

**“Tell everything as it is – no better and no worse:”
Images of the West
in Washington Irving and Mark Twain**

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Abstract

In the United States of the nineteenth-century, the struggle to liberate American writing from European influences took many forms, but one prophecy was that a literature of the West would amount to an American coming of age. The prophecy remains unfulfilled and as one commentator has argued, all the fiction and non-fiction concerning the Frontier “can best be expressed in the image of a Western man straddling his vast empire in splendour, yet standing with his back to the West and looking eastward with awe and reverence” (Robert Lee, From West to East). To explore this proposition, I wish briefly to examine two texts, Washington Irving’s A Tour on the Prairies (1835) and Mark Twain’s Roughing It (1872). In Irving’s Tour, for instance, we are given an account by a well-educated easterner, in which the actual details of Western life and idiom are censored into the picturesque, whilst Twain’s Roughing It is written from the position of a wide-eyed innocent. Both approaches tend to distort the truth. In the work of both authors, the romance of the West takes over from reality and it can be argued that in both cases the disorder of frontier life was kept outside texts, which were written for a predominantly eastern audience. The question posed, then, concerns the way the West was turned into a pastoral world by these authors.

Whitman wrote, in “A Broadway Pageant,” a title that somehow seems to be echoed in one form or another by all those musical films of the Depression 1930s, that

I chant the world on my Western sea,
I chant copious the islands beyond, thick as stars in the sky,
* * * * *
I chant the new empire grander than any before, as in a
vision it comes to me,
I chant America the mistress, I chant a greater supremacy.

His words, though, all recall and echo the celebration of the Whitmanian chant, the repetition, the excitement of what America possessed – “my

Western sea," "the islands beyond," "the new empire," "America the mistress," and, of course, he sings of a "greater supremacy." This poem was written in 1860, and if it is ante-bellum, it hurries to proceed to the end of the nineteenth-century, despite the experiences, national and personal, that Whitman would experience in the Civil War.

Whitman hails the vast empire of an American continent that by 1860 was being tamed and controlled. Admittedly, the "Wild West" and "the frontier" could still be found, but the westward expansion of the migrants was taking its toll on large areas of the natural landscape. When Washington Irving gives us a pastoral scene at the beginning of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," the rural retreats of New York State are contrasted with "the great torrent of migration and improvement, which is making such incessant changes in other parts of this restless country" (Irving 1982, 1060). In much of the writing about America, there is both optimism and a fear of what is happening to the natural scenery and its native inhabitants.

For Whitman, on his "Western sea," there is potential and boundless hope, and that sea not only means the American side of the Atlantic, where European ways can be sloughed off, but also California and the Pacific. Irving, on the other hand, may laud the tranquillity of "little retired Dutch valleys," but he is also unnerved by his "restless country." This will be echoed by later writers of the nineteenth-century and we are reminded of Thoreau's own anxiety, when he tells us that the "whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter" (Thoreau 1854/1983, 160). It is with these issues in mind that we can turn to writers who travelled into the wilderness, especially Washington Irving, in his *A Tour on the Prairies*, 1835, and Mark Twain's *Roughing It* (1872). There is a gap of thirty-seven years between the two books, but there are certain similarities between them.

In 1832, Washington Irving spent a month in the West, having been invited to accompany Henry Ellsworth, a Commissioner for Indian Affairs, who had been appointed to resettle the Indian tribes moving from east to west of the Mississippi. In the *Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*, Irving had written two essays in which he argued that the Indians had been wronged by the white settlers and he lamented that they had disappeared from the eastern regions: thus, in "Traits of the Indians," he writes that "The rights of the savage have seldom been properly appreciated or respected by the white man" and he goes on to argue that "such must sooner or later be the fate of those other tribes which skirt the frontiers, and have occasionally been inveigled from their forests to mingle in the wars of white men" (Irving 1983, 1011). By joining the expedition, therefore, Irving believed that

he could observe the Indians at first hand and see something of America. He had spent time in and writing about Europe, and this would give him the chance to write about his own country.

It was not just the Indians of the Eastern seaboard that had disappeared, but all the tribes would soon become things of the past, so Irving set off with two European friends, an Englishman, a Mr Latrobe, and a young Swiss Count, who, as Irving tells us, travelled as Latrobe's Telemachus. Latrobe, we are told with approval, "was a man of a thousand occupations; a botanist, a geologist, hunter of beetles and butterflies, a musical amateur, a sketcher of no mean pretensions, in short, a complete virtuoso" (Irving, *A Tour*, 5). Mention of Telemachus also points the reader to the style and framing of Irving's narrative, because his material, though dealing with America, would use various European conventions: picturesque travel accounts; allusions to classical history and literature; and the pastoral mode, such as, "Beyond the river, the eye wandered over a beautiful champaign country, of flowery plains and sloping uplands, diversified by groves and clumps of trees, and long screens of woodland; the whole wearing the aspect of complete, and even ornamental cultivation, instead of native wilfulness" (*A Tour*, 12). Two issues are involved here, because this is a journey westward. Firstly, we should refer to Irving's description of rural New York in "The Legend," where the valleys, are "like those little nooks of still water, which border a rapid stream, where we may see the straw and bubble riding quietly at anchor, or slowly revolving in their mimic harbour, undisturbed by the rush of the passing current" (Irving 1983, 1060). Secondly, the cultivated countryside of Europe. The country of wilderness America and that of New York are described in ways familiar to European readers. To emphasise this, Irving's landscapes are likened to European architecture:

We were overshadowed by lofty trees, with straight, smooth trunks, like stately columns; and as the glancing rays of the sun shone through the transparent leaves, tinted with many-colored hues of autumn, I was reminded of the effect of sunshine among the stained windows and clustering columns of a Gothic cathedral. Indeed, there is a grandeur and solemnity in our spacious forests of the West, that awaken in me the same feeling I have experienced in those vast and venerable piles, and the sound of the wind sweeping through them, supplies occasionally the deep breathings of the organ. (*A Tour*, 24)

So, not only does the natural landscape take on the idea of the artificial and man-made, but also a natural phenomenon, such as the wind in the trees, aspires to the condition of music. Thus, Irving's framing takes on identifiable markers: Old World architecture and the picturesque. Indeed, the foliage of the trees gives "to the sunny landscape the golden tone of one of the landscapes of Claude Lorraine" (*A Tour*, 25).

In Irving's account of his sojourn in the West, Latrobe is the prototypical English gentleman, the talented amateur, and the young Count a high-spirited, if wayward, aristocrat. Both of them represent an ideal, that of what we suspect is Irving's approval of a specifically European class system at its best. As Stephen Fender, in his *Plotting the Golden West: American Literature and the Rhetoric of the Californian Trail*, says, the travellers are

defined by their approximation to European literary types. Pourtalès [the young Count] steps out of the *Iliad*; Latrobe out of the *Fairie Queen* or any other renaissance pastoral in which the knight's civil accomplishments prove useful even in a remote country setting, and 'Tonish,' of course, is the antimasque to these, the comic servant with none of the gifts of nature or fortune, except a sly cunning and the ability to survive. (22)

And it is to 'Tonish' and some of the other travelers that we must now turn. 'Tonish' incorporates everything that made many Easterners disturbed by and suspicious of the frontier world. As Fender notes, he has no gifts, "except a sly cunning and the ability to survive." It is, perhaps, Irving's first intimation that he will be leaving civilisation behind and that he has found himself amongst people very different to those he understands and knows:

I must not pass over unnoticed, a personage of inferior rank, but of all-pervading and prevalent importance: the squire, the groom, the cook, the tent man, in a word, the factotum, and, I may add, the universal meddler and marplot of our party. This was a little swarthy, meagre, French creole, named Antoine, but familiarly dubbed Tonish: a kind of Gil Blas of the frontier, who had passed a scrambling life, sometimes among white men, sometimes among Indians; sometimes in the employ of traders, missionaries, and Indian agents; sometimes mingling with the Osage hunters. We picked him up at St. Louis, near which he had a small farm,

an Indian wife, and a brood of half-blood children. According to his own account, however, he had a wife in every tribe; in fact, if all this little vagabond said of himself were to be believed, he was without morals, without caste, without creed, without country, and even without language; for he spoke a jargon of mingled French, English, and Osage. He was, withal, a notorious braggart and a liar of the first water. (*A Tour*, 5)

Despite the author's amusement and conversational style, there is a certain anxiety here which echoes, say, Crèvecoeur's ideas about the frontier and those who live on the boundaries, in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, where those who have moved from settlements and stability have reverted to the state of hunters and a barbarism has led them into being out of control. The geographical position in which they find themselves means that they revert to uncivilised ways and life. Unlike James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, 'Tonish' is not a man "without a cross;" that is, he is of mixed race and therefore tainted. Other members of the party were a mixture of frontier types: "there was a sprinkling of trappers, hunters, half-breeds, creoles, negroes of every hue; and all that other rabble rout of nondescript beings that keep about the frontiers, between civilised and savage life ..." (Irving, *A Tour*, 8), a hint that this group is composed neither of gentlemen nor of noble Indians. This is why the picturesque and the pastoral elements play such important roles in skirting round the harsher realities of the journey and the encampments. Latrobe is a chivalrous knight, the Indians are honorary members of the Roman Empire at its best, and the ancient and romantic knightly virtues symbolise a barrier against the violence and rawness of the wilderness and its inhabitants

Two subtexts that interconnect Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* to a text like *A Tour on the Prairies* are those of the vanishing Indian and the disappearance of the natural world. For Irving, on encountering his first Osages, the Indians, not only take on the form of the Noble Savage, but also assume the trappings of antiquity. The Indians are pure in Irving's eyes, because they are both natural and at home in their environment, and classical in appearance, unlike the "rabble rout" of the frontier population, which prompts him to see them as ancient Romans.

The fact is, though, that the tour is a pastoral idyll and although the reader obtains a great deal of interesting and persuasive information about the life and manners of soldiers, settlers, and Indians, as well as the folklore and history of the frontier region in which Irving travels, the author

remains an Easterner in the wilderness, writing for those back in places like New York and Boston. If the food consumed was cooked “in hunter’s style,” Irving wants us to believe that he is undergoing an authentic experience, because he is “roughing it.” In a way, the journey is seen as recuperative, having an effect on the character and health of an Easterner who will return home (after a month in actuality). He makes a break with civilisation, not only in eating “hunter’s style,” but in abandoning the shelter of a tent and sleeping like the rangers who accompany the group: “A bearskin spread at the foot of a tree was my bed, with a pair of saddlebags for a pillow. Wrapping myself in blankets, I stretched myself on my hunter’s couch, and soon fell into a sound and sweet sleep, from which I did not awaken until the bugle sounded at daybreak.” (Irving, *A Tour*, 21) Yet Irving and his readers know subconsciously that this is in no way a true break with the civilisation of the Eastern seaboard. This is a temporary sojourn, to be written up on the writer’s return to the East.

In Chapter 10, he wants (upper class) young American men not to make the Grand Tour, but to go through a rite de passage through a journey of initiation into the wilderness, the better play a responsible role in the democratic governance of America. “We send your youth abroad,” Irving writes, “to grow luxurious and effeminate in Europe; it appears to me, that a previous tour on the prairies would be more likely to produce that manliness, simplicity, and self-dependence, most in unison with our political institutions” (Irving, *A Tour*, 19). In keeping with the concept of American democracy and universal male suffrage, everyone should be encouraged to develop individuality and slough off the trappings of European manners and culture. This befits a new nation, though it points up the type of audience, to which the book is directed, namely the well-to-do in the “civilised” areas of the land. Parental finance could be better directed at a trip to the wilderness than a Grand Tour to Europe: instead of being overloaded with foreign culture, the forests and the prairies of the West would develop what Emerson would later term self-reliance.

The problem lies in the fact that Washington Irving’s account sanitises a trip by utilising European models and by setting himself up as a naïf, something of an innocent abroad, although in this case *abroad* happens to be on the American continent and the very foreignness of the experience is its central novelty. One gets the feeling that Irving is suddenly relieved in the concluding passages of the account to find himself at a frontier farmhouse “in the very region of Cogaigue,” where he finds that “every gastronomic faculty” is heightened by the smell of food that is not in “hunter’s style.” The traveller in *A Tour* is someone who remains like Mark Twain’s novice in *Roughing It*.

In Mark Twain's *Roughing It* (1872) the West is explored through penetrating observations and commentaries on the culture and society of the regions, and the text blends anecdotes, character sketches, tall tales, and historical facts and information, which both celebrate and demythologise ideas about the frontier and the wilderness. *Roughing It* sees Samuel Clemens turning himself into the more familiar Mark Twain, but there is an uneasiness in much of the writing. Clemens/Twain is often seen as a Western writer, but he was born in a settled community, Hannibal, in the mid-West, not on the frontier. As many critics have pointed out, Clemens's neutral background made him feel uncomfortable and the books themselves, though drawing on earlier writing that he was undertaking on his own "tours", were honed and polished in Hartford, Connecticut, a decidedly Eastern environment. The uneasiness mentioned above can, in fact, be seen in various passages in *Roughing It*. There is, for instance, the description of Lake Tahoe, where the mountains could have come out of Irving and Claude Lorraine. This is a typical example of the picturesque:

The forest above us was dense and cool, the sky above us was cloudless and brilliant with sunshine, the broad lake before us was glassy and clear, or rippled and breezy, or black and storm-tossed, according to Nature's mood; and its circling border of mountain domes, clothed with forests, scarred with landslides, cloven by cañons and valleys, and helmeted with glittering snow, fitly framed and finished the noble picture. The view was always fascinating, bewitching, entrancing. (Twain, 191)

Twain knew that there were problems with this clichéd and old-fashioned form of writing, which falls back on Romantic notions of the beautiful and the sublime, in which the lake itself goes through all the variations that Mother Nature can prescribe. At the same time, mountains have "domes," canyons are "cloven," and everything is "helmeted with glittering snow." This is subfusc writing and Twain knew it, outmoded and not particularly written in a modern, 1872 American mode.

All this became troublesome and Twain must have wondered how he could break out of the literary practices he had absorbed. One clue comes to us through Leo Marx, whose classic study, *The Machine in the Garden* examines the pastoral and the technological in American culture and writing. Marx writes that "As a writer of comic travel books, Clemens recognised that the stock language of landscape appreciation was easily deflated by exposure to everyday facts" (Marx 1964/2000, 322), so that the

Twain narrator looks upon a natural landscape and eats at the same time. Thus, travelling across Nevada in a stagecoach, we are given a distinctive perspective of nature:

And it was a comfort in those succeeding days to sit up and contemplate the majestic panorama of mountains and valleys spread out below us and eat ham and hard boiled eggs, while our spiritual natures reveled alternately in rainbows, thunderstorms, and peerless sunsets. Nothing helps scenery like ham and eggs. (Twain, 161)

Well, there it is, the picturesque brought to human proportions and human capacities, in which the narrator pulls down everything that is *the* beautiful and *the* sublime in the contemplation of raw Nature in terms of one of the most basic of human needs, for Twain the traveler, at least: *ham and eggs*. A very American way of plain speaking, with the juxtaposition of downloading his clichés and pretensions at one and the same time. The vista is broken by his eating, which goes against Irving, where the cooked and the raw mean something different. Irving makes a meal, “hunter’s style,” into something of an adventure, but Twain writes of it as separated from “the majestic panorama of mountains and valleys.” Eating has become more normal, because the travelling companions have ordered their food at an outstation on their stagecoach journey. It has also broken up the barriers between the real and the picturesque. Suddenly, Twain has moved from an older, more European centred way of writing and into an American style. *Roughing It* has its faults, but we can observe not only the figure of Clemens/Twain undergoing a metamorphosis, but a genuine American style emerging. Tony Tanner observes that the “tendency in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to see landscapes as paintings and to inject an added richness by the deliberate exploitation of literary associations is responsible for that tepid aestheticizing of nature best summed up by that equivocal word – ‘charm’ (Tanner, 118). Twain falls into this trap quite often in *Roughing It*, but the book also shows us a new writer emerging, one who is learning to use simple and economic language.

The question remains, however, as to just how “western” Mark Twain really was, because major works, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* were written after he settled in the East, as was the first half of *Roughing It*, and as Fender observes,

And the reason why the first half of *Roughing It* is at once poised and witty, while the second is inhibited and

ambiguous, is that the first was written afresh, in the East, from the vantage point, and for readers who inhabited, a culturally secure environment. Now he could write with real freedom and energy, and at the same time with comprehending control, of his invaluable experience in the West. If the West gave Mark Twain his seriousness and his exalted fancy, the East taught him how to express it. (159)

The narrator is shown as a gullible loser, and the West is an area of failure, where everything that can go wrong does go wrong. Those who populate the wilderness are inevitably going to trick the innocent continually. The reader even sees this in the final chapter, where the Twain character, despite all his experiences, remains an outsider, the butt of a practical joke by so-called "friends." He is subjected to a mock hold-up, in which he loses his money, his watch "and a multitude of small trifles." But, then again, the narrator tells us that since this incident he does not play practical jokes on others and gets angry when jokes are played on him, though the tall tales and character sketches often read like practical jokes themselves.

Twain had written much of *Roughing It* as a series of articles, "Old Times," for the *Atlantic Monthly* and his friend the *Atlantic's* editor, William Dean Howells, wrote to him that "If I might put my in my jaw at this point, I should say, stick to actual facts and character in the thing, and give things in detail ... Don't write at any supposed *Atlantic* audience, but yarn it off as if into my sympathetic ear" (quoted in Tanner, 104). Howells, of course, was himself from the West and thought of Twain as an authentic Western writer, but as Fender notes above, Twain was writing in the East and for a sophisticated and cultured audience, just as Washington Irving had done with his own trip to the West. Robert Lee, whose book, *From West to East* (1966), examines the stance taken by writers in the American West, points out that the fiction and non-fiction "can best be expressed in the image of a Western man straddling his vast empire in splendour, yet standing with his back to the West, and looking eastward with awe and reverence toward his superannuated past" (Lee, 1). One gets the feeling, especially in *Roughing It*, though hints are made in *A Tour on the Prairies*, as well, that the wilderness was a place without history, culture, or roots and that it had to be molded to the tastes of an eastern readership. What both Irving and Twain do is find ways to appeal to the sensibilities of these readers. In a letter home, Clemens wrote that the ideal should be to "tell everything as it is – no better and no worse," but both Irving and Twain were experienced writers and their work conforms to high level of literary practice, which actually forces everything *as it is* off the page.

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