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Joseph Yokelson
Bridgewater State College

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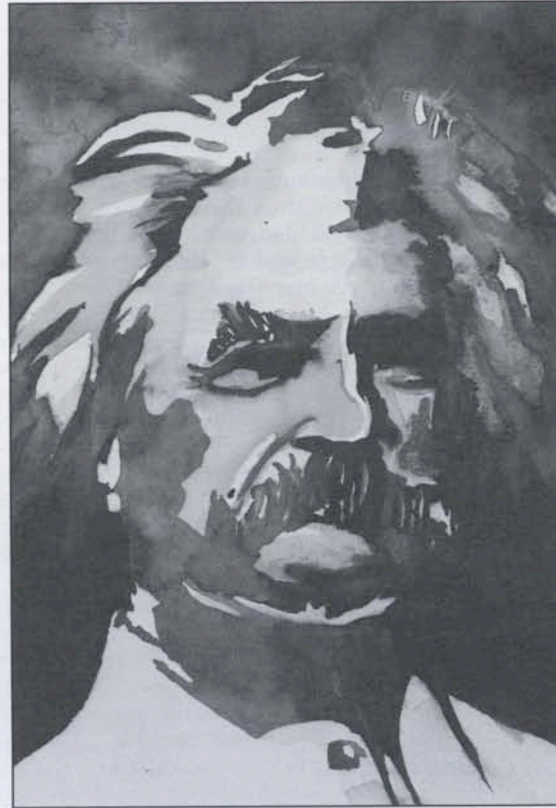
Mark Twain's *Roughing It*: A Humorist's Darker Side

Joseph Yokelson



Roughing It was based rather roughly on a period of Twain's life that began in 1861, when Twain went west with his brother Orion: Orion had been appointed Secretary of the Nevada territory with the help of friend who had a friend in Lincoln's new cabinet. Twain had just faded quietly out of the Confederate army after suffering from boils and a sprained ankle and never firing a shot. For a while out west, Twain prospected for silver around Virginia City; then for about two years he was a reporter for the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise*. In 1864 he drifted on to San Francisco, where he was a reporter and a free-lance writer. In 1866 he was sent to the Hawaiian Islands by the Sacramento *Union*. The period covered by the book ends with his return to San Francisco, his first success as a lecturer, and his boarding ship for the voyage that was to take him to New York and his career as one of America's most famous writers.

The stretch between the inception and the publishing of *Roughing It* -- from the beginning of 1870 to February 1872 -- was for Twain one of protracted crisis.

There was, first of all, a national crisis. The country was fully embarked on that profit-crazed and corruption-marked era that Twain was soon to stigmatize in his first novel as "The Gilded Age." Twain thought, like even the optimistic Whitman, that democracy was a failure. Second, there was a personal crisis. Just about the time Twain began to think of making a book of his adventures in Nevada and California, he married Olivia Langdon, the daughter of a wealthy coal-dealer in Buffalo. This is not to say that marriage is a crisis in a negative sense, but that it must have been for Twain is clear when we learn that Jarvis Langdon, his father-in-law, offered the former steamboat-pilot, prospector, and journalist ten thousand dollars if he would stop drinking ale and smoking. Then followed a series of disasters. Just when Twain planned to get down to the writing of his book, Jarvis Langdon was found to have stomach cancer, and Twain and his frail wife personally nursed him around-the-clock. In August, 1870, shortly after Twain signed the contract for *Roughing It*, Jarvis Langdon died, and Olivia, worn down by the nursing, collapsed and herself needed constant care. On top of this, in September, Olivia's friend Emma Nye came for a visit, contracted typhoid, and died in the couple's bed. More than thirty years later, Twain was to describe the days before Emma's death as "among the blackest, the gloomiest, the most wretched of my long life."

Nor was this the end. Shortly after Emma's death, Olivia had a near miscarriage and on November 7 she gave birth to a premature, sickly child who was not expected to survive but who held on, to die several months after the publication of Twain's book. Twain wrote Orion: "*I am sitting still with idle hands* -- Livy is very sick and I do not believe the baby will live five days." Even when Twain started making good progress on his book the following spring, there were times when he thought he was hearing "a popular author's death rattle" [his own] -- a feeling certainly added to by the sudden immense popularity of Bret Harte,

a competitor in writing about the West, who threatened to eclipse Twain by his sentimental depiction of prospectors and prostitutes. These personal misfortunes provide an essential background for *Roughing It*, for although the novel is generally read as the work of a comic writer, it has a darkly pessimistic side.

It seems to me that Twain's conscious, clear intention in *Roughing It* was to debunk the values, including the religious ones, of respectable -- read eastern -- society and to explore the values that arise in the choas of frontier conditions. To realize his intention Twain creates a narrator who is looking back at his initiation into the life of the West. Much of the wonderful humor of the book comes from the successive discomfitures of the initiate until he wises up and learns to deal with his new world.

Or at least that is the direction the book should have gone in -- towards a happy positive resolution. But while the narrator has become a successful lecturer in the last two chapters, his contact with the West and with characters who live apart from the conventional culture of the East has provided him with no code as an effective alternative to that of eastern culture. There is much -- and it came as a surprise to me as I read the book -- connected with the narrator's failure to find a code -- to find, as it were, solid ground: haunting episodes and images, some on the surface comic, which suggest that during Twain's stay in the West deeply troubling symbols of the dark nature of life were sown in his mind -- symbols that were to reappear as expressions, perhaps, of the ordeal he was going through while writing the book. W.D. Howells, who was to become Twain's best literary friend but had known him only for a short time when *Roughing It* appeared, had this insight into the book's symbolism: "All existence there [in the West] must have looked like an extravagant joke, the humor of which was deepened by its nether-side of tragedy." Interestingly, many of Twain's gag-lines appear within or just after some of the darker symbolic passages, as if he were trying to reject some deeply troubling knowledge.

It is time for examples. I would like to suggest that in spite of the narrator's exhilaration at the start of the book, pessimistic implications appear as early as Twain's account of the career of a desperado named Slade, who has killed twenty-six people and is talked about everywhere. At one stage-station the narrator finds himself seated at the same table with Slade, who "gentlemanly-appearing, quiet, and affable," politely presses the remaining coffee on him. Hearing three years later that Slade begged for mercy at his excution, the narrator indulges in perhaps the most complex and serious speculation in the book. Although Slade, a true desperado, was "a man of peerless bravery," he would take "infamous advantage of his enemy" and at the end cried "under the gallows." Thus one could not say that "moral" courage was the source of his bravery.

> Then, if moral courage is not the requisite quality, what could it have been that this stout-hearted Slade lacked? -- this bloody, desperate, kindly-mannered, urbane gentleman, who never hesitated to warn his most ruffianly enemies that he would kill them whenever or wherever he came across them next! I think it is a conundrum worth investigation.

Twain never does investigate -- perhaps because he cannot face the thought that if Slade is not moved by *moral* courage, which implies free selection of right from wrong, he is a mechanism operating according to some mechanical law.

Now the narrator reaches the Mormon country in Utah, and Twain is as puzzled by the Mormons as he was by Slade and possibly for the same reason. The Mormons irritate and intrigue him. In five chapters and two appendices he discusses their history, their control of Utah, their supposedly polygamous leader Brigham Young, and the Book of Mormon. The appendices -- strangely split -- recount both the persecution of the Mormons which finally drove them to the untenanted West, and a massacre supposedly committed by the Mormons against a wagon-train of "gentiles." Clearly Twain sees the Mormons as having been out-group victims of the established religious society of the East. But the Mormons, now installed in Utah, have in their turn, Twain finds, shown the same proneness to intolerance and crude exertion of force in the name of true religion demonstrated originally by the establishment they fled. Once again the problem of the springs of human behavior presents itself to Twain and he backs off. His sympathy for the out-group warring with his aversion, he resorts to pot shots against the Book of Mormon and Brigham Young, making merry with the idea that Young is being bankrupted by having to give equal favors to all of his wives.

Twain's prose is cliched and portentous when he describes the mountains he has come through on the way to Utah: they are "a convention of Nature's kings" or "Sultans ... turbaned with tumbled volumes of cloud." But an alkali desert 100 miles west of Salt Lake evokes some of his finest descriptive writing, oddly capped off by verbal foolery:

> Imagine a vast, waveless ocean stricken dead and turned to ashes; imagine this solemn waste tufted with ash-dusted sagebushes ... imagine team, driver, coach, and passengers so deeply coated with ashes that they are all one colorless color. ... The sun beats down with dead, blistering, relentless malignity; ... there is not the faintest breath of air stirring; ... there is not a living creature visible in any direction whither one searches the blank level that stretches its monotonous miles on every hand; there is not a sound -- not a sigh -- not a whisper.

Arrived at the next station, the narrator is hard put to describe his relief and the tiredness of the mules:

> To try to give the reader an idea of how *thirsty* they were, would be to "gild refined gold or paint the lily."
>
> Somehow, now that it is there, the quotation does not seem to fit -- but no matter, let it stay, anyhow. I think it is a graceful and attractive thing and therefore

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ROUGHING IT

BY

MARK TWAIN.

SHOWING HOW A THREE MONTHS PLEASURE TRIP WAS EXTENDED TO A TERM OF SEVEN YEARS, AND THE CAUSES THEREFOR; WITH A RELATION OF MANY BOTH HUMOROUS AND INSTRUCTIVE INCIDENTS CONNECTED WITH THE EDUCATION OF AN INNOCENT.

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> have tried time and time again to work it in where it *would* fit, but could not succeed ... it seems to me best to leave it in ... since this will afford at least a temporary respite from the wear and tear of trying to "lead up" to this really apt and beautiful quotation.

Twain is having his fun with the learned prose of the estabishment, no doubt, but certainly the joking represents a retreat -- a "respite" -- from the picture of the universe suggested by the alkali desert -- a picture like Melville's of "the heartless voids and immensities of the universe" that stab us "from behind with the thought of annihilation."

After the narrator reaches Carson City, some fifteen chapters deal with the "silver fever" that infects him and others. Everyone is in the "grip" -- rushing about staking claims, deceiving himself or others about the richness of his "vein." Monomania or automatism seems to abound: a Swede is forever singing the same song, a character named "Arkansaw" is always drunk and looking for a fight. Things connected with or around the characters are in equally crazy motion: the narrator is duped into buying a Mexican horse that bucks too outrageously to be ridden; a flood occurring in perfectly clear weather isolates him, along with the Swede and Arkansaw, in a hotel whose outbuildings melt down "like sugar" in the rushing waters.

At the end of the sequence the narrator, pursuing an elusive character named Whiteman, who is in turn hunting for a fabulous lost gold mine, takes time out on the shores of Mono Lake, the "Dead Sea of California":

> Mono Lake lies on a lifeless, treeless, hideous desert, eight thousand feet above the level of the sea ... This solemn, silent, sailless sea ... is little graced with the picturesque. It is an unpretending expanse of grayish water ... with two islands in its center, mere upheavals of rent and scorched and blistered lava, snowed over with gray banks and drifts of pumice-stone and ashes.

This lake, which Twain tells us has no outlet, is so nearly pure lye that no life exists *in* the waters except "a white feathery sort of worm, one-half an inch long, which looks like a bit of white thread frayed out at the sides ... They give to the water a sort of grayish-white appearance." Thousands of flies come to feed on the worms washed up on shore. Twain continues in parody of nineteenth-century pulpit language:

> Providence leaves nothing to go by chance. All things have their uses and their part and proper place in Nature's economy: the ducks eat the flies -- the flies eat the worms -- the Indians eat all three -- the wildcats eat the Indians --the white folks eat the wildcats -- and thus all things are lovely.

With his companion Higbie, Twain, as we can perhaps call him now, goes out to one of the islands in the lake. When their canteen water turns brackish, they search the island for a spring but find only "picturesque" mocking jets of stream, near one of which stands the island's only tree; all else is "solitude, ashes, and a heartbreaking silence." Then noticing that the wind has risen, they go to secure their boat -- which is fifty yards from the shore. Since it would be fatal, according to Twain, to try to swim to the mainland, they are prisoners. Luckily the boat drifts by about a yard from Higbie, who leaps into it; and the two fight their way to the mainland through the billows of the alkaline lake, the boat going over at the last minute. The "agony that alkali water inflicts on bruises, chafes, and blistered hands, is unspeakable," Twain writes; but that is all they suffer.

Mono Lake is the landscape of the

alkali desert again, but in more menacing form. The pessimistic implications for the nature of the world seem for once to be on the conscious level in the parody passage. It would hardly seem likely for such knowledge to resubmerge, but that may be just what it does.

The instability of mankind rather than of nature is the concern of the second half of the book. Hucksterism, even if for a good cause, sweeps the crowd along in one chapter; in another we are told that the first twenty-six graves of Virginia City are occupied by murdered men, that juries are made up of the feckless, that desperadoes receive more acclaim than community leaders. One chapter is given over to showing how a murder breeds only further murders -- in short, irrational feuds. One of the funniest episodes in the book sums up the irrational atmosphere. A western character, Scotty Briggs, comes to arrange with a clergyman, fresh from the East, a funeral service for his companion Buck Fanshaw. He addresses the clergyman:

> "*Are you the duck that runs the gospel-mill next door?*"
>
> "*Am I the -- pardon me, I believe I do not understand?*"
>
> With another sigh and a half-sob, Scotty rejoined:
>
> "*Why you see we are in a bit of trouble, and the boys thought maybe you would give us, if we'd tackle you -- that is, if I've got the rights of it and you are the head clerk of the doxology works next door.*"
>
> "*I am the shepherd in charge of the flock whose fold is next door.*"
>
> "*The which?*"
>
> "*The spiritual adviser of the little company of believers whose sanctuary adjoins these premises.*"
>
> Scotty scratched his head, reflected a moment, and then said:
>
> "*You ruther hold over me, pard. I reckon I can't call that hand. Ante and pass the buck.*"

And so on. The point here is not alone the stuffiness of the minister but that neither man is making sense to the other. Scotty is as roundabout in his expression as the minister.

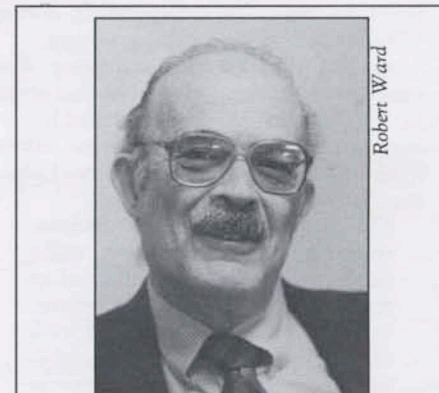
Once again, as if trying to fight off the knowledge of senselessness, Twain in one chapter gives several pages of statistics on the silver industry, then almost casually talks about visiting one of the mines. The descent is like "tumbling down through an empty steeple"; the tunnels are supported by a "world of skeleton timbering"; and when you leave you are "dragged up to daylight feeling as if you are crawling through a coffin that has no end to it." The end of the chapter tells what it is like to be in a mine after a cave-in, with "things cracking and giving way, and ... the world overhead ... slowly and silently sinking down upon you." The whole mining enterprise is associated with these images of loss of control, death, nothingness.

Soon after Twain leaves for the Promised Land of California -- which he finds "grave and somber," the forests monotonous. San Francisco, close up, is full of "decaying, smoke-grimed wooden houses" and has a monotonous climate. In the Sacramento valley, left a waste land by the gold rush fifteen years before, lurk old ghost-like miners. While in San Francisco, Twain "enjoys" his first earthquake; and people streaming out of buildings are exposed in a double sense: many are naked, and many respectable people emerge from non-respectable places. Everyone experiences nausea. In the following chapter Twain portrays himself as living in the direst poverty and "slinking" around the streets, haunted by a double who is "homeless and friendless and forsaken." All of these images, it seems to me, work together to convey a sense of vertigo, of depression brought on by exposure of the nether world. In effect, we are seeing not only California, but Twain's interior landscape.

If I have made the work of a great humorist seem rather grim, I can only stress that I was surprised by Twain's negative rendition of his western adventures. Literary critics warn against the biographical fallacy -- against the illusion that there is a clear connection between life and literature, but *Roughing It* tempts me to the heretical thought that the disasters in Twain's life while he was composing the book are projected onto the western landscape, or discovered in it. But "discovered" is not altogether accurate. Probably when he went west, there was pessimism in his luggage, and more when he sailed from San Francisco to the east to conquer the literary world.

It *has* been rather clearly shown that pessimism is one of the secrets of great humorists. They share perhaps a deep sense of the irrationality, the absurdity, the -- when you get down to it -- tragedy of the world. And the way they are able to transcend this sense is to transform it into art, the *performance* of the humorist. (Interestingly, Twain's book ends with his launching of himself on his career as a lecturer.) But the humorist has to know tragedy, had to live with it. Twain notes in the Lake Mono episode that in order to reach the boat Higbie was prepared to swim *for a while* in the fatal alkali lake. Perhaps the remark of one of Twain's early reviewers is appropriate: "The aggrieved way in which he gazes with tilted chin over the convulsed faces of his audience, as much as to say, 'Why are you laughing?' is irresistible." Why are you *laughing*? I have saved the best comment for the last. "The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven." That was said by Mark Twain.

**Most of the secondary material in this article is from Justin Kaplan's* Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain.



Joseph Yokelson is Professor of English at Bridgewater State College. He received his Ph.D. from Brown University and wrote his dissertation on Hemingway. He teaches a seminar on Mark Twain. and finds both writers interesting due to the complexity of their outlooks.