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Nineteenth-Century American Travel Writings on the Catalan-Speaking Community

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Catalan Review, Vol. XII, number 1 (1998), p. 61 - 72

NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN TRAVEL WRITINGS ON THE CATALAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY¹

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The incorporation of foreign languages and cultures into the literary imagination of the United States owes a great deal to the cultural work of nineteenth-century travel and travel writing. Let me begin with an example to illustrate how this is true of the Catalan-speaking lands. Towards the end of April, 1818, the young Bostonian George Ticknor, who was traveling from Perpignan to La Jonquera, relates in one of his diary entries that the driver of the stagecoach on which he was traveling had been born "on the wrong side of the Pyrenees" (Travels 8-9). This unfortunate circumstance notwithstanding, he ironically adds that the man had always lived in France and "managed so well in his travels and emigrations that he cannot speak one word either of French or Spanish, nothing, in short, but the patois of the frontiers and coast which is common to this part of both countries, and has little relation to the genuine language of either" (Travels 8-9). Ticknor eventually became the first Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard University, and three decades later was to write on the Catalan language with more academic knowledge in his *History of Spanish Literature* (1849).² However, the first impressions on the language of the Catalan-speaking territories that Ticknor and other American travelers provided to nineteenth-century readerships too often was that of a dialect, a *patois* of the borderlands, an idiomatic hodge-podge. In short, it was viewed as a bastardized language with an unbalanced surplus and lack of features that rendered it incomplete alongside the perfection of its two major neighbor national languages.

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to the Generalitat de Catalunya for awarding me a CIRIT grant to carry out research on this subject at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1992-1993, and also to the Barra Foundation for supporting my research at the Library Company of Philadelphia in March of 1998 with its International Fellowship in American History and Culture.

² Longfellow, who took over the Harvard professorship when Ticknor retired, was also interested in Catalan. The introduction to the Spanish part in his anthology *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* (1845) contains a brief description of the language, its origins, and the area in which it is spoken. Moreover, a notebook at the Houghton Library contains several pages with notes on the Catalan language, mostly transcriptions of religious prayers, proverbs, and the proceedings of a court case. I am grateful to Susan Halpert, reference librarian at the Houghton Library, for having provided me with a transcript of those notes.

The perception of Catalan that Americans held throughout most of the nineteenth century was, if we are to rely on many of the travel writings that deal with it, unfavorable, fragmentary, and for the most part erroneous. James Riley, who also first heard the language spoken in Roussillon, dubbed it "an impure Spanish" and, even worse, "the mongrel Spanish of Catalonia" (I, 210). Likewise, George Parsons Lathrop, Nathaniel Hawthorne's son-in-law, wrote about "the uncouth *patois* of the locality, in which French and Spanish are outlandishly mingled" (183). These two examples, drawn from the large, extant body of American travel writing on the Peninsula, evidence some of the misconceptions certain travelers came to believe. However, for lack of a full-fledged American travel book on the Catalan-speaking area, these and other less belittling impressions interspersed in narratives, book chapters, essays, diaries, and letters are worth studying. This essay, arising from the study of nineteenth-century cross-cultural relations between Europe and the United States rather than from a strictly philological approach, seeks to make known some brief impressions on Catalan present in several nineteenth-century American travel books on Spain. Furthermore, in so doing, it discusses linguistic, cultural, political, and aesthetic prejudices of the period that on certain occasions compelled these travel writers to deploy a discourse antagonistic to Catalan. Surely, if we leave a few cases aside, their subjective observations are not as reliable as one might expect as a means of appraising the true state of the language in Catalonia in the nineteenth century; there are scholarly texts that have fortunately carried out such a task (Anguera; Solà; Vallverdú). Yet, bearing in mind what the literary historian William Charvat has demonstrated, that throughout most of the past century the travel book was the second-most read literary genre in the United States after history (74), these travel writings become relevant since they shed light on the extent and degree to which middle or highbrow audiences became exposed to views of Catalan.

The American travelers who wandered across Europe in the past century constituted a very heterogeneous group that concomitantly participated, unawares, in an extremely cohesive cultural practice that ritualized the discovery of otherness and turned it into a valuable commodity (Buzard 160; Stowe 18-25). The discovery of Europe undertaken by these travelers can be divided by and large into two separate periods. To the initial decades belong the writings of litterati, educators, soldiers, and diplomats who still followed, *mutatis mutandis*, the philosophy of the eighteenth-century Grand Tour, albeit already manifesting the influence of a clear Romantic sensibility. This is the generation of George Ticknor, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Washington Irving, and other writers who opened the gates to

American participation in the construction of the myth of Romantic Spain. No doubt these antebellum authors are the ones who wrote the most interesting travel narratives in the century, for they still depicted a Spain untouched by the modern events and developments that were already transforming other European nations.

The American Civil War interrupted the flow of travelers to Europe for a few years, but no sooner had the conflagration ended than they set out on the continental tour with increased eagerness. Goaded by transatlantic and local improvements in transportation and communications, and later animated by the economic bonanza of the Gilded Age, the American travelers of the final decades of the last century flooded the Old World searching for new routes. The Iberian Peninsula gradually became one of their favorite destinations off the beaten track. This is the age of the tourist, in the modern sense of the word, incarnated and trivialized in Mark Twain's image of "the innocent abroad." Whether they became innocent tourists frightened by the immense cultural legacy of Europe or whether they turned out to be self-proclaimed iconoclasts proud of Yankee values, the men and women who made up the swarms of late nineteenth-century European travel also wrote travel literature, though on average much inferior in literary quality and fraught with guidebook conventions.

The American travelers who visited Spain in the nineteenth century, like their European counterparts, often proceeded across the Catalan-speaking territories as if they were mere passing zones. They rushed through them in order to experience the essence of Imperial Spain and Moorish Andalusia as soon as possible. In the construction of this foreign reality, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, and Catalonia played little or no part (Sánchez 69).

The intertextual network that had constructed the myth of Romantic Spain during the first half of the nineteenth century was so strong that this naturally was the image that remained in the American imagination for many decades. The American travelers in Spain, influenced as they were by the Orientalist and medieval views of the Iberian Peninsula disseminated by some European authors and some of their own compatriots alike, expected to find a sudden Hispanic milieu laden with sensualism, historical associations, and other peculiarities. These should immediately convey what they took to be the true essence of "Spanishness," that is, what James Buzard, speaking of Anglo-American travel writing at large, has termed "the authenticity effect" (177).

The nobility, softness, and sonority of the Spanish language appear among the attributes that, in the eyes of many a traveler, helped to fully experience the spirit of the place. Washington Irving, in a letter he sent from Madrid in early May of 1827 to his friend Thomas

Storrow, expressed this belief that subsequently other travel writers of the period also verbalized:

The more I am familiarized with the language the more I admire it. There is an energy, a beauty, a melody and richness in it surpassing in their combined proportions all other languages that I am acquainted with... It is characteristic of the nation; for with all its faults, and in spite of the state into which it has fallen, this is a noble people, naturally full of high and generous qualities... There are more natural gentlemen among the common people of Spain than among any people I have ever known, excepting our Indians" (Letters II, 233-34).

By means of the above-mentioned qualities and the implicit allusion to Rousseau's concept of the noble savage, the author of *The Alhambra* believed that the Spanish language encompassed the inherent nobility found in Spaniards like his cicerone, the ragged hidalgo Mateo Ximénez. His comment, however, shows but the tip of a large textual iceberg where eulogies to the most Castilian aspects of "Spanishness" abound at the expense of other linguistic and cultural signs of peninsular difference.³

The biases of some nineteenth-century travelers are comparable to those of the average modern tourist. Just as nowadays tour operators, television networks, and other media feed postmodern tourists with multiple images of abroad, so fiction, travel books, and periodical literature influenced travelers in the past century. Irving, like many of his contemporaries, had read some Spanish classics before going to Spain, and, consequently, traveled across the Iberian Peninsula with literary models and linguistic preconceptions difficult to deconstruct. As sociologist Dean MacCannell has cogently demonstrated, the pleasure experienced by the tourist during the act of travel stems above all from a system of attractions exerted between a marker or sign and the original sight. The culminating and most pleasurable moment in the traveler's journey is therefore that in which he or she is able to

³ Another good example of the American traveler's passion for the Castilian tongue can be found in *A Year in Spain*, by the New Yorker Alexander Slidell Mackenzie: "In its present state, the Spanish language is perhaps the most excellent of all. Like the Italian, full of vowels, it lends itself with ease to the uses of poetry, and furnishes the most graceful garb to a happy idea... As a spoken language, the Spanish is unequalled; for while its graceful inflections and sonorous cadences please the ear, even of one who does not understand them, the mind is delighted and self-love flattered and gratified by a thousand happy proverbs and complimentary expressions... In the pulpit the Spanish is dignified and solemn, requiring but a little skill and feeling to kindle it into eloquence; at the head of an army it is prolonged, powerful, and commanding; in ordinary discourse it is expressive, sprightly, and amusing; from an enraged voice, its gutturals are deeply expressive of hatred and detestation; as the language of a lover, as the vehicle of passion, the Spanish has an earnest eloquence, an irresistible force of feeling; in the mouth of a woman it is sweet, captivating, and fraught with persuasion" (III, 296-97).

collapse both the marker and the sight. The original monument or landscape gains or loses value insofar as it appropriately matches its reproduction (39-45). Similarly, a trip to Spain did not represent to the American traveler an opportunity to broaden one's horizons, but rather became a way to prove a solid training in foreign culture, a training one previously acquired only through schooling at home. The writing of a travel book was the rhetorical exercise that concluded that process and in turn created new markers for future travelers.

Nineteenth-century American travelers employed a discourse antagonistic to Catalan because that bewildering tongue linguistically denied them a clearly defined, direct entry to that which they culturally regarded as southern Europe. Paradoxical as it may seem, their travel accounts neither manifest curiosity nor present Catalan as a new asset for the exoticism travelers often sought. Instead, the documents stand as an uneasy reminder of the diversity that travelers were discovering everywhere. The anonymous author of *Scenes in Spain* (1837), probably a native of New Orleans, describes Catalan as "a bastard language, which seems to be a jumble of French, Italian, Spanish, and perhaps other tongues," and also adds that it has "a harshness of accent more worthy of a northern latitude than of the soft and sunny clime of the Mediterranean" (323). This traveler cannot bear the presence of an element that distorts his presumption of the Mediterranean world as a Dionysian milieu, but he is not the only one to make such a complaint. The same connection between Catalan and the symbolic locus of the north appears in Octavia Walton LeVert's *Souvenirs of Travel* (1857), where she writes about a people who "are the descendants of the Goths, and are in strong contrast with the other Spaniards, being of fair complexion, with light hair and blue eyes. They speak a *patois* styled *Catalan*, a harsh, disagreeable language. Not a sound of the noble and flowing Castilian can be traced in it" (I, 58). In texts such as these, readers found subjective discourses that charged the minority language with inharmony and denied it exoticism in order to disqualify—from a linguistic standpoint, at least—the presence of otherness. The non-Mediterranean view of the people that some texts disseminated through their views on the language nevertheless contrasts with the emphasis they particularly placed on the industriousness of the Catalans, stereotypically represented as hard-working northerners.

The comments discussed so far refer to the eastern Catalan dialect, whose phonetics confused travelers to the extent of making them believe they were listening to an apparently unintelligible language. Moreover, some travellers became truly frustrated since they were not able to communicate with a predominantly monolingual population that showed difficulty as well as a strong accent when speaking

Spanish.⁴ The Catalan spoken in Valencia, however, escaped this criticism because from a phonetic and geographic point of view, it opened the gates to the travelers' theoretical idea of the south. Caleb Cushing provides a good example of this in his Romantic sketchbook *Reminiscences of Spain* (1833). There he relates how, as he was walking along the *horta* of Valencia with his wife, he encountered two young girls:

[They] entered into conversation with us, if conversation it could be called, with all the native sprightliness of the light-hearted Valencians. I say, if conversation it could be called; for I confess it demanded no slight exercise of ingenuity to comprehend the language they spoke. It was the dialect of the country, a combination of Castilian with the old Provençal, which the French brought into Catalonia when they conquered the country from the Moors, and which spread with the progress of the Christian arms into Valencia. *This idiom sounds harsh and repulsive in the mouths of the Catalans; but is liquid, delicate, and soft when articulated by Valencians, and especially by the musical lips of their lively women* (I, 198).

In Cushing's travel sketch the language is not appraised according to race, class, or nation but by the speaker's gender. The last lines—which I have italicized deliberately—not only draw on the polarity between a “repulsive” north and a “delicate” south but also on a stereotypical notion of Spanish womanhood that betrays the patriarchal bias of certain nineteenth-century travel writings.

Surely the arguments on the dissonance and lack of purity of Catalan wielded by some travelers are not exclusive to the Catalan language. They are old, universal linguistic prejudices that have been applied to other languages as well.⁵ It can be argued, however, that the comments written by some nineteenth-century American travelers at

⁴ Several travelers recorded the monolingualism of the time. Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, for example, became melancholy in Tarragona on seeing local travelers going to and fro while he was sitting alone, for “the girl that waited upon me at table spoke even less Spanish than myself” (I, 69). Likewise, in reference to the local peasants, Samuel Parsons Scott wrote, “Few of them speak Spanish, their dialect, which has a distinct literature, being nearly identical with the ancient Limousin” (248). In a city like Barcelona the situation was slightly different, for a traveler could make himself understood by means of Spanish and French. John Milton Mackie observed that the local language was “always used by the Catalonians in their intercourse with each other; though in conversing with Spaniards, they employ the Castilian. This latter is taught in the schools, as a foreign tongue, and is not understood by a considerable portion of the peasantry” (232).

⁵ Francesc Feliu et al. have studied several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary treatises in defense of the Catalan language where the apologists try to refute linguistic prejudices similar to those expressed by the nineteenth-century American travelers I analyze here. A good example of a text that defends the intrinsic beauty of the Catalan language is Fra Agustí Eura's “Controvèrsia sobre la perfecció de l'idioma català” (67–102).

times manifest neoclassical aesthetic criteria akin to picturesque theories of the moment. Travel writers often resorted to such theories to represent landscapes and people by means of set rules of form and composition. The language, almost reduced to the condition of landscape or painting, may thus be valued according to the effect it has on the listener, and its intrinsic beauty may be made to depend on the harmonious distribution of elements just as if it were a canvas on the traveler's easel.⁶ We previously saw that Irving praised the Castilian language because of the "combined proportions" its diverse characteristics gave to it. To some travelers' ears, however, Catalan fell flat: it sounded less euphonious and was more irregular, thus leaving the realm of the Picturesque to enter, in terms of aesthetic theory,⁶ the awe-inspiring category of the Sublime.

The sound friction of Catalan repelled and at the same time baffled some travelers. Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, who in October of 1826 was traveling across Roussillon to Barcelona, relates in *A Year in Spain* that in Perpignan "the Provençal begins to blend itself with the Catalan, the latter entering more and more into the compound as you approach the Pyrenees." What begins as a neutral statement, however, progressively becomes a more subjective evaluation of the language:

The Provençal is a degenerate offspring of the Latin, between the French and Italian, the French words being terminated by aspirated vowels, and softened into an Italian pronunciation ... But the Catalan ... is a rougher and much harsher tongue: it has a hawking, spluttering sound, which may have come with the barbarians from the north of Europe (I, 24).

Not everybody, though, referred to Catalan as a spluttering language of barbarians. In *By Ways of Europe*, Bayard Taylor provides a pragmatic scenario in which the local language is far from being associated with uneducated speakers. While traveling by train from Girona to Barcelona, he observes some passengers:

...belonging to the better class, and speaking in Spanish whenever it was necessary, all seemed to prefer the popular dialect. Proprietors of estates and elegant young ladies conversed together in the rough patois of the peasants, which to me was essentially tantalizing, because it sounded so familiar, and yet was so unintelligible (157).

Taylor goes on with his narration and affirms that this language, so suggestive and at the same time so unintelligible, is related to the

⁶ The manipulation of these picturesque conventions to encapsulate and freeze the exoticism of otherness makes itself manifest in the chapters on the Balearic Islands and Catalonia that Bayard Taylor included in *By-Ways of Europe* (Gifra).

Provençal and “differs very slightly from the dialect spoken on the other side of the Pyrenees.” For him Catalan “is terse, forcible, and expressive, and I must confess that the lisping Spanish, beside it, seems to gain melody at the expense of strength” (157). In short, he views Catalan as a concise and expressive language which has sacrificed a musical intonation pattern in order to be more vigorous.

The opinions on the expressiveness and the strength of the Catalan spoken in Catalonia and Valencia were also shared by some travelers who spent some time in Minorca with the American squadron in the Mediterranean. Charles Rockwell, who remained in Mahon for more than four months in 1834, acknowledges the public use of the local language and also observes that, due to its being located in a commercial crossroads, it has borrowed words from many other languages. The islanders, he states, especially those who work as sailors, are excellent polyglots.⁷ Rockwell passes judgment on the intrinsic qualities of the language with the following words:

Though I have seen but few books in this dialect, still, from residing in Mahon, and from having on board ship servants who spoke the language, some knowledge of it was forced upon me. Many of its words more nearly resemble French than Spanish, and, from their often having one or two syllables less than the corresponding Spanish words, the language has thus gained in brevity and force, while it is, at the same time, greatly deficient in the full and sonorous melody of sounds, which is the peculiar glory of the Castilian tongue (II, 58).

Just as Taylor does in the excerpt discussed above, Rockwell continues to praise the Castilian language yet makes clear that the “brevity and force” of the Catalan dialect of Minorca do not deserve to be underrated. A similar view was held by Enoch Cobb Wines, who called at Mahon on board the *Constellation* in 1829. Even though most of the officers who sailed with him found the language of Minorca lacking in musicality, Wines sustained a different opinion. After declaring that it is “essentially the same with the old Provençal language” and that “its basis is the Spanish and Italian ... considerably modified by the introduction of French and English terms,” he affirms that he perused “several manuscript songs in the Minorcan dialect, not altogether destitute of elegance of language or poetical spirit” (I, 158). The allusions to “few books” and “several manuscript songs” that Rockwell and Wines respectively make, interestingly enough, increase

⁷ “In Mahon, there have been engrafted on the original Catalan, uncouth and vulgar scions from most of the languages of Europe, to say nothing of the traces of the dialect of the Moors... In this way have English, Dutch, French, Italian, and other words become so blended with the Catalan, as used by the lower classes in Mahon” (II, 58-59).

the prestige of the language by shifting it from a mere oral sphere to a written culture in a period in which, as I have shown, most travelers regarded Catalan as the vulgar tongue of a rustic population.⁸

Many nineteenth-century American travelers, coming as they were from a country that was experiencing a sound process of political and cultural homogenization, tended to grasp otherness through frameworks that advocated a monolithic idea of the nation. Thus, they relegated the language of the Catalan-speaking lands—a living example of difference—to a peripheral position. This linguistic prejudice, a corollary of the American expansionist ideology that developed throughout the century, found some of its best allies in the conventions of travel writing and the didacticism of Romantic history. The latter became especially important as several travel writers co-opted the historical, nationalist discourse of New England historians like William H. Prescott, George Bancroft, and Francis Parkman in order to illustrate the rise and fall of empires and cultures like those found in Spain. The American republic, set in the century that witnessed the Monroe doctrine, lived through the optimism of the Jackson administration, established the ideology of Manifest Destiny, and crushed the seceding impulses of the southern states, needed to strengthen itself at home and abroad. Nothing was better than an allegorical reading of the fate of other empires and cultures (Levin). The study of the traits, languages, and other peculiarities of foreign nations on the wane thus allowed nineteenth-century travelers to display the pride they took in the rise of their own, which they expressed either through chauvinistic outbursts or through sentimental discourses associated with the passing of time.

The impressions present in the majority of travel writings are, as we have seen, too brief to allow any allegorical or historical account of the fate of Catalan. Only Ticknor, whose comments I have already mentioned at the beginning, pays some attention to medieval Catalan

⁸ This view is expressed, for example, by Francis Schroeder, who visited the island in January of 1844. He complains on several occasions that his ignorance of the language of the country is an obstacle to communicate with the locals, and he decries its orality as a major cause of his situation: "The intercourse of the society is not comfortable, from the abominable language, which is unwritten, and can not, therefore, be well acquired; and to brush up one's Spanish would scarcely avail, except among the upper classes" (II, 39). A few decades earlier, George Jones, who was also a member of the American fleet, had put forward this view in more inexorable terms: "Their dialect has no grammar, and but two or three small books; and it is too far removed from the Spanish to allow an access to the literature of that language. Imagine, then, the life of such a people: they are shut out from all sources of knowledge: to them, the sun rises, and seasons roll, without meaning: they know that there is a king in Spain, for they feel his iron hand on them: they know that there are other nations, for their ships come among them: but all else is a blank" (I, 72-73).

literature in his *History of Spanish Literature*. It comprises two chapters that he closes by employing the simile of a civilization that is born, develops, and finally, unable to resist the impetus of its Spanish neighbor, perishes. The marriage of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella—one of the major historical events most praised by Irving and his contemporaries—makes evident, according to Ticknor, the lack of political force of Catalan, and thus tilts the linguistic, political, and cultural balance towards Castile:

The change was certainly neither unreasonable nor ill-timed. The language of the North was already more ample, more vigorous, and more rich in idiomatic constructions; indeed, in almost every respect, better fitted to become national than that of the South. And yet we can hardly follow and witness the results of such a revolution with feelings of a natural regret; for the slow decay and final disappearance of any language bring with them melancholy thoughts, which are, in some sort, peculiar to the occasion ... But our regret is deeper when the language of a people is cut off in its youth, before its character is fully developed; when its poetical attributes are just beginning to appear, and when all is bright with promise and hope (I, 343-44).

The language Ticknor employs in these lines takes the reader close to the conventions and discourses of travel writing. If I mentioned before that the rules of the Picturesque provided many travelers with rhetorical strategies to dub a language incomplete, in this case it is the Romantic discourse employed for the contemplation of ruins what characterizes the traveler's view of the language. Ticknor, using such terms as "melancholy thought" and "our regret," echoes a discourse based on the inevitability of change, and seeks consolation in transcendent sentimentalism. As a young man he had stopped before the ruins of post-Napoleonic Saragossa to ponder death, the passing of time, and the fall of empires; so too from his Boston studio he was now ready to bury "the language of a people cut off in its youth," that is, the young corpse of Catalan.⁹ The death of the local language therefore seemed a foregone conclusion to be recorded by future generations of travelers visiting Valencia, the Balearic Islands, and Catalonia.

Today these travelers' superciliousness and their rejection of linguistic otherness sound like an anachronism in a country that has become an example of multiculturalism and multilingualism. Even though many comments uttered by some of the travelers discussed in this essay suggested an ominous future for the development of Catalan as a modern language, their implications have proved wrong. The

⁹ Many readers surely believed in Ticknor's pessimistic view on the future of Catalan. The former owner of the copy of *History of Spanish Literature* that I looked up at the Library Company of Philadelphia scribbled the word "End" possibly with that intention on the last page of the Catalan chapters (I, 344).

language has survived and the bilingualism of the population makes it easy for Spanish-speaking travelers to wander about. The academic research carried out since then has also corrected many of the wrong impressions represented in their writings. The average tourist visiting Europe on a package tour, however, may still believe what the mass media may want him or her to believe. The study of the perception of the Catalan language in twentieth-century American travel writing has not been carried out yet, but whoever undertakes such a task will surely have to count on texts, sounds, and images alike. All that nineteenth-century travel writers had to rely on was the power of the word to stir up their readers' imagination.

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