

Nietzsche and Mark Twain: The Art of Satire

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I. What Nietzsche Read of Mark Twain and When He Read It

It is a fact now recognized by scholars as quite beyond dispute that Nietzsche was a passionately enthusiastic reader of the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (Stack 1992, Zavatta 2019). Nietzsche's interest, however, in Emerson's countryman, the comic writer Mark Twain, is much less known, though hardly less passionate. The most reliable source for establishing just which writings of Twain's Nietzsche had read is the catalogue of Nietzsche's personal library drawn up by Campioni and his collaborators (Campioni *et al.* 2003). This catalogue lists the following volumes:

1. *Die Abenteuer Tom Sawyers. Ins Deutsche übertragen von Moritz Busch* (Leipzig: Grunow, 1876), 314 pages (11th volume in the series *Amerikanische Humoristen*). This was the German edition of the novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which was published by Twain in 1876 and translated into German that very year due to the great popularity that the author had already achieved in the German-speaking world.

2. *Die Arglosen auf Reisen, Übers. von Moritz Busch* (Leipzig: Grunow, 1875), 406 pages (4th volume in the series *Amerikanische Humoristen*).

3. *Die neue Pilgerfahrt. Ins Deutsche übertragen von Moritz Busch* (Leipzig: Grunow, 1875), 395 pages (5th volume in the series *Amerikanische Humoristen*). These two volumes together constitute the German translation of a single work of Twain's: *The Innocents Abroad*, or *The New Pilgrims' Progress*, a kind of travel diary of a journey through Europe and the Holy Land, written on commission from a newspaper that Twain published in 1869.

4. *Jim Smiley's berühmter Springfrosch u. dergl. wunderliche Käuze mehr. Im Silberland Nevada. In's Deutsche übertragen von M. Busch* (Leipzig: Grunow, 187), 408 pp. (2nd volume in the series *Amerikanische Humoristen*). This is the German translation of some fifteen stories selected from Twain's 1867 collection of short comic prose pieces *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*. The original American edition had comprised some twenty-seven pieces, all of which had previously appeared in newspapers or magazines.

5. *Das vergoldete Zeitalter. Roman. Erster Theil. Ins Deutsche übertragen von Moritz Busch* (Leipzig: Grunow, 1876), 315 pages.

6. *Das vergoldete Zeitalter. Roman. Zweiter Theil. Ins Deutsche übertragen von Moritz Busch.* (Leipzig: Grunow, 1876), 352 pages. This two-volume work is the German translation of *The Gilded Age*, Twain's first novel, written in collaboration with Charles Dudley and published in 1873.

The series *Amerikanische Humoristen* comprises six volumes by Twain, of which indeed only four (numbers 2, 4, 5, and 6) have come down to us as parts of Nietzsche's private library. Missing are *Die Abenteuer Tom Sawyers*, which Nietzsche warmly praised to his friend Franz Overbeck, to whom he gave it as a gift in 1879, and the *Skizzenbuch* (476 pp.) of 1877, a further selection of humorous writings by Twain which corresponds to no work which had already been published in English. We do not know if Nietzsche ever owned a copy of this book. If he did, it must have been lost or given away, but we have no record of either event.

None of the copies of Twain's books that we can still examine in Nietzsche's private library displays any marks or notations in their margins or elsewhere. This would indicate that Nietzsche read Twain principally for entertainment and recreation—although, of course, the possibility is not thereby excluded that Nietzsche may have derived from this reading not just pleasure and relaxation but also a certain instruction that may have proven useful to his own work.

Nietzsche began to read Twain in 1875 during his years as a teacher of Classical Philology at the University of Basel. Ida von Miaskowski, the

wife of the Professor of Economics at this same university has told of how, in the winter of this year, a small group of friends agreed to meet every Tuesday evening, at the home of one or another of them, to play music or to read aloud to one another pieces of poetry and prose. The group included, besides Ida von Miaskowski herself and her husband August, two young German professors and their wives, Friedrich Nietzsche, the theologian Franz Overbeck, and Heinrich Romundt, another classical philologist. We learn from a letter of Ida von Miaskowski's to her mother, to whom she was in the habit of writing and describing these evenings spent among friends, what enthusiasm Nietzsche had already at this time for the work of Mark Twain: "For this evening Professor Nietzsche is said to have once again obtained a simply magnificent book to read aloud from" (Gilman 52). The book that Miaskowski refers to was the collection *Jim Smiley's berühmter Springfrosch u. dergl. wunderliche Käuze mehr. Im Silberland Nevada*, which had just recently been translated into German. According to the receipt preserved as part of the philosopher's *Nachlaß*, Nietzsche purchased this book on the 19th of December 1874 at the Felix Schneider bookshop in Basel (Campioni *et al.* 2003, 639).¹

In December of 1875—more precisely on the 21st of this month—Nietzsche purchased, at the same Basel bookshop, four more books by Twain, namely: *Die Arglosen auf Reisen*; *Die neue Pilgerfahrt*, which had just appeared in German that year, and the two volumes of *Das vergoldete Zeitalter*, which had appeared so recently that they bore on their title pages the year that was about to begin, 1876. In the following year, 1877, Nietzsche bought *Die Abenteuer Tom Sawyers*, which had been translated into German immediately on publication of the English-language original. No bookshop receipt for this last purchase has come down to us, so we do not know the precise date on which Nietzsche bought his copy of *Tom Sawyer*. We only know that on the 29th of December 1879 he took it to a bookbinder to be rebound, most likely because repeated re-readings had worn out the original binding (Campioni *et al.*, 639). We may, however, suppose that Nietzsche purchased his copy of the German edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* some time during the first half of 1877 because

halfway through June of this year we find him writing, on a postcard, to Paul Rée:

I took three books with me to the place² that this postcard shows: something new from the American Mark Twain (whose idiocies I love more than I do the ingenuities of the Germans [*ich liebe dessen Albernheiten mehr als die deutschen Gescheutheiten*], Plato's *Laws*—and you, my dear friend [*und Sie, lieber Freund*] (KSB 5, 245f).

Nietzsche is obviously referring, with this “you,” to the book *The Origin of the Moral Sensations* that Rée had published that same year and which was to exert such a great influence on Nietzsche's “philosophy of the free spirit.” As to the reference to “something new from the American Mark Twain,” it is difficult to imagine that, in using such an expression, Nietzsche could have been alluding to books bought a year and a half earlier. The more probable hypothesis is that he meant *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which had appeared in German in just this very year of 1877. This book, according to Nietzsche's sister Elisabeth, was the one among his collection of *Amerikanische Humoristen* volumes that her brother enjoyed the most.³ In the autumn of 1879, when Nietzsche was lying very ill in his mother's house in Naumburg, he asked her to read it to him aloud so as to spare his failing eyesight. In a letter to Overbeck from November 1879 Nietzsche tells how:

My mother has been reading to me: Gogol, Lermontov, Bret Harte, M. Twain, E.A. Poe. If you do not yet know the most recently published of Twain's books, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, I would be glad to make you a little present of it.⁴

A month later Nietzsche writes to Overbeck that he has indeed sent him this “little present”: “Next week your Twain will arrive” (KSB 5, 470). This is surely the reason why this book is no longer to be found among the books of Nietzsche's private library. It is probable, moreover, that Nietzsche continued to read Twain also during the following year because in one of the philosopher's notebooks from the year 1880 we find the following remark:

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American laughter does me good [*Mir thut das amerikanische Lachen wohl*], these rough and ready seamen of the Mark Twain type. Since reading this, I find I'm no longer able to laugh over anything German [*ich habe über nichts Deutsches mehr lachen können*] (NL 1880 7[229], KSA 9, 365).

Some ten years later, when Nietzsche, having descended into madness, once again found himself confided to his mother's care, the old woman took once again to reading him passages from *Tom Sawyer*, hoping perhaps that, as they had in his younger years, Twain's "idiocies" would cheer him up and awaken his enthusiasm once again.⁵

II. Why Nietzsche Read Twain

Nietzsche read Twain in the period running from 1875 through to 1879 or, in other words, during the period in which he developed his so-called "philosophy of the free spirit." This period is characterized by Nietzsche's distancing himself from the Romantic sources that had pervaded his earliest works. The metaphysics of Schopenhauer in particular becomes, at this time, an object of rigorous criticism. In 1876 Nietzsche also parts ways with the Wagnerian project of a total reform of German culture to which he had lent, up until this point, very energetic and public support. Not only the public but also Nietzsche's closest personal friends found themselves confused and dismayed by this sudden change of attitude on Nietzsche's part. Many attributed it to the influence of Nietzsche's new friend Paul Rée.⁶ Nietzsche's change of approach to these important philosophical and cultural questions was due, in reality, to reading he had been doing in a whole series of scholarly and scientific fields, including anthropology, comparative ethnology, and mass psychology. In this period, through the comparative study of different cultures, Nietzsche set about investigating a series of problems specific to European civilization (see Vivarelli 2008, 528). One defining characteristic of Nietzsche's philosophical methodology during his "free spirit" period consists in a deliberate self-alienation from all that is known

and familiar to him, so as to see this sphere of the known and the familiar in a different light and thus to acquire new perspectives on it (HH 23). In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche held an “ever greater detachment [*wachsende Loslösung*]” to be characteristic of a new type of philosopher, the “good European” (BGE 242), who can be considered a further-evolved form of the “free spirit” (Gori and Stellino 2016). This new philosopher makes himself “increasingly independent of any *particular* environment” (BGE 242), that is to say, his value-judgments are no longer the fruits of “the spirit of the age” but are, on the contrary, turned critically against this spirit.

It was particularly Nietzsche’s readings in American literature that provided him with a privileged perspective on certain phenomena occurring in the Europe of his day. Nietzsche was reading during these years the *Lehrbuch der Volkswirtschaft und Sozialwissenschaft* (Handbook of Politics and Sociology) by the American economist Henry Charles Carey (see Brobjer 1999, 59). In aphorism 287 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, Nietzsche explains just what prompted him to turn his reading in this particular direction. He states that whoever wants to study the movements of the body politic and body social is obliged to turn his gaze toward North America rather than Europe, since in this latter, “elder” region of the world “the initial and normal movements” of this body social are no longer easily observable (WS 287).

Nietzsche was in fact one of the very few German intellectuals of his day who took an interest in the work of American authors. For the most part, educated Germans tended not to take these “New World” writers seriously, looking on them as ignorant and superficial (see Biedenknapp 1902, 240).⁷ Also widespread among European intellectuals was the fear of an Americanization of European culture. Jacob Burckhardt, in the course entitled *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* [Considerations on Universal History] that Nietzsche attended in Basel in the autumn of 1870, evokes this possibility, as if evoking the advent of a new barbarism (Vivarelli 2008, 533-34). Burckhardt suggests in these lectures that the wild rush to self-enrichment supposedly characterizing American society

inevitably brings it about that such activities of a higher order as art and philosophy come to be classified as "unproductive" and looked on, at best, as mere idle pastimes indulged in by those able to afford a life of leisure.⁸ Nietzsche shared Burckhardt's worries that such an attitude would spread, or had already partially spread, to Europe. In aphorism 285 of *Human, All Too Human*, titled *Modern Unrest* [*Die moderne Unruhe*], Nietzsche observes:

Modern agitatedness grows greater the farther west we go, so that to the Americans the inhabitants of Europe seem one and all ease-loving and epicurean creatures, though in fact they are swarming among one another like bees or wasps. This agitatedness is growing so great that higher culture can no longer allow its fruits to mature.... For lack of repose our civilization is turning into a new barbarism. (HH 285)

However, in contradistinction to Burckhardt, who had an all-embracing contempt for what he felt to be the general absence of culture in America, Nietzsche picked out certain Americans as personalities worthy of the highest admiration. Among these were the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson and Mark Twain. Nietzsche was able to see, behind the "mystic" Emerson and the "humorist" Twain—for these were the two stereotypical labels that many felt sufficed to grasp the respective work of these two authors—two thinkers of real depth and substance equal to the task of developing an acute social and cultural criticism of the country that had produced them. The justice of Nietzsche's observation here is proven by the fact that the American perspective on Europe to which Nietzsche refers in MA 285 is precisely that of Mark Twain who, in the chronicle of his journey through Italy contained in *Innocents Abroad*, writes:

Just in this one matter lies the main charm of life in Europe—comfort. In America, we hurry—which is well; but when the day's work is done, we go on thinking of losses and gains, we plan for the morrow, we even carry our business cares to bed with us and toss and worry over

them when we ought to be restoring our racked bodies and brains with sleep. We burn up our energies with these excitements, and either die early or drop into a lean and mean old age at a time of life which they call a man's prime in Europe. [...] I do envy these Europeans the comfort they take. When the work of the day is done, they forget it. Some of them go, with wife and children, to a beer hall and sit quietly and genteelly drinking a mug or two of ale and listening to music; others walk the streets, others drive in the avenues; others assemble in the great ornamental squares in the early evening to enjoy the sight and the fragrance of flowers and to hear the military bands play—no European city being without its fine military music at eventide; and yet others of the populace sit in the open air in front of the refreshment houses and eat ices and drink mild beverages that could not harm a child. They go to bed moderately early and sleep well. They are always quiet, always orderly, always cheerful, comfortable, and appreciative of life and its manifold blessings. (Twain 1869, 186)

Although he was known to the broad reading public as a “comic” writer, what Mark Twain practiced was really not comedy but rather satire. His humor, that is to say, was a highly functional humor, aimed at pointing up the contradictions of the social reality in which he lived. His humorous observations, in other words, were intended to spur his readers on to become conscious of these contradictions and, ultimately, to bring about change. Nietzsche explicitly recognized satire's function of social, cultural, and political critique. We find proof of this, in fact, precisely in the period of early 1877 when he was at work writing the first volume of *Human, All Too Human*. In an unpublished note dating from the first part of this latter year, Nietzsche criticizes Cervantes for having railed, with his *Don Quixote*, rather against the educated Spanish public's taste for stories of knightly adventure than against the real evil of his day, namely

the Inquisition. This leads Nietzsche to judge Cervantes to be an expression of "the decadence of Spanish culture" in the 16th century and even to call him a "national disaster [*nationales Unglück*]" (NL 1876-1877 23 [140], KSA 8, 453f).⁹ We may conclude, then, that what Nietzsche was looking for in the stories and novels of Mark Twain was not just a moment's entertainment or distraction; rather, the passion he felt for the American author is comparable to that which he felt for the French "moralists," principally for the first and perhaps greatest author in this tradition, Montaigne.¹⁰ Nietzsche was searching, in Twain, for a model for the philosopher that he was striving, in these years, to become: a moralist who employs, in his moral critique, above all the instrument of laughter.

III. The Critique of American Materialism and Greed

The first collection of Twain's stories that Nietzsche read, *Jim Smiley's berühmter Springfrosch* (the partial translation of *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*) gathered together stories previously published in newspapers and magazines. In these stories Twain recounted, in the first person, things that had befallen him during his journeys through the Wild West, undertaken during the years 1861-1867. The reason that had prompted him to visit these parts of the country had been the wish to visit his brother, who had been appointed Secretary of the Nevada Territory. The notes he made on these journeys were enriched, obviously, by certain self-invented details that served to make the events recounted more tragi-comic. Twain, however, did not use his imagination to invent unreal worlds but rather simply to emphasize, so as to make them look ridiculous, certain aspects of the reality with which he had come into contact. Through these stories Twain provides us with a sort of cross-section of the still-young society of America, while ironizing ferociously on its vices and defects. Twain attacked the cultural poverty of his American contemporaries, particularly those living on the eastern seaboard. He attacked their spiritual pettiness, their rampant materialism, their greed and passion for financial speculation. Finally, he attacked the corruption of American political life at the time. This corruption is the

central polemical target also in Twain's first novel *The Gilded Age*, which he wrote together with Charles Dudley Warner, a slightly older friend. The story that Warner and Twain tell here is set in the period immediately following the US Civil War, when the American phenomenon of land speculation reached its peak. The authors took the term "gilded" from Shakespeare's *King John* (1595): "To gild refined gold, to paint the lily [...] is wasteful and ridiculous excess" (Shakespeare 1887, 75). Gilding gold meant, literally, putting gold on top of gold. It served as a metaphorical description of what was being done by the large American landowners who were attempting to increase their capital through speculation. These men would stop at nothing to achieve their ends and would sink even to bribery and corruption. *La Revue des deux mondes*, of which Nietzsche was a regular reader, described *The Gilded Age*, in its review, as a "brutal daguerreotype" of contemporary American society, which was characterized by an unbridled "thirst for riches" and by the "greasiest sort of corruption in political affairs" (Vivarelli, 537).

IV. The Critique of Reverence for the Past and the Cult of the "Great Man"

Besides the social, cultural, religious, and political critiques developed by Twain there was a further reason why Nietzsche felt especially drawn to him and his work: we find, in fact, in Twain a theme that also plays an important role in the philosophy of Emerson and that surely motivated Nietzsche's interest also in this latter American author. This is the critique of the sense of reverence toward tradition and toward the "great men" of the past. According to Twain this sense of reverence was especially typical of American scholars but, as Nietzsche repeatedly emphasizes throughout his work from the second of the *Untimely Meditations* onward, it was a psychological trait no less noted among their European counterparts. This type of critique is especially clearly observable in Twain's work *The Innocents Abroad, or the New Pilgrims' Progress*, which sealed his reputation as an author of international renown. After having worked as a journalist in Nevada and California, in 1867

Twain was sent by a San Francisco newspaper as a foreign correspondent to Europe and the Middle East. Specifically, Twain visited France, Italy, Greece, and the Holy Land. *The Innocents Abroad, or the New Pilgrims' Progress* is his travel journal, the entries of which were published in instalments in the newspaper that had sent him. The regions that Twain visited had become the typical destinations chosen for the "pilgrimages" undertaken by well-to-do Americans eager to admire the great monuments of European culture. Twain's intention with this travel diary was to critique the attitude of reverence toward the past that characterized many of his contemporaries, "de-sacralizing" many of the famous sites and personalities that had become, for rich Americans, veritable "cult objects." For example, Twain reports on his visit to the tomb of Lucrezia Borgia in the following terms:

We saw also an autograph letter of Lucrezia Borgia, a lady for whom I have always entertained the highest respect, on account of her rare histrionic capabilities, her opulence in solid gold goblets made of gilded wood, her high distinction as an operatic screamer, and the facility with which she could order a sextuple funeral and get the corpses ready for it. We saw one single coarse yellow hair from Lucrezia's head, likewise. It awoke emotions, but we still live. (Twain 1869, 185).

Twain not only ironizes the excessive reverence displayed toward the past, but he also adopts a sarcastic attitude when it comes to the veneration of "great men." He writes, for example, of Michelangelo:

I wish to say one word about Michael Angelo Buonarrotti [*sic*]. I used to worship the mighty genius of Michael Angelo—that man who was great in poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture—great in everything he undertook. But I do not want Michael Angelo for breakfast—for luncheon—for dinner—for tea—for supper—for between meals.... In Genoa, he designed everything; in Milan he or his pupils designed everything.... in Padua, Verona,

Venice, Bologna, who did we ever hear of, from guides, but Michael Angelo? In Florence, he painted everything, designed everything, nearly, and what he did not design he used to sit on a favorite stone and look at, and they showed us the stone. In Pisa he designed everything but the old shot tower, and they would have attributed that to him if it had not been so awfully out of the perpendicular.... He designed St. Peter's; he designed the Pope; he designed the Pantheon, the uniform of the Pope's soldiers, the Tiber, the Vatican, the Coliseum, the Capitol, the Tarpeian Rock, the Barberini Palace, St. John Lateran, the Campagna, the Appian Way, the Seven Hills, the Baths of Caracalla, the Claudian Aqueduct.... The eternal bore designed the Eternal City, and unless all men and books do lie, he painted everything in it!.... "Say no more!... Say that the Creator made Italy from designs by Michael Angelo!" I never felt so fervently thankful, so soothed, so tranquil, so filled with a blessed peace, as I did yesterday when I learned that Michael Angelo was dead. (Twain 1969, 287)

Twain's irony is good-natured because he surely did recognize Michelangelo to be a great genius. His intention is simply to dampen down a little the veneration that people felt for the "great man" and above all the sense of their own inferiority that could so easily ensue from this veneration. Veneration for "great men" is dangerous because it oppresses and paralyzes, whereas the effect of a "monumental" approach to history should rather be to stimulate people to action.

In the second of the *Untimely Meditations* Nietzsche argues for the usefulness of focusing on the deeds of "great men" because he hoped that a certain admiration for what they had achieved might shake human beings of the present day out of their mediocre search for a petty happiness and induce them to set about improving and perfecting themselves. Nietzsche presents the psychological dynamic that takes hold of the mind of the so-

called "common man" at the sight of a "great man" as something similar to the productive envy¹¹ that gives rise to the Greek *agon*, in which the virtue of our opponent spurs us on to perform better. Clearly, if the "great man" with whom we find ourselves confronted appears to us to be a sort of supernatural being—i.e., a being utterly qualitatively distinct from ourselves—then this productive dynamic will be blocked. That is to say, admiration is something productive and stimulating so long as it does not become veneration—i.e., so long as the "great man" is not placed on a pedestal and looked upon as a demi-god. But this is precisely what Carlyle did in his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841). Carlyle presented various types of the "hero," all of whom had acted, thanks to their superior energies and intuitive capacities, as motors of historical progress. Carlyle claimed that the "common man" should greet with gratitude such heroes, pay them the tribute of veneration, and submit himself trustingly to their projects. In short, Carlyle hoped for the coming of a new aristocracy of talent in which less gifted human beings would sacrifice themselves to render easier the lives of the more gifted, who would then in turn guide and govern the world for the good of all. This position might be attributed to Nietzsche on the basis of certain early writings such as *The Greek State* (1871) (Church 2015), written when he was still under the intellectual domination of Wagner and a supporter of this latter's project of a rebirth of German culture on the basis of Wagnerian music-drama. But these were certainly not positions Nietzsche held from 1876 onward, when he vigorously and publicly attacked the metaphysical conception of genius on which the Wagnerian project was based. Nietzsche wrote in aphorism 162 of *Human, All Too Human* that, if we think of genius as some kind of miraculous gift, then we will feel no call to set about perfecting our own selves so as to emulate the deeds of "great men": "To call someone 'divine' means: 'here there is no need for us to compete'" (HH 162). This is the reason why Nietzsche considered the cult of great men *à la* Carlyle to be a great danger for culture. If the figure of the "great man" is to exercise a productive function in society, the so-called "common man" must understand that the distance that

separates him from this “great man,” although it is real, can still be bridged.

In *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche pointed up the immense distance that separated Emerson from Carlyle, even though the American author’s reflections on “great men” have often been thought to be simple echoes of the reflections of the Scotsman, with whom he had close and friendly relations (TI Skirmishes 12 and 13). Emerson develops severe criticisms of the “great men” of the past, with a view to clarifying the fact that these latter are not idols to be venerated but rather simply examples (this is why he called his work on them *Representative Men*) who could be, and indeed ought to be, outdone by the men of the present day through achievements still more admirable.¹² He had emphasized this point in “Self-Reliance”: “Why all this deference to Alfred, and Scanderbeg, and Gustavus? Suppose they were virtuous: did they wear out virtue? As great a stake depends on your private act to-day as followed their public and renowned steps” (EII, 36; V, 47). The same might be said of Twain: he too exercised his ferocious sarcasm on the “great men” of the past, so that the men and women of the present would not feel oppressed by the sight of their greatness but would rather be moved to plan works and actions still more extraordinary.

V. The Self-Reliant Individual and the Transvaluation of Values

Finally, we need to examine another reason, no less important, for Nietzsche’s great appreciation of Twain. This emerges where we turn to look at that book of Twain’s that Nietzsche loved the best, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Twain wrote this novel in the summers of 1874 and 1875, remembering his childhood on the Mississippi. The book was published in 1876 and, for commercial reasons, it was presented as a “boy’s book.” However, right from its first conception, Twain had never thought of it as a “boy’s book.” Indeed, along with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it is a satirical masterpiece.

Tom Sawyer is an “anti-model” or, as we read in the *British Quarterly Review*, a veritable plague, an “enfant terrible.” Tom hates Sunday school,

is disobedient, and is always in search of adventure, which invariably leads him into trouble. He is the perfect non-conformist who defies social conventions, despises a religion reduced to empty conventions, and refuses to base his judgments on the opinions of others. Tom Sawyer embodies that self-reliant individual that Emerson describes in his essays and that Nietzsche so much admired, giving form to this individual's traits and characteristics, first in "Schopenhauer as educator," then in the "free spirit," and then in Zarathustra (Zavatta 2019, 68-113).

It is not by chance that Mark Twain chose a young boy to represent these values. As Brahm and Robinson (2005, 155) have observed, Twain looked on boyhood as an enviable age by reason of its "blissful freedom and moral perfection." As Emerson explained in his essay *Self-Reliance*, young boys are genuinely free because they have no need of gaining the sympathy or approval of others:

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlour what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict. You must court him: he does not court you. But the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with éclat, he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account. (Emerson, 39-40)

Both Emerson and Twain consider the imperturbable innocence of boyhood as a condition that must be regained if one wishes truly to act autonomously and to think for oneself.¹³ Twain, describing the heroes that

he admired the most, Ulysses S. Grant and Joan of Arc, characterizes them as “simple-hearted,” endowed with “frankness and child-like naivety” and “unmarred by timorous self-watching and constraint.” Like boys, great men do not think about the consequences of their actions or about the judgments of others but act in terms of “an intuition which could not err,” that is to say, their own sense of morality (Brahm and Robinson 156).

Tom Sawyer, an exemplary personification of this freedom of thought and action, is a perfect instance of what Nietzsche calls, in *Zarathustra*, the “creator,” i.e., the individual who is capable of transvaluing the values of the tradition. The passage of the novel in which this becomes most memorably evident is the famous passage describing Tom’s wriggling out of the chore of painting a fence. In order to see to it that someone else performs this tiresome chore in his stead, Tom has the brilliant idea of making this boring work appear to be something magnificent and desirable. Standing in front of the fence, he adopts the pose and the mannerisms of a great painter, so that those who happen to pass by eventually begin to envy him, even going so far as to offer to pay him if he will only allow them to do this important work in his stead. Twain offers the observation:

He had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it—namely, that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain. If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. And this would help him to understand why constructing artificial flowers or performing on a tread-mill is work, while rolling ten-pins or climbing Mont Blanc is only amusement. There are wealthy gentlemen in England who drive four-horse passenger-coaches twenty or thirty miles on a daily line, in the summer, because the privilege costs them

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considerable money; but if they were offered wages for the service, that would turn it into work and then they would resign. (Twain, *Tom Sawyer* 22)

As Nietzsche would put it, Twain discovers that "it is we who have been the colourists of the world" (HH 16), that is to say, that it has been human beings who have filled Nature with meaning and with value. Then, forgetful of their own power, these same human beings believed, for many centuries, that the meaning and the value that they had infused into the world were things objective, undiscussable, eternal. In fact, in the moment when a consciousness of Man's meaning- and value-creating action re-emerges, a transvaluation of all values becomes, for the first time, possible. It becomes, in other words, for the first time possible for the individual to live according to a measure and a law of his or her own, and to change the meaning and value of things simply by giving them new names.

VI. The Art of Satire

After focusing on the convergence between the polemical targets of Twain and of Nietzsche, we must now investigate the quite specific form that both adopted in order to launch their polemical attacks: namely, satire. As we have already indicated, satire consists in holding up to ridicule, by use of various rhetorical strategies, certain aspects of reality or certain attitudes that one is resolved to critique. Satire, however, is a very specific form of critique. Whereas invective is a direct critique, one which expresses indignation and anger and aims to give rise to the same feelings in the audience, satire is an indirect critique that is born of a wish to take one's distance vis-à-vis certain values and attitudes and, again, aims at enabling its audience to take just such a distance. Laughter is the sign that the satirical author's strategy has hit the mark and that his audience has risen to adopt the satirist's perspective. From this perspective it is possible to see in a new light the reality that surrounds us and to exercise our own judgment regarding attitudes and values so widespread in our society that they are usually simply taken as unquestionable "givens." It is not by chance that Nietzsche always associates, in *Zarathustra* and elsewhere,

laughter with altitude, this altitude being associated in its turn with a “*pathos* of distance,” or a feeling of having taken one’s distance from commonly-accepted moral ideas and practices. In *Zarathustra* Nietzsche portrays as “tarantulas” those who nourish in themselves a hatred for their opponents and wish to harm them. It is easy to recognize this attitude as belonging to “slave morality,” whereby the weak and the suffering nourish resentment against the strong and the happy and wish to take revenge on them. In order to drag the strong and the happy down into something like their own condition, the “tarantulas” here call the strong and the happy “evil,” so as to give rise in them a sense of guilt. The opposite attitude to this is represented by “master morality,” the “masters” knowing, for their part, neither resentment nor the thirst for vengeance. These latter have, indeed, no interest in calumniating others, since, focused as they are on themselves and their own tasks and projects, they pay little attention to what others are doing. When they observe something that clashes with their own values, they simply take their distance from it, saving their energies for things that are really important. This is why, *qua* representative of an aristocratic “master” morality, Nietzsche responds to the “tarantulas” as follows: “I want to expose your hiding places to the light; therefore I laugh into your face my laughter of the heights” (Za II, On the tarantulas, 76). In the moment in which certain values and attitudes are “exposed to the light”—that is to say, looked at from a different perspective—they lose their power over us. They appear to us to be no longer supportable or sustainable, and we begin to laugh at them. In the aphorism that opens *The Gay Science* Nietzsche takes as his polemical target “the teachers of the purpose of existence,” i.e., those who feel that they must constantly be explaining everything that happens in terms of some ultimate end or purpose. These people assume that existence has an “aim” and that our actions acquire profound significance in view specifically of this “aim.” A coming to awareness of the fact that such an “aim” and such a “meaning” are things invented by us and introduced arbitrarily into existence, will tend to provoke, writes Nietzsche, a sense of “liberation,” of “irresponsibility,” and a great burst of laughter (GS 1).

Laughter, then, is the reaction to a tension that has had to be put up with for a very long time and that is suddenly, unexpectedly relieved. Whoever laughs is truly liberated from the old morality; his heart becomes light and innocent as that of a child. Whoever, though, still casts curses on, and spews hatred against, others—as is the case, for example, of the “foaming fool” whom Zarathustra encounters in the vicinity of “the big city” (Za III, *On passing By*, 140)—is surely someone who has not yet overcome Christian morality, because his mind is still pervaded with that resentment out of which Christian morality was born. This is why Zarathustra admonishes his disciples in the following way: “Not by wrath does one kill, but by laughing” (Za I, *On reading and Writing*, 29).

In *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche portrays Emerson as “the sort of man who instinctively feeds only on ambrosia and who leaves behind whatever is indigestible in things” (TI *Skirmishes* 13, 198-99). While Emerson is devoid of all resentment, hatred, and anger, Twain makes conformism, the dominant values of his society’s and people’s general lack of faith in themselves, look ridiculous. He gives his readers the opportunity to consider the customs and practices in which they are daily immersed, from a different angle, and thereby to take their distance from them. We do not know if Twain was aware that the only way to overcome Christian morality was, precisely, laughter. But we do know that he considered himself, rather than a “humorist,” a moralist, and that he was perfectly conscious of the power that he wielded. In fact, in the story *The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain does present laughter as the most powerful weapon of destruction possessed by Man. The protagonist of this story, who happens to be Satan, says that the human race

has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter. Power, Money, Persuasion, Supplication, Persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug... but only Laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of Laughter nothing can stand. (*The Mysterious Stranger: The Chronicle of Young Satan*, qtd Brahm and Robinson 165-66)

VII. Appendix: What Did Twain Think of Nietzsche?

The (rare) scholars who have considered it worthwhile to investigate the relations between Twain and Nietzsche have nominated as points of similarity between these two writers their shared psychological approach and interest in human behavior, their common recognition of the role of the unconscious in determining this behavior, and their common skepticism regarding so-called “free will.” Furthermore, we can add that both writers denounce social conformity, which they see to be due only to the need for approval and fear of disapproval. Above all, both are vigorously critical of religion in general and of Christianity in particular, due to the latter’s anti-natural morality. As Gabriel Noah Brahm and Forrest G. Robinson have put it, “both were maverick moralists given to immoralist masquerades” (140).

We have seen how, and to what degree, Twain influenced Nietzsche during the period of the maturation of his “philosophy of the free spirit,” which is to say, of Nietzsche’s own critical thinking. Mark Twain, however, for his part liked to boast of having never read Nietzsche. We may not suppose, then, that Nietzsche influenced in any way Twain’s vision of morality or religion, or his choice to make satire his particular mode of moral and social intervention. Nonetheless, Isabel Lyon, Twain’s personal secretary and a great admirer of Nietzsche, tells of how sometimes, when reading through Twain’s works, she could not help but perceive what she felt were remarkable similarities to Nietzsche’s works. This prompted her to repeatedly urge Twain to read excerpts that she made for him from the German writer’s books. Twain’s initial reaction was always the same: he exclaimed, “Damn Nietzsche!” (Brahm and Robinson, 137). But after having read the excerpt in question, says Lyon, he would always end up nodding his approval.¹⁴

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Notes

¹ This book was also read by Nietzsche's close friend since schooldays, Carl von Gersdorff, who in April 1875 wrote enthusiastically to Nietzsche about some of the more boisterous of the stories in the collection, such as *The Mexican Plug* ["*Der mexicanische Stoepsel*"]. See Gersdorff's letter to Nietzsche, April 1875, KGB II:6/1, 179.

² Rosenlauibad, where Nietzsche was staying during the summer holidays.

³ In the preface she wrote to the first catalogue of Nietzsche's personal library first published in 1900 and then republished in 1913, Elisabeth writes: "Many of the volumes of this *American Humorists* series are still to be found among the books of his library. The only one that I have not succeeded in finding there was his favorite of all, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. He was always on the lookout for books of a comic nature that he could have someone read aloud to him. It is only when one is asked to perform a service like this that one realizes how little good comic prose of this sort we Germans have produced" (Berthold 453, qtd D'Iorio 44).

⁴ KSB 1879 letter no. 904.

⁵ "On his good days she took him on walks and let him play the piano. Sometimes she read to him, 'in a soothing monotone,' from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*" (Krell and Bates 51, qtd Griffin 141).

⁶ See Reinhard von Seidlitz's letter to Nietzsche dated 19 June 1878 (KGB II:6/2, 900f) and Nietzsche's letter to Paul Rée dated 10 August 1878 (KSB 5, 346).

⁷ George Biedenknapp was one of the first to write on Nietzsche's reading of Emerson. He declared himself astonished by the fact that Nietzsche could have found Emerson so interesting, precisely because he was American. "What we admire about the Yankee [...] scarcely contributes even remotely to lead us thinking that these dollar-hunters [*Dollarjäger*], millionaire cleaners-of-boots [*Stiefelputzermillionäre*], Oxen-Baron [*Ochsenbarone*] or whatever we call them, could write even a single line of philosophy" (Biedenknapp 240).

⁸ This hostility toward perceived typically American styles of behavior showed forth also in the term "Americanism," which was

employed by many Europeans in this period. These included Renan, who meant by this term all that was culturally mediocre, and Moritz Lazarus, editor, along with the philologist Steinthal, of the *Zeitschrift fuer Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*. Lazarus and Steinthal used, more or less interchangeably, the terms “Americanism” or “cultural barbarism” to indicate the tendency, which they perceived to be spreading more and more widely in Germany, to consider as superfluous all those mental and spiritual activities—such as poetry, philosophy and the arts—which produced no immediate effects on the practical plane (Vivarelli 535).

⁹ It is no doubt significant that Nietzsche remained throughout his life a great enthusiast for satire in all its forms, as is demonstrated for example by his appreciation of the Venetian Pietro Buratti, an outstanding exponent of Italian satire (NL 1885 34[8], KSA 11, 425); or his praise of Voltaire’s satire on the immortality of the soul (NL 1887-1888 11[201, KSA 13, 83]); or, finally, his celebration of the *Satyricon* of Petronius for its having freed sexual desire from the shadow of sin (NL 1888 15[104], KSA 13, 467).

¹⁰ Nietzsche also read with great interest Charron, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, Fontanelle, Vauvenargues, Chamfort, Helvétius and Stendhal. See Donnellan, Pippin, Vivarelli.

¹¹ Already in his early essay *Homers Wettkampf* [Homer’s Contest] Nietzsche distinguished between two senses of “envy,” one positive and one negative. Drawing on Pausanias’ interpretation of Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, Nietzsche represented “envy” here through the image of two sister goddesses. “Bad Eris” [envy] corresponds to a desire to possess what the other person possesses. This gives rise to destructive forms of behavior aimed at depriving the other person of what they have, that is to say, at diminishing this latter’s power and pleasure. The “good Eris,” by contrast, personifies the desire to overcome one’s adversary by performing better than they do. The encounter takes the form not of a destructive struggle (*Vernichtungskampf*) but rather of a competition (*Wettkampf*). Whereas the *Vernichtungskampf* tends to bring about the mutual destruction of those involved in it, the *Wettkampf* rather exalts the qualities of each,

inasmuch as the struggle stimulates both the contending parties to be creative and productive (Acampora 114). For this reason, Nietzsche considered the *agon* to be the best path by which personal excellence could be pursued.

¹² In *Daybreak* Nietzsche defines the cult of the hero as "a morality of sacrificial beasts" in which the sacrifice, however, is only apparent. He who venerates a great man in fact wishes to experience a sense of power without himself making any effort. "For by devoting yourselves with enthusiasm and making a sacrifice of yourselves you enjoy the ecstatic thought of henceforth being at one with the powerful being, whether a god or a man, to whom you dedicate yourselves." This attitude is typical of weak natures who have no intention of committing themselves to a "sober morality" of self-perfection (D 215).

¹³ Emerson continues: "Ah, that he could pass again into his neutrality! Who can thus avoid all pledges, and having observed, observe again from the same unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence, must always be formidable. He would utter opinions on all passing affairs, which being seen to be not private, but necessary, would sink like darts into the ear of men, and put them in fear" (Emerson 40).

¹⁴ When Lyon bought a copy of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and insisted that Twain at least take a glance at it, his reaction was the usual one: "Oh damn Nietzsche! He couldn't write a lucid sentence to save his soul" (8 August 1906, qtd Brahm and Robinson 137). On 27 August, however, Twain "slapped his leg hard" and shouted "Hurrah for Nietzsche!" when Lyon reported the philosopher's description of "acts of God" as "divine kicks"—a humorous deflation of the punitive Judeo-Christian God that tallies with similar attacks by Mark Twain (Brahm and Robinson 138).

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