplomatically speaking."¹¹

The humorist works in a very immediate medium: either the audience laughs or by its silence signals failure. In the delighted reviews of Twain's first book we can hear America laughing. Both financially and diplomatically *Innocents Abroad* was a hit with readers at home. Bliss' gamble in publishing a humorous subscription book paid off, and Twain's career as a popular writer was off to one of the best starts in American literary history.