

Mark Twain in the Desert

Amy Clary, (American University of Beirut)¹

Abstract¹

Mark Twain's The Innocents Abroad contrasts the populated, ruin-strewn Holy Land desert with the wild terrain of the arid American West. Twain's text reflects the pervasive anxiety that the U.S., like Twain's Middle East, will become wholly settled and domesticated and will thus lose its claim to religious, cultural, and political exceptionalism. The Innocents Abroad deserves consideration as a pioneering work of desert nature writing for its nuanced descriptions of the flora and fauna of Middle Eastern and U.S. deserts. The text's preoccupation with natural landscapes suggests that for Twain, domesticating the wild American desert would be a fundamental loss to American culture.

Samuel Clemens, writing in 1869 as Mark Twain, reverently described the “thirteen hundred miles of desert solitudes” stretching between Missouri and California as offering “limitless panoramas of bewildering perspective” and rocks that were “splendid with the crimson and gold of the setting sun” (*Innocents* 107). This romantic desert portrait may seem surprising coming from Twain, whose comic complaints about the landscape permeate his 1872 *Roughing It* and 1869 *The Innocents Abroad*. However, despite the comic disparagement of the deserts they describe, these texts nevertheless make an important contribution to American nature writing. Patricia Limerick acknowledges that while “*Roughing It* did not add much to the store of factual knowledge about American deserts... it supported the judgment emerging from the overland experience. The desert, travelers agreed, was an anomaly in the American landscape” (75). Twain’s celebration of this anomalous landscape is an early instance in American literature of what ecocritic Tom Lynch terms “xerophilia,” or desert appreciation. When twentieth-century nature writers such as Mary Austin and Edward Abbey pay homage to the American desert, they are following a path blazed at least in part by Twain.

While Mary Austen’s influential and often-anthologized *Land of Little Rain* (1903) holds a secure place in the canon of American nature writing, as does Edward Abbey’s 1968 *Desert Solitaire*, one might be skeptical of Twain’s relevance to a discussion of deserts in American literature. After all, Twain is not usually classified as a nature writer; when he is, his descriptions of the Mississippi River and its environs take center stage. However, it is important to look at Twain because he uses his secure place in the American canon to raise questions about the place of wilderness in the American imaginary. In other words, Twain’s texts help illuminate the importance of wilderness to the nation’s sense of itself. Twain does this by using the desert as a stand-in for wilderness more generally, much as Abbey does in *Desert*

¹ Amy Clary, American University of Beirut, amy.l.clary@gmail.com

Solitaire. This essay will explore how Twain, “the most distinctively American of American authors” according to Shelley Fisher Fishkin (xiii), uses representations of the deserts of the Middle East and American West to make connections between wilderness and national identity.

Textual representations of deserts such as those by Twain, Austin, and Abbey are indicative of the importance of wilderness in American culture. The desert landscape each author describes is challenging and inhospitable—precisely the kind of landscape most resistant to the encroachment of urbanization and development. Literary representations such as these suggest that when a nation’s deserts are fully domesticated, it is likely that precious little wilderness is left anywhere within its borders. While Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* explicitly articulates the need to protect the American desert to ensure that there will still be some wilderness left in the U. S., this essay argues that Twain, too, is anxious about the creep of domestication and development into the wild American desert. However, Twain’s text, unlike Abbey’s, does not explicitly articulate this anxiety. In fact, the text in which he expresses anxiety about the settlement of the American West is not, on the surface, about America at all.

The Innocents Abroad is the story of Twain’s 1867 “pleasure excursion to Europe and the Holy Land” aboard the steamship *Quaker City* (20). While *The Innocents Abroad* narrates Twain’s experiences in the ship’s various ports of call, it is his three-week overland trip through the Middle Eastern desert that sheds the greatest light on his concern for the future of America’s wild areas. In *The Innocents Abroad*, the landscape of the Holy Land is described as a repulsive “Other” against which the U. S. defines itself. The comparison Twain makes between the landscapes of the Middle East and that of the United States shores up his image of the U. S. as a wilderness nation at the same time as it implicitly cautions American readers against allowing their wild landscapes to be degraded.

In September 1867, three months after sailing from New York City, Twain and seven other *Quaker City* passengers disembark the ship in Beirut and travel on horseback through the Holy Land before rejoining the ship at Jaffa. The literary and historical significance of Twain’s text is recognized by Franklin Walker, who writes in his book *Irreverent Pilgrims* that Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad*, along with works by Herman Melville and John Ross Browne, are “the three most important literary works to result from American visits to the Holy Land during the nineteenth century or, for that matter, up to the present time” (7). Walker also asserts that upon its publication, *The Innocents Abroad* became “America’s most famous travel book” (7). Accordingly, much scholarly attention has been paid to *The Innocents Abroad* by writers such as Walker, Hilton Obenzinger, and many others.² While their scholarship touches on Twain’s representation of the Middle Eastern terrain he traverses, his depiction of the desert landscapes has been underexamined. Likewise, *The Innocents Abroad* has been largely overlooked by ecocritics, whose goal of studying “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii) would seem to invite a reading of Twain’s desert sojourn.³ Twain’s other works, notably *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, have gained attention for their representations of the American landscape, but the equally rich portrayal of the Middle Eastern desert in *The Innocents Abroad* has largely escaped examination. However, *The Innocents Abroad* invites an ecocritical approach for much the same reason as *Desert Solitaire*, which has been the subject of numerous ecocritical studies. Both Twain and Abbey give detailed, perceptive, and, at times, poetic descriptions of their travel—on foot and horseback—through harsh desert landscapes. Although their deserts are separated by time and distance, both texts pay close attention to landscape. If Abbey’s text invites ecocritical study, so too must Twain’s.

Twain, like Abbey, is not always earnest in his descriptions of the desert and its denizens. Indeed, much of the humor of *The Innocents Abroad*’s Middle East chapters comes at the expense of the desert

landscape. For instance, when first catching a glimpse of Damascus in the distance, Twain grudgingly confesses that the verdant city is indeed a beautiful sight. He then qualifies his statement by adding, “when you think of the leagues of blighted, blasted, sandy, rocky, sun-burnt, ugly, dreary, infamous country you have ridden over to get here, you think it is the most beautiful, beautiful picture that ever human eyes rested upon in all the broad universe!” (456). The Middle Eastern desert elicits derision from Twain, as do the fawning descriptions of it penned by other North American writers who, to his mind, should know better. He writes, “If all the poetry and nonsense that have been discharged upon the ... bland scenery of this region were collected in a book, it would make a most valuable volume to burn” (495).

This derision, tempered with sympathy, extends to most of the non-human inhabitants of the Holy Land desert. Twain remarks that a prone camel looks like a “goose swimming,” while a standing camel resembles “an ostrich with an extra set of legs” (489). However, the same chapter also contains some surprisingly nuanced descriptions of wild desert creatures, such as Twain’s account of a “mud-turtle” sunning itself in a nearly dry brook who “kept on raising his head up and letting it down, and drawing the skin over his eyes for a minute and then opening them out again” (491). Twain also carefully observes the gray lizard he encounters among the desert ruins: “His coat is the color of ashes: and ashes are the symbol of hopes that have perished, of aspirations that came to nought, of loves that are buried” (489). Twain calls the lizards “those heirs of ruin, of sepulchers and desolation,” and sees them as the natural inheritors of land no longer domesticated by human beings (488). As such, they take on a vaguely sinister hue in Twain’s portrait. He imagines them declaring, “I will crawl over *your* corpse at the last” (489).

While Twain’s descriptions of the turtle and the lizard would not be out of place in a work of xerophilic nature writing, some readers might protest that the overall comic tone of *The Innocents Abroad* disqualifies any of its dramatic descriptions, fanciful comparisons, tall tales, or comic grouchiness from serious consideration or interpretation. To be sure, reading *The Innocents Abroad* as an earnest, factual account of Samuel Clemens’s overseas vacation is to gravely miss the point. Instead, the book is, as Michelson writes, “a pleasure tour through modes of narration” such as “sentimentality and parody, patriotism and anti-Americanism” (396). Michelson rightly asserts that we, as readers, “are meant to enjoy his narrator’s pleasure trip, his tour through the world of literary voices, just as we enjoy his tour of foreign lands” (396). However, the text’s playful shifts in narrative modes do not render the narrated subject matter irrelevant. Despite its comic tone, *The Innocents Abroad* still provides an important window into the role of deserts in the American literary imagination.

When describing his travels through the Holy Land, Twain alternates harsh criticism of its physical appearance with acknowledgement of the meanings those lands hold for him. For instance, after climbing the hills above the Sea of Galilee, he calls the view “as bald and unthrilling a panorama as any land can afford” (518). He then qualifies this criticism by saying, “Yet it was so crowded with historical interest, that if all the pages that had been written about it were spread upon its surface, they would flag it from horizon to horizon like a pavement” (518). Indeed, this is a particularly apt image, as the meanings created by the many textual accounts of the region domesticate the physical landscape for Twain as surely as paving stones. Twain does not celebrate the barrenness of the desert as a sign of its remarkable resistance to human impact, as Abbey does nearly a century later in the American West. Nor does he find a desert devoid of human-imposed meaning, as Abbey does in the U. S. On the contrary, for Twain, the meaning of the Middle Eastern landscape is fixed and overdetermined, domesticated and made familiar by centuries of narrative. His horse may not have walked on flagstones from Galilee to the Dead Sea, but the way was just as certainly paved by the “pages that had been written about it” (518).

Twain's criticisms of the Middle Eastern terrain showcase a double standard for deserts: one pertaining to the United States, and one to the Middle East. In the Holy Land, there is no such thing as a good desert, only good stories about the desert. However, Twain's descriptions of the U. S. desert Southwest are by no means as dismissive as those of the Middle East. In fact, in his book *The Southwest in American Literature and Art: The Rise of a Desert Aesthetic*, David W. Teague credits texts by Twain and other nineteenth-century authors such as Stephen Crane with raising public awareness about the American deserts and contributing to the rise of a new "desert literacy," which he defines as a "vocabulary of value with which to describe the arid landscapes they saw in the West" (17).

Indeed, even *The Innocents Abroad* contains a lyrical portrait of the desert of the American West. In Chapter Twelve, Twain's narrative of his train trip through France is interrupted by an extended reminiscence of his two-thousand-mile stagecoach journey through the West, "from the Missouri line to California" (106). Even this early in *The Innocents Abroad*, the reader is familiar enough with the wry tone of the text to expect Twain to complain at least a little about the difficulties of such a long trip over rough and bumpy trails. After all, the preceding eighty pages have been full of comic complaints about life at sea, his fellow passengers, and the shortcomings of the ports of call. However, this unexpected digression into Twain's narrative of crossing the American West is entirely sentimental, romantic, and nostalgic.

Twain writes that on the journey to California he experienced "never a weary moment, never a lapse of interest!" (106). His pleasure is not attributed to pleasant traveling companions or comfortable accommodations; on the contrary, it is due entirely to the wildness of the landscape itself. He writes that "it was worth a lifetime of city toiling and moiling...to scan the blue distances of a world that knew no lords but us" (106). It is the vastness and wildness of the landscape that moves him, because he, like many American writers before him, equates wild land with freedom from servitude and government oppression. In saying that the West "knew no lords but us," Twain echoes J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's 1782 assertion that men living on the frontier are "beyond the reach of government, which in some measure leaves them to themselves" (600). Although Twain's romantic memory of the West conspicuously ignores the presence of Native Americans, it accurately describes the mythical American landscape against which he measures all others.

At first, it seems jarring to have a narrative of an earlier U. S. stagecoach journey abruptly inserted into a narrative of European and Middle Eastern travel. However, upon further reflection, it makes thematic sense. The visit to France comes toward the very beginning of the Twain's exploration of Europe and the Middle East. Their only earlier ports of call were short visits to Gibraltar, Spain, and Morocco; thus, the visit to France marks the beginning of the passengers' first extended land-based excursion. Before embarking on a lengthy sojourn through foreign terrain, Twain establishes a basis of comparison against which all such landscapes can be measured. By recalling the American stagecoach journey in the middle of his account of France, Twain signals that his narrative will implicitly or explicitly compare all terrains he encounters to his romanticized idea of the wild American West.

Given his romanticized account of the stagecoach journey, it is clear that the foreign terrain Twain encounters will have a lot to live up to. For instance, he emphasizes the green fertility of the vast tracts of land he passes out West, describing the "first seven hundred miles" of his trip across the American plains as traversing nothing less than a verdant paradise, with the coach rolling through a "grassy carpet greener and softer and smoother than any sea" (106). What is more surprising, though, is the fact that Twain's appreciation of the American land is not bounded by a European-style preference for green landscapes. On the contrary, Twain mythologizes the desert through which he travels just as much as

the grasslands. He describes seeing “thirteen hundred miles of desert solitudes...limitless panoramas of bewildering perspective... [and] rocks...splendid with the crimson and gold of the setting sun” (107).

This is not to say that Twain’s descriptions of American deserts are always glowingly sentimental—on the contrary, his description of the desert surrounding Salt Lake City in his 1872 book *Roughing It* is every bit as scathing and venomous as his descriptions of the Holy Land. He writes, “we entered upon one of that species of deserts whose concentrated hideousness shames the diffused and diluted horrors of Sahara—an ‘alkali’ desert....Imagine a vast, waveless ocean stricken dead and turned to ashes; imagine this solemn waste tufted with ash-dusted sage brushes....The sun beats down with dead, blistering, relentless malignity” (143). This malignant “waveless ocean” is a far cry from the majestic limitless “panoramas” of his earlier description. However, there is a marked difference in tone between this description of the American West and that of the deserts of the Middle East. Whereas he brackets his descriptions of the Middle Eastern deserts with nods to the rich human history that has unfolded there, he frames his account of the Western desert with an acknowledgement of the challenging landscape’s own inherent allure.

In other words, Twain complains about the American desert, but at least he *sees* it. In *Roughing It*, even Twain’s complaints about the desert sound at times like nature writing: “there is not the faintest breath of air stirring; there is not a merciful shred of cloud in all the brilliant firmament...not a buzz, or a whir of wings, or a distant pipe of bird” (143). True, this passage criticizes the desert’s austerity, but it also captures the majesty of it: the “brilliant firmament,” eerily devoid of all signs of life, takes on a larger-than-life importance. This is nature in all its wildness. It is no surprise, then, that Twain acknowledges the allure the American desert holds for him: “now we were to cross a desert in *daylight*. This was fine—novel—romantic—dramatically adventurous—this, indeed, was worth living for, worth traveling for! We would write home all about it” (143). Although Twain mocks his enthusiasm for the desert journey, writing “This enthusiasm, this stern thirst for adventure, wilted under the sultry August sun and did not last above one hour. One poor little hour” (143), he treats the American desert as a fitting repository for hopes and fantasies. By introducing his lyrical description of the “blistering, relentless, malignity” of the desert with an acknowledgement, however jocular, of the romance and adventure the land promises, Twain treats the American desert as a worthy receptacle for meaning. Although both the deserts of the Middle East and those of the U. S. Southwest are shown to be difficult and at times repulsive, the American desert is described with respect and admiration, while the Holy Land desert is represented as an unworthy setting for the grand stories associated with it.

Why does Twain celebrate the American desert and dismiss that of the Middle East? To attribute his attitude simply to chauvinistic nationalism is to sell the text short. To do so also misses an opportunity to read *The Innocents Abroad* as a book concerned with the role of wilderness in shaping national identity. A more interesting answer to the question is suggested by the presence in *The Innocents Abroad* of what Perry Miller in *Errand into the Wilderness* calls “the American theme... of Nature versus civilization” (205-6, emphasis in original). Miller also makes the important assertion that “Nature...in America means the wilderness” (204). By labeling it “the American theme,” Miller indicates that the tension between nature and civilization is one with far-reaching implications for American culture and identity. It is important to note that Miller uses the term “civilization” to denote the opposite of “wilderness,” much the same way that Abbey uses the term “progress.” This essay uses “civilization” to refer to human settlement or lasting human structures of any sort. It is not meant in the colonial sense of “Anglicization,” or “sophistication.” The tension between nature and civilization as Miller describes it is still seen in the U. S. in literary works like Abbey’s, and in the ongoing debates over the development or preservation of wild public land.

Twain's refusal to admire the Middle Eastern desert the way he does the American desert may stem in part from his awareness that wilderness as he knows it in the U. S. does not exist in the Middle East. That this absence would be important to Twain is supported by Miller's assertion that "In American literature of the early nineteenth century, this theme [of Nature versus civilization] is ubiquitous...If there be such a thing as an American character, it took shape under the molding influence of these conceptions" (210). Indeed, *The Innocents Abroad* is preoccupied with defining the "American character" by contrasting it to the character of the other countries Twain visits. The wildness of the American landscape is an indispensable yardstick by which Twain measures the worthiness of other lands.

As evidence of the national importance of "the American theme [,] of Nature versus civilization," Miller points to the tension between nature and civilization evident in "the observations of foreign travelers" (205). Indeed the perspective offered by "foreign travelers," such as J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, is invaluable when seeking to understand—or argue for—the uniqueness of the new nation. Crèvecoeur looks to the landscape for an answer to his famous question, "What then is the American, this new man?" (598). He asserts that "Men are like plants; the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the particular soil...in which they grow" (599). Although Crèvecoeur asserts that the wild American soil does not always produce admirable men—indeed, he asserts that the frontier gives rise to men who are "no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank,"—he acknowledges that the tension between wilderness and civilization plays a central role in shaping the culture and identity of the young American nation (601). Crèvecoeur's observation that the wild American land shapes American people is echoed over one hundred years later by Frederick Jackson Turner, who, however, sees the wilderness as a positive force in shaping American identity. In fact, Turner credits the wilderness at the edge of the frontier with fomenting American democracy.

While writers from abroad such as Crèvecoeur did much to articulate and shape the identity of the United States by examining it with a newcomer's eyes, Twain's *Innocents Abroad* inverts the formula. Twain is a newcomer to the lands he visits, but he is less interested in understanding them than in defining his home country in contrast to them. For instance, Twain frequently re-names Arab villages with English names: "After nightfall we reached our tents, just outside of the nasty Arab village of Jonesborough. Of course the real name of the place is El something or other, but the boys still refuse to recognize the Arab names or try to pronounce them" (467-8). While this re-naming is easily understood as a colonial move cloaked in humor, as when Obenzinger describes it as having "the effect of colonizing the Holy Land for the American imagination through laughter," it also an act of comparison (191).

It is no surprise that such comparisons prompt Twain to dismiss the Middle Eastern landscape as nothing more than an ugly waste, while describing American places of similar severity with affection and respect. For one thing, Twain's comparative narrative strategy would collapse were he to find any Middle Eastern landscape or town superior to—or even equal to—its American counterpart. For Twain to transcend what Obenzinger calls his "inability to see the land and its people outside a comparative framework" would undermine his irreverent narrative persona. However, the Middle Eastern desert is not explicitly compared to that of the U. S., as are the towns ("El something" and Jonesborough), the lakes (the Sea of Galilee and Lake Tahoe), and the people ("they reminded me much of Indians" [472]). On the contrary, it is only by examining Twain's depictions of the American and Middle Eastern desert that the significant differences in their treatment emerge. Therefore, it is an oversimplification to interpret Twain's disdain for the Middle Eastern desert as simple nationalistic chauvinism.

As wretched as Twain finds the Middle Eastern desert, there is no denying that it has what U. S. deserts lack: well-preserved ruins of internationally-known historical and religious sites. Indeed, Twain himself emphasizes the lack of such human-made structures in the American desert. In Chapter Twelve of *The Innocents Abroad*, when he recalls his stagecoach trip through the American desert, Twain compares the natural landscape to an imaginary built environment. He writes of seeing “mimic cities, of pinnacled cathedrals, of massive fortresses, counterfeited in the eternal rocks” (107). His delight at the desert landscape lies in the absence of the very things he finds in the Middle Eastern desert: human-made cities, cathedrals, and fortresses. The only such structures in the American West of Twain’s imagination are “mimic” ones, formed by living rock, not human hands. Miller writes that in nineteenth-century America, nature “served not so much for individual or artistic salvation as for an assuaging of national anxiety. The sublimity of our natural backdrop ... relieved us of having to apologize for a deficiency of picturesque ruins and hoary legends” (211). Interrupting the story of his travel through Europe with a lengthy description of the wild desert Southwest and its beautiful, imaginary cathedrals and cities allows Twain to use the American wilderness as a touchstone against which he can evaluate the ancient cathedrals and cities he encounters in the Old World.

When Twain departed for his excursion to Europe and the Holy Land, he left behind a nation that increasingly looked to the out-of-doors for inspiration and recreation. From Albert Bierstadt’s rosy landscape paintings to the allure of natural areas such as Yosemite and the Grand Canyon that increasingly attracted visitors to their scenic vistas, Americans sought evidence that theirs was a nation with a vast and unparalleled natural heritage.⁴ Steeped in the cultural valorization of the wild and natural, it is easy to imagine that for Twain, no foreign landscapes could prove as wild, as natural, or, therefore, as beautiful as those of his home country. It stands to reason, then, that Twain would not find the deserts of the Middle East, with their man-made cathedrals and cities, to be as “fine—novel—romantic” as those in the American Southwest (143).

In the six decades before the official closing of the American frontier in 1890, the popular enthusiasm for nature spilled over into the nation’s religious life. Perry Miller argues that in the nineteenth century United States, Christianity, under the influence of a romantic European backlash against the Enlightenment’s valorization of reason, embraced nature as never before. In fact, he claims that “most of the ardent celebrators of natural America serenely continued to be professing Christians,” despite the fact that “Nature somehow...had effectually taken the place of the Bible” (211). Miller clarifies this provocative statement by asserting that in the nineteenth century U. S., it was the “unremitting influence” of capital-“N” Nature, not the Bible, that was expected to “guide aright the faltering steps of a young republic” (211).

Emerson’s 1836 *Nature* was a landmark in the American spiritualization of nature. In it, he criticizes religion that separates God from man, and man from nature. Emerson describes forests as “plantations of God,” and declares in his famous “transparent eyeball” passage that when he is in nature he becomes “part or particle of God” (1112). The spiritualization of nature was particularly poignant to a nation that was fast losing its wild areas to settlement. Miller says that Emerson’s writing on nature “bespoke the inarticulate preoccupation of the entire community,” which was the national “obsession” with the tension between nature and civilization (204). It is no accident that the first efforts to preserve scenic wild lands such as the Yosemite valley or the Grand Canyon were made in the nineteenth century, just as the nation faced a crisis of faith and identity attendant upon the closing of the western frontier.

In 1897, Theodore Roosevelt wrote that in the fifteen years following the Civil War (which, of course, encompasses the period during which Twain was in the Holy Land), market hunters killed the plains

bison “by the hundreds of thousands for their hides,” while “long trains of big white-topped wagons crept slowly westward across the prairies, marking the steady oncoming of the frontier settlers” (69). Given the U. S.’s rapid destruction of wild animals and landscapes during the period in which Twain wrote *The Innocents Abroad*, it is not surprising that one of the chief characteristics of the U. S. that emerges from Twain’s comparisons with the Holy Land is wildness. Consistently depicting the Holy Land as domesticated, enclosed, and not wild reassures Twain—and his readers—that the U. S. of his imagination is still, despite evidence to the contrary, a nation that values its wilderness and still, consequently, has religion on its side. To acknowledge that America, too, has cut down and settled the Emersonian “plantations of God” is to admit that the nation has relinquished any claim to exceptionalism and holiness that it might have had. Indeed, Twain’s contempt for the desert landscapes of the Middle East stems in part from a profound uneasiness with the realization that Christianity’s most revered sites are not in wilderness, but rather in areas that have long been settled.

The lack of wild, unsettled areas in the Holy Land is illustrated by Twain’s account of his journey on horseback to Jerusalem. The landscape he traverses is desert every bit as harsh and unwelcoming as the formidable “alkali” desert of the American West, yet it is peppered with evidence of human settlement, past and present. Despite Twain’s complaints that “The further we went the hotter the sun got, and the more rocky and bare, repulsive and dreary the landscape became,” the land, though unwelcoming, is not wild (555). Twain and his companions pass in quick succession a long list of storied sites and ruins scattered throughout the “stupid hills” and “unsightly landscape” (555). By contrast, the similarly severe American desert boasts only rocks reminiscent of “mimic cities...and cathedrals,” not actual settlements. Twain’s fantasy that the wild American desert “knew no lords but us” is impossible to replicate in the Middle Eastern desert, where at every turn there is evidence that others have lived there, built there, and suffered thirst there centuries before Twain arrived. Even when the Holy Land desert seems so severe that “even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country,” Twain and company come upon “the ancient Fountain of Beira...its stones worn deeply by the chins of thirsty animals that are dead and gone centuries ago” (555). Far from being the lords of a wild land, the excursionists are simply the latest in a long line of “thirsty animals” that have populated the landscape since antiquity.

When Twain finally spots Jerusalem in the distance, it affects him greatly. Standing in the open air under the brutal desert sun, Twain gazes with awe at Jerusalem “for an hour or more,” “without speaking a dozen sentences” to his fellow travelers (556). This view of Jerusalem moves him so much that while his “brain was teeming with thoughts and images and memories invoked by the grand history of the venerable city that lay before us,” he makes no further complaint about the discomforts of the landscape that affords him such a view. Contrasting the desert with the city allows Twain to forget for a moment that the desert outside the city is not wild. The momentary contrast of desert and city allows Twain to endow the landscape with a holiness noticeably absent from his earlier wry accounts of it. This liminal space between desert and city allows Twain to imagine that the distinction between nature and civilization is still operative in the Holy Land. It is no surprise, then, that Twain’s most spiritually significant reflections on Jerusalem take place out of doors, under the blazing midday desert sky.

Twain’s religious reflections are abruptly forced indoors when he enters the city. The text does not mention the natural world again for the duration of its treatment of Jerusalem. On the contrary, Twain and the other excursionists go from holy site to holy site, nearly all of which are inside grottoes, churches, or chapels. When visiting the place of Jesus’ crucifixion, Twain himself remarks on the enclosure and domestication of the landscape that has occurred since biblical times:

When one stands where the Saviour was crucified, he finds it all he can do to keep it strictly before his mind that Christ was not crucified in a Catholic Church. He must remind himself every now and then that the great event transpired in the open air, and not in a gloomy, candle-lighted cell in a little corner of a vast church, up-stairs—a small cell all bejeweled and bespangled with flashy ornamentation, in execrable taste. (572)

This passage succinctly articulates the religious overtones of the tension between nature and civilization. If for Twain, as for many nineteenth-century American Christians, it was important to imagine that religion was on nature's side, the domestication of holy sites must have been especially galling. Although Twain never explicitly expresses a belief that natural landscapes are better suited to religious reflection than human-made structures, the above passage strongly suggests it. Describing the crucifixion as transpiring in the "open air, and not in a gloomy...cell" suggests that for Twain, the human-made memorial diminishes the event and de-sacrilizes the place. Just as Twain describes Jerusalem most reverently when he is outdoors gazing upon it, the above passage suggests that Twain finds the "open air" better suited to contemplating a holy site. Just as Emerson experiences oneness with God when his head is "bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space" (1112), Twain, in order to find spiritual meaning in a man-made holy site, must remember that the "great event transpired in the open air" (572).

Obenzinger asserts that all of the "'serious' passages" in *Innocents Abroad* "can only be regarded as ...designed for performance" in order to "help Twain position his disdain within the bounds of acceptability" (175). While certainly the earnest, pious passages in the text serve as effective foils for the humorous and skeptical ones, to assert that all the "serious" passages are nothing more than performative does the text a disservice. To read the above passage as reminding readers that the crucifixion took place outdoors simply to heighten the comedy of the "execrable taste" with which the site is "bejeweled and bespangled" is to diminish the importance of the natural world in nineteenth-century American thought, particularly religious thought (572). Twain may poke merciless fun at organized religion—especially Catholicism—but the domestication of Christianity in the Middle East is troubling to him. Twain is bothered by the fact that one of the most significant events in the Christian tradition took place outdoors, yet the site of its occurrence has been developed, enclosed, and made wholly unnatural. This enclosure is also significant to those wishing to better understand the confluence of religion and nature in nineteenth-century America.

Edward Abbey asks, "what is the peculiar quality or character of the desert that distinguishes it, in spiritual appeal, from other forms of landscape?" (300). He answers, in part, that the desert "evokes in us an elusive hint of something unknown, unknowable, about to be revealed" (301). In assessing the "spiritual appeal" of the desert, Abbey is, of course, talking about the wild deserts of the American West. It is easy to imagine Twain agreeing that there is something "elusive," "unknowable," and "spiritual" about the "thirteen hundred miles of desert solitudes" he saw on his stagecoach journey through the American West. The desert of the Holy Land, on the other hand, confounds Twain's expectations. That desert is not wild, nor unknown, nor unknowable—on the contrary, it has long been known intimately by those who live there. For Twain, the Middle Eastern desert prefigures the possibility of an America that is wholly settled, domesticated, and known—an America where villages and crowds replace the "desert solitudes," without even storied pilgrimage sites to compensate.

Reading *The Innocents Abroad* from an ecocritical perspective sheds light on the anxiety that lies beneath the humor in Twain's text. The grandeur that Twain celebrates in American desert landscapes, with their natural rock formations shaped like "mimic cities...and cathedrals," is replaced in the Holy

Land with the “execrable taste” of man-made cathedrals. Implicit in the book’s criticisms of the Middle Eastern landscape is a fear that the U. S. deserts will suffer the same fate, with lasting human-made structures encroaching on and ultimately destroying the wilderness. Recognizing Twain’s tacit acknowledgement of the vulnerability of the American landscape, no matter how robust it appears in his stories, is crucial to understanding Twain as an author worthy of ecocritical attention.

Endnotes

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² Forrest G. Robinson’s “Patterns of Consciousness in *Innocents Abroad*” [in *American Literature* 58.1. March (1986): 46-63] and Bruce Michelson’s “Mark Twain the Tourist: The Form of *The Innocents Abroad*” [*American Literature* 49.3. November (1977): 385- 398] are two articles that have been of particular use to me, as has Brian Yothers’s section on Twain in his *The Romance of the Holy Land in American Travel Writing 1790-1876* (UK: Ashgate, 2007).

³ At the time of writing, Donald Hoffmann’s 2006 *Mark Twain in Paradise: His Voyages to Bermuda* (Missouri: U of Missouri P) was the only book-length ecocritical reading of Twain listed in the bibliography of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). However, in “Literary Place Bashing” Cheryll Glotfelty does address Twain’s descriptions of the Nevada desert in *Roughing It* and describes the text as “place bashing” for comic effect. Patricia Limerick’s 1985 *Desert Passages* also contains a valuable ecocritical reading of *Roughing It*.

⁴ In 1864, President Lincoln signed an act requiring that the Yosemite Valley “be held for public use, resort, and recreation...inalienable for all time” (USDI 1991: 10); Bierstadt’s 1869 painting *The Oregon Trail, 1869* is an iconic image of the idealized American West.

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