

MARK TWAIN AND THE SIRENS OF PROGRESS

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Mark Twain lived in an age of stunning technological progress. At the time of his birth in 1835, communication, transportation, and creature comforts were little advanced beyond the level when in pre-history man tamed the horse, caught the wind in sails, and dug a privy trench. Only five years before Mark Twain was born, Peter Cooper's locomotive on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad made possible the first steam railroad transportation. It was not until eight years later, when Sam Clemens was three years old, that the Atlantic was crossed by a ship using steam power alone. He was old enough to remember the telegraph's inception in 1844; he was a young man when the Atlantic cable was successfully laid in 1866; and he was in his fifth decade when Bell patented the telephone and Edison the phonograph and the incandescent electric light.

By the time of his death in 1910, the railroads had flung a web of track across the whole continent. Urban dwellers had abandoned first the candle and the kerosene lamp and were ripping out gas pipes to replace them with wiring for the electric light. The moving picture had been invented seventeen years previously; the gasoline engine was being used to propel automobiles and airplanes; and Marconi's wireless telegraphy, nine years old, was competing with the cable in sending transatlantic messages. Nearly all the scientific and technological developments of the first half of the twentieth century, including the use of atomic energy, had had their inception by 1910.¹

Of this stupendous progress Mark Twain was, among American writers, the most fervent in his praise and the most lavish in his support, until his last years. Up to 1898 he gloried in the material progress of the nineteenth century, he deified the inventors, he was himself an inventor, and he supported financially the development of certain machines to the tune of several hundreds of thousands of dollars. But in 1898, as we shall see, he suffered a dramatic change of mind. From then on material progress seemed to him futile and meaningless inasmuch as man himself had not improved. But even to the end of his life, no matter how hollow to him seemed the triumphs of progress, he was capable of marveling at its material achievements.

No writer gave more praise to the inventors and engineers or more particular attention to their creations. In A Connecticut Yankee he called Gutenberg, Watt, Arkwright, Whitney, Morse, Stephenson, and Bell "the cre-

tors of this world--after God."² Once when he was asked to complete a list of the hundred greatest men of all time, he suggested Edison and Bell.³ He prided himself on being one of those forward-thinking people who encouraged the work of inventors, by his faith in their dreams and his willingness to use "new-fangled" gadgets. In Tom Sawyer Abroad, the "genius" who invented a flying machine was jeered at by a mob of men of little faith with whom Mark Twain had obviously no sympathy.

It made him [the inventor] hot to hear them, and he would turn on them and shake his fist and say they was animals and blind, but someday they would find they had stood face to face with one of the men that lifts up nations and makes civilizations, and was too dull to know it; and right here on this spot their own children and grandchildren would build a monument to him that would outlast a thousand years, but his name would outlast the monument.⁴

Mark Twain did not wait for his grandchildren to recognize the inventive geniuses of his time. According to his testimony he was the first private user of the telephone,⁵ "the first person in the world to apply the type-machine to literature" in typewriting the manuscript of Tom Sawyer,⁶ the first person to use phonographic dictation to compose a novel,⁷ one of the first people to use a fountain pen,⁸ and the first private citizen to install a telharmonium--a sort of juke box--in his home.⁹

His own inventions hardly changed the face of the world, but they attest to his fascination with and endorsement of the multitude of gadgets proffered to a not unwilling public in the name of progress. They include the putting of buttons on a waistcoat and buttonholes on trousers so that the latter might be held up without the aid of a belt or suspenders, a shirt requiring no studs, a perpetual-calendar watch charm,¹⁰ a bed-clamp to keep children from kicking their covers off,¹¹ a history game played with a board and cards,¹² and a scrapbook which required no pasting by virtue of gummed strips of mucilage on each page.¹³ Most or all of these inventions Clemens had patented, and some of them he attempted to have manufactured with the hope of making his fortune, but only one--the Mark Twain Scrap-Book--was commercially successful.

He was even less successful but no less hopeful in his financing of other people's inventions. A steam generator, a steam pulley, and a novel method of marine telegraphy, each lightened his pocketbook by twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars before he gave them up.¹⁴ The Kaolotype process, a new method of producing printing plates for illustrations, cost him fifty thousand dollars before he was convinced of its impracticality.¹⁵ Into the Paige typesetting machine he poured three hundred thousand dollars over a period of ten years,¹⁶ and he might have tried even longer to finance it until its hundreds of moving parts would operate without breakdown, but he went bankrupt in 1894 and the machine was presented to the Sibley College of Engineer-

ing where it was shown "as the costliest piece of machinery, for its size, ever constructed."¹⁷

The fact that his investments failed is of no significance beyond raising misgivings concerning his business acumen. What is significant is the evidence that between 1880 and 1894 Mark Twain craved to be a recognized participant in America's mighty industrial and technological progress, and also that he wanted to join "the Vanderbilt gang" of multimillionaires. He had become, as Van Wyck Brooks wrote, "something no longer himself but the embodiment of the whole industrial epoch."¹⁸ On this point Bernard De Voto agreed: "When he [Mark Twain] turned away from the animal to consider its tools, he was as awestruck by the mirage of Progress as any platform lecturer of his time: this dominant illusion of his age was integral in his thinking."¹⁹

Just as exciting to Mark Twain as the technology of his century was the American spirit of enterprise and aggressiveness that sparked progress. In 1878 he characterized this spirit as "the drive and push and rush and struggle of the living, tearing, booming, nineteenth, the mightiest of all centuries."²⁰ In 1882 he travelled up the Mississippi to St. Paul, where he smelled the "go-ahead atmosphere which tastes so good in the nostrils"²¹ and where he found "all the enlivening signs of the presence of active, energetic, intelligent, prosperous, practical nineteenth-century populations."²² It was the lack of that spirit which kept the South from advancing. Walter Scottism, "a debilitating influence" arising from a lingering romanticism and outmoded reverence for heroisms and chivalry, checked there "the wave of progress and even turned it back."²³

It was American ingenuity and enterprise, at least as asserted in the North, that put America, in Mark Twain's eyes, above any foreign country. England, he wrote in 1879, might feel she is superior to us, but

We shall presently be indifferent to being looked down upon by a nation not bigger and no better than our own. We made the telegraph a practical thing. We invented the fast press, the sewing machine, the sleeping parlor-car, the telephone, the ironclad, we have done our share for the century.²⁴

He was quite above feeling rivalry with France in the matter of progress. France was pitifully backward. What can France teach us? he asks in "What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us" (1894). "Railroading? No. France knows nothing valuable about railroading. Steamshipping? No. French steamboating is still of Fulton's date--1809. Postal service? No. France is a back number there. Telegraphy? No, we taught her that ourselves."²⁵

By the same token, what he found praiseworthy in a foreign culture was generally its evidences of progress. Backward as he found Italy in 1867, he nevertheless admired her roads and railroads. "These things," he wrote, "win me more than Italy's hundred galleries of priceless art treasures. . . ."²⁶ In Australia in 1895 it was the buildings, parks, asylums, and electric street

lighting that he admired,²⁷ and in New Zealand it was the railroad car about which he said: "A narrow and railed porch along the side, where a person can walk up and down. A lavatory in each car. This is progress; this is the nineteenth century spirit."²⁸

Before his change of mind in 1898, Mark Twain appears to have taken it for granted that an inevitable concomitant of technological progress was cultural advancement. Material improvements on the one hand and such humane achievements as reasonable criminal laws, universal education, and extended suffrage on the other, were in his thinking and in the popular mind the Siamese twins of progress. When Hank Morgan, the Connecticut Yankee, set about to bring civilization to King Arthur's England, he introduced the telephone, telegraph, typewriter, phonograph, steamboat, and railway, but he did not neglect also to organize schools, to start newspapers, to abolish slavery, equalize taxation, and to ease oppressive laws. When Mark Twain praised the Upper Mississippi towns for their driving American spirit and their modern machinery of transportation and communication, he did not neglect to commend them for their schools, newspapers and libraries.²⁹ Since he regarded humanitarianism as a necessary part of civilization he was reluctant to apply the term "civilized" to preceding centuries, but the nineteenth century in America fairly well lived up to his requirement that civilization must not allow "human slavery, despotic government, inequality, numerous and brutal punishments for crime, superstition almost universal, ignorance almost universal, and dirt and poverty almost universal."³⁰

This he wrote in 1889, just a few years before he was to deny that the world had achieved any degree of civilization through material progress. Before we examine that denial, let us ask if during his years of exuberant faith in progress there are not some little doubts expressed. There are not many. The dangers of the machine do not seem to have bothered him. In answer to the popular alarm over railroad accidents Mark Twain commented in 1872:

When we consider that every day and every night of the year full fourteen thousand railway trains of various kinds, freighted with life and armed with death, go thundering over the land, the marvel is not that they kill three hundred human beings in a twelvemonth, but that they do not kill three hundred times three hundred.³¹

The steamboat explosion in The Gilded Age, a disaster that took the lives of 118 passengers, is blamed not on the demon steam but on the obstinacy of the second engineer.³² Neither was he perturbed about the economic dislocations resulting from an advancing technology. The profits from his typesetting machine would come, as he happily calculated, from the wages of the compositors that it would throw out of work. The compositors would have to understand that.

Printers are peculiarly well instructed men. They all know the history of the great labor-saving and speed-enhancing inventions, and they know that no hostility in the world can stop such a machine from coming into use, or even notably delay it.³³

But in his recurring moods of world-weariness is a sort of implicit criticism of progress. As much as he praised the driving American spirit, as much as he marveled at the inventions of his century, and as much as he surrounded himself and titillated his existence with all the latest in scientific gadgets, he discovered that when he left civilization and was forced to live an unencumbered life, the ensuing peace was wonderful. In 1867 he contrasted the "restless, driving, vitality consuming life" in America with the relaxed, gracious living of the Europeans. Only when we live as Europeans do, he said, do "we begin to comprehend what life is for."³⁴ In 1877, luxuriating in the remoteness and simplicity of a Bermuda vacation, he wrote, "Bermuda is free (at present) from the triple curse of railways, telegraphs, and newspapers."³⁵ Ocean voyages soothed him. On board ship he would not be irritated by telegrams and news while the "harassed people on shore behind us were suffering just as usual."³⁶ In Aix he discovered a rest home where live "people who are tired of the roar of cities" and who want to "heal their blistered spirits and patch up their ragged minds."³⁷ In 1902 he recalled his Hannibal boyhood as "a paradise for simplicity--it was a simple, simple life, cheap but comfortable, and full of sweetness, and there was nothing of this rage of modern civilization at all."³⁸

Why, if in a few moments of enforced quiet Mark Twain questioned the benefits of civilization, did not he temper his Babbittesque statements with these considerations? The answer lies in his most grievous intellectual shortcoming: He found it difficult to maintain an equilibrium in the area of tension between two contradictory ideas. Any single idea charmed him completely as its antithesis might charm him in another mood. When in 1898 he was struggling back to financial solvency, fatigued with his round-the-world lecture tour, and heartsick over the death of his favorite daughter Susan, he could no longer retain his brave faith in progress, and characteristically he denied the fact of progress from then on. His reaction was intuitive rather than intellectual, and its causes cannot therefore be fully analyzed, but the reaction itself can be copiously documented.

"And what does it amount to?" asks Satan in The Mysterious Stranger, speaking of the futility of life's succeeding generations. "Nothing at all. You gain nothing; you always come out where you went in. For a million years the race has gone on monotonously propagating itself and monotonously reperforming this dull nonsense--to what end? No wisdom can guess."³⁹ The main contribution of Christianity to the progress of the world, says Satan, is the development of the weapons of war. "... It will be recognized that all the competent killers are Christians; the pagan world will go to

school to the Christian--not to acquire his religion, but his guns."⁴⁰ No matter how much the externalities of civilization changed, human nature was not improved. Civilization, Mark Twain said, "had not succeeded in obliterating the natural man even yet."⁴¹ Man was still a Thug at heart who enjoyed violence and seeing violence done.⁴² Neither man's heart nor his head had changed. "The heart," he wrote in 1905, "is just about what it was in the beginning. . . . Its good and evil impulses and their consequences are the same today that they were in Old Bible times, in Egyptian times, in Greek times, in Middle Ages times, in Twentieth Century times. . . . Mean-
time, the brain has undergone no change. There are a few good brains and a multitude of poor ones. It was so in Old Bible times and in all the other times--Greek, Roman, Middle Ages, and Twentieth Century."⁴³

Thus, while he had to recognize still the technological advances, he no longer admitted the moral ones. In 1905 he surveyed the past century:

Well, the 19th century made progress. In what? Materialities. Prodigious acquisitions were made in things which add to the comfort of many and make life harder for as many more. But the addition to righteousness? Is that discoverable? I think not. The materialities were not invented in the interest of righteousness; that there is more righteousness in the world because of them than there was before, is hardly demonstrable, I think.⁴⁴

Moreover, modern luxury undermines integrity:

By our teaching we learn that vast material prosperity always brings in its train conditions which debase the morals and enervate the manhood of a nation--then the country's liberties come into the market and are bought, sold, squandered, thrown away, and a popular idol is carried to the throne upon the shields and shoulders of the worshipping people and planted there in permanency.⁴⁵

And as a final quotation: "My idea of our civilization," he wrote in 1900, "is that it is a shabby poor thing and full of cruelties, vanities, arrogancies, meannesses, and hypocrisies. As for the word, I hate the sound of it, for it conveys a lie; and as for the thing itself, I wish it were in hell, where it belongs."⁴⁶

He and the world, it seemed to him, had steered full tilt at the rock where the sirens sang a song of progress, and crashing on it there was nothing left for him to do but contemplate the wreck of civilization. Perhaps his disillusionment with progress gave him the insight and foresight to write in 1904 his engaging and alarming story, "Sold to Satan," which invokes the nightmare of the mushroom cloud. Satan's body, it seems, is composed of radium, an element the Curies had recently isolated. Satan can release from his fingertip enough atomic energy to "set in motion the works of a lady's watch or destroy a world."⁴⁷ If Satan were to strip off his skin and

release all the energy in his body, "the world would vanish away in a flash of flame and a puff of smoke, and the remnants of the extinguished moon would sift down through space a mere snow-shower of gray ashes."⁴⁸

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Footnotes:

- ¹ The historical facts here and elsewhere are taken from Encyclopedia Britannica, 1948 edition, and C. A. and M. R. Beard, History of the United States (New York, 1921).
- ² Samuel Clemens, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (The Author's National Edition, New York and London, no date), 295. Hereafter separate works in The Author's National Edition will be referred to by title only.
- ³ Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain's Letters, edited by A. B. Paine (New York and London, 1917), ii, 817.
- ⁴ Tom Sawyer Abroad, 20.
- ⁵ "The First Writing Machines," The \$30,000 Bequest, 166-170.
- ⁶ Ibid., 169. A. B. Paine thinks that this first typewritten manuscript was not Tom Sawyer but parts of Life on the Mississippi. Mark Twain, A Biography (New York and London, 1912), i, 536.
- ⁷ Letters, ii, 543-544; Biography, ii, 918-919.
- ⁸ Biography, ii, 668-669.
- ⁹ Biography, iii, 364.
- ¹⁰ Van Wyck Brooks, The Ordeal of Mark Twain (New York, 1920), 132.
- ¹¹ Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain, Business Man, edited by Samuel Charles Webster (Boston, 1946), 266.
- ¹² Biography, ii, 753.
- ¹³ Biography, i, 457; ii, 611.
- ¹⁴ Mark Twain, Business Man, 171.
- ¹⁵ Biography, ii, 726-727.
- ¹⁶ Mark Twain, Business Man, 171.
- ¹⁷ Biography, ii, 996. The machine is now on display in the Mark Twain house in Hartford.
- ¹⁸ Brooks, The Ordeal of Mark Twain, 147.
- ¹⁹ Bernard De Voto, Mark Twain's America (Boston, 1932), 296.
- ²⁰ Biography, ii, 878-879.
- ²¹ Life on the Mississippi, 426.
- ²² Ibid., 421.
- ²³ Ibid., 347-348.
- ²⁴ Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain's Notebook, edited by A. B. Paine (New York and London, 1935), 156-157.
- ²⁵ "What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us," Literary Essays, 143.
- ²⁶ The Innocents Abroad, i, 325.

- 27 Following the Equator, i, 136-137.
- 28 Ibid., 303.
- 29 Life on the Mississippi, 428.
- 30 Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain's Speeches, edited by A. B. Paine (New York and London, 1923), 150-151.
- 31 "The Danger of Lying in Bed," The \$30,000 Bequest, 261.
- 32 The Gilded Age, i, 54.
- 33 Notebook, 188.
- 34 The Innocents Abroad, i, 241-244.
- 35 Biography, ii, 591.
- 36 "Some Rambling Thoughts of an Idle Excursion," Tom Sawyer Abroad, 258.
- 37 Samuel Clemens, "Aix, The Paradise of the Rheumatics," Europe and Elsewhere (New York and London, 1923), 112.
- 38 Mark Twain's Speeches, 249.
- 39 Samuel Clemens, The Mysterious Stranger and Other Stories (New York and London, 1922), 111-112.
- 40 Ibid., 111.
- 41 "About Play Acting," The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg, 299.
- 42 Following the Equator, ii, 125.
- 43 Letters, ii, 769.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain in Eruption, edited by Bernard De Voto (New York, 1940), 69.
- 46 Letters, ii, 695.
- 47 "Sold to Satan," Europe and Elsewhere, 333-334.
- 48 Ibid., 333.