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WHERE AMERICA LIES: TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION IN MARK TWAIN'S *ROUGHING IT*

Abstract

Twain is a chronicler of what he describes as an essentially wild West. Written a decade after the events, his textual transformation of a transforming territory is not devoid of nostalgia and *Roughing It* enters American literary tradition while at the same time, contributing by its innovations to the transformation of that society.

This paper starts by considering the humorous confrontation between tradition and modernity before analyzing the extent to which what was then called "salting" (lying) was a key ingredient in the transformation of the territory, as well as in the construction of the country's identity and tradition. It eventually probes Twain's essentially nostalgic outlook on the transformation of America.

Keywords: *America, identity, nostalgia, salting, tradition, modernity, transformation, Twain*

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Roughing It was published in 1872, in the wake of the huge success of *The Innocents Abroad* (1869). It relates the travels and adventures Mark Twain undertook through the American West between 1861 and 1866. When the journey started, Twain was twenty-six; he was accompanying Orion, his brother, who “had just been appointed Secretary of the Nevada Territory,” (1) and who in turn had appointed Twain as his private secretary. Twain stayed there only briefly before embarking on a mining expedition which led him to several years of roaming the West.

The diegetic time is that of the gold and silver rushes in California and Nevada just before the advent of the railroad¹ and the radical transformation it was to bring to the West, which many still considered as a territory without history or tradition. *Roughing It* uses “tradition” both to express a “customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior” and a “story [...] commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable.”² Such co-existence and the impossibility of being able to differentiate between one meaning and another revealingly blur the distinction between commonly admitted knowledge and a textual construct.

Twain is a witness and a chronicler of what he describes as an essentially wild West, which endows *Roughing It* with undeniable, yet unreliable historical interest. He thus becomes an author of stories with a problematic degree of paternity over his material. Written a decade after the events, this textual transformation of a transforming territory is not devoid of nostalgia and *Roughing It* enters American literary tradition while at the same time, contributing by its innovations to the transformation of that society.

This paper will first consider the humorous confrontation between tradition and modernity as exemplified in stagecoach traveling; it will then analyze the extent to which what was then called “salting” (lying) was a key ingredient in the transformation of the territory, as well as in the construction of the country’s identity and tradition. It will then probe Twain’s essentially nostalgic outlook on the transformation of America.

¹ The last spike of the transcontinental railroad was driven in 1869.

² “Tradition”: *Merriam-Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary*.

1. Tradition and modernity: a humorous confrontation

The stagecoach journey from St. Louis, Missouri, to Carson City, took twenty days. The older Twain alludes to the imminent appearance of the train, but the confrontation between modernity and tradition is not expressed in any comparison of the two means of transport. It is related through a symbolic battle inside the coach itself, as Twain's brother "took along [...] six pounds of Unabridged Dictionary" (3) which turned out to attack the passengers at each significant bump on the uneven trail: "Every time we avalanched from one end of the stage to the other, the Unabridged Dictionary would come too; and every time it came it damaged somebody. One trip it 'barked' the Secretary's elbow; the next trip it hurt me in the stomach, and the third it tilted Bemis's nose up till he could look down his nostrils." (11) This "assault" (11) does not symbolize Twain's renowned battles with spelling in general so much as it humorously illustrates the two brothers' blindness to the rapid transformation of the country: "we did not know—poor innocents—that such things could be bought in San Francisco on one day and received in Carson City the next." (3) Though their attachment to linguistic tradition does not prevent them from accomplishing their journey, it provides an apt reminder of the inadequacy of former beliefs in the context of a fast developing America. Not surprisingly, that inadequacy encompasses the English language that has taken root in the Territories, unbeknownst to the travelers alienated by geography as much as by linguistic incompetence:

"Pass the bread, you son of a skunk!" No, I forget—skunk was not the word; it seems to me it was still stronger than that; I know it was, in fact, but it is gone from my memory, apparently. However, it is no matter—probably it was too strong for print, anyway. It is the landmark in my memory which tells me where I first encountered the vigorous new vernacular of the occidental plains and mountains. (15)

Despite the strong impression it made upon Twain, the "western freshness and novelty" (15) may not be rendered fully in his narrative. This denotes the enduring power of the linguistic rules imposed by the aggressive dictionary, whose imperialist domination is an obstacle to the evolution of the English language into a genuine American idiom. Twain's forgetting the precise word proves all the more surprising since he has become the acknowledged master of the vernacular. His dismissal of the term seems

to make him an unexpected supporter of the traditionalist stance of the dictionary. It is, however, to be explained both by the combined futility of the linguistic in the context of an overbearing landscape and by the absence of a truly poetic quality in the production of the speakers of that precise region: “it presently grew monotonous, and lost its charm.” (15)

Roughing it is a travel book that endeavors to capture the essence of a transitional era. Humorous though they may be, the anecdotes provide a glimpse of the state of America as the westward expansion was already virtually completed. It presents the implied readers with a world that most of them had only heard of, through narratives that often partook of legend and folklore. Twain’s innocent discovery reflects that of his readers and his frankness makes up a narrative device that contributes to his pretention to reliability. The inexperienced travelers cross wonderful landscapes peopled by creatures of legendary status. When Twain sees his first coyote, it is one of the traditional figures of the western wild; the sight is brief and the narrator’s description is based on future experience. The first piece of information is linguistic; the discovery of the local species requires altering standard English usage too: “the regular *cayote* (pronounced ky-o-te).” (17) Twain’s unflattering description starts by deflating the animal’s reputation of ferocity: “The coyote is a long, slim, sick and sorry-looking skeleton, with a gray wolf-skin stretched over it, a tolerably bushy tail that forever sags down with a despairing expression of forsakenness and misery, [...] a living, breathing allegory of Want.” (17) Yet he hints at an uncanny skill at avoiding danger from rifles and, more revealingly, from a settler’s dog, “a dog that has a good opinion of himself, and has been brought up to think he knows something about speed.” (17) Such pomposity gets ridiculed by the cunning and the exceptional physical qualities of the coyote who, with “a fraudulent smile over his shoulder,” plays with his pursuer before leaving him “solitary and alone in the midst of a vast solitude!” (17) In fable-like manner, the advancing civilization, symbolized by the dog and his aggressive attitude, is not kept in check but is reminded of the vanity of its pretention to superiority over the indigenous species. The coyote’s only damning feature is that he does not fit the aesthetic ideal of the settlers, who get reminded of their essential fragility in the face of nature. As a tamed version of the wild coyote — himself a wretched figure of the mighty (?) wolf — the personified dog realizes his limited capacity to change the order of things in the wild and “takes up a humble position.” (18) Ironically, the coyote’s superiority over the dog and the owners it

stands for also lies in his playful reaction to danger, in a veiled allusion to the power of humor which he demonstrates is definitely not the special attribute of humans.

Relating the stagecoach trip prompts Twain to quote from the diary he kept during his travels across the Holy Land a few years later, shedding light on the universal character of the American experience. It recounts the discovery of biblical landscapes by a young man from New York — an experienced traveler totally unfamiliar with the Scriptures, who is the equivalent of the innocent stagecoach passengers on their way to Nevada. When being told that the desert he was crossing was the one that Moses led his tribe through, his response is outstandingly naïve: “Moses who? [...] ‘Forty years? Only three hundred miles? Humph! Ben Holliday would have fetched them through in thirty-six hours!’” (22)³ Free from the religious heritage of Christian culture, the young boy is representative of a new generation of Americans, now driven to a paradoxical state of ignorance: their lack of basic religious knowledge does not preclude their total adaptation to a transformed universe where businessmen have actually replaced spiritual figures as leaders of men. Ironically, the new American, whose pious ancestors were driven by the impulse to transform the wilderness into a Christian civilization, has now become a pathetic Adam free from his Judeo-Christian tradition. The rapid pace in the transformation of America may be the harbinger of universal upheavals, given the swift Americanization of the planet through the combined effects of economic and touristic imperialism.

2. “Salting” one’s claim: mining and writing

Striking it rich rests at the heart of Twain’s and his contemporaries’ motivation in their restless roaming. The narrator takes an active part in the gold and silver rushes which, in their dramatic ups and downs, were shaping California and Nevada into mythical territories. *Roughing It* chronicles the miners’ unceasing attempts to fulfill the dream. Hard physical work was not always the ideal way to become a millionaire, for hitting upon a truly precious vein was exceptional. To the unlucky yet clever ones, resourcefulness was the key: “One plan of acquiring sudden

³ Ben Holliday was the owner of the western stagecoach business.

wealth was to ‘salt’ a wild cat claim and sell out while the excitement was up.” (161) “Salting” was a common swindling technique which sometimes proved quite profitable:

The schemer located a worthless ledge, sunk a shaft on it, bought a wagon load of rich “Comstock” ore, dumped a portion of it into the shaft and piled the rest by its side, above ground. Then he showed the property to a simpleton and sold it to him at a high figure. Of course the wagon load of rich ore was all that the victim ever got out of his purchase. (161-2)

Twain narrates one such anecdote, which reads like a traditional folk tale involving a “simpleton” going through initiatory misadventures. Revealingly, the unfortunate hero is a real life American figure whose profession provides added western meaning to the universal pattern:

The stock rose to sixty-five dollars a foot, and at this figure the world-renowned tragedian, McKean Buchanan, bought a commanding interest and prepared to quit the stage once more. [...] On one of the lumps of “native” silver was discovered the minted legend, “TED STATES OF,” and then it was plainly apparent that the mine had been “salted” with melted half-dollars! The lumps thus obtained had been blackened till they resembled native silver, and were then mixed with the shattered rock in the bottom of the shaft. It is literally true. Of course the price of the stock at once fell to nothing, and the tragedian was ruined. But for this calamity we might have lost McKean Buchanan from the stage. (162)⁴

McKean Buchanan’s naïve belief in the rumor contrasts strongly with his thorough knowledge of Shakespearean tragedies, which are rife with shenanigans and warnings against the blindness to which excessive passion leads. Twain’s insistence on the literality of the truth delivered by his story covers both its historical authenticity and its reliance on letters — *i.e.*, its textual nature. The actor’s misfortune reads like a punishment inflicted by

⁴ McKean Buchanan was an actor whose style Twain loved to deride: “The great McKean Buchanan having been driven from all the world’s great cities many years ago, still keeps up a pitiless persecution of the provinces, ranting with undiminished fury before audiences composed of one sad manager, one malignant reporter, and a sheriff to collect the license, and still pushes his crusade, strewing his disastrous wake with the corpses of country theaters.” (quoted by Fisher in “Buchanan, McKean,” p. 86)

Nemesis; his tragic flaw, however, resides as much in his foolish submission to Mammon as in his flagging commitment to drama. The anecdote hints at an analogy between historical reality as it may be known or experienced by his readers and the diegetic world of folk tales as well as of tragedy. The literality claimed by the narrator is thus a narrative device with a metatextual value. The “native” quality of the silver is also testified to literally, by the not so cryptic letters “TED STATES OF,” which in themselves make up a “legend,” thereby inextricably linking the transforming America that Twain is chronicling with the question of its writing. In that context, “salting” refers to the story made up to perpetrate the swindle as well as to the critical stance required so as not to become its victim. Apart from the mining context, *Webster’s* offers two definitions of “salt” related to storytelling and its reception: “an element that gives liveliness, piquancy, or pungency” and “with a grain of salt, [...] with an attitude of skepticism.” The attentive reader is thus led to enjoy Twain’s anecdote while bearing in mind that the authenticity of such stories must always be doubted, both because they may well be American tall tales and because, as a popular writer, Twain will inevitably spice up his own “native” narratives.

As Sam Clemens’s persona, Twain often displays his deep interest in financial success. It is not surprising he should not condemn the salting swindle, whose pecuniary goal requires great ingenuity and a gift for storytelling. Also shown as a narrative basis for creating riches, the *Book of Mormon* prompts Twain’s indictment, for he considers it guilty of damning offenses:

The book is [...] such a pretentious affair, and yet so “slow,” so sleepy; such an insipid mess of inspiration. It is chloroform in print. Joseph Smith [...], according to tradition, merely translated it from certain ancient and mysteriously-engraved plates of copper, which he declares he found under a stone, in an out-of-the-way locality [...]. The book seems to be merely a prosy detail of imaginary history, with the Old Testament for a model; followed by a tedious plagiarism of the New Testament. (58-9)

Joseph Smith’s most crucial failing is his stylistic inability to elicit the interest of his reader, combined with a crippling lack of respect of the Bible as narrative. Smith is simply a painstaking plagiarizer lacking the dishonest miners’ creative skill. To crown it all, he is a poor linguist who failed to convey the genius of the popular biblical text: “The author labored to give

his words and phrases the quaint, old-fashioned sound and structure of our King James's translation of the Scriptures; and the result is a mongrel—half modern glibness, and half ancient simplicity and gravity.” (59) Unlike Twain, who masterfully translated his contemporaries' language by remaining close to local idioms and pronunciations, Smith did not make the necessary choice between modernity and a traditionalist's approach to the sacred text.⁵ As for Smith's followers, they consciously subverted the biblical message further by betraying even its faulty translation to suit their needs or inclinations: “Polygamy is a recent feature in the Mormon religion, and was added by Brigham Young after Joseph Smith's death. Before that, it was regarded as an ‘abomination.’” (62) At the time of Twain's travels, the Mormons were instrumental in the transformation of the West. Twain was fascinated by their success and his diatribe does not end in a wholesale rejection of their faith:

The Mormon Bible is rather stupid and tiresome to read, but there is nothing vicious in its teachings. Its code of morals is unobjectionable—it is ‘smouched’* from the New Testament and no credit given.

*Milton (65)

His conclusion is not a mere repetition of his previous arguments, for the asterisk, supposed to guarantee that the narrator does not resort to Smith's plagiaristic technique, is most probably a swindle in itself. According to Boewe (1991: 10), “concordances of Milton's prose or poetry contain no form of ‘smouch.’” The critic's hypothesis (“Was Twain slyly conning Livy⁶ into believing that the word had classical sanction?”) does not take into account the intra-metatextual value of a footnote that, by constituting a perfectly believable lie within his critical narrative, amounts to “salting” the latter. Doing so, it sheds ironic light on Smith's failure while fooling the

⁵ For an account of the process that led to the King James version of the Bible, of the translating guidelines and its contemporary assessment, see *The Revised New Testament and History of Revision, giving a literal reprint of the Authorized English Edition of the Revised New Testament, with a brief history of the origin and transmission of the New Testament Scriptures, and of its many versions and revisions that have been made, also a complete history of this last great combined movement of the best scholarship of the world; with reasons for the effort; advantages gained; sketches of the eminent men engaged upon it, etc., etc. prepared under the direction of Professor Isaac H. Hall, LL.D.* (Isaac Hollister Hall, ed., Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, 1881, pp. 43-63).

⁶ Livy — Olivia Clemens — was Samuel Clemens's wife; she proofread and edited his manuscripts.

reader as to the reliability of *Roughing It*, which shares the same misleading potential as the *Book of Mormon*.

3. A Nostalgic outlook on the transformation of America

In 1891, the Superintendent of Census made a capital announcement: “Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at the present the unsettled area has been so broken into isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.” (quoted by Rezé 1998: 60) Thirty odd years earlier, Twain had been a witness to an already vanishing era. A letter written in 1868 when he was back in Nevada — four years before the publication of *Roughing It* — articulates his nostalgic outlook: “The little wildcat mines are abandoned and forgotten, and the happy millionaires in fancy (I used to be one of them) have wandered penniless to other climes, or have returned to honest labor for degrading wages.” (“Letter”) He portrays himself as one of the countless dreamers who shaped the West and whose sad fate casts a melancholy shadow over the destiny of believers in a typically American dream. His allusion to the salting ploy as well as to other, bloodier, schemes does not include any concern for the victims:

What has become of that wonderful mine, whose name I cannot recollect, but which was so deftly “salted” with imperfectly melted half dollars for the especial attraction and capture of McKean Buchanan, tragedian — and with such brilliant success? Where is the Madison, whose day and night shift of cut throats used to stand in the dark drifts and tunnels with bated breath and ears pressed to the damp walls, listening to the dull thump of pick and crowbar in the subterranean corridors of the Ophir, ready to receive the miners with murderous assault of knife and pistol whenever they should cleave through the narrow bulwark of quartz that separated them? [...] And finally, Oh were [sic] is the wonderful Echo⁷? [Echo, according to ancient usage, simply answers, Where?] (“Letter”)

⁷ See Branch, pp. 258-9. Echo was a mining corporation of which Samuel Clemens was a shareholder. “The mine was located a quarter mile north of Devil’s Gate, near the road to Gold Hill, Nevada.” (259)

The final touch of humor defuses the tragic implications of the lessons taught by contemporary American history. The mock-poetic reference to the nymph Echo also places the young country within a timeless ironic mythical context and composes a subtle ironic comment on the solipsistic nature of the author's writing enterprise. For although Twain aims at telling the chronicles of the West, his text always ends up betraying his self-referential concerns. This which makes him the mirror-like opposite of the cursed Echo who, however hard to tried to express her own thoughts, could only repeat somebody else's last spoken words.

Roughing It glorifies life in the Wild West, which at the time of the publication of his book had already vanished. Its heroes transformed that part of the continent forever, though most of the towns they built have "so absolutely died and disappeared." (222) The ghost places that remain are like ancient ruins reminding the tourist of past glories that now sustain the collective unconscious. The lyrical description of the mine regions in California makes it possible to determine the type of society that flourished then and still informs the author's idealized view of his country:

it was an assemblage of two hundred thousand *young* men—not simpering, dainty, kid-gloved weaklings, but stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves, brimful of push and energy, and royally endowed with every attribute that goes to make up a peerless and magnificent manhood—the very pick and choice of the world's glorious ones. No women, no children, no gray and stooping veterans,—none but erect, bright-eyed, quick-moving, strong-handed young giants [...]. (222)

Home to the romantic superman, California is depicted as a modern Sparta, whose inhabitants, armed with guns, picks and shovels "reveled in gold, whisky, fights, and fandangoes, and were unspeakably happy." (222) Chief among the remarkable qualities of those "stalwart *men*" (223), their irrepressible solidarity in times of dire poverty, their worship of women and children and their strongly democratic creed: "those people hated aristocrats." (223) The "grotesque" (223) aspect of that society lies only superficially in its apparent absence of rules or sophistication; it rests mostly in the life-giving force of the momentary chaos that disrupts the traditional order of things. The inversion of values characteristic of the grotesque and that makes a rough, uneducated man a hero does not affect his essential qualities. What Bakhtin calls "the peculiar logic of the world 'inside out'"

(Bakhtin 1698: 11) applies to the miners' debauchery and lawlessness, for deep down he abides by the cornerstones of Christianity — hospitality and respect for the weak (in that context, women and children). As for his instinctive rejection of high class pretentiousness, it embodies the spirit of the American Republic. At the level of the whole country, the fleeting years of the silver and gold rushes make up a peculiar carnivalesque universe. Isolated from the rest of the country, the alternate society enjoys a festive lifestyle that fits the democratic pattern ("all were considered equal during carnival" [Bakhtin 1698: 11]) and the fascination for ("the thirst for a new youth' pervaded the carnival spirit" [Bakhtin 1698: 57]). The main difference, however, is that unlike the all-inclusive pre-Renaissance carnival, the miners' California is fundamentally based on exclusion. The absence of women children and old people obviously precludes the organic facet of the rejuvenation that makes up the *raison d'être* of the carnival, thus breaking the cyclical nature of the latter. Hence the inevitability of an apocalyptic ending to the golden age:

And where are they now? Scattered to the ends of the earth— or prematurely aged and decrepit—or shot or stabbed in street affrays—or dead of disappointed hopes and broken hearts—all gone, or nearly all—victims devoted upon the altar of the golden calf—the noblest holocaust that ever wafted its sacrificial incense heavenward. (222)

The allusion to the golden calf encompasses Twain's ambivalence as he felt he once was part of the supermen who failed in the pursuit of their purely materialistic dream, and whose image he did his best to perpetuate — and to capitalize on:

Twain viewed the West as a place of personal renewal, and he shrewdly incorporated popular constructions of western men into his public persona in order to re-create himself and the American male writer. Tapping into the myths and realities of a region that increasingly occupied the popular imagination, he portrayed himself as a violent man whose language and success springs from western masculinist values. (Coulombe 2011: 53)

4. Conclusion

Ambivalence lies at the core of *Roughing It*, which celebrates the birth of a new country while it expresses nostalgia at its transformation. The latter is an ongoing process that the younger Twain contributed to fostering, but that the older writer has come to resent. As a harbinger of the new and a veteran of an already bygone era, Twain enthusiastically embraces virility as the key to Americanness, anchored in the frontier spirit.

Because it echoes the concerns of previous canonical works such as Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* and because it foreshadows upcoming classics like Stephen Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" and Carl Sandburg's "Chicago," Twain's virile America demonstrates the resilience and the life-giving force of a traditional concept that consecrates the United States as a work in progress. The constant transformation of this future-oriented America is duly recorded and promoted by its essentially nostalgic literature.

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