

Mark Twain was converted to downright
worship of Joan....

-- Bernard Shaw, Preface to Saint Joan

CHAPTER IX PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF JOAN OF ARC

Among all his works, Twain considered Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc his best. He had a lifelong interest in St. Joan's story and the Maid of Orleans was his favorite character in history, no doubt because her story is the story of innocence and virtue triumphing over evil. As a thirteen-year-old printer's apprentice in Hannibal, Twain became fascinated by a leaf from a book which described the Maid's persecution in prison by the rough English soldiery.¹⁸⁰ The interest was kept alive while Twain was engaged in writing his earlier works. During that time he spent twelve years studying her story. He then spent another two in writing it. Since the book "cost" him the most, he thought it was his best work. In 1900 he said:

I like the Joan of Arc best of all my books; & it is the best; I know it perfectly well...¹⁸¹
I have never done any work before that cost so much thinking and weighing and measuring and planning and cramming, or so much cautions and painstaking execution.¹⁸²

Such remarks surprise latter-day readers who can only wonder why he could think the book his best. In fact, the time and energy Twain devoted to writing the book was largely wasted and the outcome is close to total failure. It is obvious that in this work

something more was involved than Twain's rational mind. He was emotionally committed to the book and this extra dimension was something he was not in control of..

Twain had lost his faith in mankind. Evil had been growing more and more powerful in his later works, A Connecticut Yankee and Pudd'nhead Wilson. It is therefore a great surprise to see the vision of triumphant innocence being established again in Joan of Arc. Twain creates Joan as an embodiment of purity, youth and innocence, radiant and serene in the world of evil. Joan is completely a flat character with no dimensions at all. In the courtroom where she is brought for trial, Joan is shown friendless and alone among the learned jury carefully selected for the destruction of the Maid. But Joan defies them with her presence of mind, courage, fortitude, intelligence, constancy, simplicity and candor. They weary and burden her with long and complicated questions. Sometimes the interrogators shift their ground suddenly and pass to another subject to see if she will contradict herself. But Joan always replies with astonishing wisdom, memory and great prudence as if she is inspired. Many times they set traps by asking questions that will lead her to say something dangerous for her safety, but Joan disappoints the courtroom and says with reposeful indifference, "Passez outre."¹⁶³ Each trap falls. In fact, Twain's image of Joan is unrealistic and unconvincing. She symbolizes the total triumph of the innocent:

Ah, had she a mind such as I have described? You see what these priests say under oath -- picked men, men chosen for their places in that terrible court on account of their learning, their experience, their keen and practised intellects, and their strong bias against the prisoner. They make that poor young country-girl out the match, and more than the match, of the sixty-two trained adepts. Isn't it so? They from the University of Paris, she from the sheepfold and the cow-stable! Ah, yes, she was great, she was wonderful. It took six thousand years to produce her; her like will not be seen¹⁶⁴ in the earth again in the fifty thousand.

Any random comparison with the Saint Joan of Bernard Shaw shows how the heroine and inquisitors of Twain's romance are no more complexly drawn than stock black-and-white characters from melodrama.

Twain sentimentalizes the image of Joan by his excessive and extreme admiration of her. The reason for the sentimentalization is partly because Joan appeals to his romantic ideal of womanhood. But a far deeper, more complicated reason is that Joan is his only hope to recapture his psychological balance, to regain his vision of innocence. At this time, Twain had suffered the loss of personal inner harmony. His vision of life had become blacker and blacker and his vision of childhood and happiness had been destroyed. The vision of the Happy Valley in Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn is built on personal experience and imagination and it has primarily a personal meaning rather than a universal one. When later, pessimism has a strong hold on him, he¹⁵ no longer able to conjure up such a vision. He therefore seeks out a story in

which he can re-establish his faith in life. He finds Joan's story -- embedded in historical fact -- suitable for the purpose. It is the story of a real, historical triumph over innocence, not just an imaginary one. Thus, Twain can praise innocence again simply by sticking to the historical account, and without having to fight through the blackness to invent his own story. Twain wrote the story almost therapeutically, as if by keeping the peaceful vision of evil before his eyes, he could ward off the darker vision threatening to engulf him.

But Twain is too sentimental about women to manage a believable portrait of one with whom his emotions are involved. Worse than that, psychologically too much was at stake. In the courtroom scene, Joan is presented as an innocent maiden conquering all. Joan's genius has flowered without training. Joan is pale and triumphant at such great length that the book sinks into boredom. To accuse Mark Twain, of all people, of unadorned sentimentalism is a serious charge, but it is a charge that must be leveled. As we have seen, Twain tried hard to search for realism both in expression and in his view of life. His attack on the *Orange Bone* by Scott's romantic novels and his strong attack on Cooper's idealized image of the Noble Red Man and Cooper's romantic fictions, The Pathfinder and The Deerslayer, exemplify how Twain regarded realism as his guiding literary principle. Yet, ironically such a confirmed anti-romanticist comes to produce in Joan of Arc a work of total romanticism and sentimentalization. The book is evidence of how carelessly Twain unconsciously abandoned his own literary principle. In the Preface of Joan of Arc, the

author's dismaying tone and motive are revealed:

When we reflect that her country was the brutalest, the wickedest, the rottenest in history since the darkest ages, we are lost in wonder at the miracle of such a product from such a soil....But the character of Joan of Arc is unique. It can be measured by the standards of all times without misgiving or apprehension as to the result. Judged by any of them; judged by all of them, it is still flawless, it is still ideally perfect.¹⁸⁵

Twain intentionally sets up her portrait as a contrast to the age she lived in. Because of her uniqueness, Twain tends to make her a Christ figure, the "ideally perfect" individual who "was not made as others are made."¹⁸⁶ Joan is clearly a saint but also a superhuman child. During her trial, "she rose above the limitations and infirmities of our human nature."¹⁸⁷

Similarly to Huck Finn and A Connecticut Yankee, the book is written in the first-person narrative technique. Through Louis de Conte, Joan's life and the account of her martyrdom are revealed. However, here it is a useless device and nothing is gained by the use of the firstperson narrator. In introducing de Conte to the readers, Twain says that de Conte was Joan's page and secretary who was with her from the beginning until the end. Twain points out that since de Conte had shared the same experience as Joan ever since their childhood, he should be best qualified to tell her story:

I was her playmate, and I fought at her side in the wars; to this day I carry in my mind, fine and clear, the picture of that dear little figure....I was with her to the end... my hand was the last she touched in life.¹⁸⁸

But de Conte's special relation to Joan turns out not to be an asset; the tone of the book, the tone of sentimental adulation, does not help either. Twain gains no advantage in letting de Conte tell the story, especially since de Conte's personality is not revealed through his voice. In Huck Finn, the first-person device proves a success since Huck's personality is completely revealed in the book. Louis de Conte is in fact only Twain's vehicle to sentimentalize and weep over Joan. The tone of the book is consistently stilled maudlin, and mawkish:

It is pitiful to think of these things.
One wonders how they could treat
that poor girl so. She had not done
them any harm.¹⁸⁹

Again, in the court-room, de Conte speaks in Twain's voice describing the absurd, exaggerated portrait of Bishop Cauchon and sentimentalizing over Joan's fate in the trial:

When I looked around upon this
army of masters of legal fence...
and remembered that Joan must fight
for her good name and her life single-
handed against them, I asked myself what
chance an ignorant poor country-girl of
nineteen could have in such an unequal
conflict and my heart sank down low, very
low. When I looked again at that obese
president, puffing and wheezing there, his great
belly distending and receding with each breath,
and noted, his three chins... and his repulsive

cauliflower nose, and his cold and malignant eyes -- a brute, every detail of him -- my heart sank lower still.¹⁹⁰

But when Joan enters the court-room, de Conte gives us a portrait of a romanticized young girl:

What a dainty little figure she was,
and how gentle and innocent, how
winning and beautiful in the fresh
bloom of her seventeen years!¹⁹¹

The account of Twain's attack on organized religion and the monarchical government found in Joan of Arc repeats the same theme of The Innocents Abroad and A Connecticut Yankee. Similarly to A Connecticut Yankee, Joan of Arc proves a failure because of Twain's lack of detachment, because of unbalance and overstatement, and because of the sophomoric quality of the argument. Twain's portrait of Cauchon is a caricature of absolute evil. His distaste for Catholicism is displayed by his attack on the Bishop and his associates, by showing their hypocrisy and their cruelty and injustice to Joan. In fact, Twain writes the book with his emotions; the book is deprived even of the flavor of historical authenticity. Now and then he even slips and makes de Conte mouth his own pessimistic beliefs about the depravity of the human race. When de Conte hears the reports that the King was going to ransom Joan, he says:

I believed these, for I was young
and had not yet found out the little-
ness and meanness of our poor human
race, which brags about itself so
much, and thinks it is better and
higher than the other animals.¹⁹²

This is human nature and it will not change; man cannot improve. The passage suggests once again Twain's painful awareness of the inconvertible evil in humanity. Joan will always be killed whenever she appears in the world since her victory is only in moral principle. Man is not made to appreciate her goodness and Joan will always be judged according to human pettiness.

As a whole, the book proves a failure, though Twain worked most laboriously and treasured it greatly. The book is his desperate artistic attempt to regain personal balance and inner harmony. But it fails because the effort to recapture faith in innocence is strained and artificial. Joan is his only hope to regain his view of innocence. She is part of history, a triumphant figure in the world of evil, and Twain sizes upon her like a drowning man clutching at straw. Twain strains to make his point. He makes it at extremely great length, six hundred pages of the same unrelieved sentiment, over and over again. The novel is tedious; it is not a complicated enough vehicle to support every-thing he needs to use it for, and often loses control over his material and gets lost in long drawn-out flat historical narrative. Thus, his attempt to regain faith in innocence is a failure. The book in fact contains some of Twain's worst writing, certainly the least interesting of his major works, and is often almost unreadable.

Even at that, Joan's triumph is only a moral victory, for innocence does not literally triumph. Joan of Arc is burned at the stake. Twain knows, even in this last long hymn to innocence, that Joan's victory is at best incomplete. Even if innocence and

virtue should survive, even if we admire those who are innocent and virtuous, the world is so constructed that the innocent and the virtuous are doomed. The Joans will always be crucified.