



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

6 | 2012

Marking the Land in North America

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/2834>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.2834

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Delphine Louis-Dimitrov, « The Unreliable Traces of the West: Mark Twain's Appropriation of a Symbolical Landscape in *Roughing It* », *Miranda* [Online], 6 | 2012, Online since 28 June 2012, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/2834> ; DOI : 10.4000/miranda.2834

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The Unreliable Traces of the West: Mark Twain's Appropriation of a Symbolical Landscape in *Roughing It*

Delphine Louis-Dimitrov

- ¹ *Roughing It* (1872), Mark Twain's allegedly realistic account of his trip across the continent in 1861 and of his subsequent experience of the West, unfolds in a symbolical landscape organized around traces of different kinds. Through the use of humor, irony and pastiche in his allusions to the traces and inscriptions found in natural sites, the narrator simultaneously installs and unsettles the mythical image of the West. In the descriptions of the desert and even more of Lake Tahoe, *Roughing It* indeed plays with a network of symbolical associations and more specifically with the national mythology that has become tightly connected with the natural scenery of the West in cultural discourses—iconographic, literary and political representations.
- ² Traces may first of all be taken in the most concrete sense of the word. Etymologically, a trace is a mark left by an object that has been dragged on the ground (from the Latin *trahere*). It articulates place and time, landscape and history, and also a very definite relationship between past, present and future. The construction of America's symbolical landscape also relies on another interpretation of the trace: it is a marking or a line drawn by a pencil on a page, or by a brush on a canvas. In addition to this concrete graphic dimension, the aesthetic trace is a symbolical marking projecting collective values on the landscape, thus contributing to its cultural appropriation. Besides, literary or iconographic traces, in the sense of fragments from previous texts or artistic genres surfacing in a text, also provide landmarks around which the Western landscape takes shape in *Roughing It*.
- ³ Nevertheless, the traces of the West in *Roughing It* appear as unreliable signs, be they imprints left on the ground, cultural landmarks or artistic markings. While imitating literary and iconographic traditions, the narrator plays with these traces, disrupts them in a humorous way. And if spatial traces are unreliable, so is Twain's text. Beyond the unlearning of romantic illusions that has already been extensively studied by critics, the

text reveals a complex game with Frontier and Puritan patterns as well as artistic traditions—the sublime in particular. His appropriation of traces raises the question of the presence of a debunking, critical purpose targeting the imitated traditions, and consequently of the identification of such passages as pastiches or as parodies, the former being devoid of a critical purpose, contrary to the latter. What is at stake, then, is the reliability of the symbolical landscape constructed in the text.

- 4 If the prospective traces of the desert in *Roughing It* provide a straightforward vision of American historicity, yet the narrative episodes built around the difficult deciphering of traces in a snow-clad landscape humorously unsettle founding cultural patterns rooted in the Puritan and Frontier imagination; finally, the pastiche-like appropriation of iconographic markings extends the question of reliability to the aesthetics of the American sublime and its national symbolism as presented in Twain's narrative.

1. America's Prospective Traces

- 5 Drawing upon traditional representations, the narrator depicts the West as an unlimited, rolling expanse of grass open to new tracings. The opposition between the sepulchral soil of the Old Continent, evoked in *The Innocents Abroad* (published three years earlier, in 1869), and the promising grassy extent of the New one in *Roughing It* is part of America's founding mythology. It stems from the pastoral vision of America that flourished in the 18th century, in Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) and in Freneau's poetry (Marienstras 80). It carries the utopian notion of a pristine, Edenic and boundless land where traces are scarce.

- 6 In *Roughing It*, the “limitless expanse of grassy land” (544), similar to a “world-wide carpet” (561), is described as a rolling and heaving ocean:

Just here the land was rolling—a grand sweep of regular elevations and depressions as far as the eye could reach—like the stately heave and swell of the ocean's bosom after a storm. And everywhere were cornfields, accenting with squares of deeper green, this limitless expanse of grassy land. But presently this sea upon dry ground was to lose its “rolling” character and stretch away for seven hundred miles as level as a floor! (*Roughing It* 544-545)

- 7 The comparison of the prairie with the ocean recurs in travel narratives and historical accounts of the early 19th century, as well as in novels and poems. When Twain published *Roughing It* in 1872, it was already an established theme, sometimes used in a merely rhetorical manner. Expanding on the topic in the wake of Walter Prescott Webb (Webb 487-489), Joey Lee Dillard has shown that the seagoing image is omnipresent from the writings of the early travelers through 20th century literature and that, beyond its use in comparisons and metaphors, it deeply affects the vocabulary of early plains travels (Dillard 147).

- 8 In early travel narratives, the comparison hinges on two main components, the absence of markings on the prairie—water being immune to tracings and imprints—and its unlimited undulating expanse. Josiah Gregg for instance, describing the Santa Fe Trail in the 1830s, justifies the use of this simile by the absence of traces and hence landmarks on the prairie:

This tract of country may truly be styled the grand “prairie ocean”; for not a single landmark is to be seen for more than forty miles—scarcely a visible eminence by which to direct one's course. All is as level as the sea [...]. (Gregg 71)

- 9 Washington Irving similarly notes the absence of traces on the plains, alluding to “a region almost as vast and trackless as the ocean” in *Astoria* (1836). In *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835), he compares the limitless expanse of grass to an oceanic landscape: “An immense extent of grassy undulating, or as it is termed, rolling country with here and there a clump of trees, dimly seen in the distance like a ship at sea [...]” (82) The simile is also used by Parkman in *The Oregon Trail* (1847) and by Cooper, for whom the waving surface of the prairie, its boundlessness and the “absence of foreign objects”—traces of past passages, landmarks—arouse the image of the ocean.¹ Lastly, Melville extensively explores the kinship of the prairie and the sea—“[...] in one aspect, the country and the ocean seem cousins-german”, he writes in “Benito Cereno” (82). With him, the similarity between the two expands into a reversible metaphor: if the prairie may evoke the sea, the descriptions of the ocean are conversely interspersed with images of land, as for instance in *Moby Dick*, Chapter 114 (534).
- 10 Yet in spite of the mythical theme of its oceanic vacancy, the “limitless expanse of grassy land” (545) in *Roughing It* bears markings that contribute to its cultural appropriation, materializing the progress of civilization, its expansion westwards. For all its similarities with the ocean, the prairie is made of soil and cannot remain unmarked. It bears the imprint of ownership and land exploitation, cut in as it is by the lines of cornfields and “squares of deeper green” (545), by the internal grid of the cadaster and of land-surveying.
- 11 Beyond the prairie, cultural appropriation is achieved more effectively yet through the presence of the liberty-pole, a recurring and structuring component of Western towns: “In the middle of the town [...] was the ‘plaza’ which is native to all towns beyond the Rocky Mountains—a large, unfenced, level vacancy, with a liberty pole in it [...]” (642); “Unionville consisted of eleven cabins and a liberty-pole” (677). Placed in the West though, the revolutionary emblem is but a fake trace. As an emblem and a symbol, it borrows the semiotic functioning of the trace, relating a sign to a signified. The trace, as de Certeau writes, is indeed the visible part of an absent past, for which it substitutes a presence of meaning (de Certeau 102). Yet the trace emanates from the absent past which its visible part represents. Contrary to a mere emblem or symbol, it is rooted in the past, hence the fundamentally anachronistic value which Didi-Huberman relates to its intrinsic negativity—that of loss, default and mourning, which are stamped in it (Didi-Huberman 70, 72). Traces are the memory of past and missing events—rather than objects, as remains may be.² Though it hints at a historical past, the liberty-pole of Western towns is devoid of the internal temporal density that characterizes the trace. It is displaced, rootless, disconnected from the land, consequently the metonymic relationship between place and history, which would be at work in an authentic trace, cannot function.
- 12 The West is not devoid of genuine traces bearing the seal of time and history—negative or positive traces, that is to say imprints carved into the ground or, conversely, sediments left upon the surface. The scattered “relics” (635) of past emigration waves, for instance, turn the desert into a graveyard:

We left the snowy Wind River Mountains and Uinta Mountains behind, and sped away, always through splendid scenery but occasionally through long ranks of white skeletons of mules and oxen—monuments of the huge emigration of other days—and here and there were up-ended boards or small piles of stones which the driver said marked the resting-place of more precious remains. It was the loneliest land for a grave! A land given over to the cayote [*sic*] and the raven—which is but another name for desolation and utter solitude. On damp, murky nights, these

scattered skeletons gave forth a soft, hideous glow, like very faint spots of moonlight starring the vague desert. It was because of the phosphorus in the bones. But no scientific explanation could keep a body from shivering when he drifted by one of those ghostly lights and knew that a skull held it. (*Roughing It* 600-601)

13 The funerary landscape is structured around steles, piles of stones and ranks of skeletons that are aptly referred to as “monuments of the huge emigration of other days”. A monument is indeed the materialization of memory opened to the future; it is a landmark for later generations. The root *monere* already carries the ambivalent temporality of the monument, combining memory with notions of warning, inspiration and exhortation. On a ghostly and ghastly mode, the luminescence of the bones suggests light-producing death. It reveals the vividness of American traces, their prospective function, their effectiveness as landmarks.

14 The ambivalent temporality of American traces—memorial yet prospective—is strongly emphasized in another description of the desert. The remains of past emigration waves seem apt to line up and compose the image of a transportation network connecting all the States of the Union:

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that we could have walked the forty miles and set our feet on a bone at every step! The desert was one prodigious graveyard. And the log-chains, wagon tyres, and rotting wrecks of vehicles were almost as thick as the bones. I think we saw log-chains enough rusting there in the desert, to reach any State in the Union. Do not these relics suggest something of an idea of the fearful suffering and privation the early emigrants to California endured? (*Roughing It* 635)

15 The narrator deciphers this “prodigious graveyard” as a page of history that yet remains open to new inscriptions. If the scattered “relics” are indeed historical fragments that provide insight into the harshness of pioneer life, the image of the web of rusting log-chains uniting the American territory confirms the implicit vividness of these traces, their aptness to be part of a new tracing, to be integrated into a new itinerary. As the telling image of the travelers setting their feet on a bone at every step further suggests, the remains of the past pave the way for further developments. It is this tension between past and future, between memorial and prospective value, which defines the American trace, as opposed to the fossilized, sealed traces that stifle the Old Continent in *The Innocents Abroad*. American traces are prospective rather than simply retrospective, oriented onwards rather than backwards and downwards. They make the Western dialectics of trace and track, of point and line, possible.

16 In the American West, necrophagous history integrates death into its progress. It incorporates the remains of the past into a new track, records the past to get a new impulsion, according to the Frontier dynamism that would later be described by Turner.³ Besides, “American development”, he writes, “has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area” (Turner 2-3). *Roughing It* evokes this pattern of successive waves as the travelers encounter a group of migrants who replay—to the point of exhaustion—the experience of the pioneers whose remains can be contemplated in the desert: “[...] we overtook an emigrant train of many wagons, many tired men and women, and many a disgusted sheep and cow” (600). In addition, the narrator, relating his adventures more than a decade later, anticipates the next stage of the expansion westwards, noting that the road has since then been overlaid by a railroad: “[...] if the Pacific express trains whiz through there now any faster than we did then in the stage-

coach, I envy the passengers the exhilaration of it" (602). Different temporal strata coexist in the text, the markings of the past being still readable in the present and adumbrating future developments.

- 17 Just as American history integrates the past into its onward movement, the travelers assimilate the vision of death in their progress. Contrary to the exhausted emigrants who have run out of energy, they ride through the desert at an exhilarating pace, "bowl[ing] along cheerily" (599), "spinning away at a round rate too" (600). The driver soon "let[s] his team out", so that the travelers "fairly seemed to pick up [their] wheels and fly" (602). The prodigious graveyard of the desert fully becomes part of the exhilarating progress of the travelers and more generally of American history.

2. The Narrative Integration of the Trace: Playing with Literary Markings

- 18 Conforming to the basic Frontier principle according to which the past is constantly replayed, *Roughing It* repeatedly reenacts the mythical founding experience of the pioneers. With the ludicrous irony of thwarted imitation, Frontier and Puritan themes recur in the narrative, especially in episodes that dramatize the difficult deciphering of markings, the disappearance of traces and track in the darkness, the rain or the snow, as well as the ensuing experience of disorientation. In the 19th century, such narrative patterns hinging around the trace offer a basis for a broader national narrative expressing key elements of the United States' collective imaginary. They also represent literary markings which the narrator of *Roughing It* humorously appropriates, diverts and distorts, especially in the snow storm episode of chapters 31 and 32.
- 19 The heritage of the tall tale is strongly present in these passages, as the representation of specifically American features is marked by exaggeration and laughable absurdity. In his study on *Mark Twain and the Art of the Tall Tale*, Henry B. Wonham indeed explains that tall humor developed with the inflated "stories of hardship and loss" that settlers in the American wilderness piled up on one another "until the representation of life became laughably absurd" while remaining "plausible" (Wonham 18-19). What characterizes American tall humor is precisely the fact that "it articulates incongruities that are embedded in the American experience" (Wonham 20), as in the episodes under consideration.
- 20 Some critics have pointed out the underlying presence of cultural or aesthetic elements in the snow storm episode. Smith for instance reads the despair of the character as the parody of 19th century religious discourse (Smith 219), and Gunn interprets the disorientation of the characters as a scene of initiation, implying "the symbolic dissolution of the old person and the resurrection of the new" (Gunn 573-574). Nevertheless, the Puritan and Frontier patterns hinging on the trace have remained unexplored. The purpose of the following development will be to consider their unreliable treatment and the workings of humor in the passage.
- 21 The snow storm episode that impedes the progression of the characters toward Carson City in chapters 31 and 32 brings forth the motive of bewilderment caused by the loss of the track, a founding Puritan experience that recurs in American literature. The original wilderness is etymologically a place of loss and disorder (Nash 1), of objective as well as subjective confusion—that of the place as well as of the pioneer. The Puritan ordeal of

disorientation is nevertheless the necessary condition for spatial progress, as the loss of old landmarks allows the deciphering of divine signs in pristine nature.

- 22 In the wake of this founding experience, Thoreau in *Walden* celebrates the “surprising and memorable” state of being lost in the woods, indicating that “by night, the perplexity is even greater” (*Walden* 459). The snow too, he notes, has specific defamiliarizing qualities:

Often in a snow storm, even by day, one will come out upon a well-known road, and yet find it impossible to tell which way leads to the village. Though he knows that he has travelled it a thousand times, he cannot recognize a feature in it, but it is as strange to him as if it were a road in Siberia. (*Walden* 459)

- 23 The disappearance of traces and landmarks makes the place unidentifiable, “strange” in the sense of foreign. Thoreau's “productive disorientation” (Baker 62) responds to the desire of creating anew what Emerson calls “an original relation to the universe” (Emerson 7). Thoreau indeed urges his readers to shake off ingrained habits, to turn away from the landmarks of everyday life (“beacons and headlands”) for the sake of authentic vision:

In our most trivial walks, we are constantly, though unconsciously, steering like pilots by certain well-known beacons and headlands, and if we go beyond our usual course we still carry in our minds the bearing of some neighboring cape; and not till we are completely lost, or turned round, [...] do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature. Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations. (*Walden* 459)

- 24 According to Thoreau, only through the loss of old landmarks can man be restored to authentic identity, relationships and vision. Disorientation in a snow-clad landscape then becomes the symbol for the redemptive restoration of man's original relation to nature.

- 25 In *Roughing It*, the defamiliarizing quality of the snow, the attempt at learning the points of the compass again, as well as the spiritual redemption the experience might entail, surface in a ludicrous manner that brings several literary and cultural markings into play. The snow storm episode successively dramatizes two potential traps related to the apprehension of traces. The first one is the initially Puritan ideal of breaking free from the hold of traces, of escaping from all bounds and orienting oneself with no reference to previous landmarks. In contrast stands what might be called the “Sleepy-Hollow” trap—getting bogged down within the settlement, yielding to the pressure of traces, sinking into lethargy, sleep and forgetfulness, falling prey to the abhorred Puritan sin of “sloth” (Petillon 32). These two pitfalls proceed from a binary pattern that originates in Puritan imagination and recurs in American fiction: the tension between the thrust westwards and the enclosure within the settlement (Petillon 74).

- 26 These two temptations successively come to the fore in *Roughing It*, as all markings fade away in the snow-clad landscape:

The snow lay so deep on the ground that there was no sign of a road perceptible, and the snow-fall was so thick that we could not see more than a hundred yards ahead, else we could have guided our course by the mountain ranges. (*Roughing It* 694-695)

- 27 The snow obliterates both internal and external landmarks, as it fills in the tracings of pathways and makes it impossible to identify the geographical location of the place. The filling-in and covering-up of all markings—“the covered sage-bushes” (696), “steadily filling and slowly disappearing wheel-tracks” (696), “the last faint trace of the wheel-

tracks had long ago been buried from sight” (696-697)—steadily draw the landscape toward visual abstraction. Deprived of lines, relief and color, it progressively loses all definition. The specific determination of its components—“mountain ranges” (695), “wheel-tracks” (696), “road” (697), “sage-brush avenue” (697)—gives way either to complete indistinction (“we could not see more than a hundred yards ahead” 694-695) or to elementary forms (“faint grooves”, “snow-mounds”, “smooth sugar-loaf mounds” 696) that subsist only through light effects such as “the white glare of the snow-bed” (696), temporary ones at that, considering their imminent covering up by the snow and the falling night.

- 28 In the absence of any landmarks by which to orient themselves, the characters cannot but confide in Ollendorff, “the Prussian,” a parodic land-surveyor or cartographer who proudly claims to have a natural, instinctive compass: “The case looked dubious, but Ollendorff said his instinct was as sensitive as any compass, and that he could ‘strike a bee-line’ for Carson city and never diverge from it.” (695) They do find a “fresh trail” (695) very soon—the typical prospective trace whereby a pioneer or trapper may draw his own track onwards in the Frontier pattern. Yet the humorous absurdity of what follows debunks Ollendorff's ambition, unveiling the risks inherent in the Puritan ideal of breaking free from the old world so as to cast one's own tracing:

So we put the horses into as much of a trot as the deep snow would allow, and before long it was evident that we were gaining on our predecessors, for the tracks grew more distinct. We hurried along, and at the end of an hour the tracks looked still newer and fresher—but what surprised us was, that the *number* of travelers in advance of us seemed to steadily increase. We wondered how so large a party came to be traveling at such a time and in such a solitude. Somebody suggested that it must be a company of soldiers from the fort, and so we accepted that solution and jogged along a little faster still, for they could not be far off now. But the tracks still multiplied, and we began to think the platoon of soldiers was miraculously expanding into a regiment—Ballou said they had already increased to five hundred! Presently he stopped his horse and said:

“Boys, these are our own tracks, and we've actually been circussing round and round in a circle for more than two hours, out here in this blind desert!” (*Roughing It* 695)

- 29 The ambition of being one's own compass and casting cartographic lines on the landscape without relying on any spatial markings leads to the absurd pattern of a never-ending spiral. Instead of hinting at a previous passage and thus constructing meaning in a semiotic way, the trace here becomes a tautological sign, meaningless and sterile. It multiplies unendingly and entraps the travelers in absurd circularity.
- 30 What the episode dramatizes here in an incongruous, humorous mode, is a recurring American utopia that originates in Puritan imagination. In Twain's fiction, it culminates with Huckleberry Finn's flight adrift on his raft, which indeed does not leave any trace⁴ nor follow any—while Huck himself debunks cultural markings, thus discarding their potential authority. It is also Whitman's poetic utopia in *Leaves of Grass* “To be absolv'd from previous ties and conventions, I from mine and you from yours!”, “To escape utterly from others' anchors and holds!”, “To drive free!”, “To feed the remainder of life with one hour of fulness and freedom!” (Whitman 263). The Whitmanian ecstasy relies on the refusal of cultural landmarks as well as of all spatial, temporal and verbal limitation. It is a dream of complete physical and artistic self-sufficiency.
- 31 In contrast to the dangerous ideal of setting out on a new track without relying on any previous traces stands the pitfall of getting caught in the grip of the settlement. The

landscape in which the characters get trapped in *Roughing It* is a spatial figuration of drowsiness, forgetfulness and death. The white, mute and silent desert, from which markings have disappeared, is an amnesic space that has also lost the ability to signify. The entropic process that the snow-clad landscape seems to fall prey to also threatens the characters. Its human counterparts are exhaustion, death and oblivion, as the fading away of one of them anticipates:

[...] in a short minute [the young Swede] faded and disappeared in the white oblivion. He was never heard of again. He no doubt got bewildered and lost, and Fatigue delivered him over to Sleep and Sleep betrayed him to Death. (*Roughing It* 696)

32 The silence that prevails soon thereafter completes the process, following the extinction of the signifying function of the landscape.

33 Such themes nevertheless cannot be taken at face value here. The passage appears indeed as a ludicrous imitation of different styles integrated in a more broadly Puritan pattern. The tongue-in-cheek irony of the narrator surfaces for instance in the high-flown and abstracting use of the synecdoche (the reference to the snow as “white oblivion”) and in the allegories easily produced by the capitalization of key notions. Besides, the end of the chapter, with its focus on upcoming death, casts the themes of drowsiness, oblivion and death into a now melodramatic, now mock-epic style:

We put our arms about each other's necks and awaited the warning drowsiness that precedes death by freezing.

It came stealing over us presently, and then we bade each other a last farewell. A delicious dreaminess wrought its web about my yielding senses, while the snow-flakes wove a winding sheet about my conquered body. Oblivion came. The battle of life was done. (*Roughing It* 701)

34 If the key motives of drowsiness, dreaminess and oblivion definitely conform to a pattern that recurs in American fictions, yet the preciousness of the style, rich in embellishing adjectives and images, and the mock-epic tone of the last sentence betray the humorous note of artificial imitation.

35 Thwarted imitation reaches its climax with the mimicry of Puritan spiritual reform, as the characters face their seemingly imminent deaths:

Finally a sad-voiced conversation began, and it was soon apparent that in each of our hearts lay the conviction that this was our last night with the living. [...]

Ollendorff [...] forgave me for things I had done and said. Then he got out his bottle of whisky and said that whether he lived or died he would never touch another drop. He said he had given up all hope of life, and although ill-prepared, was ready to submit humbly to his fate; that he wished he could be spared a little longer, not for any selfish reason, but to make a thorough reform in his character, and by devoting himself to helping the poor, nursing the sick, and pleading with the people to guard themselves against the evils of intemperance, make his life a beneficent example to the young, and lay it down at last with the precious reflection that it had not been lived in vain. He ended by saying that his reform should begin at this moment, even here in the presence of death, since no longer time was to be vouchsafed wherein to prosecute it to men's help and benefit—and with that he threw away the bottle of whisky.

Mr Ballou made remarks of similar purport, and began the reform he could not live to continue, by throwing away the ancient pack of cards that had solaced our captivity during the flood and made it bearable. [...]

My own remarks were of the same tenor as those of my comrades [...]. I threw away my pipe, and in doing it felt that at last I was free of a hated vice and one that had ridden me like a tyrant all my days. While I yet talked, the thought of the good I

might have done in the world and the still greater good I might now do, with these new incentives and higher and better aims to guide me if I could only be spared a few years longer, overcame me and the tears came again. (*Roughing It* 700-701)

- 36 For Smith, the characters “solemnly renounce their respective wickedness in language which is an incandescent parody of the sanctimonious rhetoric of the 19th century evangelical pulpit” (219). This spiritual dimension nevertheless also depends on the imitation of Puritan styles and patterns that actually shape the “sanctimonious rhetoric” of the 19th century. Beyond its melodramatic tone and its high-flown style (larded for instance with formal verbs like “vouchsafe”, “prosecute” or “solace”) the passage may be considered as an imitation of the Puritan genre of the spiritual biography that flourished in England in the 17th century and then influenced such writers as Defoe, as well as later American novelists. To start with, the rhythm of the lines concerning Ollendorff's reform mimics Defoe's style, characterized by long sentences and involved sequences of subordinate and coordinate clauses. The capital letters in nouns like “Sleep”, “Fatigue” and “Death” in one of the passages quoted previously were already a typical feature of Defoe's style.
- 37 Thematically, the passage also evokes the repentance in which Moll Flanders and Robinson Crusoe for instance engage while being in a critical situation. The episode in fact relies on the recurrent pattern of Puritan spiritual autobiography—the “rebellion-punishment-repentance-deliverance” sequence described by J. Paul Hunter (88). The engagement to reform, emphasized in Ollendorff's case by the accumulation of pious wishes, is here debunked since it is fully inspired by the “selfish reason” the character discards. The ironical dimension of the passage eventually culminates with the sudden comic reversal that follows on the spiritual crisis. Indeed, the characters soon realize that the whole scene has taken place just a few steps away from their shelter, behind which their horses have been waiting patiently, all ears and all smiles: “[...] they must have overheard and enjoyed all our confessions and lamentations” (703). The founding Puritan experience of disorientation in the wilderness is here incongruously transposed into the trivial sphere of individual adventures and distorted by the plausible absurdity of the tall tale.
- 38 The line distinguishing pastiche and parody becomes very fine in these passages. The absence of a critical purpose targeting the imitated tradition itself is typical of the pastiche mode, yet the ironical deformation of the original mode—the amplification of its effects, its merging with a melodramatic tone—brings it close to parody.
- 39 Just like proper traces, literary markings acquire a prospective dimension in Twain's narrative. Through the intertextual use of Puritan and Frontier motives, the narrator indeed makes “well-known beacons and headlands” unfamiliar and strange, the better to integrate them into a new context. The thwarted appropriation of cultural landmarks then appears as a condition for the emergence of literary humor.

3. Aesthetic Markings and Cultural Appropriation

- 40 Beyond concrete traces and the narrative patterns that integrate them, the cultural determination of the land also depends on aesthetic traces that provide the landscape with structure and meaning. These graphic markings are not only patterns of lines and colors but also symbolical tracings, sets of meaning whereby the cultural appropriation of the place is achieved. Iconographic constructions stand in the background of the text and

provide interpretative landmarks, other “beacons and headlands” whereby the narrator in his turn apprehends and represents the West.

- 41 In *Roughing It*, the iconographic traditions surfacing in the descriptions of the landscape contribute to the evocation of a national landscape. As Schama writes, much of the “ferocious enchantment” of national identity stems indeed from “the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland” (Schama 15). Iconographic traditions participate in the mapping of the place, in its cultural framing and in the construction of the homeland.
- 42 The tension between “the mystique” of the landscape and humor culminates in the lengthy description of Lake Tahoe in chapters 31-32.⁵ Though throughout the book, as a long critical tradition has shown, the more mature perception of the narrator demystifies the tenderfoot's imaginary vision of the West, Hobbs points out that the lake descriptions in *Roughing It* are moments when “the West's harsh actuality does not completely eradicate the tenderfoot's romantic notions of the world” (Hobbs 13). He remarks that the sacredness of the landscape subsists behind the “comic masking” of the text (Hobbs 16)—an echo to Gunn's more general statement that “the book's mythic scope is veiled by its satiric facade” (Gunn 566). If indeed the intervention of humor does not totally eradicate the sense of nobleness and sacredness aroused by the vision of the lake, yet the “comic masking” makes the style and symbolism of the descriptions unreliable. Indeed, the disruption caused by humor suggests that the narrator may be playing with borrowed traditions and styles rather than actually participating in the textual construction of the national landscape (as clusters of symbolical elements in the descriptions would otherwise imply). The humorous divergence of the text from the traditions it evokes may create some distance between them, undermining the national symbolism of the landscape and calling the cultural appropriation of the place into question.
- 43 Lake Tahoe is an American icon, an emblem of the marvelous wherewith some components of the Western wilderness are identified in the 19th century.⁶ Iconographic references are clearly perceptible in the background of the narrator's descriptions and provide an interpretative frame structuring the vision: “As it lay there with the shadows of the mountains brilliantly photographed upon its still surface I thought it must surely be the fairest picture the whole earth affords.” ; [...] its circling border of mountain domes [...] fitly framed and finished the noble picture” (*Roughing It* 650, 653). Such allusions to painting and photography identify the lake itself with its representations, bringing forth the mythical vision of the Western marvels that circulates in the East (Louis-Dimitrov §19-21).
- 44 In the series of descriptions of the lake, the sense of natural nobleness is reinforced by the imitation of the genre of the domesticated sublime. This notion, coined by William McKendree Bryant, refers to sublimity that is not frightening as the Burkian sublime is but conveys values of “simple, severe, unchanging grandeur” (McKendree Bryant 81)—values that establish a metonymic equivalence between the monumental landscape and the nation. The national symbolism of the Lake reaches a climax as the narrator relates the moment when “[...] the darkness closed down and the stars came out and spangled the great mirror with jewels [...]” (650). The combination of the words “star” and “spangled” recalls Francis Scott Key's well-known poem, which was written in 1814 and would become the national anthem in 1931.

- 45 The light effects on the lake convey a providentialist symbolism that is part of the Puritan perception of the American landscape:

At the first break of dawn we were always up and running foot-races to tone down excess of physical vigor and exuberance of spirits. [...] While smoking the pipe of peace after breakfast we watched the sentinel peaks put on the glory of the sun, and followed the conquering light as it swept down among the shadows, and set the captive crags free. We watched the tinted pictures grow and brighten upon the water till every little detail of forest, precipice and pinnacle was wrought in and finished, and the miracle of the enchanter complete. (*Roughing It* 653)

- 46 The passage is loaded with such Puritan motives as the image of beginnings (“the first break of dawn”, 653) and that of the “conquering light” (653) which allows order to emerge from chaos and is a sign of divine power—“the glory of the sun” (653), glory being both an artistic and religious term. The scene seems to depict a providentialist theophany, a theme which, as Sacvan Bercovitch has shown, is tightly connected with the teleological vision of American history (Bercovitch 152).

- 47 The Puritans' redemptive vision of nature also is present in the passage, humorously debunked though by its reductive transposition into the trivial realm of physical well-being. The narrator indeed celebrates the invigorating power of camping outdoors on the shore of Lake Tahoe, giving the example of a consumptive “skeleton” (651) restored to vigor by the experience:

There is no end of wholesome medicine in such an experience. [...] Three months of camp life on Lake Tahoe would restore an Egyptian mummy to his pristine vigor, and give him an appetite like an alligator. I do not mean the oldest and driest mummies, of course, but the fresher ones. [...] I know a man who went there to die. But he made a failure of it. He was a skeleton when he came, and could barely stand. He had no appetite, and did nothing but read tracts and reflect on the future. Three months later he was sleeping out of doors regularly, eating all he could hold, three times a day, and chasing game over mountains three thousand feet high for recreation. And he was a skeleton no longer, but weighed part of a ton. This is no fancy sketch, but the truth. His disease was consumption. I confidently commend his experience to other skeletons. (*Roughing It* 651)

- 48 In accordance with the tall tale tradition, incongruous exaggeration again combines with a typical feature of the American experience, here Frontier-like outdoor life. Yet as in the episodes of disorientation, literary and iconographic allusions complexify Twain's humor, lending it an additional dimension. Indeed, his humor also proceeds from the discrepancy between the high, symbolic mode which the descriptions have progressively installed and the sudden fall back upon triviality—that of the lower level of restored appetite. Besides, the incongruous apparition of the voracious alligator, of the “fresh” mummies and of the living skeletons after the solemnity of the Puritan vision participates in the humorous unsettling of the imitated traditions.

- 49 Alongside Puritan and providentialist markings, the description of the landscape relies on iconographic tracings borrowed from the American sublime. Hobbs has rightly pointed out the “infernal inversion of the reverential moment” that occurs in the fire episode of chapter 23, adding that “far from being negative”, this inversion seems to afford the veteran's imagination the experience of “a grander sublimity in the face of chaos” (Hobbs 17-18). Focusing on the rhetoric of the sublime, the present development will consider how it sets the landscape in a symbolical frame that again is unsettled by the intervention of humor.

- 50 The episode relating a fire—initially a cooking incident—on the shore of Lake Tahoe takes the form of a pastiche of the sublime, as the hyperbolic style of the passage turns it into a cosmic crisis that brings eschatological symbolism into play:

Within half an hour all before us was a tossing, blinding tempest of flame! It went surging up adjacent ridges—surmounted them and disappeared in the cañons beyond—burst into view upon higher and farther ridges, presently—shed a grander illumination abroad, and dove again—flamed out again, directly, higher and still higher up the mountain-side—threw out skirmishing parties of fire here and there, and sent them trailing their crimson spirals away among remote ramparts and ribs and gorges, till as far as the eye could reach the lofty mountain-fronts were webbed as it were with a tangled network of red lava streams. Away across the water the crags and domes were lit with a ruddy glare, and the firmament above was a reflected hell!

Every feature of the spectacle was repeated in the glowing mirror of the lake! Both pictures were sublime, both were beautiful; but that in the lake had a bewildering richness about it that enchanted the eye and held it with the stronger fascination. (*Roughing It* 655-656)

- 51 The spectacular effects of the fire as well as the awe it arouses relate the passage to the Burkian sublime, on which the American sublime relies. With its frequent representations of fiery skies, the American sublime also entails an apocalyptic dimension that is a prominent component of Twain's description. This episode offers the hyperbolic spectacle of a fierce, crimson blaze inflated to a cosmic scale and laden with infernal connotations. The fire and the wind, unleashed, unite in a vortex of lava that devours the mountains, soon saturating the landscape. The flames indeed reflect both on the sky (“the firmament above was a reflected hell”) and in the “glowing mirror of the lake”. The description thereby hints at such paintings as *Twilight in the Wilderness* by Friedrich Edwin Church (1860), which presents a spectacular sky the ruddy colors of which are reflected in water. In this painting, the national symbolism the sublime entails is pinpointed by the discreet presence of an eagle and a cross.
- 52 In the wake of Cole's providentialism and, beneath, of the Biblical reading of the American destiny, the sublime landscape indeed expresses a vision of America's national identity and more specifically of the nation's “millennial hopes and apocalyptic fears”, so that in extreme cases “history collapses into nature, and nature becomes one with nation” (Miller 109). This final identification realizes the nationalist painter's mission: “to convince his audiences that nationhood was rooted in land, sky, and water, and governed by Providence” (Miller 109).
- 53 The dramatic frame of the episode in *Roughing It* feeds on such national symbolism. The “spectacle” (656) unfolds in a dramatic space that significantly excludes human agency. As the framing allusions to the audience indicate, the narrator and his comrades are indeed but the “helpless ”and “spell-bound” spectators of a drama the protagonist of which is the vortex of fire (the “crimson spiral”), a motive that in Cole's paintings is an emblem of the crises of history (Miller 56):
- We were driven to the boat by the intense heat, and there we remained, spell-bound. (*Roughing It* 655)
- We sat absorbed and motionless through four long hours. [...] But at eleven o'clock the conflagration had traveled beyond our range of vision, and then darkness stole down upon the landscape again. (*Roughing It* 656)
- 54 The curtain fall that occurs after the conflagration emphasizes the fight between light and darkness that stands at the core of the passage. The exclusion of human agency in

such a scene is quite significant. In the case of Church, the sublime substitutes natural for historical causality (Miller 110), natural causality being, in the American iconographic tradition, a symbol of divine Providence. Besides, the fierce natural conflict may be interpreted as a metaphor for the civil war, as in Church's *Cotopaxi* (1862) which dramatizes “a nature that was, like the nation, at war with itself” (Miller 130). If Twain famously retreated shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, such connotations nevertheless were acute at the time of his trip across the continent, begun in 1861. In the years that surround the sectional conflict, the apocalyptic and millennial rhetoric in landscape representations expresses the threat to the union as well as a notion of destruction and renewal—“baptism through violence into a redeemed sense of nationhood” in the case of Church's wilderness apocalypse (Miller 129).

- 55 The effects of the sublime in *Roughing It* are nevertheless debunked by the hyperbolic, overwritten emphasis of the description and by the discrepancy between its elevated symbolism and the trivial narrative context in which it is set. The apocalyptic natural scene indeed does not express a natural crisis, a cycle of destruction and renewal that would be apt to symbolize national destiny. It proceeds instead from a culinary incident the triviality of which literally frames the passage:

[...] I took the loaf of bread, some slices of bacon, and the coffee-pot, ashore, set them down by a tree, lit a fire, and went back to the boat to get the frying-pan. While I was at this, I heard a shout from Johnny, and looking up I saw that my fire was galloping all over the premises! (*Roughing It* 655)
Hunger asserted itself now, but there was nothing to eat. The provisions were all cooked, no doubt, but we did not go to see. (*Roughing It* 656)

- 56 The iconographic and cultural implications of the vision, defused in advance by the trivial circumstances listed by the narrator, are eventually fully debunked by the comic fall that brings the reader back to the cooking issue after the apotheosis of the sublime. Whereas the principle of narrative representation contributed to national symbolism with the painters of the Hudson River School, here on the contrary the narrative frame of the description annihilates its symbolical effects. The pleasure of pastiche writing obviously prevails over the construction of a symbolical discourse.
- 57 The literary and iconographic traditions that Twain appropriates in *Roughing It* clearly cannot be taken for granted. The process of installing a mode or a genre (the Puritan spiritual autobiography for instance, or the American sublime) coexists with a debunking strategy the target of which appears not to be the genre itself (as when the narrator ridicules the American romance and its representation of the Indians in particular) but its appropriateness in the given context. The ironical edge of these passages is not that of critical distance as in parody (Hutcheon 37) but rather that of humorous incongruity. Much of their humor indeed stems from the discrepancy between elevated, symbolical discourse and trivial situations. The narrator's humorous writing indirectly defines these forms of discourse as inadequate traditions, as clichés, as inauthentic visions in relation to the context in which they are set.
- 58 The humorous rather than critical dimension of imitation in these passages defines them as pastiches rather than parodies. Yet Jameson's hostile reduction of pastiche to a “neutral practice” of “mimicry”, enounced in his reflection on post-modernism, does not hold here:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of

the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. (Jameson 17)

- 59 Twain's creative humor fully contradicts the perception of pastiche as being a form of “dead language” “amputated” or “devoid” of the vigor and insight that parody entails. On the contrary, his vigorous pastiches in *Roughing It* are a humorous and fertile mode that allows a very original style to emerge. Imitation in this case goes far beyond the simple reproduction of a preexisting mode with no increase of meaning.
- 60 The transformational relation to the models situates Twain's pastiches in a liminal zone where pastiche and parody may merge. Genette (for whom the ludicrous function may be common to the two modes) distinguishes between imitative and transformational relations: pastiche imitates a style or manner while parody transforms a text (Genette 34). In his wake, Hutcheon identifies pastiche with similarity and parody with differentiation (Hutcheon 38). Twain's style in *Roughing It* oversteps these distinctions in the sense that his imitative passages are endowed with parody's transformative and differentiating value in relation to the modes and styles that he appropriates. Indeed, imitation here involves thwarting and exaggeration. In fact, Twain's humorous pastiches proceed from the same hyperbolic mode as the tall tale, to which the traveler becomes initiated in the text. The borrowing of elevated styles allows the narrator to “enlarge upon the facts”—a tendency which, as Cox has shown, actually defines Twain's humor in the whole book (Cox 22).
- 61 Twain's pastiches stem from the pleasure of imitation and humorous thwarting and this, rather than criticism of cultural landmarks, accounts best for the appropriation of famous modes and styles in such passages. His pastiches entail an educative, initiating dimension that in fact characterizes the whole narrative. In some respects, *Roughing It* may be perceived as a *Bildungsroman*, not only for the character, a tenderfoot who needs to cleanse his perception from ingrained illusions, but also for the blossoming professional writer. The narrator's delectation in ludicrous imitation and thwarting merges with his jubilation as a young writer producing purple passages.

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NOTES

1. Parkman mentions the “green undulations, like motionless swells of the ocean” (Parkman 34). As for Cooper, he writes that: “The earth was not unlike the ocean, when its restless waters are heaving heavily, after the agitation and fury of the tempest have begun to lessen. There was the same waving and regular surface, the same absence of foreign objects, and the same boundless extent to the view” (Cooper 892).
2. Didi-Huberman defines the trace as “*mémoire d'un 'avoir-lieu'*”, that is to say as the memory of something that has taken place (Didi-Huberman 19).
3. “The very essence of the American frontier is that it is the graphic line which records the expansive energies of the people behind it, and which by the law of its own being continually draws that advance after it to new conquests” (Turner 52).
4. “[...] a raff is what I's arter; it doan' *make* no track”, the runaway slave Jim points out (*Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn* 55).
5. See my development on the monumentality of Lake Tahoe and its symbolism in Twain's description (Louis-Dimitrov, §18-26).
6. This lake is a recurrent topic in the paintings and photographs of the years that surround the publication of *Roughing It* (1872). It can be seen in eight paintings presented by John Ross Key in 1870, and in several other paintings such as *Reflections (Lake Tahoe)* by Gilbert Munger (c. 1873-1874), *Lake Tahoe* (1873) by Thomas Moran, and *View of Lake Tahoe Looking Across Emerald Bay* (1874) by Thomas Hill. It also stands in a photograph by Carleton Watkins entitled *A Storm on the Lake, Lake Tahoe* (c.1873-1878).

ABSTRACTS

The purpose of this article is to consider the function of traces in Mark Twain's representation of the West in *Roughing It*. Through the humorous appropriation of the topographical, literary and

iconographic markings which provide the landscape with its symbolical structure, the text simultaneously installs and unsettles the mythical image of the West. Traces here appear as unreliable signs destabilizing the symbolical meaning of the national landscape depicted by the narrator. The thwarted imitation of literary and iconographic modes raises thereby the question of the identity of the text itself, of its positioning between pastiche and parody.

Cet article a pour objet de considérer la fonction des traces dans l'image de l'Ouest présentée par Mark Twain dans *Roughing It*. Par le jeu de l'appropriation humoristique des marques topographiques, littéraires et iconographiques qui confèrent au paysage sa structure symbolique, le texte installe et ébranle dans un même geste l'image mythique de l'Ouest. Les traces apparaissent ici comme des signes qui peuvent être trompeurs et qui déstabilisent la signification symbolique du paysage national dépeint par le narrateur. L'imitation déformante de modes littéraires et iconographiques soulève de ce fait la question de l'identité du texte lui-même, de son positionnement entre pastiche et parodie.

INDEX

Mots-clés: trace, inscription, Tahoe, puritain, frontière, sublime, humour, pastiche, Ouest américain, parodie

Keywords: trace, marking, west, Tahoe, puritan, frontier, sublime, humor, pastiche, parody

Quoted persons: Anne Baker, Tim Barringer, Sacvan Bercovitch, Michel Certeau de, Frederic Edwin Church, James Fenimore Cooper, Thomas Cole, James Melville Cox, J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, Daniel Defoe, Georges Didi-Huberman, Joey Lee Dillard, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Philip Freneau, Gérard Genette, Josiah Gregg, Drewey Wayne Gunn, Michael Hobbs, Linda Hutcheon, Washington Irving, Frederic Jameson, Elise Marienstras, William McKendree Bryant, Herman Melville, Angela Miller, Roderick Nash, Francis Parkman, Pierre-Yves Petillon, Simon Schama, Henry Nash Smith, Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Jackson Turner, Mark Twain, Walter Prescott Webb, Walt Whitman, Andrew Wilton, Henry B. Wonham

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