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«*A ROYAL HOLIDAY BEYOND THE BROAD OCEAN*». VISUAL HUMOR AND PARODIC REFLECTIONS IN MARK TWAIN'S *THE INNOCENTS ABROAD*

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Halfway between fiction and travel writing, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) chronicles Mark Twain's own experience as a tourist through Europe. As previous scholarship has widely underlined, Twain's persona of the naïve American traveler casts an ironic outlook on the traditional rhetoric characterizing nineteenth-century literary narratives and travelogues about the European Grand Tour. In this context, the manifold forms of water in *The Innocents Abroad* represent a key feature of Twain's parodic reinvention of the cultural myth connected to the Old World. Although it may be perceived as a plain literary background, the function of water addresses central issues on the semantic and hermeneutic level alike.
In Twain's travelogue, in fact, waters (such as the Atlantic Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea, or even rivers and lakes) are far from being expressive of an archetypal and reassuring symbolic trail, which is headed toward the rediscovery of mutual transatlantic origins, along with their regenerative power. Contrariwise, waters reflect –both verbally and visually thanks to the illustrations included in the first American edition of *The Innocents Abroad*– the parodic image of an unintelligible world; countless inconveniences and misadventures hinder the American traveler's mobility, ruining the successful outcome of this rite of passage. Therefore, by subverting the heuristic value traditionally assigned to water as a literary object, *The Innocents Abroad* does not merely typify a counternarrative to nineteenth-century travelogues; instead, Twain's work may also stand as a leading precipitant of the most recent turns in twenty-first-century sea literature.

Keywords: American Literature, Nineteenth-Century Literature, Travel Writing, Sea Literature, Parody

Coordinates: Verbal and visual humor in Twain's travel writing

Ranking among the first major works in Mark Twain's literary career, *The Innocents Abroad* retraces its author's experience as a nineteenth-century American tourist traveling through Europe and the Middle East in 1867. As such, and within the critical context of American tourism studies (Francescato & Martinez 2017), much of the scholarship in the last twenty years has underscored the nexus of literary ingenuity and tourist perspective characterizing Twain's travelogue. Indeed, *The Innocents Abroad* has been read as a literary specimen

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of a socio-cultural practice of popular tourism (Melton 2002), a satirical reversal of standard travel books (Melton 2019: 92-93), a work thus distinguished by a peculiar use of a set of stylistic conventions pertaining to both realism and travel writing (Martinez 2014), and even as a picaresque adventure (Holbrook). Of course, Twain's American-oriented perspective intertwines with a comic outlook on the traditional Grand Tour experience. In fact, the visual humor marking Twain's style often emerges beneath the surface of his travel books: in other words, Twain's humor often derives from a mental visualization of the characters and situations he describes through what has been defined as a "performing" literary technique (Budd 471-472).

On this background, however, the occurrence of water has been rather seen as a tacit element within the wider phenomenon of middle-class, modern transatlantic migration and mobility chronicled by *The Innocents Abroad*. Instead, a discussion on the symbolism pertaining to water may prove useful in order to deepen the critical import of the stylistic features of Twain's writing; otherwise stated, the analysis of both semantic and hermeneutical aspects which deal with Twain's parody of the traditional Grand Tour will be focused on the depiction of water–a depiction not limited to verbal descriptions, but extending to visual representations. In this respect, a key function is played by the illustrations created by the New York-based company Fay & Cox, and included in the first American edition of *The Innocents Abroad*, published in Hartford in 1869[1].The textual merging of the two forms contributes to a thorough representation of water, whose function in *The Innocents Abroad* matches Twain's ironic viewpoint toward the whole experience of the European travel. As Tom Quirk argues, «the narrating persona of *The Innocents Abroad* often gives the impression of someone personally betrayed by events, as though […] even the Old World itself, had conspired to hoodwink and disappoint him» (xxi). Twain's persona does not limit itself to a standard account of the American travel experience through Europe; on the contrary, by reversing the conventional perceptions on the Old World, Twain's satire involves multiple constitutive features of the cultural pilgrimage to the "lands of art"–such as the European manners, historical sites and monuments, or urban and natural landscapes–and in this process of cultural subversion the multiform water landscape plays an essential role.

1 Founded by Augustus Fay and Stephen J. Cox in New York City between the late 1850s and early 1860s, the firm used to provide illustrations for subscription publishing companies such as the American Publishing Company from Hartford, Connecticut, which issued, along with Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It* (1872), popular travel books like *Beyond the Mississippi: From the Great River to the Great Ocean* (1869) by Albert D. Richardson (Graphic Arts Collection Princeton University).

As the following analysis will show, Twain's parodic reflections on the European waterscapes take place through a geographical and textual voyage that, starting from the Atlantic Ocean, in its eastward movement gradually involves the Mediterranean Sea, and goes up to renowned lakes and rivers, such as Lake Como and the Arno. By means of a stylistic juxtaposition of a picturesque rhetoric (typical of nineteenth-century travel literature) with a distinctively American viewpoint, Twain manages to convey to his readers the whole cultural complexity of interpreting different worlds.

Parodic reflections: A hermeneutics of water

Water stands at the cornerstone of Twain's parodic reinvention, in his inversion of the traditional tropes characterizing American narratives on the Grand Tour. The fact that the expected «royal holiday beyond the broad ocean» (Twain 19) soon becomes a troubling adventure, marks the very beginning of Twain's travel experience, as the departure is being delayed due to a chain of unfortunate events: participants giving up the journey «compelled» by «urgent duties», or because «something interfered» (24), and a stormy weather heavily hitting the passengers already aboard the *Quaker City* («we could see, ourselves, that there was a tremendous sea on», 29). These signs of bad omen, however, seem to dissipate as soon as the ship sets sail at last. And on this occasion, Twain crucially employs irony to refer to the standard cultural meaning of water as follows:

> The next morning, we weighed anchor and went to sea. It was a great happiness to get away, after this dragging, dispiriting delay. I thought there never was such gladness in the air before, such brightness in the sun, such beauty in the sea […]. All my malicious instincts were dead within me; and as America faded out of sight, I think a spirit of charity rose up in their place that was as boundless […] as the broad ocean that was heaving its billows about us. I wished to express my feelings–I wished to lift up my voice and sing; but I did not know any thing to sing, and so I was obliged to give up the idea. It was no loss to the ship though, perhaps (32-33).

Water is a traditional emblem of life and regeneration (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 374) and, hence, a symbol of power, beauty, and wisdom (Marrin 786-787), but in Twain's perspective water undergoes a crucial hermeneutical shift. Twain plays upon the classic literary trope of water seen as a source of inspiration for the art of poetry writing, declaring, instead, that the Atlantic does not give him poetic inspiration at all–and nobody on board would care about his failure. Nevertheless, Twain does not seem at the same time to completely discard the conventional literary strategies linked to the verbal and visual depiction of landscapes in travel narratives. Since the incorporation of visual objects represents

a vital textual element paralleling the verbal descriptions that are usually to be found in much travel writing, both text and image in Twain's travelogue are still expressive, to some extent, of a cluster of epistemological functions which «inflect readers' sense of place, establish authors' reputation for truth-telling, and create fervour for travel» (Leitch 456). For example, in outlining the canals in Venice, or the Mediterranean seascapes of Capri and Stromboli Twain still relies on the typical nineteenth-century aesthetics of picturesque. First, in the two small pictures titled *Rialto Bridge* and *Bridge of Sighs* (Twain 241) the placid waters encircled by the peculiar architecture of Venetian palaces and buildings emphasize the traveler's standard viewpoint and attitude toward the Italian landscape. Here, Twain recalls that «I was writing in our front room and trying hard to keep my attention on my work and refrain from looking out upon the canal» (242), whose dreamy atmosphere always entices the foreign traveler: «I was resisting the soft influences of the climate as well as I could, and endeavoring to overcome the desire to be indolent and happy» (242). In the second instance, the illustration titled *Blue Grotto* portrays two tiny figures standing on a rock in a huge, underground vault surrounded by water, as Twain relates that «The waters of this placid subterranean lake are the brightest, loveliest blue that can be imagined […]. No tint could be more ravishing, no lustre more superb» (321). Likewise, in *Stromboli* the volcano is the main feature of a picture whose foreground is characterized by the moonlight shining on the sea surface, while a boat sails through; a «superb Stromboli» dominates this seascape at dusk «with the western horizon all golden from the sunken sun […], the full moon sailing high over head, the dark blue of the sea under foot, and a strange sort of twilight affected by all these different lights and colors» (337-338). But in other cases Twain engages with these literary and artistic conventions in an overtly parodic way–that is, by using traditional visual depictions centered on the stock picturesque to match a more personal, American-biased verbal description (for example, in the case of Lake Como, as it will be discussed later on).

The visual and the verbal dimensions also converge in the ironic viewpoint according to which Twain narrates the initial stages of his transoceanic voyage. Although *The Innocents Abroad* can be considered a specimen of the historical and cultural significance of ocean space in its value of literary object (see Yamashiro; Mathieson), Twain's travelogue dwells on the hidden aspects and side effects of this mobility taking place across water. In this sense, Twain's parody subverts the kind of imagery usually connected to the ocean, seen as a reflection of the processes of self-awareness and self-knowledge. Conversely, the narrator focuses on the discomfort and awful bodily sensation brought about by this "royal voyage"; in so doing, he exploits the whole rhetorical potentialities of the performing literary techniques linked to the visual humor identifying

The Innocents Abroad. Indeed, «several stormy experiences […] sent fifty per cent. of the passengers to bed, sick, and made the ship look dismal and deserted» (47), a situation later culminating in «a week of seasickness and deserted cabins; of lonely quarter-decks drenched with spray» (62). But these unpleasant consequences of sea traveling are ominously anticipated in the opening stages of Twain's travelogue, as the «tremendous sea» that has been one of the causes of the delayed departure still produces its troublesome effects on many passengers. The narrator thoroughly describes this scene as follows:

> By some happy fortune I was not seasick.–That was a thing to be proud of […]. If there is one thing in the world that will make a man peculiarly and insufferably self-conceited, it is to have his stomach behave itself, the first day at sea, when nearly all his comrades are seasick. Soon, a venerable fossil, shawled to the chin and bandaged like a mummy, appeared at the door of the after deck-house, and the next lurch of the ship shot him into my arms. I said:
> "Good-morning, Sir. It is a fine day."
> He put his hand on his stomach and said, "*Oh*, my!" and then staggered away and fell over the coop of a skylight.
> Presently another old gentleman was projected from the same door, with great violence. I said:
> "Calm yourself, Sir–There is no hurry. It is a fine day, Sir."
> He, also, put his hand on his stomach and said "*Oh*, my!" and reeled away.
> In a little while another veteran was discharged abruptly from the same door, clawing at the air for a saving support. I said:
> "Good-morning, Sir. It is a fine day for pleasuring. You were about to say-"
> "*Oh*, my!"
> I thought so. I anticipated *him*, any how. I staid there and was bombarded with old gentlemen for an hour perhaps; and all I got out of any of them was "*Oh*, my!" (Twain 33-34)

From a semantic viewpoint, the theatrical effect characterizing this passage emerges through the accumulation of verbs suggesting uncontrolled movement ("shot", "staggered", "fell", "projected", "reeled", "discharged", "clawing", "bombarded"), testifying to a hyperbolic use of language which reaches its climax with the comic reiteration of the same trifling dialogue between the narrator and his fellow-travelers («"Good-morning, Sir. It is a fine day." He put his hand on his stomach and said, "*Oh*, my!"» 33). What is more, the overall comic result deriving from this verbal description is strengthened by the visual depiction that is here juxtaposed. The illustration, aptly titled "*Good morning, Sir*", shows two men on the foreground–one of them preventing the other from falling down; another passenger grasps the frame of an open door in the desperate effort of standing still, while three more travelers lean out of the ship, in a state of evident seasickness. Huge dark waves can be seen on the background, as the sign of the «tremendous sea». In his parodic reconstruction of the sea voyage, then, Twain seems to anticipate the most recent trends of twenty-first-century sea literature:

otherwise stated, «ocean space as a literary project creates and expands, refutes and subverts worlds» (Jones 274) as well as Twain's literary ocean space represents a complex textual object expressive of a parodic reversal of the standard process of intellectual regeneration.

While subverting the traditional use and meaning of water imagery, Twain often employs an American viewpoint in order to underline the basic differences between the New and Old World. This crucial hermeneutical issue involves the narrator's firm rooting into his native cultural environment, instead of opening his perspective toward diverse experiences. Rather than representing both the symbolic and actual gate headed to a metaphoric voyage of inner regeneration, water paradoxically stands as the space upon which the narrator projects his own worldview (see Kravitz; Piatti). This can be seen in a well-known passage in *The Innocents Abroad*–that is, the celebrations which take place on the *Quaker City* for the American Independence day on July 4, during «a characteristic Mediterranean day–faultlessly beautiful. A cloudless sky; a refreshing summer wind; a radiant sunshine that glinted cheerily from dancing wavelets […]; a sea beneath us that was so wonderfully blue, so richly, so brilliantly blue, that it overcame the dullest sensibilities with the spell of its fascination» (90). Yet, in striking contrast with this picturesque description of the Mediterranean seascape, Twain adds the awkward details of the American ceremony, as the main concern for both passengers and crew is to not give up the celebration after all:

> The thunder of our two brave cannon announced the Fourth of July, at daylight, to all who were awake. But many of us got our information at a later hour, from the almanac. All the flags were sent aloft, except half a dozen that were needed to decorate portions of the ship below, and in a short time the vessel assumed a holiday appearance […]. In the afternoon the ship's company assembled aft, on deck, under the awnings; the flute, the asthmatic melodeon, and the consumptive clarinet crippled the Star Spangled Banner, the choir chased it to cover, and George came in with a peculiarly lacerating screech on the final note and slaughtered it. Nobody mourned.
>
> We carried out the corpse on three cheers (that joke was not intentional and I do not indorse it,) and then the President, throned behind a cable-locker with a national flag spread over it, announced the "Reader," who rose up and read that same old Declaration of Independence which we have all listened to so often without paying any attention to what it said […]. A minister pronounced the benediction, and the patriotic little gathering disbanded. The Fourth of July was safe, as far as the Mediterranean was concerned (92).

The antithesis between the idyllic Mediterranean setting and the viewpoint according to which the same setting is being interpreted marks the whole scene. Beside the most evident cases of play on words (such as the one concerning the "corpse" of the anthem so clumsily performed), the overall comic effect stems from a complete disconnection between the travelers and the place they are

crossing; more precisely, the "careless" Mediterranean reflects parodically the travelers' mindset and consequent behavior in approaching their encounter with the Old World. Indeed, regardless of the cultural significance of the rite of passage they ought to be committed to, the American travelers are more concerned in keeping their own rituals–although this means to celebrate a national holiday in odd conditions and unknown places. Leisure mobility affects the minds of the naïve American travelers so that they become utterly unaware of the sense of time (and place), since most of them do not even remember, at first, what day it is («many of us got our information at a later hour, from the almanac» 92). Thus, they simply stick to the simulacrum of a ceremony that is being hurriedly and grotesquely carried out, as underlined, again, by the theatrical effect derived from the use of adjectives pertaining to the sense of hearing in the brief description of the melody idly played by the musical instruments («the asthmatic melodeon, and the consumptive clarinet» 92). Also, the American perspective is hardly limited to the interpretation of seascapes in *The Innocents Abroad*. In fact, the same American-oriented bias is employed to describe both lakes and rivers, as in the cases of Lake Como and the Arno. In the first instance, Twain openly compares the clearness of the water of the Italian lake with Lake Tahoe, judging the latter unequaled for beauty: «how dull its [of Lake Como] waters are compared with the wonderful transparence of Lake Tahoe! […] As I go back in spirit and recall that noble sea, reposing among the snow-peaks six thousand feet above the ocean, the conviction comes strong upon me again that Como would only seem a bedizened little courtier in that august presence» (204). This verbal contrast between "king" Tahoe and "courtier" Como is visually highlighted, once again, by means of the picturesque illustration of the Italian gardens surrounding Lake Como, which is enclosed by tall trees on the foreground and distant mountains on the background (*Garden, Lake Como*). In conformity with a similar strategy, Twain's American mind keeps on projecting its memories on unfamiliar waters by linking domestic landscapes with foreign ones, as it occurs while the narrator is staring at the Arno:

> We went to the Church of Santa Croce, from time to time, in Florence, […] and between times we used to go and stand on the bridges and admire the Arno. It is popular to admire the Arno. It is a great istorical creek with four feet in the channel and some scows floating around. It would be a very plausible river if they would pump some water into it. They all call it a river, and they honestly think it *is* a river […]. They even help out the delusion by building bridges over it. I do not see why they are too good to wade (247).

At a closer glance, however, in this passage the narrator's reference to familiar waterscapes is indirect. To Twain's American eye, the Arno is too shallow to be

named a proper river: instead, the Arno subtly misleads the good-natured traveler through a sort of optical deception aided by the various bridges that the Italian craftsmen deemed necessary to build in order to cross the watercourse. The «historical» Florentine river rather resembles a «creek» that might be easily waded, if implicitly compared to the larger American waterways–a case in point is the Mississippi, the so-called "big river" of Twain's youth and Huckleberry Finn's adventures. The hypothesis that Twain's mind here goes back to the Mississippi, is enhanced by the fact that the American writer often «romanticized his experience on the river» (Scharnhorst 99). More to the point, the blending of the biographical and fictional levels helps explain Twain's literary treatment of a landmark in his production. Twain's apprenticeship and activity as a steamboat pilot that occurred between 1857 and 1861 along the Mississippi did affect the literary creation of both incidents and characters in his prose writing, and culminated in the 1880s with the publication of *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Viewed on the background of Twain's whole literary career, *The Innocents Abroad* can thus be considered as a prototype of Twain's way of dealing with the water theme, which is foundational to the later masterpieces. Especially in comparison with *Huckleberry Finn*, the earlier travelogue envisions a pivotal parodic perspective on the water crossing–be it Huck's Mississippi in the 1884 novel, or the American traveler's Atlantic in the 1869 work.

Moorings: Twain's waterscapes in diachronic and synchronic contexts

In conclusion, the semantic and hermeneutic discussion of water in *The Innocents Abroad*, carried out so far, results in a twofold critical implication. On the one hand, Twain's visual and verbal reconstruction of waterscapes, while undermining the traditional dichotomy between American and European cultures, stands for a primary precipitant of twenty-first-century sea literature; on the other hand, the conundrum of water imagery and parodic viewpoint in *The Innocents Abroad* also encourage deeper critical readings of classic tropes in Twain's canonical works.

The first critical aspect involves a diachronic consideration of *The Innocents Abroad*. In this respect, Twain's travelogue does certainly fit into the historical development of sea literature as a transnational, global genre. Whereas, of course, sea literature can rely on a firmly established tradition in Western culture, Twain's irony in dealing with the tropes pertaining to this tradition offers a brand-new perspective on the cultural effects of the symbolic meaning of water in literature, anticipating the latest trends in this genre. Then, in his

modern interpretation of waterscapes Twain secures himself a place in the whole historical evolution of sea literature, from its origins in the classical world to the contemporary era.

Finally, the synchronic side of *The Innocents Abroad* may suggest a more detailed account of waterscapes in Twain's literary canon. On the textual level, even though limiting an overview to *Life on the Mississippi* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the riverscape of the Mississippi Valley represents the setting shared by both works. If compared along with *The Innocents Abroad* too, the three works together cast complex perspectives on water and its symbolic meaning. Not coincidentally, then, the hermeneutics of water may be considered as the hallmark of Twain's literary construction of a wide transatlantic world–a world that stretches from the American scene of the Mississippi and the West, to the European backgrounds and their cultural history.

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