

Mark Twain, the Talking Cure, and Literary Form

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There are many reasons why Mark Twain's lifelong struggles with psychic trauma, serious mood disorders, and suicidality have only recently been accorded much critical attention—reasons including resistance to biographical interpretation, the (apparent) incongruity of humor and melancholy, and the continuing stigmatization of mental illness.¹ Moreover, the complete text of Twain's frank and voluminous autobiography remained unpublished (at his insistence) for a full century after his death. The recent publication of the three-volume *Autobiography of Mark Twain* (2010–15) has brought a fresh abundance of information to light while also, crucially, making possible a fuller and more accurate assessment of the structure and methodology of the *Autobiography* itself. Indeed, his autobiography's significance for the story of mental health in America has as much to do with its form as with its content—an innovative autobiographical form that Twain crafted not only out of personal upheavals but also with acute insight into the depth psychology of his time.

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1. Suffer the Reminiscences

While scholars have begun to appreciate the extent of Twain's early traumatization and its lifelong consequences, it still goes virtually unknown among his casual readers and fans, even though his most widely read and cherished (and densely autobiographical) books are full of horrific violence, deep melancholy, and perhaps the highest body count in American literature. By the time he was 15 years old, he had witnessed two enslaved children regularly beaten and flogged by his own father; an adult enslaved man being

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bludgeoned to death by a local overseer; a tramp burning to death in the village jail; a local man getting fatally shot on the town's main street; a traveler from California being gutted with a Bowie knife; another Californian being perforated with musket slugs by a woman whose house he was trying to rob; the attempt by two brothers to murder their aged uncle; the hanging of an enslaved man accused of raping a girl and murdering her brother; two young friends drowning in a local creek; and the deaths of his sister Margaret, his brother Benjamin, his father John, and his aunt Martha ("Patsy").

A great deal of the misery of Twain's life—the many deaths, acts of violence, illnesses, defeats, and upheavals—is woven in various ways into the fabric of his popular novels and tales. Of course, Twain's experiences of love, happiness, and sheer curiosity about the world are also amply reflected in these writings. Taking the good along with the bad, Twain is undoubtedly one of the most autobiographical fiction writers in US literary history.

Twain is also one of the nation's greatest autobiographers. Yet his *Autobiography* itself is not widely known. And where it is known, it has been largely misapprehended, despite the fact that it is "arguably," as Joshua Galat puts it, "the most multifaceted piece of life writing ever produced by an American author" (33). When Twain died in 1910, he left behind what Michael Kiskis describes as "a chaotic collection of manuscripts that he identified rather loosely as 'my autobiography'" (xxi). Among these papers was the series of short "Chapters from My Autobiography" that Twain had published in the *North American Review* between 1906 and 1907 and that constitute Kiskis's 1990 edition of *Mark Twain's Own Autobiography*. The vast remaining bulk of manuscripts and dictations, however, was enjoined from full publication by Twain himself for 100 years following his death. In the meantime, several editors—all less scrupulous than Kiskis—took it upon themselves to arrange and publish various *portions* of Twain's autobiographical writings, according to their own respective whims. None of the resulting volumes (Albert Bigelow Paine's *Mark Twain: A Biography* [1912], Bernard DeVoto's *Mark Twain in Eruption* [1940], and Charles Nieder's *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* [1959]) are even remotely complete, and none accord with Twain's own designs for the work.

Thus, it was not until after the stipulated century had passed that the complete work was published in something like the form Twain intended. Yet the *Autobiography of Mark Twain* is still relatively unknown, not only because of the publication delay and its multifaceted complexity but also because the three-volume set, meticulously edited by Benjamin Griffin and Harriet Elinor Smith, is forbiddingly long. All told, it runs to more than 2,200 pages. This is *15 times* the length of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791),

to cite an example that, much to the point of this essay, Twain found “pernicious” (“Late” 138). Although he never fully accounted for this antipathy, we can infer from the lambasting Twain gave it that, like many other readers of Franklin’s *Autobiography*, he faulted its refusal to attempt anything approaching frank psychological self-analysis.

2. Autobiography and Self-Analysis: Twain, James, Freud

Mark Twain was a keen student of human psychology, with a paraprofessional interest in the scientific field itself, at the forefront of which was his friend William James, who shared Twain’s fascination with the flux of consciousness and “inward division” (Horn 135). Twain also studied, and on occasion even participated in, various developments—including techniques of hypnosis, positive thinking, and hydropathy—in the “mind-cure” movement sweeping Europe and the US in the late nineteenth century. Twain’s lifelong interest in dream interpretation, prophecy, and telepathic communication led him in 1884 to join Britain’s recently founded Society for Psychical Research, and he later published two essays on telepathic phenomena, “Mental Telegraphy” and “Mental Telegraphy Again,” in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*. At the close of the century, Twain’s 20-month residence in Vienna (from 27 September 1897 until 30 May 1899) put him, wittingly or not, at the center of the nascent psychoanalytic movement, with its emphasis on the meaningfulness of dreams and the curative power of what one of Sigmund Freud’s earliest patients dubbed (in English) “the talking cure” (“Über Psychoanalyse” 7).

In fact, Freud was a keen fan of Twain’s writing and made sure he had a ticket to the American author’s first lecture in Vienna. In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud wrote that he had “treated myself to listening to our old friend Mark Twain in person, which was a sheer delight” (Masson 299). Although there’s no hard evidence that the two ever conversed, Freud cited Twain on numerous occasions, both in his correspondence and in three of his major works: *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* [*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*] (1905), “Das Unheimliche [The Uncanny]” (1919), and *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* [*Civilization and Its Discontents*] (1930).² Forrest G. Robinson insists that Twain and Freud “worked in complete independence of each other” (33), even as he is quick to concede that “their shared fascination with the mysteries of the human psyche, and their unflinching witness to the predicament of modern humanity, drew them along often parallel tracks to a range of strikingly similar conclusions” (33–34).

Indeed, in *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*) (1900), the revolutionary book—itself a new kind of autobiography—that Freud was finishing during Twain’s sojourn in Vienna, dreams were said to be “die Via regia zur Kenntnis des Unbewussten [the royal road to knowledge of the unconscious]” (613)—the road to understanding one’s unrecognized and unavowed wishes and desires.³ For Twain, autobiography was the road to much the same goal, as he explained in a letter to William Dean Howells in 1904:

An Autobiography is the truest of all books; for while it inevitably consists mainly of extinctions of the truth, shirkings of the truth, partial revealments of the truth, with hardly an instance of plain straight truth, the remorseless truth *is* there, between the lines, where the author-cat is raking dust upon it which hides from the disinterested spectator neither it nor its smell . . . the result being that the reader knows the author in spite of his wily diligences. (Twain and Howells 782)

Some of these “wily diligences” have to do with the question of referentiality and, more specifically, of naming. For, having embarked on a self-historicizing project, any autobiographer is bound to wonder—perhaps for the first time, perhaps in new ways—about their own nature and identity: What *is* it, exactly, that’s indexed by my use of the first-person pronoun? And who *is* the person to whom my “proper” name refers? All autobiographers must adjudicate the relation between sense and referent, and the most interesting usually give readers some sign of how their lives *inform* that process of adjudication.

3. The Subject of Autobiography

Unlike Griffin and Smith, I will henceforth refer to the author of *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* as Samuel Clemens—not, however, to discount the importance of the name “Mark Twain” in literary history, nor to ignore the complexities (so thoroughly explored by scholars including Justin Kaplan [1966], Susan Gillman [1989], and Forrest G. Robinson [2007]) of Clemens’s powerful, if ambivalent, identification with his most famous creation. Instead I wish to help keep the question of the proper name in mind and to address this question in light of Clemens’s own considerable psychological, one could say proto-psychoanalytic, insight. For the question of the proper name is also the question of the subject (the one who speaks) and of the subject’s initiation: its origins as well as

its formative participation *in* and subjection *to* significant rites and rituals.

Such rites and rituals are often secret. Consider, for example, the “initiation” ritual that Tom Sawyer insists upon in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). In Chapter 35, Huck (initially) resists the terms of this initiation because they are so extreme. They are, in reality, matters of life and death, not only for himself but for others as well. And it is precisely the cost—the life-or-death stakes—of the speaking subject’s initiation as such that preoccupied both Clemens and Freud throughout their lives, especially as they aged and as their respective views of humanity grew increasingly grim. This heavy psychic cost was the central preoccupation of Freud’s late work, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and it was taken up, pertinently, several decades later by Jacques Lacan, in his controversial 1967 polemic concerning the “self-given” authority of the psychoanalyst (“Proposition”)—later dubbed “auto-autorisation [self-authorization]” by Lacan’s editor Jacques-Alain Miller (“Statut” 187–88).

To my knowledge, no publisher has ever marketed an autobiography as “authorized” or “authoritative.” The author’s own approval of and competence for the task of writing such a book are stipulated by the metonymic “signature” on its cover, which is the sign of what Jacques Derrida refers to as the author’s “having-been present” and, thus, of both the work’s “originalité énigmatique [enigmatic originality]” and its tenebrous but consequential relation to the (displaced) figure of the author (*Marges* 391). Readers of autobiographies, including readers as deeply skeptical of origins as Derrida, still take seriously the *impression* of monolithic substantiality conferred by authorial signatures—even if, once opened up, many such monoliths seem more like cleft embankments, heavily striated by anxieties about the nature of authority itself. The stakes of autobiography include knowing, as Derrida elsewhere puts it, “ce qu’est la propriété de ‘sa propre vie’, qui peut en être le ‘maître’ [what is the property of ‘my life,’ and who could be its ‘master’]” (*Passage* 310).

This pun on “propriété/property” as *possession*, *attribute*, and *propriety* marks a conundrum that all autobiographers face with varying degrees of confidence, irony, anxiety, and effort. It’s hard work to make and to keep a life that seems worth having, a life one can “own,” not just in the modern sense of personhood to which C. B. Macpherson gave the name “possessive individualism,” but also as a life to tell to others, to painstakingly delineate in what would be heard as the voice of what Derrida ironically calls its “master.” Eve Sedgwick observes in her autobiography that “production of the first person is . . . labor intensive” (207)—not

least because we each have so *many* “first persons” to produce. “The human being is a swarm of beings,” writes Gaston Bachelard (19)—countless busy workers in a first-person factory.

Of the output of his own first-person factory, G. W. F. Hegel states: “When I say ‘I,’ I mean myself as this singular, quite determinate person. But when I say ‘I,’ I do not in fact express anything particular about myself. Anyone else is also ‘I,’ and although in calling myself ‘I,’ I certainly mean me, this single [person], what I say is still something completely universal” (57). Here Hegel gives us the first-person singular pronoun as a kind of early Ford motorcar: each one is the same, but everyone drives it differently. Moreover, no one drives exactly the same way every time they get behind the wheel. Thus, when I say “I,” I often mean myself as I know not *what* sort of person. At other times I mean myself as precisely the singular, determinate person I’m determined *not* to be. Or that I very much aspire to be. Or that I seem to have forgotten how to be. Or that I might once have recognized but now wish to disown. Or that now goes by a different name, or goes by many names—names that might suit many (im)proprieties.

The judgments we form of ourselves often involve questioning our competence to speak well and truly for ourselves, to give the best possible account of ourselves. And there are many good reasons to ask: Am *I* really the best person to write my autobiography? Do I know enough, *myself*? Do I know myself *enough*? Yet, ironically, feelings of trepidation in the face of such questions may be the surest sign of one’s autobiographical competence, of having an adequately keen sense of the many limits of self-knowledge and thus of being able, at the very least, to give the blanks, hollows, and inconsistencies their due.

4. Pseudonymy, Celebrity, and Self-Regard

Clemens had been using “Mark Twain” as the *nom de plume* he frequently called his “*nom de guerre*” since 1863.⁴ It was one of many pseudonyms—including “Grumbler,” “John Snooks,” “Josh,” “Rambler,” “Sargeant Fathom,” “Son of Adam,” “Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass,” and “W. Epaminondas Adrastus Blab”—that he’d tried out as a young newspaperman during the early 1860s. Pen names were fashionable then. But more important to Clemens was the protection they afforded him as the author of various satirical and occasionally incendiary articles. The way Clemens tells it, in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), he settled on that name precisely because of the unintended hurt that one of his lampooning sketches had caused a famous steamboat captain and occasional newspaper correspondent,

who, Clemens claims, had used “Mark Twain” as his own pen name (516–20). But, according to biographer Ron Powers, no evidence has ever been found of any articles by Captain Isaiah Sellers signed “Mark Twain” (118). Kevin Mac Donnell argues that Clemens plucked his pen name from a hitherto overlooked comico-nautical sketch published in *Vanity Fair* in 1861, in which one of the characters is called “Mark Twain.” And Gary Scharnhorst (dismissing without mention Donnell’s claim) concludes that the most “plausible explanation” centers on young Clemens’s documented reputation as a man who habitually drank enough liquor for two. In any case, the name itself would have resonated for Clemens, who had obtained his pilot’s license in 1859, as thoroughly riverine: in his day, riverboats used ropes marked at intervals of six feet (equal to one fathom), and the second *mark*—Mark Two, or “Mark Twain” in Mississippi River lingo—indicated a depth (twelve feet) that was *just safe enough* for steamboat navigation, making it a nicely ambiguous metaphor for the “depth” of a person’s character.

But whatever foibles, jokes, or parodies it signaled to those in the know, “Mark Twain” was not, in itself, a risible name (like “W. Epaminondas Adrastus Blab”). Nor, as an authorial signature, did it signal that all of its productions were satires or burlesques. Rather, once he’d settled on “Mark Twain,” Clemens used it not only as a pen name but also, on various occasions, as if it truly were his proper name. As early as July 1863, he was signing “Mark” to various letters home to his mother and sister, and, while he seems to have been temporarily dissuaded from doing so, he resumed the practice in 1866, in letters that year alone to a wide range of correspondents, from family and friends all the way to the governors of Nevada and California. From that point on, in his voluminous correspondence, he alternated—apparently according to whim—between variants of “Samuel Langhorne Clemens” and “Mark Twain.” It’s difficult to think of another author whose pen name became so thoroughly implicated in who that author was understood to be as a historical person, while at the same time being so thoroughly a part of who that author understood himself to be. The simplistic distinction drawn by some critics between what Jennifer Zaccara, for one, calls “the authentic self of Samuel Clemens and the persona or mask of Mark Twain” is plainly insufficient (107). For only having cut through the claptrap about split-personalities and *Doppelgänger* can one begin to appreciate how complex, ambivalent, cannily reflexive, and shrewdly responsive to the world around him this particular autobiographer’s multiple self-designations actually are.

Such an appreciation is crucial to any reading of Clemens’s *Autobiography of Mark Twain* and the forms of self-encounter memorialized in its many thousands of long-secreted manuscript

pages. For decades, Clemens both laughed and wept at the task of self-representation he had set for himself, a task he executed against the backdrop of a growing culture of mass publicity increasingly defined by the new medium of photography. A ready technology for the documentation of ordinary lives, photography also created modern mass-media celebrities, like Clemens himself, opening up possibilities for self-invention and falsification to adepts of an ever-expanding range of image-making technologies. Even with his modest provincial beginnings, Sam Clemens began at an early age to grasp (literally as well as figuratively) the technological challenges of representing himself both from and against the point of view of his mediatized images, ultimately making and remaking himself—both in the living and in the writing of his life—as, simultaneously, subject and object of regard.

Consider that, in 1850 (probably as a 15th-birthday present), Clemens sat for a daguerreotype: a studio portrait of the young printer's apprentice cradling a composing stick holding three display-size letters, "S," "A," and "M" (Figure 1). Sam would grow up to be one of his era's most astute observers of how photography transformed American life and the stories Americans told about their lives—including his own *Autobiography*. Clemens's book brims, not with photographs, but with reflections upon the nineteenth-century explosion of print media and the effect of the mechanical reproduction of photographic images on democratic society. Even as a youth, Clemens seems to have grasped the possibilities. For in the 1850 daguerreotype, he has set the three letters backwards (as "M," "A," "S"), so that, when reversed by the photographic apparatus, they would read in the proper, self-identifying order.

Beyond his fellow Americans' widely shared confidence in photography's indexical relation to the "real," Clemens further intuited its potential for shaping appearances in a culture increasingly riven by antithetical commitments to publicity (the transparency and knowability of the workings of an open society of equals) and to privacy (individual control over public access to one's own identity and experience). One of the first modern media celebrities, Clemens watched democratic culture become increasingly dependent upon photography's power both to widen and to distort popular perception of things "as they really are," including its power to shape his own increasingly international image.

As young Sam understood, the daguerreotype apparatus works as a mirror, and he was savvy enough to manipulate the objects in the viewfinder's frame (like the three letters of his name) so as to control what everyone would see in the reversed, reflected, framed image (recall that "frame" is also a printer's term for the wood or metal form that holds the type-block in place). More than 50 years



Fig. 1. G. H. Jones, Samuel L. Clemens, 29 Nov. 1850, Hannibal, Missouri. Image courtesy of the Mark Twain Papers and Project, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

later, Clemens used the same mirror metaphor to describe his *Autobiography*: in one of his 1906 dictations, he insists that his autobiography “differs from *all* other autobiographies” inasmuch as those are mere “windows” through which the “conventional” autobiographer observes the world, whereas his “is a mirror, and I am looking at myself in it all the time” (2: 12). The *Autobiography* is the 1850 daguerreotype writ large (*very large*), in that Clemens rarely shared with others a glimpse into the mirror of his life that he hadn’t already timed or staged to achieve some desired effect. While the *Autobiography* has far more “moving pieces,” its methodology and resulting form sustain the analogy. Clemens “composed” his *Autobiography* from many hundreds of pieces, like a journeyman printer assembling and reassembling typographical elements, blocks of type, and engravings to produce desired impressions in desired arrangements.

As a canny manipulator of the technologies of celebrity, Clemens recognized that widely shared enthusiasm for celebrated figures results not only in regimes of interpellation, in which celebrities are called upon to sustain imitations of their own mediated images but also in collective expressions, on the part of enthusiasts, of their own desire for recognition. Celebrity autobiographers—including Clemens, who wrote his life story well before consumer-capitalism’s technologies of mass-imaginary projection came to be a subject of serious study—face an exaggerated form, endemic to their hypertrophied publicity, of a challenge that all autobiographers face: deciding whether to write from or against the point of view of their own mediated image(s) and, ultimately, negotiating with others

exactly what it will mean for them “to write” and subsequently to sign this writing with a name that only ever uncertainly endorses its own propriety.

5. Who Am I To Say?

Most of the *Autobiography*'s “moving pieces” were dictated to an amanuensis or stenographer, and additional “audience” members often attended these sessions. As Linda Rugg observes,

the specular, reflexive situation, imagined by many critics of autobiography as taking place within the narrator or between the narrator and a projected reader, refers [in Clemens's case] explicitly to the body as it is seen and heard by others at the time of the dictation. (63)

Signs of the performative situation of this dictation permeate Clemens's text, as do reminders of his rejection of chronological ordering (“the plan that starts you at the cradle and drives you straight for the grave”) in favor of a thoroughly associative method: “Side-excursions,” he wrote early on, “are the life of our life-voyage, and should be, also, of its history” (*Autobiography* 1: 203). Later, in one of his 1906 New York dictations, he elaborated on his methodology:

[T]he idea of blocking out a consecutive series of events which have happened to me, or which I imagine have happened to me—I can see that that is impossible for me. The only thing possible for me is to talk about the thing that something suggests at the moment. (1: 250)

The following day, he expanded on his associative method and its concomitant *dissociative* features in representing the “most interesting” incidents:

Later, you wonder why you ever thought of setting such a thing down—it has no value, no importance. The champagne that made you drunk with delight or exasperation at the time has all passed away; it is stale. But that is what human life consists of—little incidents and big incidents, and they are all of the same size if we let them alone. An autobiography that leaves out the little things and enumerates only the big ones is no proper picture of the man's life at all; his life consists of his

feelings and his interests, with here and there an incident apparently big or little to hang the feelings on. (1: 258–59)

There's a more astute psychology at work here than mere capitulation to an avowed digressive tendency. Clemens recognizes, and has the courage in his *Autobiography* to portray, the fundamentally dissociative nature of the human psyche—not pathologically “split,” but resembling a community of what his literary executor Albert Paine referred to as “our various and multiple selves” (352), rather than a singular, unified consciousness.

Like William James, Clemens was thoroughly skeptical of the notion of a monadic self. Both writers were much taken with Ralph Waldo Emerson's theory of mood, which anticipates Clemens's rationale for his own (dis)associative method: “Our moods,” says Emerson,

do not believe in each other. To-day I am full of thoughts, and can write what I please. I see no reason why I should not have the same thought, the same power of expression, to-morrow. What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. (406)

Instead of dutifully employing the often dreary technique of chronological sequencing, Clemens looks in whatever direction pleases him, today—whether it's toward an episode from childhood or the latest bulletin from New York, a lifelong friendship or a passing fancy, a memory of romance or an intimation of mortality—knowing always that, tomorrow, he might wonder who he was, not to have been looking somewhere else.

Although Clemens dictated the lion's share of his *Autobiography* between 1906 and 1910, the project had occupied him since 1870, when he began drafting episodes and experimenting with compositional method and form. All told, more than half his life was spent crafting his own contribution to a literary genre he greatly admired. As a reader, he counted Benvenuto Cellini's *Vita [Life]* [1566], Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), and Giacomo Casanova's *Histoire de ma vie [Story of My Life]* [1797] among his favorite books, and he was a special devotee of Samuel Pepys's *Diary* [1669], which, at over a million words and renowned for its frankness, was a model of sorts for Clemens's own frank account, projected from the start to be on a grand scale. As Clemens assured one correspondent in 1886, “if one's autobiography may be

called a book—in fact mine will be nearer a library” (qtd. in Willis 168). And, in a note to himself in 1896, he reaffirmed his commitment to write this autobiography “in full & with remorseless attention to facts & proper names” (qtd. in Smith 12). He wanted to tell everything, without reservation, and he believed that mandating the hundred-year postponement would help him to avoid both self-censorship and the possible discountenance of others.

He never deviated much from this general plan. Yet the more he wrote the less sanguine he became about his (or anyone’s) ability to be completely honest. To an interviewer for the *London Times* in 1899, Clemens asserted that a

book that is not to be published for a century gives the writer a freedom which he could secure in no other way. In these conditions you can draw a man without prejudice exactly as you knew him and yet have no fear of hurting his feelings or those of his sons or grandsons.

Such a book, he continued, would be incomparably valuable to “a remote posterity” as a truthful “picture of the past.” In the same interview, however, Clemens also acknowledged that one could never be entirely forthcoming about oneself, regardless of circumstance or strength of will:

A man cannot tell the whole truth about himself, even if convinced that what he wrote would never be seen by others. I have personally satisfied myself of that and have got others to test it also. You cannot lay bare your private soul and look at it. You are too much ashamed of yourself. It is too disgusting. (“Bequest” 4)

Howells was one of those other “testers,” with whom Clemens engaged in extended conversations about the limits of forthcomingness. In a 1904 letter, Howells confessed his skepticism:

You always rather bewildered me by your veracity, and I fancy you may tell the truth about yourself. But *all* of it? The black truth, which we all know of ourselves in our hearts, or only the whity-brown truth of the pericardium, or the nice, whitened truth of the shirtfront? Even *you* won’t tell the black heart’s-truth. The man who could do it would be famed to the last day. (Twain and Howells 781)

Clemens’s extraordinary reply (quoted above) about the nature of autobiographical truth helped clinch Howells’s transferential

complicity (as a kind of Breuer to Clemens's Freud) in Clemens's effort to produce a new kind of autobiography grounded in depth psychology and its new method of self-analysis.

By 1906, Howells had read enough of the manuscript to concede (in language that reveals the perhaps unconscious influence of Clemens's idiom): "You are nakeder than Adam and Eve put together, and truer than sin" (Twain and Howells 803). Yet not quite. As Clemens wrote elsewhere that same year,

I have thought of fifteen hundred or two thousand incidents in my life which I am ashamed of, but I have not gotten one of them to consent to go on paper yet. I think that that stock will still be complete and unimpaired when I finish these memoirs, if I ever finish them.

And just a year before his death, he responded to a question about the truthfulness of the details in one of the published excerpts by saying: "Yes . . . literarily they are true, that is to say they are a product of my impressions—recollections. As sworn testimony they are not worth anything; they are merely literature" (qtd. in Smith 57).

Tellingly, Clemens made this remark as a plaintiff during a deposition in a lawsuit (over his family's land in Tennessee)—a situation that evokes the longstanding, highly overdetermined relation between autobiography and both confessional discourse and legal testimony. The importance of that very relation had been for Clemens the key to the problem of method, for he had initially found the *writing* of his autobiography particularly arduous and unsatisfying. He made sporadic efforts to begin and to begin again. But he didn't develop real momentum until he committed himself to dictation. Ultimately, this is how most of the *Autobiography* got written—and rewritten. As he told Howells, much of what he'd already written would have to be done "over again with my mouth," in order to achieve the "dewy & breezy & woodsy freshness" of discursive narration (Twain and Howells 779). As Smith argues persuasively, in composing his *Autobiography*, in particular, Clemens felt "the need for a responsive, human audience" (10) and that his desire to tell the truth was well served by "the disinhibiting nature of talk" (22).

Dictation also helped Clemens dispel any lingering attachment to chronological sequence. As early as 1876 he had declared his intention to family friend Annie Adams Fields not to "limit myself as to space and at whatever age I am writing about even if I am an infant and an idea comes to me about myself when I am forty I shall put that in" (qtd. in Smith 7), and by 1906, as he was compiling his piecemeal manuscripts into a single narrative, he had pretty much

freed himself of the chronological compulsion. For Clemens, this was not only a matter of content but also of form, as he explained to his friend Henry Huttleston Rogers in 1906:

I would like the literary world to see . . . that the *form* of this book is one of the most memorable literary inventions of the ages. And so it is. It ranks with the steam engine, the printing press and the electric telegraph. I'm the only person who has ever found out the right way to build an autobiography. (Twain and Rogers 611)

The fact that, in this letter, Clemens sounds more like an engineer than an author owes much to his correspondent, Rogers, a titan of industry, who, among his many other enterprises, had helped John D. Rockefeller set up the Amalgamated Copper Company, which supplied most of the raw material that wired the country's rapidly expanding electronic networks.

In 1900, Rogers, acting as Clemens's agent, negotiated the rights to the *Autobiography* with the president of Harper and Brothers, George Harvey, who suggested the insertion of a clause to the agreement that would "provide for publication in whatever modes should then [one hundred years hence] be prevalent, that is, by printing as at present, or by use of phonographic cylinders, or by electrical method, or by any other mode which may then be in use" (qtd. in Smith 19). While the Mark Twain Project Online couldn't have been fully envisioned by either Clemens or Rogers, both would surely be pleased by the simultaneous print and electronic publication of the *Autobiography*, the first meticulously edited volume of which appeared in 2010—almost exactly 100 years after Clemens's death—followed by the remaining two volumes in 2013 and 2015, complemented by an even larger electronic version that includes additional editorial apparatuses.

6. Clemens and the Psychodynamics of Literary Form

For all its deterrent bulk (not to mention its documented woes and tragedies), the *Autobiography* is as rousingly brisk a book as Clemens ever wrote, not least because of the structural anachronicity that makes it both the story of Clemens's life as he remembers it *and* the story of Clemens's memory as he experiences it. And it is principally as the story of Clemens's memory that his *Autobiography* addresses itself to the larger questions of the genre's resources for managing the limits of self-knowledge and self-authorization and for adjudicating the relation between sense and referent. Clemens's

fascination, not merely with memory's fallibility but also with the narrative fungibility of particular memories, is frequently on display, as in this passage concerning the nature and value of early childhood memories:

I used to remember [my brother Henry] walking into a fire outdoors when he was a week old. It was remarkable in me to remember a thing like that, which occurred when I was so young. And it was still more remarkable that I should cling to the delusion, for thirty years, that I *did* remember it—for of course it never happened; he would not have been able to walk at that age. If I had stopped to reflect, I should not have burdened my memory with that impossible rubbish so long. It is believed by many people that an impression deposited in a child's memory within the first two years of its life cannot remain there five years, but that is an error. The incident of Benvenuto Cellini and the salamander must be accepted as authentic and trustworthy; and then that remarkable and indisputable instance in the experience of Helen Keller. . . . For many years I believed that I remembered helping my grandfather drink his whiskey toddy when I was six weeks old, but I do not tell about that any more, now; I am grown old, and my memory is not as active as it used to be. When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it had happened or not; but my faculties are decaying, now, and soon I shall be so I cannot remember any but the latter. (1: 209–10)

The mordant wit of that final sentence characterizes what is perhaps Clemens's most widely recognized self-state: the highly self-referential humorist with an unflappable sense of irony and an engagingly aphoristic style. But the divagations of paradox and earnestness that characterize the longer passage, and many others like it, are not always easily reconciled with that self-state. Indeed, one of Clemens's achievements in the *Autobiography* is to resist the facile assimilation of self-states, or moods, or states of mind, into a mere reflection of it. Instead, he plies the discordances and contradictions. Here he simultaneously denies and defends the truthfulness of early childhood memories, discrediting his early memory of Henry, while insisting that the prevailing theory of the transience of infantile memories "is an error," with an appeal to the authority of two other famous autobiographers: Cellini and Clemens's good friend Helen Keller. With regard to his aging mind, he speaks of having a less "active" memory, not a less accurate one, using the word in the way adults will speak of a child's "active imagination," which is usually their way of declining to meet the child on the plane

of its still-developing mind, where the principle of noncontradiction has yet to be conquered by repeated reality-testing.

The allusions to Cellini and Keller are also heavily overdetermined, linking early childhood memory to parental abuse in Cellini's case and to the physical pain and fear of illness in Keller's. Clemens's premature birth and protracted infantile illness, his early childhood nightmares and other sleep disorders, the deaths he witnessed, and the abuse he suffered are all well documented in his *Autobiography*. His forthcomingness on these matters may well have been one of the factors in his decision to put so long a stay on its publication, which revealed, for example, that "in my age, as in my youth, night brings me many a deep remorse" and that "from the cradle up I have been . . . never quite sane in the night." His life was a cycle of descents into "the raging hell of repentance" (1: 159) for guilty acts both real and imagined, like the death by fire of his beloved little brother. Henry, however, did not die in the fire-walking scene described above, but in a steamboat explosion in 1858. Yet Clemens always blamed himself, which makes it not at all "remarkable that I should cling to the delusion, for thirty years, that I *did* remember" Henry passing through flames unharmed (1: 209). Like several other members of his family, Clemens waged a lifelong battle with what we can now recognize as a form of bipolar illness. As he puts it, "periodical and sudden changes of mood in me, from deep melancholy to insane tempests and cyclones of humor, are among the curiosities of my life" (1: 362).

Clemens's characteristic understatement—"a boy's life is not all comedy" (1: 157)—doesn't begin to diminish the horror of this early career of traumatic witnessing, which helps one more fully understand his heartbreaking reminiscence of "those pleasant days" in a letter written in 1900 (after he'd endured many further traumas across five decades of adult life) to the widow of his closest childhood friend, Will Bowen:

[T]hose were pleasant days; none since have been . . . so well worth living over again. . . . I should greatly like to relive my youth, & then get drowned. I should like to call back Will Bowen & John Garth & the others, & live the life, & be as we were, & make holiday until 15, then all drown together. (qtd. in Loving 22)

In his *Autobiography*, Clemens is quite open about the fact that he'd contemplated suicide many times. Moreover, his pinpointing age "15" in the letter to Dora Bowen not only recalls the daguerreotype of 1850 but also might help account for an otherwise perplexing

claim made in a letter written two years earlier to his sister-in-law, Mollie:

The “boy-picture holding the printers’ stick”—I remember it well. It was a daguerreotype. I *destroyed it* in [his sister] Pamela’s house in St Louis in the spring of 1861. (“Samuel Langhorne Clemens to Mollie Clemens”)

Here is proof that Clemens could “remember anything, whether it had happened or not.” The daguerreotype was not destroyed; it exists to this day, in its original wooden case, as part of the Twain collection at Berkeley’s Bancroft Library, to which it was donated in 1949 by Clemens’s daughter Clara. Daguerreotypes, unlike photographs, are unique objects: copper plates coated with light-sensitive silver emulsion, exposed to light to produce a mirror-image, which is then fixed with mercury vapors onto the plate itself. There is no negative from which identical copies can easily be made, and there is no evidence that a second, similar daguerreotype was produced on that or any other day. Clemens tells Mollie he remembers the daguerreotype well; yet he seems even surer of having “*destroyed it*” in a particular place, as well as at a particularly memorable *time*: during the US Civil War.

In Clemens’s vast oeuvre, the Civil War exists like a grain of sand around which an oyster spins its pearl: an irritating disruption at the heart of things, known to be there but seldom dwelt upon explicitly. Even Clemens’s novel about the war years, *Roughing It* (1872), barely mentions the bloody chaos of their unfolding. Yet the spring of 1861 was a watershed in his own history and the nation’s—a break with virtually everything that came before. At first, 25-year-old Samuel Clemens did his best to steer clear of the conflict that began on 12 April by pursuing his piloting career on the Mississippi. But by June he was compelled to join the Missouri State Guard, and he briefly zigzagged his way through military life before deserting his squad, the war, his home, and his livelihood and lighting out for Carson City, Nevada, which he reached sometime in August.

At the end of his autobiographical sketch, “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed” (1885), he invents the episode that both justifies his desertion and adds yet another corpse to the already well-packed mausoleum of his youth. One night, as Clemens tells it, his squad spotted a rider they assumed was a Union soldier and fired on him. Clemens’s narrator takes upon himself the guilt of having killed this unarmed, ununiformed stranger, perhaps as Clemens habitually blamed himself for actual deaths he couldn’t have caused:

The thought shot through me that I was a murderer; that I had killed a man—a man who had never done me any harm. That was the coldest sensation that ever went through my marrow. . . . The thought of him got to preying upon me every night; I could not get rid of it. I could not drive it away, the taking of that unoffending life seemed such a wanton thing. And it seemed an epitome of war; that all war must be just that—the killing of strangers against whom you feel no personal animosity; strangers whom, in other circumstances, you would help if you found them in trouble, and who would help you if you needed it. My campaign was spoiled. (“Private History” 42–43, 44–45)

That Clemens, in 1898, would have felt the urge to “spoil” or erase an iconic image of his childhood and that he would have associated this urge with the point in time when both his own life and his country’s history were lurching off the rails yield a plausible explanation for his claim to have “*destroyed it*.” And the fact that he refers to “it” with the singular pronoun strongly suggests that, in his mind at least, there was only one of them. Yet even if there had (implausibly) been a second daguerreotype that Clemens in fact destroyed, the time and circumstances still suggest an effort to leave himself behind, as it were. For during the weeks in May and June of 1861 spent at his sister Pamela Clemens Moffett’s house in St. Louis, he was both a deserter from the Confederacy and a likely candidate for arrest by Union agents. These circumstances alone could surely have prompted him to destroy various personal effects in case Pamela’s house was searched. And shortly thereafter Clemens fled the world he knew and began his peripatetic career as a writer who would eventually (in 1863) settle on “Mark Twain” as his “*nom de guerre*”—a term he might well have favored over *nom de plume* because it puns on the name of the inventor (Louis Daguerre) of that photographic process.

There is another possibility, perhaps the most plausible of all. Daguerreotypes are extremely delicate and highly susceptible to degradation and damage. The Bancroft daguerreotype bears many visible traces of such damage: several smudges and numerous scar-like markings on and around Sam’s face appear to have been made with a pencil or some other pointed instrument. It has not been “destroyed,” but it has been *defaced*, perhaps by an anxious, conflicted young man hiding in his sister’s house while the world as “SAM” the journeyman printer knew it was itself being destroyed. The emphasis Clemens places on the phrase “*destroyed it*” strongly suggests the extravagant self-reproachfulness in which Clemens so frequently indulged. It even suggests he was reproaching himself,

not merely for having damaged the daguerreotype, but—in 1898—for the popular reception of his writings as tributes, chiefly, to the mythic boyhood world for which the handsome, impish lad in that early daguerreotype so poignantly stands.

7. Autobiography and the Historicity of Unconscious Life

In a St. Valentine's Day dictation in 1908, just two years before his death, Clemens found himself musing on his many encounters with new technologies, including the daguerreotype:

I still remember quite clearly the wonder and delight that swept through me the first time I ever saw a daguerreotype; and along with it was the sense that there wasn't any reality about this miracle; that it was a dream, a product of enchantment—beautiful, astonishing, but impermanent. (*Autobiography* 3: 205)

Here was a technology that promised accurately to represent and preserve otherwise fleeting moments in time that was itself not only highly unstable as a physical object and easy, even for a 15-year-old boy, to manipulate as a visual record, but also, in Clemens's recollection, a chimera, as if it were something, in his words, like a "dream."

Yet Clemens had been preoccupied for quite some time with the Nietzschean observation that dreams were just as real as anything else in this "impermanent" world. He habitually recorded them and often culled material from his dream journals for his fictional works. One of them, "My Platonic Sweetheart" (written in 1898), is a narrative made up of dream-sequences about a teenage love affair, where the names and even the appearances of the lovers change after each of their encounters. But the real hero of the story is what Clemens calls "the dream-artist who resides in us" and who can create anything while we are asleep, unlike during "my waking hours, when the inferior artist in me is in command." This "dream-artist," the unconscious, Clemens continues, is no mere illusionist but an author of the real: "In our dreams—I know it!—we do make the journeys we seem to make: we do see the things we seem to see" (*Collected* 293–94). And through the unself-censored recounting of dreams made these "things" apparent to himself and to others.

Through his autobiographical practice of dictation, Clemens had already discovered, as Zaccara rightly observes, the benefits of the psychoanalytic "talking cure" for himself, recognizing that there was "method" in the seemingly random associative process of

saying out loud, to a receptive, nonjudgmental listener, whatever comes to mind. As he explains, this method is

only apparently systemless, for it is not that. It is a deliberate system, and the law of the system is that I shall talk about the matter which for the moment interests me, and cast it aside and talk about something else the moment its interest for me is exhausted.

He was confident that his *Autobiography*, when finished, would represent both “a form and method whereby the past and the present are constantly brought face to face, resulting in contrasts which newly fire up the interest all along like contact of flint with steel” (*Autobiography* 1: 441). And nothing could “fire up the interest” in dynamic contrasts of past and present experience like an attentive but “disinterested” audience—an audience of listeners and readers who might well find themselves privy to “the remorseless truth” despite the author’s “wily diligences.”

Clemens’s “disinterested spectator” is the mirror-image, as it were, of the Freudian analyst, who turns his or her “gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit [evenly suspended attention]” (483) both to what is being said and to what the “wily diligences” of the patient’s unconscious are struggling (not) to say. In one of the prefatory texts for his *Autobiography*, composed in 1906, Clemens employs a characteristically Freudian depth-metaphor to convey his own sense of the relative importance of conscious and unconscious experience:

What a wee little part of a person’s life are his acts and his words! . . . All day long, and every day, the mill of his brain is grinding, and his *thoughts*, (which are but the mute articulation of his *feelings*,) not those other things, are his history. His *acts* and his *words* are merely the visible thin crust of his world, with its scattered snow summits and its vacant wastes of water—and they are so trifling a part of his bulk! a mere skin enveloping it. The mass of him is hidden—it and its volcanic fires that toss and boil, and never rest, night nor day. *These are his life*, and they are not written, and cannot be written. (1: 220–21)

For Clemens, as for Freud, the wish to understand anything at all of one’s ultimately unknowable life is best pursued by talking and by doing one’s best, while talking, to associate freely: the only “law of the system.” Clemens, like Freud, recognized that most of one’s experience, most of one’s thoughts and feelings—most of one’s

proper “self”—would always be unintelligible. Remarkably, Clemens’s work on his *Autobiography* seems to have been galvanized rather than frustrated by this awareness, not least because he imagined it would become the model for a new kind of autobiographical writing, for which modern psychology’s destabilization of the monadic self would illuminate and authorize new forms of self-relation and thus, consequently, new ways of answering the question, “Who am I to say?”

Notes

1. A Quarry Farm Fellowship from the Center for Mark Twain Studies provided a welcome break from city life as well as the uninterrupted time needed to do at least partial justice to one of the longest and most unusual autobiographies I’ve ever read. Sincere thanks to Joseph Lemak, Matthew Seybold, and Steve Webb for helping to make my stay at Quarry Farm both so pleasant and so productive.
2. See Carl Dolmetsch, “*Our famous guest*”: *Mark Twain in Vienna* (1992).
3. Except where otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
4. See, for example, *Mississippi Writings* (1982), edited by Guy Cardwell, pp. 363 and 520.

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