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Savage America in Frances Trollope's and Fanny Kemble's Travel Writing

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Abstract
This paper compares nineteenth-century travel accounts of two British women visiting the United States of America: Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* and Fanny Kemble's *Journal*. Both writers focus on similar issues and are equally critical of the young republic; what they particularly dislike is its political and social equality, American manners, and what they see as the absence of literature and art. The paper argues that this strongly negative way of depicting America stems first from the literary convention of anti-Americanism, widespread in nineteenth-century Europe, and second from both authors' wishes to elevate themselves while comparing their homeland with the "savage" New World.

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1. Introduction

Frances Trollope and Fanny Kemble were two Englishwomen who came to America in the late 1820s and early 1830s and described their experiences in published books: the former in *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), and the latter in her *Journal* (1835). Trollope's work was her first book on the way to establishing her as a popular writer. Kemble, on the other hand, was already famous as an actress when she came to the United States, which provided a context for the interest in her *Journal*. Written within the space of a few years, both books reveal a similar sense of superiority towards the new country, characteristic for most British travellers in the first half of the 19th century.

Frances Trollope came to America in 1827 to examine the possibilities of opening a business in Cincinnati. The project of establishing a "bazaar" turned out to be a spectacular failure, which may have coloured the writer's subsequent impressions of America. Her disillusionment with the USA as a country of infinite economic possibilities and her Tory sympathies resulted in a bitter, and often amusing, image of the young republic. Together with Basil Hall's 1829 *Travels in North* America, a travel account she referred to often in her own work, Trollope's book became a notorious example of British anti-American sentiments of the time[1]. She disliked everything in America: landscapes were not picturesque, cities were young and unimpressive, and non-white were treated unfairly: black slavery, so popular in a country boasting of its principles of freedom, and the displacement of "poor banished Indians" (37). She depicted America as savage and uncultivated in her observations, the most prominent of which include political and social equality, manners, literature and art.

Trollope's criticism was indeed very characteristic for early 19th-century British travellers; as Max Berger notes, later books on America displayed more tolerance and understanding (Berger 20). However, what makes Trollope's work stand out is the sheer accumulation of negative remarks and her bluntness in their formulation. She is probably the only travel writer open

[1] Both books caused a scandal in America. On the popularity of Hall's and Trollope's travel accounts in America, see Mesick 287-291.

enough to admit in the concluding passages of her book: "I do not like them [Americans – J.F.]. I do not like their principles, I do not like their manners, I do not like their opinions" (315). Other travel writers of the era seemed slightly more sympathetic. For example, Thomas Hamilton, in his 1833 *Men and Manners in America*, was equally critical of the treatment of blacks, American manners, and landscapes, yet he appreciated the existence of a "more enlightened class" (though he meant by this those who were conservative and pro-British) (Hamilton 243–244). Charles Dickens, whose *American Notes for General Circulation* were published in 1842, similar to Trollope disliked the American lack of table manners and their constant spitting and was horrified by slavery, but minding his American audience, his criticism was significantly milder and less straightforward. On the other hand, British enthusiasts of America, such as the famous reformer Frances Wright, whose 1821 *Views of Society and Manners in America* was almost completely uncritical of the new republic, constituted a minority.

There seems to have been no visible difference between the way women travellers and their male counterparts perceived America, apart from the fact that women less often commented on matters directly referring to the political system. Trollope herself coyly declared: "I am in no way competent to judge the political institutions of America" (47); she perceived her writing as relating rather to manners rather than to theoretical issues of political systems (which in fact did not prevent her from expressing strong opinions on American democracy).

Trollope's critical remarks are mirrored by the work of another British traveller from the same period, Fanny Kemble. Her *Journal* reports on an 1832 journey to the United States, where she went as a young actress on a tour with her father Charles Kemble. Even though the performances she gave were successful and the reception of the American audience welcoming, her opinion of the republic was not less critical than the one by Trollope. Later, in 1863, she published another account of her life in the United States, entitled *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839*. This work was more consciously critical of slavery, as it stemmed from Kemble's painful first-hand observations made at her American husband Pierce Butler's plantation. However, even the earlier *Journal* shows that the author focused on the same subjects as Frances Trollope in order to create a similar image of an uncivilized country. Even though both women came from different social backgrounds and had access to representatives of different classes in America (as Mesick notes, Trollope "did not mingle with the higher social ranks of people" – 292), their ways of perceiving the country were remarkably similar.

2. American equality

There is perhaps nothing Frances Trollope is as critical of as American equality. She does not like it in principle, believing it to be untenable and contrary to fact. She calls "that phrase of mischievous sophistry, "all men are born free and equal"' (64) a "false and futile axiom, which has done, is doing, and will do so much harm to this fine country" and strongly criticizes Thomas Jefferson for both his views and his morals in having produced offspring with his slaves. In fact, even though Trollope dislikes American slavery, she still believes that "its influence is far less injurious to the manners and morals of the people than the fallacious ideas of equality, which are so fondly cherished by the working classes of the white population in America" (147). She also does not fail to observe the contradiction between Americans' professed and practiced values when they speak of freedom and equality while maintaining the slave system intact (173).

What makes Trollope even more sceptical of equality are its social results. She abhors "that coarse familiarity, untempered by any shadow of respect, which is assumed by the grossest and the lowest in their intercourse with the highest and most refined" (102). She maintains that experiencing the Americans' behaviour is a trial for her European sensibility, ironically stating: "Strong, indeed, must be the love of equality in an English breast if it can survive a tour through the Union" (103). Where the difference of social relations between the United States and England is most visible and most painful is in the difficulty of obtaining good servants, as indicated by most British travellers to America. Trollope mentions that they are always called "help" rather than servants, as the latter term is often employed with reference to slaves and that they insist on equal treatment to an extent unheard of by the English ear (52).

Fanny Kemble is even more detailed in describing her horror of dealing with representatives of the lower social strata: she complains about having to converse with shop clerks (v.1, 93), washerwomen or shop boys sitting while they talk to her (v.1, 103), and innkeepers accompanying her during meals and expecting gratitude for their services (v.1, 215–216). All this, she believes, "has its origin in a vulgar misapprehension, which confounds ill breeding with independence" (v.1, 103). Thus, she does not criticize equality itself but rather what she believes to be its false form that she is forced to endure. At the same time, she claims that "a republic is a natural anomaly; there is nothing republican in the construction of the material universe; there be highlands and lowlands, lordly mountains as barren as any aristocracy, and lowly valleys, as productive as any labouring classes" (v.1, 56). In this way she naturalizes social hierarchy, making an easy connection between social

relations to landscape features. She believes inequality to be "inherent in us', praising the republic as 'the noblest, highest, and purest form of government', but not believing it to be practicable in the fallen world of human vice. This makes her famously declare: "America will be a monarchy before I am a skeleton" (v.1, 56). What is more, she already sees the first signs of such a state of affairs in the United States, as she believes American people to have substantially more aristocratic and elitist leanings than their government (v.1, 197).

3. American lack of manners

For both writers, Americans reveal their inferiority to Europeans in their apparent lack of breeding and social graces. Trollope openly speaks of what she perceives as a "universal deficiency in good manners and graceful demeanour, both in men and women" (124). Additionally, she makes general remarks on the American character, unsupported by any specific examples, such as "the standard of moral character in the United States is very greatly lower than in Europe" (236). Observations of this sort sound less like examined criticism, and more like pure expressions of prejudice, since they rely upon claims impossible to prove.

Her complaints are often very similar to those expressed by most British travellers to the United States: Americans lack civility at the table, eating their meals, hastily,in complete silence and in solitude, which tends to shock the English, who are used to polite conversations at dinner. When they do speak, it fails to meet Trollope'ssensibilities , as Americans tend to talk of such "vulgar" topics as politics or economy, which results in a "dull and heavy conversation", with "no charm, no grace" (47). Their manners are characterized by coldness (75), and the lodgings they offer are devoid of all that "Europeans conceive necessary to decency and comfort" (41).

Like other 19th-century travellers, most notably Charles Dickens[2], Trollope complains about the American habit of chewing tobacco and "incessant, remorseless spitting" (25). The practice leads her to some quasi-scientific musings:

[2] Dickens's passages on the annoying habit of spitting may easily count as the most poetic of his *American Notes*. For example, he writes: "In the courts of law, the judge has his spittoon, the crier his, the witness his, and the prisoner his… In the hospitals, the students of medicine are requested, by notices upon the wall, to eject their tobacco juice into the boxes provided for that purpose, and not to discolour the stairs. In public buildings, visitors are implored, through the same agency, to squirt the essence of their quids, or 'plugs', as I have heard them called by gentlemen learned in this kind of sweetmeat, into the national spittoons, and not about the bases of the marble columns" (Dickens 272–273).

> I am inclined to think this most vile and universal habit of chewing tobacco is the cause of a remarkable peculiarity in the male physiognomy of Americans; their lips are almost uniformly thin and compressed. At first I accounted for this upon Lavater's theory, and attributed it to the arid temperament of the people; but it is too universal to be explained; whereas the habit above mentioned, which pervades all classes (excepting the literary) well accounts for it, as the act of expressing the juices of this loathsome herb, enforces exactly that position of the lips, which gives this remarkable peculiarity to the American countenance. (182)

Thus, the "vile" and "loathsome" practice makes Americans repugnant, not only while it is being performed, but later as it engraves itself onto people's faces, leaving a permanent mark, and deforming their countenances. One can clearly notice that Trollope's displeasure at witnessing tobacco chewing makes her see it as not simply an inconvenience, a habit one might quit, but as something permanently linked with the very physical constitution of Americans. The description also allows her to casually mention the people's "arid temperament" *as if she were giving an obvious, scientifically established fact*.

According to *Domestic Manners*, American men do not know how to behave in public places such as theatres or courtrooms. Several times, Trollope depicts scenes of men sitting in a theatre "without their coats; … shirt sleeves tucked up to the shoulder", spitting, "the heels thrown higher than the head, the entire rear of the person presented to the audience, the whole length supported on the benches" (110). The same happens in courtrooms, where "not one in ten of the male part of the illustrious legislative audiences sat according to the usual custom of human beings" (181). Interestingly, both of these passages start with the exact same phrase: "the spitting was incessant". According to Mesick, Trollope's descriptions of theatre manners became so famous that, in subsequent, years American audience members would reprimand each other, shouting "a Trollope!" (Mesick 232).

It is not only the tobacco-chewing American men who are subjected to the writer's criticism; American women do not meet her standards her, either. "They powder themselves immoderately, face, neck, and arms, with pulverised starch; the effect is indescribably disagreeable by daylight, and not very favourable at any time. They are also most unhappily partial to false hair, which they wear in surprising quantities"; finally, their dress "is very far … from being in good taste" (234). American women are not depicted as deficient in natural beauty, but as applying "European" cosmetic products without moderation or awareness of its proper use. It is their lack of breeding that deforms their natural charms; they are portrayed as near savages, not entirely proficient at using the blessings of civilization. Thus, bearing in mind

the supposed vulgarity of both sexes, it is not surprising that when they meet at parties the result is lamentable: "The gentlemen spit, talk of elections and the price of produce, and spit again. The ladies look at each other's dresses till they know every pin by heart; talk of Parson Somebody's last sermon on the day of judgment, on Dr T'otherbody's new pills for dyspepsia" (57).

American vulgarity is closely connected to materialism; in Trollope's portrayal Americans not only constantly talk of money, which is unacceptable to the European genteel taste she wants to represent, but also think of it in every situation. Being interested in nothing but gain, they seem to have no free time and no ability to enjoy life (208). "Every bee in the hive is actively employed in search of that honey of Hybla, vulgarly called money; neither art, science, learning, nor pleasure can seduce them from its pursuit", Trollope declares (45). At the same time, Americans are depicted as self-centred and jingoistic: they enjoy talking only about their own country (218) and "believe themselves in all sincerity to have surpassed, to be surpassing, and to be about to surpass, the whole earth in the intellectual race" (255). Therefore, the writer perceives Americans not only as hopelessly primitive, but also as unjustifiably proud of their inferior state of society.

Fanny Kemble's complaints often echo those formulated by Trollope. "Society" does not come up to her expectations as its meetings are outrageously crude: "it has neither elegance, refinement, nor the propriety which belongs to ours; but is a noisy, rackety, vulgar congregation of flirting boys and girls, alike without style or decorum" (v.1, 160–161). After some time, she discovers other Americans she likes to associate with; however, "[t]o and Englishman, this *fashionable* society presents … a pitiful sample of lofty pretensions without adequate foundations", hopelessly attempting to imitate European aristocracy (v.1, 162). Kemble is also particularly critical of American women. She does not scold them for their looks like Trollope, but for the fact that they speak too loudly in company. The result she refers to as a "noise" or even "uproar, which, in her opinion, is all the more disturbing as American women are generally delicate and "feminine". Therefore, "the noise they make strikes one with surprise as something monstrous and unnatural – like mice roaring" (v.1, 244). Her expectations of what is proper behaviour in society are here intertwined with her beliefs of what constitutes "true" femininity – ideas clearly different to those held in America at that time.

Speaking of American men, like Trollope, Fanny Kemble is equally disgusted by the habit of spitting:

> The universal practice here of this disgusting trick, makes me absolutely sick; every place is made a perfect piggery of – street, stairs, steamboat, everywhere – and behind the scenes, and on the stage rehearsal, I have been

> shocked and annoyed beyond expression, by this horrible custom. To-day, on board the boat, it was perfect shower of saliva all the time. (v.1, 138)

What shocks her even more is the fact that chewing tobacco and spitting is not only characteristic of the lower classes, but it is equally practiced by gentlemen and in the presence of ladies. At the same time, she does appreciate the esteem shown in general by American men towards women; she claims that the "roughness and want of refinement" is compensated for by frequent "instances of civility", much exceeding the respect paid by British men to their female compatriots (v.1, 59). In effect, Kemble seems to be more generous than Trollope, occasionally sweetening her criticism with similar instances of appreciation for the American character.

At times, however, her praise is at the very least dubious. She ascribes to Americans "great acuteness, and sound common sense, sufficient general knowledge, and great knowledge of the world, an intense interest in every political measure, no matter how trivial itself, no sense of bashfulness, and a great readiness of expression" (v.1, 203). The qualities Kemble sees in Americans are rather basic; they testify to great pragmatism rather than refinement. Indeed, this passage brings to mind Frances Trollope's "praise" of Americans, in which she declares:

> There is no point in the national character of the Americans which commands so much respect as the boldness and energy with which public works are undertaken and carried through. Nothing stops them if a profitable result can be fairly hoped for. It is this which has made cities spring up amidst the forests with such inconceivable rapidity; and could they once be thoroughly persuaded that any point of the ocean had a hoard of dollars beneath it, I have not the slightest doubt that in about eighteen months we should see a snug covered rail-road leading direct to the spot. (271)

Trollope expresses her "respect" by portraying Americans as infinitely greedy and materialistic; Kemble is significantly subtler, yet the two passages share a similar trope. Kemble does not go as far as Trollope in depicting Americans as primitive materialists; still, she is not very fond of the pragmatic spirit she observes in the United States. She complains of an "absolute absence of imagination", and adds: "[a]n American can no more understand a fanciful jest than a poetical idea" (v.1, 337). In another passage she writes: "[c]ertainly America is not the country of large idealities – it is the very reverse … the country of large realities, i.e. large acquisitiveness, large causality, large caution, and small veneration and wonder" (v.2, 93). According to both authors, this pragmatic side of Americans and their inability to wonder finds

its expression in their attitude towards beauty as well as underdevelopment of literature, art and architecture.

4. Literature and art

Both authors notice that Americans seem to have no appreciation for the beautiful, a trait especially visible in their reactions to the beauty of nature. Kemble writes of American indifference towards "glorious tabernacles of nature" and "scenes of grandeur and loveliness, that any creature with half a soul would gaze at with feelings almost of adoration" (v.2, 193). Devoid of even this "half a soul", the pragmatic Americans seem unable to contemplate nature for an extended period. This leads the writer to reflect upon the possible source of such a disposition: "is it possible that a perception of the beautiful in nature is a result of artificial cultivation?" (v.2, 193). By declaring that appreciation on nature's beauty may not be an innate human trait, she implies that, unlike Europeans, who are amazed at nature's spectacle, Americans cannot appreciate it as they are uncultivated.

Frances Trollope makes a similar observation when she meets American tourists at the Niagara Falls (300). Her explanation of this incapacity to admire nature is connected with what she perceives as the miserable state of American arts: the nation's utter materialism and lack of interest in questions of the spirit. In Trollope's opinion, American literature is underdeveloped, since "they are too actively employed to read, except at such broken moments as may suffice for a peep at a newspaper" (80). What is more, Americans have no knowledge of art, as they appreciate paintings only for "the finish of drapery" and "resemblance in a portrait", never referring to its drawing or composition (209–210).

Kemble's portrayal of the state of American art and literature is similar. "Where are the poets of this land?", she rhetorically asks twice within the same paragraph (v.1, 212), and at another instance she muses:

> where are my peculiar objects of pleasure? where are the picture-galleries – the sculptures – the works of art and science – the countless wonders of human ingenuity and skill – the cultivated and refined society – the intercourse with men of genius, literature, scientific knowledge – where are all the sources from which I am to draw my recreation? they are not. The heart of a philanthropist may indeed be satisfied, but the intellectual man feels a dearth that is inexpressibly painful (v.2, 85)

She would expect the glorious landscapes of America to have produced literary "giants": "Homers and Miltons, and Goethes and Dantes, and Shakespeares". By enumerating the geniuses of England, Greece, Germany and Italy,

she makes it even more visible that America, in her eyes, is a literary desert. Like Trollope, she believes Americans to be "marvelously unpoetical", because they are "swallowed up in life and its daily realities, wants, and cares… full of toil and thrift, and money-getting labour" (v.1, 213). Americans have no time for poetry; they are busy money-making. This prompts Kemble to declare that the existence of poetry is by necessity linked to "inequalities of rank", and the rich being able to patronize writers. As she believes American democracy to be only a transitory stage, she also trusts in the flourishing of literature in the United States after it becomes a monarchy like the rest of the civilized world.

5. Conclusion

Both writers portray America as a savage, semi-civilized country. In these depictions, Americans spit, talk loudly of politics and money, converse with their superiors like equals, and have no literature or art to speak of. This picture stems, however, not only from real differences between America and Europe, but also from a literary *topos* of anti-Americanism, common in the 19th century (Gulddal 494). As Gulddal states, the British audience at the time expected the young republic to be portrayed in this way in fiction, and the same was true for travel writing. What is more, this criticism allowed both authors a certain degree of self-fashioning through their writing. Trollope, although she came to America looking for a way to support her family, tried to create for herself an image of gentility; of a traveller visiting America out of curiosity, eager to learn about the new country (Mulvey 4). Similarly, Fanny Kemble was trying to conceal "a nagging feeling that being an actress robbed her of a certain nobility" (Deak 96) and foster her persona as a true Romantic "in contact and conflict with a most un-Romantic reality" (Mulvey 179), stressing her superiority by displaying her homesickness (Mulvey 140). Thus, what refinement the Americans lacked, both authors implied, they and their nations possessed.

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