

HUGH FERRER

Notes on the Connecticut Yankee

I

Imagine a political cartoon threatening to spark an international incident.

It is the mid-1950s, in Sarkhan, a fictional Southeast Asian country whose rural peasants farm with pre-industrial methods. While the Cold War threatens to go hot, American ambassador Louis Sears—Lucky Lou—awaits a federal judgeship back in the States. He can't speak Sarkhanese, neither can his staff, but he recognizes communist propaganda, at least when it is aimed at his vanity: the cartoon depicts a man, "Lucky," whose sweaty round face has a mule's braying mouth. He has a leash on a gracefully built Sarkhanese man; a Coca-Cola sign is their destination. When word of the ambassador's anger emerges, local power brokers intervene, cajoling the newspaper's editor to print something that will prevent a diplomatic rift.

The next day the Honorable Louis Sears reads an op-ed piece extolling the progress brought by the Americans, and is pacified.

The Ugly American (1958) is growing dusty even on the shelves of the Peace Corps library, but a stereotype lives on, and a caricature by donkey emblemizes it. Here is the insensitive loudmouth, the jackass who is not merely culturally obtuse, but willful in his ignorance, the sacred workhorse in the coca-colanization of the world: the ugly American.

In their introduction and "non-fiction epilogue," authors William Lederer and Eugene Burdick bend the fictional genre and insist repeatedly that the book's interlinked short stories are at root factual, every element drawn from interviews with members of the diplomatic corps and armed forces, and distilled into a series of tales principally for didactic reasons—to alert the American public to the dos and don'ts of international diplomacy; to galvanize a divided government into refocusing its recruitment and training; and so on. So heavy is the didacticism that no critique could begin elsewhere than with the transparent morals: learning the native language is good, ignoring indigenous ways and beliefs is bad,

empowerment training good, sweeping gestures bad. They starch the fiction into a primer; the authors have applied literary sensibility and consummate fictional technique to agitprop. (It should be observed, though, how the charges remain relevant—three years into the U.S.'s second war with Iraq, Lederer and Burdick's advice on "soft power," as we would term it now, feels timely as ever.)

In its propagandizing, *The Ugly American* is also pursuing literary ends, first on the agenda being to address and recast the ambiguity of Alden Pyle, the bookish Boston Brahman and title character of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955). A charmingly shy young man likeable for his romanticism and tweedy high-mindedness, Pyle is an *agent provocateur* whose ham-handed subterfuges murder several innocent Vietnamese. Greene makes the reader confront the moral necessity of murdering Pyle, who with naïve good intention would save Vietnam from itself. Lederer and Burdick begin by cutting out the romanticism from both the narrative style and the characters; the romantic urge muddies effective foreign policy. Then they demonize idealism, book-smarts, vanity, and naïveté, all the characteristics that put Pyle out of touch. Finally, they paint another kind of "ugly" American: an Average Joe who volunteers his time and, especially, his know-how, who dirties his hands working on a job shoulder-to-shoulder with others, a guy with street smarts who'll always find a new way to skin the cat and who never fears to show up a nincompoop. By repeating these traits in variation across the protagonists of six different stories, Lederer and Burdick fashion a complex portrait of a hero free of moral ambiguities.

But what to call this hero?

The title story of *The Ugly American* relates the story of Homer Atkins, engineer and slightly annoying know-it-all, with knobby, eternally dirty hands and an ugly dog-face, who has been pissing off the American and French aid agencies in Vietnam when Louis Sears's successor recruits him for Sarkhan: Homer sets about inventing a water pump that can be mass-produced with domestic materials at a cost peasant farmers can afford. And yet, regardless of the authors' intent, we cannot use the term the "ugly American" heroically; the term has irremediably come to reflect the book's morally ugly characters.

For this and for other reasons that will become clear in a moment, I would like to call this complex of heroic characteristics—this

multifaceted model for constructive diplomacy and projection of power—the Connecticut Yankee.

II

Perhaps because of the time-traveling premise, the plethora of illustrated editions, the adaptation into a movie with Danny Kaye, or its assignment to junior high and high school students, Twain's mercurially funny *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) is frequently misremembered as a kid's book, but it is not for children, nor should it be consigned to America's youth. The novel reads like a cheeky first roadmap for American cultural imperialism, and its plot—the story of an East Coast weapons manufacturer thrust into a medieval landscape where religious fundamentalism and antebellum views on equality hold the population in thrall—couldn't be more contemporary.

The novel's first crisis concludes with Hank Morgan's taking credit for an eclipse whose time and date he remembers from the future; moments before being burned at the stake he blocks out the sun and promises to keep it captive until a few demands are met. In light of his thirteen centuries' advantage in learning, he expects to be running the country within six months—or shame on him, he says. In the days and weeks after the eclipse, he rolls up his sleeves and consolidates his newfound authority with the judicious use of gunpowder and dynamite. (Indeed, the wisdom of thirteen extra centuries often exercises less influence than does history's coincidental improvement in making things go boom.) After he blows up the magician Merlin's tower, Hank Morgan is installed as King Arthur's prime minister, with the unofficial title of "Boss."

From there, the country sweeps into an accelerated transition. Directly or indirectly Hank issues new currency, establishes a newspaper and new communications networks, opens the economy, begins to dismantle the structures of inherited nobility, and lays the groundwork for elections. Having put these wheels in motion, he sets off across the English countryside on a picaresque journey whose quixotic adventures dominate the middle portion of the book. Hank's schemes continue to generate fireworks displays, pratfalls, and gags (knights in shining armor are ripe for comic fodder), but the novel matures, darkens, the slapstick gives way to tragicomedy. Twain's windmills are muddled thinking, inequality (e.g., indentured serfdom, patrilineage and inherited titles, and the codes of chivalry),

and the illiberal clamps placed upon a free spirit by the Roman Catholic Church. In the end, despite all of Hank's efforts to set things right, sixth-century England does not skip past its dark history into a modern Industrial Age complete with American-style democracy. The elections are derailed by backroom deals between warring factions, while most of the economic improvements—the factories and technical schools—must be dynamited to prevent their falling into the hands of an unfriendly religious establishment, which is fighting and winning a civil war kick-started by the reform process.¹

The Connecticut Yankee is a glimpse into some essential Americanisms, beginning with that religion of ingenuity, or faith in one's own lights, that de Tocqueville identified as a quintessentially American trait—the “principal [characteristic], which includes almost all the rest,” as he put it, that “in most of the operations of the mind each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding” (*Democracy in America*; vol. II, part I, ch. I). Any sketch of the major lineaments of the Connecticut Yankee's character would have to include the following:

Improviser, inventor, self-made man. Know-it-all and cagey self-promoter. Showman (when he's first on the scene). Engineer. Part Ben Franklin, part Don Quixote. A devout believer in progress, especially scientific and mechanical progress, and in the efficacy of progress, in its ability to make men of slaves: the future is bright, he says—bright for one and all. History on the other hand is dark, so sickeningly dark that one must keep moving. He's a picaro. A trickster who hates fetters on a free nature, the preordained enclosures erected by papists, inherited titles, serfdom, superstition, unjust

1. The climax of *A Connecticut Yankee* is arguably the most horrific and blackly funny battle scene ever committed to paper. Hank Morgan returns from France to discover that the Church and the nobility have allied and intend to sweep him out of power. He gathers with his 52 protégés in a valley redoubt, which they then surround with perimeters of electrified wire. The first heavily armored knight on patrol wanders over the ridge, curiously reaches out a metal mitt to the wire, and is electrified inside his suit. A second knight follows, dying when he touches on the shoulder the first knight—as though to say, hey, what are you doing standing there so strangely. And so on, and so on, each successive knight and then waves of knights frying when, hand on shoulder, hand on wire, their suit of armor joins the circuit of electrified metal. Such is the scale of Twain's vitriol towards inherited nobility that the battle eventually electrocutes—“elected” is Twain's vicious pun—11,000 knights, all of them still standing in their suits of armor, connected by outstretched arms, all of them silently toasting.

imprisonment—or anything that would weigh down or prevent free (Protestant) worship and personal transcendence. Everyone, he says, can have the liberalist dream; he espouses egalitarianism because it underwrites independence of mind, yet he doubts strict equality—some folk are plain superior. So, he’s a first among equals, a good boss with a ruthless streak. He endorses the nobility of the common man, hates the uppity, trusts in factories to turn out better, more rounded, more human individuals. At the same time, in his irregular hunger for power, he cons the ignoramus, exploits superstitions, and otherwise presses home the serendipitous advantages of circumstance; he wields political power in progress’s name, then gives it up as pointless or unsatisfying. He’ll go undercover for months, hiding from a fight, then rise, itching for one, the former soldier ready for almost limitless militarism. For all his Franklin-esque pragmatism, he struggles inwardly with a book-addled Quixote, the over-imaginative Don whose first inventive impulse is a Rube Goldberg.

III

Paul Theroux’s *The Mosquito Coast* (1982) synthesizes—in a sense is colonized by—several classic treatments of the colonial, including *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and *Heart of Darkness*; but as seminal as any of these influences is the conscious update of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Thus, an arc is traceable from Twain’s comic picaro, through the heroic constructions of *The Ugly American*,² to the anti-heroic megalomaniac Allie Fox, an arc that offers a clear measure of the American century.

2. As said before, *The Ugly American* advances six heroes: Ambassador MacWhite, Major Wolcheck, Homer Atkins (a.k.a. the “ugly American”), John Colvin, Father Finian, and Colonel Hillandale (a.k.a. the Ragtime Kid and the Six-foot Swami from Savannah). Together, these six embody all the taxonomical traits of the Connecticut Yankee: we have two forms of the Don, the Boss who is first among equals (Ambassador MacWhite, Sears’s replacement, who recruits and evaluates all the others) and the way-faring soldier of fortune (Maj. Wolchek, who advocates reading Mao’s tactical manuals and is ready for a heavy exchange of fire); the inventor and natural scientist overlap almost completely with the democrat-egalitarian-liberal humanist (Atkins, Colvin, and Finian—even the Catholic priest supporting freedom to worship); and the itinerant showman (Hillandale—as in “over hill and dale!”—who insinuates himself into hostile villages armed only with a harmonica and who exploits superstition in much the same way Hank Morgan exploited the eclipse). One variation of note: once the objective of intervention becomes “winning over,” rather than “taking over,” the Boss necessarily becomes a weaker part of the whole complex.

Allie Fox is a bible-quoting, religion-hating maverick inventor, who becomes convinced the American experiment has run aground, so much so that he expects a doomsday-type collapse: consumer capitalism has destroyed what makes America America. He uproots his hapless family from a farm in the Connecticut River Valley and drags them south to Honduras on a tramp steamer, and then inland and upriver, deep into the interior of the Honduran jungle, where they will forge and forage an authentically American, Edenic life. In the process, they will help the primitive, even prehistoric, natives live more progressively, countering the influence of missionaries with the preservation powers of refrigeration—Allie's first big project, after the house and outbuildings, is to construct a two-story, fire- and ammonia-powered condenser capable of forming and refrigerating blocks of ice.

The major elements of the Connecticut Yankee are here, but also some warping by the historical moment. Fox is certainly a Franklin; the emphases on ingenuity, natural science, progress, and antireligious liberalism are intact. But he is not complete as a Quixote. He has lost his soldiering aspect and is never really game for a fair fight. In keeping with the rise of America's fortunes, the Boss's role has inflated in Fox to minor tyranny—he is troubled not by others' strengths but by their weaknesses. Egalitarianism becomes catch-as-catch-can and seems always to favor another.³ And since Theroux excises from his colonizers any claims to charm, Fox makes an ambivalent showman. Several times, in a strange public spectacle of his power, he makes his son climb to dangerous heights; but in general he performs for the captive audience of his family. Because the preparatory stages of each invention are amplified into opera, the unveiling, rather than beguile, always feels punitive and condescending. So, while he is clearly Franklin-esque, the moral purity of invention is clouded: Fox's gadgets and machines, the scientific layout of the hut and grounds, the irrigation system, all his ingenuity is supposed to make life easier; yet several machines are benighted—the ice machine to the point of becoming murderous.

3. Some of this extends from a change in point of view. The Boss in *A Connecticut Yankee* is scaled by the first person. With an omniscient narrator in *The Ugly American*, the Boss shrinks. *The Mosquito Coast* on the other hand is told by the son looking up, as it were, at his father's power.

At novel's end, when scavenging shore birds are pecking Allie Fox to death, one wonders if it's the final death of the Connecticut Yankee, too.

IV

We're about ten years into the "New American Century," and I'm still waiting for his return. Pick up a piece of contemporary American fiction depicting Americans abroad, and you'll likely run into a pilgrim seeking personal progress amid the uncanniness of a foreign landscape.⁴ Or a war photographer. And here are the "well-meaning," the volunteers eager to make a difference in a host country. And there are the outposts of a few station agents—the legates and company men who forgot to come home. But democracy-spreading, fundamentalism-fighting nation-builders?⁵

This absence from fiction is tragic because the Connecticut Yankee persists behind the scenes, and unmonitored, un-critiqued, he runs amok. Allie Fox returns as Fox News and invisibly guides the voices convincing us that we can mandate women's rights in the craters and caves of Afghanistan, or drop into a scrubby country and install democracy as one would a sprinkler system. If such adventures feel absurd, it is thanks to the Connecticut Yankee that they also feel tautological. Listen to the soldiers speaking of their time in Iraq, of the good they feel they are doing, and you will hear Hank Morgan and his descendants. As a Franklin, ready to improvise a new sewer system, the soldier pumps the mechanical successes, the infrastructure progress, the worthwhileness of working shoulder-to-shoulder with Iraqis to put their country (back) together. As the Don, addled by romances connecting Saddam Hussein and 9/11, as a

4. I'm not trying to reduce any novel to this one dimension, so as an example I'll mention only Benjamin Kunkel's recent *Indecision*.

5. If the Connecticut Yankee was going to appear anywhere, it should have been in Tom Bissell's excellently written collection, *God Lives in St. Petersburg* (2005), about well-meaning Americans in Central Asia in the '90s. Unfortunately, with the idea of progress relativized, American know-how—the possibility of re-tinkering a start-up economy, of showing the natives a hundred little better ways to live—has been reduced to the tasks of teaching English, taking pictures, and exploring sexuality. In other words, the book re-inserts Greene's romanticisms, and the concomitant layers of complexity, back into *The Ugly American*.

first-among-equals-type Boss, he extols the egalitarian election, the newly elected government, and, unironically, self-rule.

Perhaps, in the end, the Connecticut Yankee is not appearing in fiction of Americans abroad because he has become too old for hands-on overseas work and has been reduced to pulling levers from behind a domestic curtain. But we should keep an eye out. He's still ingenious, still believes in progress and propaganda, he still fears history and memory and carries a long list of countries in need of advanced plumbing and some form of elections. He or perhaps now it's his sons are around here somewhere.