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*Brno studies in English.* 2024, vol. 50, iss. 1, pp. 167-183

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2024-1-10
Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81081
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Access Date: 18. 01. 2025
Version: 20250107

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# ‘The Subtleties of the American Joke’: Mark Twain versus Europe

*Brno Studies in English*
Volume 50, No. 1, 2024

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867
https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2024-1-10

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**Abstract**
“Guides can not master the subtleties of the American joke,” Mark Twain writes after he finishes a bout of stymying European efforts to teach culture to him and his comrades in *The Innocents Abroad* (293). The joke is double-barreled: Europeans do not realize the joke is on them for being stuck in their past and because Americans are not as dull-witted as they seem, but the joke is also of course on clueless traveling Americans, thrashing about Europe for cultural self-improvement. However, and mostly overlooked in previous analyses, there really is a “subtlety” to that multi-layered term “the American joke.” Acknowledging earlier socio-historical analyses of Twain’s confrontation between new and old worlds, as well as criticism problematizing the idea of authenticity in travel or implicating his book in Western imperialism, this paper instead explores via the lens of Menippean satire Twain’s complex narrative construction of his “joke”, which ultimately blends humor and horror.

**Key words**
*Twain; humor; Menippean satire; Europe; travel*

## Introduction: The Joke

In Chapter 27 of *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), after Mark Twain and his small coterie of American comrades whom he nicknames “the boys” (242) torture a Roman guide by repeatedly asking if everything they are shown is by Michelangelo, Twain remembers a similar episode with a Genoa guide. Guides naturally “take delight in exciting admiration,” (290) Twain notes, before continuing:

> After we discovered this, we never went into ecstasies any more–we never admired any thing–we never showed any but impassible faces and stupid indifference in the presence of the sublimest wonders a guide had to display. We had found their weak point. We have made good use of it ever since. We have made some of those people savage, at times, but we have never lost our own serenity (290).

Twain explains how the “impassible” American face, counterpoint to the impressionable face expected from Americans seeing Europe for the first time, is constructed. “The doctor asks the questions, generally, because he can keep his

countenance, and look more like an inspired idiot, and throw more imbecility into the tone of his voice than any man that lives. It comes natural to him" (290). This Genoa guide was especially excited because he had Christopher Columbus mementos to show. First, he produces a piece of handwriting purportedly by Columbus himself, whereupon the doctor begins:

> "Ah–Ferguson–what–what did you say was the name of the party who wrote this?"
> "Christopher Colombo! ze great Christopher Colombo!"
> Another deliberate examination.
> "Ah–did he write it himself; or–or how?"
> "He write it himself!–Christopher Colombo! He's own hand-writing, write by himself!"
> Then the doctor laid the document down and said:
> "Why, I have seen boys in America only fourteen years old that could write better than that."
> "But zis is ze great Christo–"
> "I don't care who it is! It's the worst writing I ever saw. Now you musn't think you can impose on us because we are strangers. We are not fools, by a good deal. If you have got any specimens of penmanship of real merit, trot them out!–and if you haven't, drive on!" (291–292)

They proceed to a bust of Columbus, and after needing to be reminded of the great one's name again, the doctor asks:

> "... Well, what did he do?"
> "Discover America!–discover America, Oh, ze devil!"
> "Discover America. No–that statement will hardly wash. We are just from America ourselves. We heard nothing about it. Christopher Colombo–pleasant name–is–is he dead?"
> "Oh, corpo di Baccho!–three hundred year!"....
> "Ah–which is the bust and which is the pedestal?"
> "Santa Maria!–zis ze bust!–zis ze pedestal!"
> "Ah, I see, I see–happy combination–very happy combination, indeed. Is–is this the first time this gentleman was ever on a bust?"
> That joke was lost on the foreigner–guides can not master the subtleties of the American joke (292–293).

Twain and "the boys" construct for Europeans the latter's worst expectations of superficial, numb-skulled Americans. And though language-challenged guides may be tricked into patiently trying to educate stereotypically dense Americans, Twain's more respectable 1867 fellow passengers on "the great Pleasure Excursion to Europe and the Holy Land" (19) were *not* stupid, as Mrs. Nina Larowe still seethed 43 years later upon Twain's death. Remembering a subsequent moment in the five-month trip when the Russian czar and czarina greeted them informally at Yalta, she told a reporter in 1910:

> "... It was a magnificent thing of them to do. But Twain had to satirize the thing and we – we who can read between the lines, – feel this deeply.
> "No, I don't want to say anything mean of the dead, but Twain was mean and had no idea what that trip meant—that it was a trip of influence. But then he was a nobody then and could not understand such things" (Gribben 2009: 89).

Of course, the poor guide was *not* trying to impress Americans with Europe but rather with their own history. Still, it was a generous act like the Czar's, and as Mrs. Larowe notes, those "who can read between the lines" know when satire masks mean ingratitude.

However, Mrs. Larowe and various subsequent critics have missed something that perhaps initially seems just Twain's unbounded delight in his own humor, but which suggests a more useful framework to "the subtleties of the American joke" than previously applied. The passage's final joke, which pretends to confuse being honored on a stone bust with being "on a bust" – i.e., drunk – is indeed a predictably unsubtle American joke, but it is not the "American joke" echoing across the book's European section. Rather, the joke that to Twain seems so good he just cannot stop using it is embodied in those lines "Is – is he dead?" It is something to say when confronted with another's death, as if the word itself challenges utterance, as if in not saying it we can somehow avoid it. It hints at deep fear, yet here it is hilarious. Why?

Before trying to answer that question, we should note another strange dislocation in the passage. Twain is not actually remembering this moment; he is simply picking up where he had left off in Chapter 17, as promised then:

> He showed us the birthplace of Christopher Columbus, and after we had reflected in silent awe before it for fifteen minutes, he said it was not the birthplace of Columbus, but of Columbus' grandmother! When we demanded an explanation of his conduct he only shrugged his shoulders and answered in barbarous Italian. I shall speak further of this guide in a future chapter (163–164).

So the guide had started by trying to deceive them, or they had simply misunderstood his "barbarous" language: recalling this could have contextualized the Chapter 27 scene with which I started. Or at least Twain could have provided a more organic return to the anecdote after nine intervening chapters – but instead the return goes something like this: following his proud mock "discovery" of an ancient Roman handbill for a Colosseum gladiator spectacle at the end of Chapter 26 (279–280), Twain complains at the start of Chapter 27 about the cliché " butchered to make a Roman holiday" (284), which reminds him of taciturn Nevada Judge Oliver who after days of silently enduring the worst of a wilderness trip finally complained it was " monotonous" (284–287) , which not only on the slimmest thread supports the " Roman holiday" comment but also introduces Twain's diatribe against the monotony of Michelangelo in Rome (287–288), leading to a short preview of how they tortured a Roman guide on this subject (289),

which finally leads to the Columbus anecdote (289–293). Here is a perfect example of the book's seemingly disjointed narrative.

## Critical Lenses

We might expect narrative continuity to be especially strong in nonfiction reportage tied to a trip's schedule. But what if we read *The Innocents Abroad* not as "nonfiction" but rather as that "fourth form of fiction which is extroverted and intellectual" identified by Northrop Frye (1957: 307) as Menippean satire? Frye writes that this form, attributed to the 3rd century B.C. cynic Menippus whose works have been lost, runs from the latter's classical heirs Lucian and Petronius through Rabelais and Burton to Swift and Voltaire and finally to Aldous Huxley.[1] Arguing against "the sloppy habit of identifying fiction with the one genuine form of fiction which we know as the novel," (1957: 303), Frye asserts that this fourth form of fiction "deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. Pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behavior" (Frye 1957: 308).

Two points in Frye's anatomization of Menippean satire seem especially relevant to *The Innocents Abroad*. One is a reliance on "the free play of intellectual fancy and the kind of humorous observation that produces caricature.... At its most concentrated the Menippean satire presents us with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern. The intellectual structure built up from the story makes for violent dislocations in the customary logic of narrative, though the appearance of carelessness that results reflects only the carelessness of the reader or his tendency to judge by a novel-centered conception of fiction" (308). The second is that "the Menippean satirist, dealing with intellectual themes and attitudes, shows his exuberance in intellectual ways, by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon" (1957: 310).

This "tendency to expand into an encyclopaedic farrago," this "creative treatment of exhaustive erudition" (310) – whether directed by the author at others or self-directed – is a hallmark of Menippean satire, Frye notes, leading him to propose "anatomy" as "a convenient name to replace the cumbersome and in modern times rather misleading 'Menippean satire'" (1957: 311). Perhaps Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* does not come immediately to mind as an example of this form because its setting – not the *cena* of Petronius or the country house weekend of Huxley – seems so unlikely. But given the admirable latitude Frye insists for the larger genus "fiction" of which Menippean satire (or "anatomy") is the fourth form after the novel, the romance, and the confession, I will try to place it right there to explain why various previous critical interpretations seem, like Mrs. Larowe, to have missed the joke.

Previous critics have extensively explored Twain's confrontation with Europe in *The Innocents Abroad*, especially within the context of the first wave of mass American travel there. Jeffrey Steinbrink situates Twain's book against the back-

drop of the Civil War's end and the arrival of steamships suddenly putting European travel within reach, both psychically and practically, of the new northern upper middle class. "Confident enough in its Americanness to be interested as never before in that which was decidedly *not* American, a new class of tourists turned its energies and its penchant for mobility to the East," Steinbrink writes. These new travelers also often longed for relief from the war's sorrows and reaffirmation of the republic's values, he adds. "While this sentiment sometimes degenerated into mere jingoism ... European experience did serve as a corrective for some Americans abroad by providing them with a context against which to reassess their own institutions" (Steinbrink 1983: 280).

Certainly, such motivations are apparent in multiple scenes in *The Innocents Abroad*, most memorably in Twain's imaginary Chapter 26 letter from a Roman countryside peasant visiting America to his compatriots, amazed over the lack of church control, a government not influenced by foreign troops, and near-universal literacy (267–271). Similar comparisons appear in most of the European chapters, mostly to Europe's disadvantage. Chapters 11–12 in France bristle with annoying contrasts between the Europe of dreams and the Europe of ugly reality for Americans: missing soap (98), murderous barbers (113–116), exasperating billiards tables (116), no gas lights (117). So, of course "the subtleties of the American joke" can be read as simply jingoistic frustration, and the book can be read, as Steinbrink does, as a reflection of larger American prejudices.

While some critics have focused solely on Twain's American mix of outrage and wonder over what he sees, Jeffrey Alan Melton elaborates on Twain's role in the essential debate of tourism versus travel. Noting the tourist's "basic inner conflict...[of] how to obtain the authentic in a world of make-believe," Melton argues that *The Innocents Abroad* reflects "the struggles that abound during the education of a novice tourist...[and] illustrates how Twain overcomes the perils of inauthenticity inherent in tourism" (Melton 1999: 65). He explains how Twain makes a play, a production, of his trip, as a frame for exploring this distinction. However, Melton finds this debate to be inherently a fake marketing scheme because of course "everybody wants to travel, but nobody wants to be a tourist, at least conceptually" (1999: 59–60). He argues that Twain relies on a preconceived picture of the strange and exotic that Melton likens to the 19th century tinted "Claude Glass" frame allowing one to "view landscape architecture as if it were a painting" (1999: 66). From there he shows how Twain gradually in his march through the amazing from Tangier to Paris to Rome to Constantinople to the Holy Land "faces the prototypical tourist dilemma: how to salvage a treasured picture of the Old World in the face of dissenting realities" (1999: 69)). By the time he reaches the Holy Land, he finally "recognizes the implicit failure of tourism to offer authentic experiences" – but he "learns how to temper that inherent failure" via "the grace allowed by touristic faith and the redemption offered by touristic memory" (1999: 77). So, *The Innocents Abroad* can also be read as an early, emblematic and necessarily doomed attempt to achieve authentic travel instead of tourism, settling in its final nostalgic, soothing paragraphs for memories that "lull the entire touring experience into the realm of dream. It is the dream of the Tourist Age" (1999: 78).

Writing more recently, Eleftheria Arapoglou notes that historically, *Innocents Abroad* criticism has been dominated by two strains persisting even today: Henry Nash Smith's (1962) argument that the book lacks cohesion because Twain at this early stage was unable to "express reverence and irreverence simultaneously" and James M. Cox's (2002: 42–59) counterpoint attention to "the static and emergent aspects of Twain's humor that combine to form the character of his stance" (Arapoglou 2008: 102).[2] Arapoglou instead addresses spatial representation, how Twain's "fictional utopias emerge at the liminal space between the topographic actuality of the 'dystopias' experienced by Twain the traveler and the imaginary production of 'eu-topias' envisioned by Twain the author.... on the one hand they relate to actual, experienced landscapes by registering the realities of socio-cultural life, while on the other they open up to imaginatively re-created spaces" (Arapoglou 2008:103).

I think Twain is more cynical than either Steinbrink or Melton allow, as eager to show how Europe misreads America as much as he is eager to show the reverse. In other words, Twain is serious when he writes that European guides – and by extension all Europeans – cannot master the subtleties of the American joke. Moreover, that joke is more complex than he reveals at first, and one of the book's great accomplishments is its layering of self-undermining humor. And while Arapoglou explicates via "space studies... a perfect illustration of Twain's highly ambivalent utopian discourse" in his Venice and Holy Land sections (2008: 103), I would argue, instead, that Twain uses both rehearsals and echoes of his "American joke" in France and Italy to achieve not spatial but rather temporal dislocations, also typical of Menippean satire.[4] It sounds strange to call his relentless, seemingly overdone takes on one joke "a single intellectual pattern" (Frye 1957: 308) of the type inherent to such satire, but then it is not just any but rather *the* American joke, tossed and turned, dreamlike, upon European guides, fellow American pilgrims, and himself. It would be a mistake to say simply the joke is really on Americans' lack of subtlety, or Europeans' abundance thereof. Certainly, the book ridicules what Leslie Fiedler called "the kind of American for whom Europe is just one more item on the menu of mass culture" (Fiedler 1966: 489). However, by setting this passage against his humorous narrative poses preceding and following it, we can more clearly comprehend its multilayered texture.

## Rehearsals and Echoes

Despite being a huge hit upon 1869 publication and remaining one of the best-selling travel books ever, *The Innocents Abroad* makes a slow start. Getting to Europe in the early chapters grows as dull as the ambitious journal soon abandoned by young "Jack," one of the passengers (40–42). Only when Twain targets those fellow travelers, starting in Chapter 7 in Gibraltar, does the book begin attaining its comic rhythm. His target is double: bloated 19th century guidebook prose, and the American know-it-alls who regurgitate it. Yet he begins the chapter sounding like one of those guidebooks, cataloguing Gibraltar's "panorama of fashion" ranging from British military uniforms to "veiled Moorish beauties (I suppose

they are beauties)" to "ragged Mohammedan vagabonds" and "Jews ... just as they were three thousand years ago, I suppose" (69). This marvelous "panorama" of a slice of Europe that looks African sounds sincere, except for that double "I suppose" and for the "tribe" of Americans who immediately intrude, looking like Native Americans "because they march in a straggling procession through these foreign places with such an Indian-like air of complacency and independence" (69). Sincere characterization seems indistinguishable from parody; characters are transformed to whatever role the satirist needs them to play, in other words "stylized rather than naturalistic" (Frye 1957: 309). "Speaking of our pilgrims," Twain continues – and here is also one of the book's early examples of throwing narrative continuity to the wind in favor of whatever the previous sentence reminds him of – he is reminded of one, the Oracle, who is

> an innocent old ass who ... never uses a one-syllable word when he can think of a longer one, and never by any possible chance knows the meaning of any long word he uses or ever gets it in the right place; yet he will serenely venture an opinion on the most abstruse subject and back it up complacently with quotations from authors who never existed.... He reads a chapter in the guidebooks, mixes the facts all up, with his bad memory, and then goes off to inflict the whole mess on somebody as wisdom.... (69–70).

Almost immediately, though, Twain opens Chapter 8 with a wildly enthusiastic prose eruption about Tangier climaxing with "Isn't it an oriental picture?" (76–77). It is indistinguishable from those guidebooks' (and their imitative readers') "avalanche of jargon," again using Frye's terms. It will become a formula: the Oracle's mis-observed landmark, Twain or another of "the boys" finding the discrepancy, the Oracle re-setting the matter into his frame of references that start real but quickly turn fictive, and the exasperated group finally surrendering to the Oracle once those references become fully unbelievable – followed by an even more lugubrious slice of guidebook-style prose that cannot help but make our author seem as unreliable an interpreter of Europe as are his targets.

The next information source targeted, in Chapter 12, are the "Old Travelers" who are an extension of the Oracle's idiocies, but again Twain makes it hard to separate his own reading of Europe from theirs. They are introduced by an authoritative-sounding anecdote about how French trains have no accidents because if they do, somebody must be punished, according to "those delightful parrots who have 'been here before'" and who "tell us these things, and we believe them because they are pleasant things to believe and because they are plausible and savor of the rigid subjection to law and order which we behold about us everywhere" (111). Twain immediately sabotages that muted endorsement by exposing the Old Travelers' reverse ascertaining of trustworthiness and their imperialism of knowledge, offering however an even more untrustworthy endorsement: they are fun for their idiocy. The passage is the book's first example of a sudden and seemingly excessive diatribe, yet another Menippean effect:[4] "But we love the Old Travelers. We love to hear them prate and drivel and lie.... I love them for

their witless platitudes, for their supernatural ability to bore, for their delightful asinine vanity, for their luxuriant fertility of imagination, for their startling, their brilliant, their overwhelming mendacity!” (111) Nonetheless, he slides right into the next paragraph’s guidebook hyperbole:

> ... we bowled along, hour after hour, that brilliant summer day, and as nightfall approached we entered a wilderness of odorous flowers and shrubbery, sped through it, and then, excited, delighted, and half persuaded that we were only the sport of a beautiful dream, lo, we stood in magnificent Paris! (112)

Already frustrated with the gap between European dreams and reality, the “boys” change the name of their first guide, who calls himself “A. Billfinger, Guide to Paris, France, Germany, Spain, etc. etc.” – a name they find ridiculous – to “Ferguson” (119–120). Twain mocks his mutilated English, simultaneously highlighting his own American prejudices.[5] The double game of exposing European mendacity with a pose of American idiocy informs his first rendition of Twain and the “boys” versus a guide here in Chapter 13; it will echo briefly in the Chapter 17 seemingly interrupted Genoa guide description already noted (163–164) and in a fuller Chapter 19 Milan diatribe against guides (183) before arriving at the Chapter 27 Rome exchange beginning this study (290–293). They want to see the Louvre; “Ferguson” instead takes them to one silk store after another, an old trick of the dishonest European guide:

> Within fifteen minutes the carriage halted again, and before another silk store. The doctor said:
> “Ah, the palace of the Louvre—beautiful, beautiful edifice! Does the Emperor Napoleon live here now, Ferguson?”
> “Ah, Doctor! You do jest; zis is not ze palace; we come there directly. But since we pass right by zis store, where is such beautiful silk—”....
> Within the half hour we stopped again—in front of another silk store. We were angry; but the doctor was always serene, always smooth-voiced. He said:
> “At last! How imposing the Louvre is, and yet how small! How exquisitely fashioned! How charmingly situated!—Venerable, venerable pile—” (121-122)

When Twain gets his teeth into a funny set piece, he works it to (mock) exhaustion, employing incremental overlaps: mocked old travelers and parodied guidebook prose repeatedly alternate, but before these moments climax, formulaic exchanges with cunning/unwitting guides start; before those peak, he starts another routine suggestive of American showman P.T. Barnum: European history in grand dioramic form, as if announced by a circus master. Chapter 14 presents Notre Dame Cathedral, introduced with asserted but by now already untrustworthy surprise at “how much we do know and how intelligent we are” (130). The subsequent interminable sentence summarizing 1000 years sounds like a dime-show diorama:

> These battered and broken-nosed old fellows saw many and many a cavalcade of mail-clad knights come marching home from Holy Land; they heard the bells above them toll the signal for the St. Bartholomew's Massacre, and they saw the slaughter that followed; later they saw the Reign of Terror, the carnage of the Revolution, the overthrow of a king, the coronation of two Napoleons, the christening of the young prince that lords it over a regiment of servants in the Tuileries to-day—and they may possibly continue to stand there until they see the Napoleon dynasty swept away and the banners of a great republic floating above its ruins (130).

Yet when he follows by reporting that the Duke of Burgundy built the 11th century structure to atone for assassinating the Duke of Orleans ("Alas! Those good old times are gone when a murderer could wipe the stain from his name…simply by getting out his bricks and mortar and building an addition to a church"), it *is* just the unadorned truth, freed from European pretensions. Maybe we Americans *do* know more than we realize. So, *is* there a hard bottom of truth, an actual position, in the narrator's voice? Of course not, for in such wild satirical adventuring, as Bakhtin observes, the protagonist "loses his finalized quality and ceases to mean only one thing; he ceases to coincide with himself" (Bakhtin 1984a, 117). Indeed, the author whose very name suggests that "noncoincidence with himself" (117) seems right around here to begin exploring, alongside European culture and American "innocents", a fractured self that if we pun on the title begins as mock innocence abroad but turns into nightmarish knowledge.

## Horror

Famously in American literature, Europe can unlock previously hidden American depths. Here the "subtleties of the American joke" also reveal buried horror. As with his humorous effects, Twain previews these horrors to come, first in Chapter 14's drowned dead man in the Paris morgue, making him imagine that man as a child loved by a mother, and then Chapter 17's dreamlike – verging on nightmarish – descent into the "old marble cave" that is Genoa, with breathless connectors. Now, though, the European place triggers a Missouri boyhood memory, his first literary reference to the Hannibal cave that will figure so crucially as a place where deadly truth is both hidden and exposed in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*:

> Cave is a good word—when speaking of Genoa under the stars. When we have been prowling at midnight through the gloomy crevices they call streets, where no footfalls but ours were echoing, where only ourselves were abroad, and lights appeared only at long intervals and at a distance, and mysteriously disappeared again, and the houses at our elbows seemed to stretch upward farther than ever toward the heavens, the memory of a cave I used to know at home was always in my mind, with its lofty passages, its silence and solitude, its shrouding gloom, its sepulchral echoes, its

> flitting lights, and more than all, its sudden revelations of branching crevices and corridors where we least expected them (169).

The two sets of descriptive images above are precisely parallel, the second set of sensory details re-stating more abstractly what the first describes more concretely, creating a repetitive effect, like a flashing signpost. It seems a visual parallel to the pre-told and re-told "Is – is he dead?" joke.

Reaching Milan's Cathedral in Chapter 18, Twain heads again downwards into European history. Here his complex layers of representation, established already humorously, unfold horrifically. The shakily attributed Phidias statue reminds him of a skinned man, engendering a prediction (echoing the imagined reminiscence of the Paris morgue's drowned man) that he will visit nocturnally, disturbing the boundary between sleep and waking by appearing at his bed, and then *in* his bed (175). The sight engenders a sudden mnemonic slide, as with Genoa, but now to pure boyhood terror:

> It is hard to forget repulsive things. I remember yet how I ran off from school once, when I was a boy, and then, pretty late at night, concluded to climb into the window of my father's office and sleep on a lounge, because I had a delicacy about going home and getting thrashed. As I lay on the lounge and my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, I fancied I could see a long, dusky, shapeless thing stretched upon the floor. A cold shiver went through me. I turned my face to the wall. That did not answer. I was afraid that that thing would creep over and seize me in the dark. I turned back and stared at it for minutes and minutes—they seemed hours. It appeared to me that the lagging moonlight never, never would get to it. I turned to the wall and counted twenty, to pass the feverish time away. I looked—the pale square was nearer. I turned again and counted fifty—it was almost touching it. With desperate will I turned again and counted one hundred, and faced about, all in a tremble. A white human hand lay in the moonlight! Such an awful sinking at the heart—such a sudden gasp for breath! I felt—I cannot tell what I felt. When I recovered strength enough, I faced the wall again. But no boy could have remained so with that mysterious hand behind him. I counted again and looked—the most of a naked arm was exposed. I put my hands over my eyes and counted till I could stand it no longer, and then—the pallid face of a man was there, with the corners of the mouth drawn down, and the eyes fixed and glassy in death! I raised to a sitting posture and glowered on that corpse till the light crept down the bare breast line by line—inch by inch—past the nipple—and then it disclosed a ghastly stab!
>
> I went away from there. I do not say that I went away in any sort of a hurry, but I simply went—that is sufficient....
>
> Now we will descend into the crypt.... (175–177)

This chilling tale of obscene, boyish curiosity about death repeats in three of the five available texts for Twain's 1869-73 "Sandwich Islands Lecture", appearing

as abruptly there as here (Railton 2012b). Is it hard to forget repulsive things, or hard to ignore them? Count how many times he "counts" to avoid looking. Don't they heighten the wild terror of looking? When all is revealed, he continues looking, "through his hands": he must see. Seemingly random narrative has engendered a prospective (not real) nightmare, which recalls (but how, if unreal?) a real memory, proving the difficulty of forgetting. Perhaps he does not want to remember. However, since this author's voice has been untrustworthy since the boat left New York harbor, how do we know he does not want to remember, in other words does not really want to engender the nightmare? Twain the boy was guilty, after all, for running away, and when he returned home, he "enjoyed" the "perfectly delightful" whipping he received (177). He seems unable to resist confessing this tale, like a guilty person.

Whatever the answers, when Twain returns to reciting cathedral details and more guidebook prose at chapter's end, it is unnerving. We are on unsteady but fascinating ground, wholly unlike other European travel books Twain both mined and parodied (Railton 2012a). Unpredictable and inexplicable tone shifts intensify, as in Chapter 20's idyllic Lake Como passage:

> Our hotel sits at the water's edge ... we go down the steps and swim in the lake; we take a shapely little boat and sail abroad among the reflections of the stars; lie on the thwarts and listen to the distant laughter, the singing, the soft melody of flutes and guitars that comes floating across the water from pleasuring gondolas ... Then to bed, with drowsy brains harassed with a mad panorama that mixes up pictures of France, of Italy, of the ship, of the ocean, of home, in grotesque and bewildering disorder. Then a melting away of familiar faces, of cities, and of tossing waves, into a great calm of forgetfulness and peace.
>
> After which, the nightmare.
>
> Breakfast in the morning, and then the lake (201).

That first paragraph inhabits the eternal present of guidebooks, presenting European travel as Edenic, dreamlike: what dreamier place to be than Lake Como! Then it "melts away" into a pure dream state, which admits "the nightmare", more terrifying for its lack of context or content, and for the sudden switch back to the normality of the travelers' waking world, now bearing terror's stain. Opposing tones are not blended but rather layered, forcing an awareness of their differences, suggesting Menippean satire's "violent dislocations in the customary logic of narrative" (Frye 1957: 310), along with its "experimental fantasticality" and "representation of the unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states of man" including "unrestrained daydreaming, unusual dreams ..." (Bakhtin 1984a: 116). Readers are left to puzzle over the seemingly inevitable and continual slide into nightmarish death and decay even as they delight in the hilarious betrayals of representation from the "Old Travelers", the mockery of guides, and the narrator's disingenuously bombastic historical panoramas and purple prose descriptions.

When the next old romance appears in Chapter 21, that of "noble Count Luigi Gennaro Guido Alphonso di Genova," horror intrudes literally upon laughter, as

it has already done, apparently uncontrollably, in Twain's narrative consciousness. Now, following the grisly tale of medieval torture, the group's predictable response – "Is-is he dead?" – is more than funny (211-215). This is the joke's first *textual* occurrence, though not its first occurrence in the actual trip timeline (i.e., that first occurrence, though only "remembered" in Chapter 27 in Rome, happened in Genoa in Chapter 17). Twain not only layers but also previews his comic and horrific effects.

Signaling such delays keeps comic tension unresolved. Indeed, a re-telling of the joke follows the Chapter 27 Columbus anecdote so seamlessly as to be barely apparent that this anecdote does not really follow the first but rather occurs in Chapter 27's real time, in Rome. The frustrated Roman guide attempts something sure to impress: a Vatican museum Egyptian mummy. Maybe because the mummy has been dead even longer than Columbus, the wait for the now predictable question hits its comic peak:

> "Ah,–Ferguson–what did I understand you to say the gentleman's name was?"
> "Name?–he got no name!–Mummy!–'Gyptian mummy!"
> .... "How calm he is–how self-possessed. Is, ah–is he dead?"
> "Oh, sacre bleu, been dead three thousan' year!"
> The doctor turned on him savagely:
> "Here, now, what do you mean by such conduct as this! Playing us for Chinamen because we are strangers and trying to learn! Trying to impose your vile second-hand carcasses on us!–thunder and lightning, I've a notion to–to–if you've got a nice fresh corpse, fetch him out!–or by George we'll brain you!" (294)

Having previewed the joke, then worn it to exasperation, Twain will now echo it. He has already materialized his echoing technique at the end of Chapter 19, when a guide shouts through a trumpet into Palazzo Simonetti's courtyard, and its famous echo answers:

> "Ha!—ha!——ha!—ha!—ha!-ha! ha! h-a-a-a-a-a!" and finally went off into a rollicking convulsion of the jolliest laughter that could be imagined. It was so joyful—so long continued—so perfectly cordial and hearty, that every body was forced to join in. There was no resisting it.
> Then the girl took a gun and fired it. We stood ready to count the astonishing clatter of reverberations. We could not say one, two, three, fast enough, but we could dot our notebooks with our pencil points almost rapidly enough to take down a sort of short-hand report of the result. My page revealed the following account. I could not keep up, but I did as well as I could.
> I set down fifty-two distinct repetitions, and then the echo got the advantage of me.... (196–197)

Twain's dotted notebook is then illustrated below this text, driving home the point past necessity, as if such unsubtlety is essential to the "subtleties of the

American joke." So naturally, in Chapter 28 after the mummy scene, Twain echoes "Is-is he dead?" He does so, as might be expected by now, within a place of "picturesque horrors": Rome's Capuchin monastery crypt, elaborately decorated with centuries of monastic skeletal remains. Here Twain and the boys change tactics with their new guide: "We made him talkative by exhibiting an interest we never betrayed to our guides" (299), Twain reports, detailing their genuine curiosity and the friar's informed answers about thigh and finger bones and whole individuals. Finally, a European guide and his American tourists behave as they should, with correct information on one end and genuine interest on the other. They study one full skeleton:

> The skinny hands were clasped upon the breast; two lustreless tufts of hair stuck to the skull; the skin was brown and sunken; it stretched tightly over the cheek bones and made them stand out sharply; the crisp dead eyes were deep in the sockets; the nostrils were painfully prominent, the end of the nose being gone; the lips had shriveled away from the yellow teeth: and brought down to us through the circling years, and petrified there, was a weird laugh a full century old!
> It was the jolliest laugh, but yet the most dreadful, that one can imagine. Surely, I thought, it must have been a most extraordinary joke this veteran produced with his latest breath, that he has not got done laughing at it yet. At this moment I saw that the old instinct was strong upon the boys, and I said we had better hurry to St. Peter's. They were trying to keep from asking, "Is–is he dead?" (302)

What does this European veteran's laugh (echoing the previous echoed laugh at Palazzo Simonetti) have to do with "the American joke"? I suggest two literal answers. First, he apparently told it in his last breath, and he is not yet done laughing at it. Thus, he already started laughing at a joke he had not finished telling – normally a bad comic technique, but Twain's own throughout the preceding chapters. Second, Twain and the boys are imposing their joke on him, appropriating what he meant to say. It is the opposite of stealing a joke, but just as bad.

Befitting Twain's comedic economy involving overlapping jokes, previewed and echoed, this skeleton's unspoken joke looks backward as well as forward. Though we need to get "all the subtleties of the American joke" via its buildup since at least Chapter 18's Phidias statue, we also need to follow its echoes. The Capuchin crypt's "picturesque horrors" ending in that petrified laugh prove "what one can accustom oneself to" (301): Europe has helped Twain accustom himself to death, previously too terrifying to face (yet terrifyingly attractive) back in America. That is the backward look.

The laugh reaches forward, too, at the now unspoken joke of the "boys", which has faded, echo-like. Perhaps an honest European, not seeking only profit from American visitors, would laugh aloud at Americans' shallow reverence toward Europe, whose grand old history really is sometimes so horrific that laughter is the only response, as Twain has shown repeatedly. Finally, a European, though dead, shares a truthful laugh with Americans. However, by imposing their one joke on

every situation, Twain and the boys display themselves as innocent know-it-alls, or Americans.

## Conclusion: Menippean Satire and Grotesque Humor

What about laughter and death, so intertwined, the uncontrollable joke containing and triggering irresistible horror? Twain's withered monk with his unfinished laugh recalls the ancient Crimean statuettes of laughing "senile pregnant hags" whom Mikhail Bakhtin uses as a central image in his elaboration of the "grotesque body" and its essentiality to carnival laughter (Bakhtin 1984b: 19–29):

> This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness (Bakhtin 1984b: 25–26).

The grotesque body with its two determining traits of 1) a relation to time and 2) of ambivalence (Bakhtin 1984b: 24) and its "stress ... on those parts of the body ... through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (Bakhtin 1984b: 26) is expressed here in its archaic form, wherein "time is given as two parallel (actually simultaneous) phases of development, the initial and the terminal" (Bakhtin 1984b: 24). Necessarily over millennia, the "sense of time and change was broadened and deepened, drawing into its cycle social and historical phenomena" making grotesque images the means for "a mighty awareness of history" in the Renaissance, for example (Bakhtin 1984b: 25).

Bakhtin elaborates the grotesque's changing literary purposes since antiquity (Bakhtin 1984b: 30–52), but insists that its "depth, variety and power ... can be understood only within the unity of ... carnival culture" (1984b: 51–52). "Deeply ambivalent" carnival laughter combines "death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter)" (1984a: 127). The skeleton's unfinished, life-affirming joke gets suppressed by the smirking Twain, already more familiar with death than he prefers. Menippean satire, "this carnivalized genre, extraordinarily flexible and as changeable as Proteus, capable of penetrating other genres" (Bakhtin 1984a: 113), has here penetrated Twain's narrative. He has achieved a "festive laughter" that "is not an individual reaction to some isolated comic 'event'", that is "universal in scope ... directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants", and that is "ambivalent ... gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding" (Bakhtin 1984b: 11–12). He tells a joke that starts by repressing horror beneath the laughter and ends by repressing laughter beneath the horror. That ambivalence is *the* American joke.

The formal lens of Menippean satire thus not only helps elucidate Twain's seemingly chaotic narrative structure, but also in achieving not a reconciliation

between Twainian laughter and death, but nonetheless an understanding of how the two coexist. Twain is still defying any such reconciliation at the book's end with his hilariously hysterical lament at Adam's tomb in Jerusalem (566–567) and in those final paragraphs whose dreamy nostalgia finds no honest support elsewhere in the book.

However, though we cannot find the joke's conclusion, so to speak, we can locate its beginning. Twain stole the line "Is – is he dead" from his platform humor predecessor and benefactor, Charles Farrar Browne, better known by his stage and pen name "Artemus Ward." In fact, that is about the only point of agreement in the debate about Ward's influence on Twain that Robert Rowlette called "an untidy loose end in Twainian criticism" (Rowlette 1973: 13). Challenging Bernard De Voto's claim that the influence was minimal, Rowlette documents a host of Twain passages like Ward's (1973: 15–21), noting also that Twain got "good service" from the line 30 years later when his Australian lecture fans shouted it from a Melbourne balcony – though Twain claimed not to remember it, perhaps because of resentment at being compared to his lesser predecessor (1973: 25, note 41).

In Ward's "The Green-lion and Oliver Cromwell" (1867), a Cockney London landlord asks a visiting American to find out the identity of a mysterious fellow American guest. Ward learns the man is "one of these spirit fellers" through whom departed great men speak. Ward invites the landlord to the medium's performance. "He says that tonight sev'ril em'nent persons will speak through him – among others, Cromwell."

"And this Mr. Cromwell – is he dead?" asks the landlord (1867: 32). At the performance, the landlord endures the medium first channeling Benjamin Franklin, but when Cromwell "appears" he interrupts the show and calls on the great dead one (whom he first calls "Crumbwell") to make the medium pay his overdue rent, prompting the latter to flee (Ward 1867: 34). The landlord is not stupid: he knows Cromwell is dead, but he asks the question to deflate awe at the past and to settle accounts in the present, just like Twain.

## Notes

1 Mikhail Bakhtin's 1963 *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* adds to his original 1929 *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Art* an extensive 14-point explication (1984a: 114–119) and application of Menippean satire theory to the 19th century Russian author's work, arguing the latter revived the genre. Subsequent critics have applied it to various 20th century and contemporary works.

2 Cox's assessment of Twain's humorous achievement in *The Innocents Abroad* informs my own reading in multiple ways: how the "failure of discrimination" between the difficult-to-define humor and the easily visible and seemingly opposed "attacks on the American tourist" and " an attack upon the past" result in " dismantling the character ... of Mark Twain into a number of contradictory attitudes" and conclusions about the book's "disunity" (38–39); how the narrator's "static aspect" provides the burlesque stance that "gives unity of vision to the immense variety of scenes and experiences he encounters" (42) and despites its "roots in indignation, it moves the reader not toward guilt but toward a laughter arising from recognition of

the absurdity of the world" (44); while its "emergent aspect ... constitutes the book's action," which is a " mock-initiation" undergone by " the suffering Mark Twain" whose comedy "lies in the narrator's insistence on being the fool of his illusions" (45); finally, how the subsequent "irreverence and sadness combine to form the face of innocence ... a role he [Twain] played for the rest of his life" (51).

[3] I realize, too, that such a reading largely ignores a strain of criticism out to implicate Twain the narrator in American cultural imperialism. "Superficially, the narrator seems to portray the pilgrims satirically, but a close reading of *Twain's* comments implicates him in the text's cultural hegemony," writes Bennett Kravitz in an analysis representative of this view (1997: 54), which seems to me blind to the nuances of representation explored here. Twain's pose of American superiority in the face of the foreign seems not "unsaid" as Kravitz writes, but rather obvious and unhelpful to a deeper understanding of this and other poses Twain assumes in the book.

[4] Though it is not specifically catalogued by either Frye or Bakhtin, I would argue that such unleashed diatribe is inherent in Frye's characterizing the Menippean satire as "anatomy" (1957: 311) and Bakhtin's description of the satire's abandonment of all "complex and extensive modes of argumentation" (1984a: 115).

[5] Along the above lines, a graduate student assigned to respond to an earlier campus roundtable version of this paper said he had little specific response, being unable to get beyond the prejudice displayed in naming all guides "Ferguson" and mimicking the mangled English of "some poor Italian man." This self-congratulatory refusal to engage the text seems to reflect the great blind spot in the "postnationalist" New American Studies that Millete Shamir cogently critiques: how its assertions of speaking from/for the margins "often relied on constructed pasts and futures, on sentiments of nostalgia and utopia, on the very narrative teleology that they openly disavowed.... While this is true of new literary histories generally, it is particularly salient in the New American Studies where the object of study is not the other, but the self. Multiculturalism, that is, habitually devised its own genetics of salvation, constructing genealogies of difference and hyphenation, sometimes imagined to be residing within or embodied by the critics themselves" (Shamir 2003: 379–81).

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