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Richard S. Lowry

FRAMING THE AUTHENTIC:
THE MODERN TOURIST AND *THE INNOCENTS ABROAD*

I

In one of the best known moments in Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*, he visits what he calls "the most celebrated painting in the world—'The Last Supper' by Leonardo Da Vinci." Coming as it does in the midst of what is already, barely a quarter of the way into the narrative, an almost frantic gallop through hotels, cathedrals, and museums, the episode represents just one more stop on a hectic itinerary. In Milan alone, itself sandwiched between a few days each in Genoa and Venice, the travelers already have visited the Duomo and its "7,148 marble statues" (129), the Ambrosian library—where they see, along with an autograph letter of Lucrezia Borgia, some drawings by Michelangelo and Leonardo ("They spell it Vinci and pronounce it Vinchy; foreigners always spell better than they pronounce" [132])—and a public bath, before they find their way to "an ancient tumbledown ruin of a church." There, in this anonymous place, they pause to see for themselves the "wonderful painting, once so beautiful, always so worshipped by masters in art, and forever to be famous in song and story" (136).

The episode opens as a rehearsal of what by 1869 had become a familiar ritual of viewing art described time and again in travel literature. Primed, like Twain, to a high pitch of expectation by guide books, art reproductions, lectures—the whole range of nineteenth-century cultivated education—previous travelers approached European art like Harriet Beecher Stowe, who, as she mounted the steps of the Louvre, felt a "flutter of excitement and expectation."² For her brother Henry Ward

Beecher, the flutter became a crescendo on his visit to the painting collection at the Palace de Luxembourg in Paris. If not typical in its intensity, his account nonetheless exemplifies the disorienting shock many felt when encountering authentic art. He felt himself undergo an "instant conversion, if the expression be not irreverent": "to find myself absolutely intoxicated—to find my system so much affected that I could not control my nerves—to find myself trembling and laughing and weeping, and almost hysterical, and that in spite of my shame and resolute endeavor to behave better,—such a power of these galleries over me I had not expected."³ Even the more urbane art critic James Jackson Jarves, who lived much of his life amid the European art he loved and collected, recalled wandering the Louvre feeling "oppressed, confused, uncertain, and feverish," struggling "in a convulsive effort to maintain mental equilibrium."⁴

In part these accounts record honestly overwhelming experiences of confronting, after years of having access only to reproductions, the authentic works themselves.⁵ "I have seen good copies all over the world," confessed one traveler, "but they lose their charm after seeing so much of heavenly beauty and earthly sweetness as this glorious work of Raphael exhibits."⁶ Another attested to "the new sense which is developed by the sight of a

²*The Innocents Abroad* (New York: New American Library, 1966) 136.

³*Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1854) 2: 159.

⁴*Star Papers; or, Experiences of Art and Nature* (New York: J. C. Derby, 1855) 59, 57.

⁵*The Art Idea*, ed. Benjamin Rowland (1864; Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960) 44.

⁶See Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years, 1790-1860* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966) 124-69.

masterpiece. It is as if we had always lived in a world where our eyes, though open, saw but a blank, and were then brought into another, where they were saluted by . . . grace and beauty."⁷ These were Americans finding for themselves, by following a program of leisured self-cultivation first codified in the eighteenth-century Grand Tour, what many intellectuals had felt their country lacked: a rich tradition of culture made sturdy by a backbone of canonical masterpieces and ancient monuments. It was this expectation that had persuaded Harvard earlier in the century to send abroad such prospective faculty members as George Ticknor, Edward Everett, George Bancroft, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to prepare for their roles as educators.⁸ Their experiences in turn helped inspire Americans to import as much of Europe as they could for their own edification. Boston's Anthology Society Reading Room—later to become the Athenaeum—was founded on the strength of books travelers brought back from Europe.⁹ Later in the century Jarves, inspired by his experience at the Louvre, assembled an impressive collection of Renaissance Italian art, which Yale acquired in 1868 for its own museum (Strout 70, 72). Similarly, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts both opened their doors in 1870 stocked with the products of their patrons' European buying tours.

Thus when Bayard Taylor, the most popular travel writer in America after mid-century, confessed, "I cannot disconnect my early longings for a knowledge of the Old World from a still earlier passion for Art and Literature," he merely made explicit what many travel accounts took for granted: Europe was for nineteenth-century Americans a vast museum, a collector's

cabinet that made solid what had only been dreamed of.¹⁰ To visit Notre Dame, Shakespeare's home, Florence, Athens was to make literal the literary, to make authentic the imaginary, to divest allusion of illusion: "The Capitol, the Forum, St. Peter's, the Coliseum—what few hours' ramble ever took in places so hallowed by poetry, history, and art?"¹¹ Thus it was the viewing of art, already consolidated in impressive collections in Paris, Florence, and above all in Rome, that in many travelers' accounts most accurately condensed the experience of visiting Europe.

In visiting the Leonardo, then, Twain walks a path already well-trod by Americans eager to open the door to authentic art and culture. In fact, he figures "The Last Supper" as the essence of Art, "celebrated" not just by travelers and critics, but by other "masters in art"; it is, in short, the masterpiece of masterpieces done by the original and originating Master. Twain's language deftly echoes a tradition of almost giddy homage to the picture both by critics and travel writers—an earlier traveler visits "This celebrated painting, a copy of which, in one form or another, everybody has seen, and which has been pronounced one of the finest in the world."¹² In their use of "celebrated," both writers in turn echo one of the most powerful pronouncements of the painting's value by Goethe, whose essay on Leonardo's "Celebrated Picture of The Lord's Supper," published in English in 1821, cited it as "The picture . . . known to all that have ever heard the name of art pronounced."¹³ According to Mrs. Jameson, whose *Sacred and Legendary Art* went through numerous editions, Leonardo, "the greatest thinker as well as the greatest painter of his age," had with this painting brought forth "a

⁷John Overton Choules, *The Cruise of the Steam Yacht North Star; a Narrative of the Excursion of Mr. Vanderbilt's Party* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1854) 221.

⁸W. M. Gillespie, *Rome: As Seen by a New-Yorker in 1843-4* (New York: 1845) 82, as qtd. in Harris 128.

⁹Cushing Strout, *The American Image of the Old World* (New York: Harper, 1963) 64.

¹⁰See Lewis P. Simpson, "Joseph Stevens Buckminster: The Rise of the New England Clerisy," *The Man of Letters in New England and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1973).

¹¹*By-Ways of Europe* (1869; New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1889) 8.

¹²Bayard Taylor, *Viciss Afoot, or Europe Seen with Knapsack and Staff*, rev. household ed. (1855; New York: G. P. Putnam, 1890) 407.

¹³Rev. John E. Edwards, *Random Sketches and Notes of European Travel in 1856* (New York: Harper, 1857) 268.

¹⁴Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Observations on Leonardo da Vinci's Celebrated Picture of The Last Supper," trans. G. H. Noehden, in *Goethe on Art*, ed. John Gage (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980) 166.

creation so consummate, that since that time it has been at once the wonder and the despair of those who have followed in the same path."¹⁴ Leonardo was more than a great artist, he embodied Art; he was, according to Charles Eliot Norton, a "great genius, one whose power all the world recognizes and honors, [one who] stands apart from his time, unapproached, alone."¹⁵

Twain's visit to the painting is framed by a whole set of expectations that links the genre in which he writes—European travel literature—with a discourse of art appreciation and demands his reaction to the painting. Where he had avoided such a confrontation earlier at the Louvre with a casual reference to "its miles of paintings by the old masters," here he faces the demands of convention (100). And he does register a new vision, but it is one that deliberately travesties those of others. The painting he describes is "battered and scarred in every direction, and stained and discolored by time. . . . The colors are dimmed with age; the countenances are scaled and marred, and nearly all expression is gone from them; the hair is a dead blur upon the wall, and there is no life in the eyes" (137). Despite the image's inscrutability, Twain finds himself alone in his disappointment. Around him artists assiduously copy it onto canvases while tourists stand "entranced before it with bated breath and parted lips," uttering "catchy ejaculations of rapture." Gauging their reactions against his own, he wonders, "How can they see what is not visible? . . . You would think that those men had an astonishing talent for seeing things . . . which had faded out of the picture and gone a hundred years before they were born." Indeed *his* eyes lead him to notice "how superior the copies were to the original, that is, to my inexperienced eye" (138).

The moment captures in miniature the irreverent texture of the text of *The Innocents Abroad* as a whole. Twain visits "The Last Supper" as what he calls elsewhere an "American Vandal," "the roving, independent, free-and-easy character of that class of traveling Americans who are *not* elaborately educated, cultivated, and refined, and gilded and filigreed

¹⁴*Sacred and Legendary Art*, 8th ed. (1848; London: Longmans, Green, 1879) 2: 268.

¹⁵*Notes of Travel and Study in Italy* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1859) 317.

with the ineffable graces of the first society." Unburdened by education (if "one has no opportunity in America to acquire a critical judgment in art," then he will parade, rather than hide, his "uncouth sentiments" [170, 171]), the Vandal gazes at Art "with a critical eye and says it's a perfect old nightmare of a picture and he wouldn't give forty dollars for a million like it."¹⁶

Twain's innocent may represent an American abroad—one English reviewer characterized him as "a very offensive specimen of the vulgarest kind of Yankee"—but he places more emphasis on the Vandal whose uncultivated or "inexperienced eye" underwrites a clear-eyed skepticism, always quick to expose the Empire's new clothes, to dismiss as shams the fruits of civilization offered to him by breathless guides and sanctimonious guidebooks.¹⁷ If Europe is a museum, he suggests, it resembles more that of P. T. Barnum than Charles Wilson Peale: a house of humbug filled with disfigured paintings by "Old Masters" and buckets of nails from the True Cross. And it is this humbug, distilled in the catch-phrased awe of visitors to "The Last Supper," and perpetuated by other travel writers, that Twain will expose. "This book," he posits in his preface, "has a purpose, which is to suggest to the reader how *he* would be likely to see Europe and the East if he looked at them with his own eyes instead of the eyes of those who traveled in those countries before him. I make small pretense of showing anyone how he *ought* to look at objects of interest beyond the sea—other books do that, and therefore, even if I were competent to do it, there is no need."

While this bravado led Bret Harte, for instance, to praise Twain as a "hilarious image-breaker," Twain's contentious stance is not as straightforward as his preface suggests.¹⁸ In fact, his disappointment about the Leonardo was, by 1869, in many ways no less a cliché than the rapture of those who stood around him. "I sat before it for some time," noted one traveler, "and looked at it, and read all the guide-books

¹⁶"The American Vandal Abroad," *Mark Twain Speaking*, ed. Paul Fatout (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1976) 27, 29.

¹⁷Unsigned review, *Saturday Review* 8 Oct. 1870, in *Mark Twain, The Critical Heritage*, ed. Frederick Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971) 43.

¹⁸*Overland Monthly* Jan. 1870, in Anderson 33.

said about it, but was not able to work myself up to the point of extravagant admiration expressed by some travellers in its contemplation" (Edwards 268). Bayard Taylor admitted to a similar reaction in viewing the comparably admired Venus de Medici: "It may be considered heresy, but I confess I did not go into raptures, nor at first perceive any traces of superhuman beauty" (*Views Afoot* 352). Even Harriet Beecher Stowe's flutter of excitement subsided once she entered the Louvre and experienced "nothing of that overwhelming, subduing nature which I had conceived" (23).

The persistence of such reactions, often coming as they do hand-in-hand with expressions of giddy elation, suggests that disappointment itself was as integral a component of the rhetoric of authentic culture as was rapture. Indeed, Twain's purpose is not so much to denigrate art—he admits to being "satisfied that 'The Last Supper' was a very miracle of art once" (138)—but to explore his, and by implication his readers', relationship to that art. The narrator's disappointment in "The Last Supper" stems from the fact that the painting—far from being *too* cultural for his vulgar taste—is not authentic enough; as merely a scarred piece of history, it cannot deliver the pure experience that the conventional rhetoric of rapture leads him to anticipate. In his disillusionment, the narrator is as much a victim of the rhetoric of reverence as are his fellow travelers in their illusion. He, too, visits the painting to experience in the original what he had known only in reproduction and in prose. His "impartial" description of the disfigured picture, by virtue of how thoroughly it negates the rapturous comments of others, perfectly expresses his disappointed expectations once he is there. Indeed, so caught up is he in his search for aesthetic experience that he endorses the copies as "superior" precisely because they at least help him recall what he came to see.

Thus the irony in his carefully worded praise for the painting: "The Last Supper" is "the picture from which all engravings and all copies have been made for three centuries" (137). This seemingly naive statement, in fact, points to the final significance of Twain's staging his confrontation with Art with the Leonardo rather than in, for instance, the Louvre. As informed commentators were well aware, in the decades after "The Last Supper" was painted it had suffered such damage from flooding and heavy-handed restoration—not to mention Leonardo's

own use of media—that the "original" masterpiece had long since, in Goethe's words, "almost ceased to exist, in its own substance" (166). To later connoisseurs, the picture was no more than the "wreck of a glorious presence" (Jameson 268) in which less educated travelers could "distinguish little beside the composition and the general sentiment of the picture."¹ By the nineteenth century the real picture had been for centuries known best only through copies; its fame and its "beauty" lay solely in its "aura" of authenticity paradoxically attested to by the ubiquity of, if not always the skill in, the reproductions.² Thus in turning an "impartial" but "inexperienced" eye from the original to its copies, Twain suggests that the rhetoric of reverence finds as its true object nothing more than the mental image such language has shaped beforehand.

Art is not the only sight on Twain's itinerary to disappear behind the flood of images and expectations framing it. At virtually no point does his tour elicit an experience "authentic" enough to exceed his expectations. The issue is comically foreclosed at one of the earliest stops on his tour at the city of Tangier, "the spot we have been longing for all the time. . . . We wanted something thoroughly and uncompromisingly foreign—foreign from top to bottom—foreign from center to circumference—foreign inside and outside and all around. . . . And lo! In Tangier we have found it" (57-58). As the apotheosis of the authentically foreign, the city's architecture, the exotic dress and customs of its inhabitants, and its associations with a history reaching to the time of ancient Thebes, all lead Twain to invest Tangier with an uncanny "foreignness":

Here is not the slightest thing that ever we have seen save in pictures—and we always mistrusted the pictures before—they seemed too weird and fanciful for reality. But behold, they were not wild enough—they have not told half the story. Tangier is a foreign land if ever there was one, and the true spirit of it can never be found in any

¹Grace Greenwood [Sara Jane Lippincott], *Haps and Mishaps, or, A Tour in Europe* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1854) 397.

²"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969).

Just as in front of "The Last Supper," Twain's attention oscillates between the object (the city, the foreign) and its image, as he weighs the reality of one against the expectations generated by the other. At first it seems that Tangier does, indeed, exceed its images, which tell only "half the story." In citing *The Arabian Nights*, however, Twain finally locates the authentically foreign in a "reality" measured not by its difference from images, but rather by its resemblance to what travelers know beforehand. Tangier, as he sums up, is nothing less than "an oriental picture," an image of the foreign best embodied in a book of fantasy.

In interpreting the "foreign" or the "authentic" by its image, as he does both in Tangier and before "The Last Supper," Twain represents both encounters in essentially aesthetic terms. Indeed, under Twain's "ignorant" eye, all of Europe emerges as a form of art. Whether he visits the Vatican, the dungeons of the Castle D'If, the markets of Constantinople, or Notre Dame ("We recognized the brown old Gothic pile in a moment; it was like the pictures" [95]), his vision tears each site from any historical or social context—any foreign or authentic reality—and transforms it into a "sight" framed by pre-existing images linking it to other "site/sights."²¹ The Leonardo, Notre Dame, Rome, Tangier: no matter the scale, everything in Europe is there to be visited, recognized, and categorized with other images. The result is an experience that is remarkably uniform, even at times boring. "What is there in Rome for me to see that others have not seen before me?" he asks in mock desolation. "What is there for me to touch that others have not touched? What is there for me to feel, to learn, to hear, to know, that shall thrill me before it pass to others? What can I discover? Nothing whatsoever. One charm of travel dies here" (190-91). Like the "twelve hundred pictures by Palma the Younger . . . and fifteen hundred by Tintoretto," much of Europe leaves Twain "weary with looking" and incapable of interest, much less enthusiasm (169-70).

Twain's prefatorial claims notwithstanding, what differentiates him from previous travel

writers is not a particularly scrupulous veracity—the standard avowal of virtually every writer—but the fact that he travels Europe as a tourist rather than as a cultural pilgrim. In his irreverent haste he anticipates what Henry James would later characterize as the "passionless pilgrims" who evinced "a disposition, which had perhaps even at most a comic side, to treat 'Europe,' collectively, as a vast painted and gilded holiday toy, serving its purpose on the spot and for the time, but to be relinquished, sacrificed, broken and cast away, at the dawn of any other convenience."²² The commentaries Twain offers, the history he supplies, the comic comparisons he constructs, all serve to fragment "Europe" into a touristic collection of interchangeable sights that are then shuffled and reintegrated in a narrative organized as much by the contingencies and coincidences of Twain's tour, as well as his personal predilections, as it is by the countries he visits.

While James may have characterized the modern tourist as "passionless," Twain's pilgrim, in fact, emerges as a creature of enthusiastic anticipation riding a cycle of expectation and consummation or disappointment. Far from rejecting aesthetic experience, he revels in it; from the opening pages he immerses himself wholeheartedly in the levelling vision of tourism, trusting in the very equivalence of one sight to another to sustain his passion. The excursion, he is sure even before he sees the itinerary, will be "a picnic on a giant scale," a "royal holiday" during which passengers would "scamper about the decks by day, filling the ship with shouts and laughter" (17). Nor does the dry language of the prospectus advertising the trip's itinerary—"The undersigned will make an excursion as above during the coming season"—dampen his enthusiasm (18). In fact its catalogue of sights gives shape to the innocent's revel by invoking a litany of magical names—Lyon, Genoa, Correggio, Corsica, Napoleon, Joppa, Jerusalem, Caesar: places and names mingle in a soup of association linked only by the timetable of travel. Twain opens the list of marvels by asking "who could read the program of the excursion without longing to make one of the party?" (18), and closes it by answering emphatically,

²¹The distinction comes from Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).

²²"Preface to 'The Reverberator,'" *The Art of the Novel*, ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner's, 1962) 189.

"Human nature could not withstand these bewildering temptations" (22).

The Innocents Abroad opens with the tourist already preformed, keyed to a pitch of comic hyperbole by the anticipation of travel itself. And in fact, this lust for travel, more than the attraction of any particular site, fuels the pilgrims' trip. Despite their repeated disappointments, indeed despite their growing skepticism as to whether these promises can be fulfilled, Twain and his companions time and again eagerly strain for the first glimpses of Gibraltar, France, Milan, and Jerusalem, their appetite whetted by pictures, guidebooks, religious and historical associations. Once having arrived, no matter how completely each place may satisfy or disappoint their expectations, the pilgrims quickly succumb to a simple thirst for travel that pulls them to the next sight.

In this sense, *The Innocents Abroad* unfolds as a sustained exegesis of the opening prospectus Twain significantly prints in full as "a text for this book." For if Europe promises a certain kind of "experience," this experience is valid insofar as it recreates and fulfills the promises of the prospectus. Europe emerges as a metonymic series of buildings, paintings, streets and vistas; like the words in the prospectus, it is linked as a system of equivalent signs. Indeed, Twain ends his text evaluating the success of the excursion in precisely these terms: "I have no fault to find with the manner in which our excursion was conducted. Its program was faithfully carried out. . . our holiday flight has not been in vain—for above the confusion of vague recollections, certain of its best prized pictures lift themselves and will still continue perfect in tint and outline after their surroundings shall have faded" (474-75). The "pictures" he has in mind are not those by the "Old Masters" but the very sites, impressed now as images, vaguely hinted at in the prospectus: "We cannot forget Florence—Naples—nor the foretaste of heaven that is in the delicious atmosphere of Greece—and surely not Athens. . . . We shall remember Baalbek—the pyramids of Egypt" (475). Twain ends his book where it began, with another prospectus that registers his experience only in the few modifiers with which he surrounds each "sacred" word.

Tourism then is not strictly a form of enlightened travel, but a comically philistine cycle of anticipation and consumption—a process which entails reading about each site,

evaluating the actual place in light of its prior image, and comparing it to other sites and experiences. Geographic places and material objects are torn from their social context and transformed into images of themselves, tourist "sights" framed by the touristic imagination. Sights for Twain are commodities the cultural value of which is established not by any "aura" of authenticity, but by guides and guidebooks, by the planned activity of tourism as it materializes in the ship's relentless itinerary, and most of all by the act of consumption itself.

II

Twain's comic discovery of Europe rode a mounting tide of American travel oriented more to sightseeing and less to personal cultivation. With the Paris Exhibition, which Twain visited on his cruise, in full flower in 1867, unprecedented numbers of visitors took advantage of lower steamship fare and faster and more comfortable continental travel to visit Europe. Twain himself estimated the number of Americans traveling abroad in 1867 as nearly 100,000 per year.²³ More sober judgments set the number at mid-century, before the travel boom following the Civil War, at around 30,000.²⁴ Despite these numbers, however, Europe remained for most Americans inaccessible: even a second-class cabin for a return trip between New York and Liverpool cost no less than \$150, far beyond the means of even the middle class. Their experience of Europe came strictly at home, where they read widely popular travel literature or viewed stereocards and chromolithographs of famous art works and well-known European vistas and monuments.²⁵

Indeed, despite popular travel writing's explicit use of the rhetoric of authenticity, it stimulated such vicarious consumption of culture. Even as authors sought "to make words a substitute for pencil and palette," even as they struggled to "acquire the power of bringing

²³Cited in Dewey Ganzel, *Mark Twain Abroad: The Cruise of the "Quaker City"* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968) 3.

²⁴Foster Rhea Dulles, *Americans Abroad: Two Centuries of European Travel* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1964) 44.

²⁵See Peter C. Marzio, *The Democratic Art: Pictures for a 19th-Century America* (Boston: David Godine, 1979).

attribute to art itself a power to shape society. "Art is the surest and safest civilizer," wrote one traveler. "Open your galleries of art to the people [as the Europeans do] and . . . you give them a refinement to which they would otherwise be strangers," a "sense of the beautiful and the sublime" that, when accompanied by "a few salutary lessons on the necessity of submission to authority," will eventually leave Americans "as well-behaved as the people of France or Italy."²⁸

Travel accounts did more than document the mutation of enthusiasm into evaluation, ignorance into knowledge. They stood as its final result. They offered their readers more than secondhand descriptions of culture. They suggested a language, a disposition, a set of expectations that allowed readers to maximize their own presumably more meager aesthetic capital in a stance of taste. Thus the pretext of travel writing lay in the pretensions of taste and hierarchy that lay implicit in virtually every episode of art viewing, pretensions that linked proper uses of culture with social hierarchies. The meaning of Europe lay not in how texts represented its cultural wealth, but in how they dramatized travelers' reactions to that wealth.

Twain's consuming vision threatened this rhetoric on a number of different grounds. In displacing an aesthetics of appreciation with one of recognition, he implied that the acquisition of cultural capital lay not in collecting the authentic but in reflecting the conventional. The values of his culture lay not in distinction (among art works, among connoisseurs) but in indistinguishability (among originals, and between originals and their images). His was, in short, an aesthetics of mass culture, an aesthetics potentially outside the realm of taste, dramatized by the blissfully ignorant tourist vandalizing the hierarchies of culture.

Thus it was not in Europe that Twain played the American Vandal most successfully, but at home, where he could align the vision of the "uneducated" or "impartial eye" of the innocent abroad with "the mercenary eye" of the practicing author.²⁹ Twain took seriously the connection between capital and culture that lay

²⁸Charles Bullard Fairbanks, *Aguecheek* (Boston: Shepard, Clark, and Brown, 1859) 127, 128, 129.

²⁹Letter to Henry Houghton 12 Feb. 1875, *Mark Twain's Letters to His Publishers 1867-1894*, ed. Hamlin Hill (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967) 83.

only implicit in the writing of others. He joined the Quaker City cruise as a well-known humorist and newspaper writer whose fare was paid, like that of others on the trip, by two newspapers which printed the letters he regularly dispatched in the course of his travels. After returning, he revised his articles into a book only when publisher Elisha Bliss could promise Twain the extensive profits of subscription publishing—an early form of mass publishing whereby huge numbers of books were sold door to door by itinerant canvassers. In signing his first book contract, Twain entered a terrain of culture shaped broadly by values of the literary as embodied in and disseminated by the book, and every bit as codified and canonized as was Europe. As when abroad, Twain traveled this new land as a vandal to taste.

It has been common to characterize Twain's attention to, and at times obsession with, the business of writing as separating him from the more literary concerns of his peers. Yet Twain's pursuit of the profits of culture actually placed him at the center of Gilded Age literary production, where culture and capital coexisted in uneasy union. Even as the marketplace for reading—shaped by the expanded scale of book publishing, the growth of mass-circulation magazines, and the emergence of reading as a leisure-time "habit"—seemed to offer greater prospects for a popular dissemination of culture, it threatened to transform all writing into a form of commerce, and author's names into, to quote William Charvat, "brand names, to be sold, goods [to] be promoted."³⁰

Bliss could assure his new author of great profits because, unlike many of his more genteel peers, he felt relatively free, in the words of one critic, to treat "literature and art . . . like common merchandise."³¹ The result, for many in the book trade, was a kind of "false" culture. Subscription books, fumed another critic, were easily identified: "[A] gorgeous binding, usually in very bad taste, thick but with cheap paper, outrageously poor woodcuts, the largest types

³⁰Matthew Brucoli, ed., *The Profession of Authorship in America: The Papers of William Charvat* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1968) 273. On the politics of the literary marketplace, see also Christopher Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985).

³¹*Publisher's Weekly* 21 June 1880: 8.

with the thickest leads, add up to a very big, gaudy book which a glib tongue or persistent boring cheats folks into buying for five dollars, when the reading matter which it contains, if worth anything, would make about a dollar-and-a-half book in the regular trade."³² This description was by and large accurate: subscription books *were* in fact big, gaudy, ornamental, and expensive. Publishers like Bliss worked hard to justify steep prices and high profits by making sure that the customer received as much physical book as possible: in effect, the text often served as nothing more than an excuse for the binding. In other words, entrepreneurs like Bliss succeeded because they focused on selling images of a culture their customers could not otherwise acquire. Such books were meant to be put on coffee tables or displayed prominently on shelves as much as they were meant to be read.

As blatantly opportunistic as this marketing strategy was, it did not necessarily represent a cynical affront to taste. Rather, it traded on an increasing propensity by the American middle class to judge a book—and its owner—by the cover. Even as genteel critics in dozens of advice books outlined for their readers courses of reading for improvement, they also charted what can be characterized as an etiquette of book possession, implying that owning books entitled one to similar claims to distinction as reading them. "[B]ooks are the most telling furniture which can be placed in a room," assured one such writer. "[A]n opinion is formed at once, from them of the taste and cultivation of the family."³³ Echoed another, "Books are not made for furniture, but there is nothing else that so beautifully furnishes a house. The plainest row of books that cloth or paper ever covered is more significant of refinement than the most elaborately carved etagere or sideboard."³⁴ Subscription books thus took their place in the family parlor with the very copies of the original artwork that Twain

³²"The Subscription Book Trade," *Publisher's Weekly* 23 July 1872: 93-94.

³³Lyman Abbott, "Suggestions for Household Libraries," *Hints for Home Reading: A Series of Chapters on Books and Their Use* (New York: Putnam, 1880) 112.

³⁴Charles F. Richardson, *The Choice of Books* (New York: American Book Exchange, 1881) 164-65.

professed to prefer.

Both Bliss and Twain, who eventually became a subscription publisher himself, recognized the importance of, and realized the profits from, this image-making process by offering buyers as elaborate a piece of furniture as they could afford. As Bliss instructed his door-to-door agents, "Books are seldom bought for what they are as a whole, but for some *particular feature* or *features* they contain."³⁵ So his agents gave their customers as many reasons as possible for purchasing by showing them ornate, leather bound prospectuses containing title page, illustrations, and some representative text. One of the most powerful selling tools was a list of prominent local citizens who already had agreed to purchase a book. Adding one's name to the list allowed the customer to join, quite literally, a select group of cultural consumers. Done correctly, Bliss assured his agents, such tactics would give them "a kind of mesmeric power" and "a tremendous leverage" over the buyer.

In effect, agents offered their customers what Twain was offered to join the Quaker City cruise: an "authentic" image of Culture. Thus when Twain opens his book with the travel "prospectus," he literally offers "a text for this book," a guide to buying his book translated as a guide for his trip. Like the customer/reader, the narrator is mesmerized by a commodity notable for its discrete features: "Constantinople! Smyrna! The Holy Land! Egypt and 'our friends the Bermudians!'" And like the customer, he, too, enters a list, "selected by a pitiless 'Committee on Applications,'" which includes celebrities like Henry Ward Beecher and General Sherman. Twain's tourist and his reader travel the same terrain of the tasteless, a geography shaped as much by the consuming pretensions of Culture as any authentic experience.

This is not to suggest that in travesty the distinctions of taste, in displacing the authentic with the reproduced, Twain rejects the value of culture altogether. Rather, just as the tourist remakes Europe into an image of itself, so too does Twain locate the ultimate value of culture in its images. This dimension emerges most powerfully at precisely the moment when Twain grows most weary of the "shams" of tourism:

³⁵The bookselling guide is reprinted in Hamlin Hill, ed., *Mark Twain and Elisha Bliss* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1964) 170-82.

during his pilgrimage through the Holy Land. The journey re-enacts with greater intensity his experience in viewing "The Last Supper." If his visit to the painting promised a paradigmatic encounter with an authentic icon of High Culture, the Holy Land promises contact with the origins of culture itself. It represents "the chief feature, the grand goal of the expedition"; the tourists' imminent arrival elicits "the wildest spirit of expectancy" (309). In traveling overland to Jerusalem, the pilgrims will touch the authentic sites of the Bible, the most powerful text in Western Christendom. They will walk the ground once "pressed by the feet of the Saviour" and gaze at the same vistas "that God looked on. . . . The situation is suggestive of a reality and a tangibility that seem at variance with the vagueness and mystery and ghostliness that one naturally attaches to the character of a god" (339).

Almost immediately, however, whatever expectations Twain entertains are dashed by the sheer absurdity of translating a text of religious miracles to a bare and ruined geography. No matter how much in disrepair was "The Last Supper," no matter how heavily framed it and other sights were by either the glib tongue of a guide or the preconceptions of guidebooks, they existed materially. In the Holy Land, on the other hand, Twain finds himself often visiting sights with no site. Biblical towns survive only as impoverished hamlets or as "shapeless" ruins. The Sea of Galilee is a dreary stretch of water in a harsh landscape bereft of the fishermen of Biblical times. He and his fellow tourists are shown the precise spot where Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus, or where Joseph's brothers cast him into the pit, knowing full well that the location is not only disputed, but in fact arbitrary.

Absurdity reaches its highest point at the pilgrimage's most sacred destination, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, where the group enters both "the most sacred locality in Christendom" and a Barnumesque stage for humbug (405). Under one roof Twain visits Christ's grave, the hill at Calvary, the "true pillar of flagellation," and the spots where Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene and to his mother after his resurrection. This zealous marking of origins breaks all bounds of the believable when Twain also encounters Adam's grave and, next to it, a pillar marking the center of the earth, from which the dust was taken to form Adam. The authentic site of history and

culture is at the same time its most thorough parody, composed of monuments that are pure images, signs with no referents. The obsequious rituals of pilgrims and monks, the vast ornamentation of the separate chapels, even the Church itself, designate what is essentially an *image* of truth.

Out of this absurdity, however, emerges an unexpected epiphany. As Twain did in front of the Leonardo, he shifts his attention away from the source to the image, from the "rock" of the Church to its "illustrious edifice." This time, however, he does so not to initiate a play between image and site, but to locate the authentic in the image itself. Despite "its claptrap sideshows and unseemly impostures of every kind," Twain concedes that the Church is, "in its history from the first, and in its tremendous associations, [the] most illustrious edifice in Christendom" (414). Adam's grave may be no more "true" than the bushel of fragments of the "true cross" Twain has seen during his voyage. Neither, however, are any of these markers a sham: the Church and its sacred filigree have accrued too much meaning throughout history to be dismissed as a fraud:

for fifteen hundred years its shrines have been wet with the tears of pilgrims . . . ; for more than two hundred, . . . gallant knights . . . wasted their lives away in a struggle to seize it and hold it sacred from infidel pollution. Even in our own day a war that cost millions of treasure and rivers of blood was fought because two rival nations claimed the sole right to put a new dome upon it. History is full of this old Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

(415)

In inverting the normal touristic relationship between the site and meaning (the church is not full of history, "history is full of this old Church"), Twain explicitly relocates authenticity in the historical process that has designated that site as worth visiting, a process that as a tourist Twain affirms. Thus the true site in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre—indeed, the true origin of historical and touristic authenticity—is the comically mistranslated sign reading, "'Chapel of the Invention of the Cross'—a name which is unfortunate, because it leads the ignorant to imagine that a tacit acknowledgement is thus made that the tradition that Helena found the true cross here is a fiction—an

invention" (411). Twain, of course, is one of those "ignorant" visitors: in this "invention," which has long since overwhelmed the integrity of the original, lies the authentic.

The image here, the designating marker, emerges not as a perversion of "true" culture, but as culture itself. If the innocent abroad never really leaves the domain of the mediated, if he is caught in an endless deferment of the authentic as he visits cities, churches, museums, shrines, and monuments, he nonetheless actively participates in making them "authentic." Moreover, it is in terms of this paradoxical situation that Twain's own text can be understood. Tourism, as he presents it, is an activity of reconstitution, of interpretation, and finally of writing. The final product of this

imposture is *The Innocents Abroad*—an extended prospectus for culture. Thus the book itself represents one more marker in the comic cycle of expectation and fulfillment that both Twain—as tourist and writer—and the consuming reader reproduce. Just as Twain's parody of travel rewrites the grounds for tourism, anticipating in its humor a new form of cultural consumption, so too does his text parody prior assumptions of cultural value as they were embodied in the book, initiating a new phase in literary production.□

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