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Source: *The Mark Twain Annual*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2013), pp. 62-76

Published by: [Penn State University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/marktwaj.11.1.0062>

Accessed: 26/11/2013 10:37

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Mark Twain, Memory, and the Failures of Historicism

James E. Dobson

I want to begin with the rather simple statement that Mark Twain's autobiographies—and here I am referring mostly to *Life on the Mississippi* and the text we now call the *Autobiography*—hold open the past as a resource for slowing down time. In itself this isn't a highly provocative claim; I imagine that many would agree that we find in Twain's work a desire to hold off futurity. I think, too, that it is fair to say that his continual return to the materials of the past is in part motivated by modernity's culture of planned obsolescence. Obsolescence becomes an issue when the speed of "progress" requires a diminishing of the present in addition to the past. Temporality, under modernity, is organized into the past, present, and a horizon of expectation known as the future. The future increasingly encroaches on the present by directing our thinking and desires forward; Twain well understood the risks and anxiety of this minimized present through the market logic of investment. Planned obsolescence exploits such anxieties through the introduction of looming future dates of expiration. While ancient, dead forms of culture were of no interest to Twain, those still-working elements of the past had some attraction. The ability to use these elements, to repeat certain experiences, to laugh twice at the same joke: these are what he understands to be threatened by obsolescence.¹

While we recognize the extent to which narrative has broken down in his *Autobiography*—it is precisely this feature that has made this text's reputation—we might not immediately link this formal feature to Twain's anxious response to modernity. If we carefully consider how individual moments of breakdown are framed and what they might contribute to any possible larger narrative structure and authorial strategy, we expose what I would like to suggest we recognize as narrative leftovers or remainders. These originate in, and are signifiers of, a failure to fall into line with the requirements of a certain temporal



regime—specifically the inability to master the fantasy of a unified present tense associated with modernity in which temporality is constructing as a flowing of the past into the present leading to the future.

My argument here is that Twain produces spaces of temporal possibility within his autobiographies through the telling of short and partial, yet by necessity linked narratives, anecdotes, and that in so doing, he comes to the surprising realization that he can mine his own past as part of an effort to resist the aforementioned logic of planned obsolescence. Further, as a prolific and practiced deployer of anecdotes, it is my hunch that Twain might be able to help us answer the question of why a previous generation of critics, the new historicists, so devalued the genre of autobiography.

What many are coming to call the “temporal turn” in American studies troubles many of the assumptions that have for the past three decades provided critics with stable tools and methodologies through which they could situate their objects of interest.² Like its spatial analogue, the transnational turn, the temporal turn unsettles what was once taken for granted, that our authors and their readers participated in a shared single and even temporality. It is in literature, that much diminished thing of the new historicist period, that recent critics like Lloyd Pratt find evidence or disclosures of the multiple and competing temporalities that composed the author’s milieu. Pratt argues that literature—insofar as it depends on narrative ordering—“refracts its readers’ understanding of time,” and thereby engages in what he refers to as a mutually constrictive double-hermeneutic.³ This refracting renders literary texts an “archive of time” that both reveals the temporal complexity of its moment of composition and wraps up and delivers new configurations of time for readers. Even in the smallest of literary archives that Twain scatters throughout his autobiographies, we can unfold complex temporalities.

The existence of these multiple and competing orders of time are made possible by certain formal features that increasingly become visible in what comes to be the dominant mode of autobiographical writing at the moment in which Twain and others of his generation begin to write of themselves. When this generation, the one referred to as “the generation of 1870” by Henry Adams, attempted to return to narrate their lives that began with an antebellum childhood, they had to cross at least one rupture that resulted in difficulties in reconciling that past with their present moment of composition. Jay Martin observes that the formal changes in autobiography were related to new conceptions of consciousness: “Even more than [Henry] Adams’s, Twain’s book marks a new stage in the autobiographical form. This has gone too long unrecognized.



The post-Civil War generation was the first to truly feel the new conditions of consciousness that would come to restructure mental process and shape the modern mind.”⁴ In attempting to record the prehistory of what Martin describes as a consciousness formed on the other side of this restructuring, this generation required a new literary form that could accommodate temporal incommensurability and that would provide some resistance to obsolescence.

The literary forms selected by Twain are important. He uses form as a response to the changing times in his *Autobiography*, and from a close reading of this text we can extract certain signature moves that are also visible in his earlier work. When, in this text, Twain jokingly claims that he “writes autobiographies for a living,” we might want to, despite the very real possibility that we are being played, take him at his word.⁵ For almost all of his work might very well be construed as autobiography. Certainly doing so can make texts like the *Autobiography* seem a little less strange and others such as *Life on the Mississippi*, a little more so. His project to find a better form with which to write his autobiography was a lifelong interest and in his final years, it became all consuming. For any reader who dares to crack open any one of the several editions of Twain’s heavy volume that have appeared since his death will no doubt quickly notice that his meta-discursive meditations, his struggle with the writing of *Autobiography* seems so much more interesting to him than the project of writing about his own past.⁶ Short, almost celebratory, notes on this topic appear several times and Twain revels in the multiple discoveries of what he proposes to be a more perfect form to narrate his life. And thus, like any amateur theorist, Twain’s enthusiastic response to these newly found conceptualizations refused to be contained and he interrupts himself to broadly apply his new understanding, rendering the *Autobiography* a dizzying read.

The first textual fragment to appear in the most recent edition—the heavily annotated first volume of the University of California Press’s planned three-volume printing of the *Autobiography*—is typical of these methodological revelations. Under the strangely mistitled heading “An Early Attempt”—for this was in fact a rather late attempt in his almost forty-year project and composed in 1906—Twain launches into yet another complaint regarding the norms of this highly structured and “old, old, old, inflexible, and difficult” narrative form that “starts you out at the cradle and drives you straight for the grave, with no side-excursions permitted on the way.” “Whereas,” he continues, “the side-excursions are the life of our life-voyage, and should be, also, of its history” (203). We find in this passage his major critique of linear and progressive history: Twain understands that any theory that forces history into a narrative



of progression that leads to an outcome already known in advance, will leave much of the “life” of “life” abandoned, as it were, on shore. But there is, to be sure, tension in Twain’s conception of the life narrative: while he wants to focus on experience that has often been rendered silent, as not contributing to the official story, he clearly argues that one cannot deny the eventual movement toward the conclusion and thus death.

The exact tension might even be said to be his signature style. If we consider Twain primarily a humorist and understand the logic of the joke as always involved in a form of belated re-cognition, we can link his need to insert a slowdown, a temporal delay, as linked to the temporality of the joke.⁷ That final moment of recognition, as the great cosmic joke unfolds, however, must always, as Twain surely knows, elude us. He therefore attempts to hold off this inevitable future and punch line for as long as he can. His theory of composition for the *Autobiography* lays out some of his understanding of a complex temporality that takes part in a similar logic to the joke; he plans to repeatedly stage temporal irruptions with no thought toward a progressive synthesis: “I intend that this autobiography shall become a model for all future biographies . . . because of its form and method—a form and method whereby the past and present are constantly brought face to face, resulting in contrasts which newly fire up the interest all along like contact of flint with steel.” This works in manner similar to how Bruce Michelson argues the witty epigrams function in *Pudd’nhead Wilson’s Calendar for 1894*: these chaotic and disconnected textual fragments interrupt the supposed scheme of calendric and narrative ordering. Twain’s autobiographical form, even though it is not particularly witty or humorous, takes part in both the slowing down of temporality and the moments of collision that he singles out as key to the telling of a good joke. Timing is, as it is well-known, everything.⁸

The economy in which the anecdote functions is one in which the “value” of this short narrative isn’t fixed or even exactly a limited resource; thus Twain can deploy the same anecdote again and again. Many of Twain’s famous and oft-repeated anecdotes originate in his early childhood experiences. They are a resource for his imagination and enable him, once he has started the telling of one yarn, to switch, as it were, “threads,” delaying or otherwise holding off, for a little while longer, the conclusion that he knows must eventually be reached. The return to childhood memories thus renders apparent a phase of life that is more than just a phase; it can be made alive—to speak to the demands and contingencies of the present—as it was never really dead. In a late passage in *Life on the Mississippi* we see an example of Twain using an anecdote as supplement to



the primary narrative by way of what he frames as an unprocessed past secret: "Upon that text I desire to depart from the direct line of my subject, and make a little excursion. I wish to reveal a secret which I have carried with me nine years, and which has become burdensome" (360). The "text" in this passage is an idea or thought, not a physical, printed text, but a sudden appearance in his mind—the "all at once"—of an old acquaintance, Mr. Brown. His equation of his own past with the creation of a literary text is telling; we know now that we are caught in a complex connection of stories. He uses one of these stories, the occasion of what he represents as the spark of a memory of Mr. Brown to reveal, or to put it another way, to produce another narrative, of a previously uncounted experience. In describing this fragment of his past as a "secret" he marks it as what could have only previously functioned as a gap in the "text" of his extant narrative.

Mr. Brown, due to his remarkable faculty of memory, appears earlier in the text in connection with a critique of the art of storytelling. Twain uses him to lampoon and critique the fantasy of perfect memory and the "complete" telling of any narrative. A steamboat pilot, as Twain explains, must have a good memory for geographical landmarks, locations, and other river "facts." But memory alone is not enough, for the river changes constantly and the ability to modify, on the fly as it were, one's set of stored data and internal map of the river is critical. Furthermore, as Mr. Brown demonstrates for Twain, perfect recall makes one a bore and misses the point of conversation: "Such a memory as that is a great misfortune. To it, all occurrences are of the same size. As a talker, he is bound to clog his narrative with tiresome details and make himself an insufferable bore. Moreover, he cannot stick to his subject" (118). Twain represents Mr. Brown as lacking the ability to discriminate as he launches into the telling of one story after another. Despite the movement in Twain's text from event to event, he claims that he, unlike Mr. Brown, manages to stick to his subject.

Sticking to the subject turns out to involve the continual and selective reworking of the past. This reworking of Twain's autobiographical material undoubtedly can be linked to the growing celebrity culture and one could read, as many have done, Twain's numerous reminiscences as exploiting his advantages as an already large figure within the literary market.⁹ But it would be a mistake not to read this reworking as part of his continual, career-long attempt to make sense of the outmoded narratives from the past, those that seem no longer functional or otherwise lacking explanatory power, yet remain attractive. Encapsulated within many of the writings that one might characterize as autobiographical sketches, are scenes of type of the "contrasts" that he



invoked in his *Autobiography*. The “sparks” created by the tension between past and present might be thought of as burning holes in the larger frame narratives, producing an alternate association, or path through a linked series of holes. Each of these moments that I am locating at the site of the spark takes the form of a short narrative, or an anecdote.

The anecdote, as I have already hinted, contains within it the sort of reserves or resources that enable the continual return to the past in order to slow down narrative time and to complicate any assumption of a unified temporality in which the past can become obsolete. It extends the possibilities of a narrative rather than provide definitive closure. The anecdote is also timely. Jane Gallop turns to the dictionary definition, “a short account of a some interesting or humorous incident,” to argue that for any anecdote to be interesting must mean that it is capable of producing an intervention in critical debates.¹⁰ To be interesting means to make something new again or to expose a previously unexposed dimension. The anecdote, of course, has a special status and meaning within the practice of literary criticism: it is one of the definitive tools of the new historicism. Joel Fineman explains that the anecdote has this special status because it can, unlike the literary text itself, provide access to a dimension of what he refers to as the real:

The anecdote, let us provisionally remark, as the narration of a singular event, is the literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real . . . there is something about the anecdote that exceeds its literary status, and this excess is precisely that which gives the anecdote its pointed referential access to the real; a summary, for example of some portion of a novel, however brief and pointed, is, again, not something anecdotal. These two features, therefore, taken together—i.e., first, that the anecdote has something literary about it, but second, that the anecdote, however literary, is nevertheless directly pointed towards or rooted in the real—allows us to think of the anecdote, given its formal if not its actual brevity, as a *historeme*, i.e., as the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact. And the question that the anecdote thus poses is how, compact of both literature and reference, the anecdote possesses its peculiar and eventful narrative force.¹¹

Fineman’s conceptualization of anecdote as “*historeme*” requires the splitting of the anecdote from any possible framing context. As a self-enclosed “minimal unit” it can thus securely comment on other cultural locations and objects and,



as the anecdote has so often been used within historicizing methodologies, it can serve as the historical other for an object of interest. The anecdote thickens context, and when we understand the text and the anecdote as both embedded within the same cultural moment we are able to securely fix our objects of interest. But what if we put a little pressure on this understanding of the anecdote by rendering it less of a well-marked signpost than what Jane Gallop refers to as an erotic opening and Twain refers to as “snag”? It functions then as a departure or a side excursion; it draws both the listener/reader and author through the opening into a complex temporality that engages with prior historical moments.

Anecdotes always require a double take. The famous first words spoken by Huckleberry Finn in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are as much of a warning as the notice written in the voice of “the author” that warns the would-be critic of the possibility of being persecuted, banished, and shot. Huck says: “You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.”¹² Twain and Huck both tell stretchers. This particular form of the anecdote produces a slowing down—a stretching out—of narrative time through the production of what could be called a supplement to the truth. When Huck tells a stretcher he does so in order to buy more time during the interrogations that take place when he comes on shore; he forces the listener into extending their questioning of his narrative. The “truth” of an event has been invoked but in being stretched it is made to cover more ground than it can justifiably claim to address. These temporal aspects of the formal feature of the anecdote, the ability to stretch out narrative time and to loop back to past narratives held in reserve, are linked to Twain’s doubled relationship to modernity and his frequent resistance to the myth of progress.

Modernity, in *Life on the Mississippi*, at times represents the possibility of an escape from the constraints found in Twain’s rural and premodern childhood. The famous anecdote that opens the chapter “The Boys’ Ambition” figures the steamboat as the sign of a new temporality that produced a ruptural change in Hannibal, Missouri. It offers a scene of awakening, the dawning of a new day that renders all the other days that precede this one the same. In this chapter, which was importantly the first to appear in the *Atlantic*’s serial publication of “Old Times on the Mississippi,” Twain describes the activation of what he understands to be his first vocational desire. The narrative unity of this section of text depends on bookending this primal scene with the achievement of the



ambition awakened by the encounter: Twain's eventual promotion to pilot. As a self-contained narrative it reads not unlike a condensed bildungsroman; Twain begins with himself as a young boy and narrates through his period of apprenticeship. The final moment of this anecdote—Twain's fulfillment of his boyhood desire—provides the origin for what could be considered the second installment, his story of return in the remainder of *Life on the Mississippi*. In this portion of the text, unlike the "Old Times" section, Twain switches to present-tense narration, thus formally repeating the ruptural break that has been represented through the appearance of the first steamboat into sleepy Hannibal.

Twain represents this moment of first arrival as introducing a break in temporality; we know this because he reverses the usual terms with which one might characterize this interruption: "Before these events, the day was glorious with expectancy; after them, the day was a dead and empty thing. Not only the boys, but the whole village, felt this."¹³ The call "S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin!" that announces the arrival of this new mode of time comes from "a Negro drayman," described by Twain as "famous from his quick eye and prodigious voice," who notices and names this symbol of the change quickly coming toward the shore.¹⁴ Twain establishes this ruptural break as ending the content, future-oriented temporality of Hannibal, Missouri, and installing a new mode of time, an empty time of desire. This temporality is empty because Twain and his boyhood friends are located in what might best be described as an interregnum between two orders of time: an earlier mode that he associates with childhood, drowsiness, and quiet and another mode marked by the rhythms of commercial activity and the regular interruption of the new. Expectancy in the "old town" was directed toward the cyclical appearance of the known and familiar while the introduction of new desires—for Twain and his friends it is a singular desire that takes the form of a hailing call into their new vocations—can only serve to deaden the rural eternal recurrence of the same.

But Twain represents the arrival of the steamboat as doing more than just reconfiguring everyday life for the youth of Hannibal; he describes how almost immediately after the first "gaudy packet" steams through, a "speedy" generational change takes place, producing, for those who "managed to get on the river," new careers and new types of people: "The minister's son became an engineer. The doctor's and the postmaster's sons became 'mud clerks'; the wholesale liquor dealer's son became a barkeeper on a boat; four sons of the chief merchant, and two sons of the county judge, became pilots" (67). These new types are associated with a transformation of the workplace that promises new liberties and escape from constraints. As the young son of a "county judge,"



Twain places himself within this generation of new types. The introduction of faster modes of commerce produces a break in regional social reproduction. If leaving Hannibal and getting “on the river” means finding a position in the new economy, it also involves a sort of generational duplication, a repetition with a difference. That some of these transitions are not dramatic—from “liquor dealer” to “barkeeper,” for example—might point to a fundamental ambivalence regarding the possibility of progress that is also visible in his non-romanticized images of the rural past: “gaudy” steamboats, streets littered with pigs, drunkards, and lazy clerks. This scene represents the new opportunities that were only made possible through modernity as an object of enthusiastic desire, but Twain’s ambivalence toward the changes results in this undercutting of a simple nostalgia. Rather than representing his antebellum pre-steamboat childhood as timeless and rural idyll, Twain uses the transformative figure of the steamboat to create the sense of excitement and possibility found within modernity and compacts and archives it into an anecdote of the past with future possibilities.

Twain carefully distinguishes between his representations of those enabling aspects of modernity and those that he figures as limiting and narrowing. The majority of these aspects are found in the material that follows the “Old Times on the Mississippi” section and self-consciously narrated in the present tense. A curiously short chapter—all of three brief paragraphs set on one page—titled “A Section in My Biography” bridges both the narrative gap between this former section and temporal lag between his youthful experiences on the river and the return to this site that takes place in his present moment of composition. In his first paragraph Twain recounts how the achievement of his boyhood ambition to become a steamboat pilot was cut short by the Civil War and the disruptions and reconstructions that followed, which in very short time rendered what was his ideal occupation obsolete. While his second paragraph accounts for and tightly compresses the amazingly varied years that followed—he begins with his experiences as a silver miner and ends with his transformation into an “immovable fixture among the other rocks of New England”—his final paragraph attempts to naturalize the previous representation of his colorful career and sets the scene for the remainder of *Life on the Mississippi*: “In so few words have I disposed of the twenty-one slow-drifting years that have come and gone since I last looked from the windows of a pilot-house. Let us resume, now” (166).

Bundling together and dismissing these years—years that were hardly “slow-drifting”—enables Twain to stay close to the subject of the life of the river. He was attached to the form of the Mississippi River; it offered him a symbol that was doubled and yet durable.¹⁵ The river, like the anecdotes that



comprise much of his autobiographical writing, contains a mixture of both the past and the present. One can always go back to the Mississippi precisely because it isn't a museum piece; it isn't frozen but it is also not unrecognizably new. *Life on the Mississippi*, for reasons beyond its complex publication history, cannot simply "belong" to the moment of 1883. It continually takes up concerns and doubts from the past and seeks to place them alongside the present of its multiple moments of composition. Therefore, he doubly marks the moment in which he resumes his narrative as occurring in his present moment and initially halts the process of nostalgic recall associated with his "Old Times." His decision to match the chapter number, twenty-one, to the number of years that have passed during the short narrative of the chapter reinforces the importance of this large temporal gap in his narrative. It produces a shift, which occurs through his use of the word "now," from the past tense associated with autobiography to the present of the travelogue. In utilizing an autobiographical commonplace—the nostalgic recollection of the period between childhood and adulthood—Twain returns to the river as the scene in which he formed his original vocational identity in an attempt to resolve a crisis in the present. This crisis, as the text itself documents, is Twain's blocked writing of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. His inclusion of a chapter from that text in *Life on the Mississippi* produces an intimate relation between his vocational crisis and his return to the river. Twain's present need to "make notes, with a view to printing" occasions his return to that ever-changing site of his youth, the Mississippi River, after twenty-one long years in order to transform himself once again from "an immovable fixture" into a productive writer.

Uncannily similar to the anecdote of the threesome that sets out for the "smiling countryside" in Freud's essay "On Transience," his early work on his theory of melancholia, Twain returns to the river with "a poet for company and a stenographer to take him down" (167).¹⁶ For Twain, both figures no doubt stand in for his doubled desire to revisit the river and his past: one represents his need as an author to convert experience into art and the other to produce an authentic record of everything as it happens. One of these is a figure for romance, the other realism; one attempts to correct the other. They are also, then, figures for the journalist and the novelist, the two dominant modes of writing that he has used in the past. Arriving on the river in St. Louis under an assumed name, what he calls his "*nom-de-guerre*," Twain attempts to travel "incognito." We recognize, of course, that the name and the persona "Mark Twain" are already one step removed from the Samuel Clemens who was once a steamboat pilot. Like Freud's melancholic poet tramping through the countryside, Twain marks his



account of his travels with his awareness of the proneness of all, and especially his past, to loss and decay. This sense of loss, for Twain, originates in an undesirable “feature” of modernity: planned obsolescence.

Life on the Mississippi, and especially the first half of the text, might be said to simultaneously track both Twain’s rise to becoming a pilot and the decline of the “old departed steamboating days” (61). Twain leaves no question as to the reason for this transformation: “First the new railroad . . . next the war came and almost entirely annihilated the steamboating industry . . . the cost of living advancing all the time; then the treasurer of the St. Louis association put his hand into the till . . . and finally, the railroads intruding everywhere” (137). He begins and ends his laundry list with the arrival of a new, faster form of shipping and transportation: the trains. With replacement of the steamboat with the stream train, Twain writes, “the association and noble science of piloting were things of the dead and pathetic past.”

The steamboats, however, do not fully disappear; they continue, in smaller numbers, to move up down the Mississippi, and when he reappears in 1882, one still remains, holding open Twain’s former position at the helm. His ambivalent relation to modernity turns decidedly negative when he reflects on the success experienced by the steam train, the steamboat’s speedier successor. When, in the final few pages of the text, Twain reflects on all that has passed, he inserts an anecdote from his recent dreams. This appears as an anxiety-producing interruption of his usual “tranquil” and “reposeful” dreamland. He claims in these dreams he has few worries “until the unholy train comes tearing along—which it presently does, ripping the sacred solitude to rags and tatters with its devil’s war whoop and the roar and thunder of its rushing wheels—and straightway you are back in this world” (400). There is here, in his use of “tearing along,” “roar and thunder,” and “rushing,” the sense that this particular technology, unlike the old steamboat, moves too rapidly and doesn’t adequately accommodate what came before. It is also intimately connected to bad timing: he describes waking up and “remember[ing] that this is the very road whose stock always goes down after you buy it, and always goes up again as soon as you sell it. It makes me shudder to this day, to remember that I once came near not getting rid of my stock at all.” Holding on to something, such as stock in the railroad or land in Tennessee, for too long can result in a major loss. Thus we find a version of a “bad” modernity characterized by quickly changing fortunes and a wholesale liquidation of one’s past investments. This stands in contrast with the changes of what might be called the “good” modernity represented by the steamboat’s arrival in “The Boys’ Ambition.” The inability for the old to stand alongside



the new leads to a nightmare scenario for Twain. We thus find another version of his recoil from a culture of obsolescence in his representation of Chicago: “It is hopeless for the occasional traveler to try to keep up with Chicago—she outgrows his prophecies faster than he can make them. She is always a novelty; for she is never the Chicago you saw when you passed through the last time” (416). This Midwestern city was experiencing rapid growth and thus symbolizes the ever “newness” of the new within modernity. While constant “novelty” might be a feature of both Chicago and the Mississippi River, what the city seems to lack in this passage is the constancy of form. While Twain might never be able to step into the same Mississippi twice, he can at least locate the complex temporality that has room for both nostalgia and novelty at this site.

The coexistence or collapse of these temporalities takes place alongside the river. While “The Boys’ Ambition” offered and even celebrated a version of modernity that would enable one to depart from or otherwise transcend the site of one’s origins, in the chapter titled “My Boyhood’s Home,” Twain brings both the past and the present into the same visual field. The title of this chapter, with its use of the possessive, suggests that he doesn’t think of Hannibal as his boyhood home as much as the place where his boyhood still resides. Approaching the town as if he, rather than this still somewhat rural town, belonged to the past, he represents himself as a returning ghost possessed, as it were, by an idealized image of what once was: “The only notion of the town that remained in my mind was the memory of it as I had known it when I first quitted it twenty-nine years ago. That picture of it was still clear and vivid to me as a photograph. I stepped ashore with the feeling of one who returns out of a dead-and-gone generation” (370). In a later passage he reports that while in Hannibal he had a recurring dream that figures the town as capable of producing revision: “I woke up every morning with the impression that I was a boy . . . for in my dreams the faces were all young again, and looked as they had looked in the old times” (382). There is a danger, for Twain, in getting too close to the past, in staying in the town haunted by his boyhood. That his “picture” of the “old times” in Hannibal remained “still clear and vivid” and filled with the faces of his childhood friends suggests that he has been trapped by a sentimentalizing nostalgic gaze.

“My Boyhood’s Home” describes a climb to the top of “Holiday’s Hill,” a high position from which he can obtain a view of the entire town. From this position Twain seeks to understand the distortions produced by his nostalgic vision: “I saw the new houses . . . but they did not affect the older picture in my mind, for through their solid bricks and mortar I saw the vanished houses, which



had formerly stood there, with perfect distinctness" (371). In describing these older and now vanished houses as somehow able to psychically coexist with the new ones that have utterly wiped out these signs of the past, Twain suggests the degree to which change has required this form of imposition or splitting from his past. In this scene he overlays his present view with these images from the past and attempts to recall figures from his "moldy past." The sudden arrival of an actual figure from the past, "an old gentleman," interrupts this scene of imaginative projection. His discourse with the old gentleman presents Twain with the possibility of closing the gap between the past and the past as this gentleman has lived through the transitional moment that Twain was not present to witness. He asks the gentleman about the fate of a number of his boyhood friends. He then inquires as to the whereabouts of a certain "Miss —" and receives the answer: "Died in the insane asylum three or four years ago—never was out of it from the time she went in; and was always suffering, too; never got a shred of her mind back" (374). It was a childhood prank committed by Twain and his peers that sent "Miss —" to the asylum thinking she had seen a ghost.

In telling the anecdote of this unfortunate woman, Twain reflects on the present state of belief: "In these days it seems incredible that people believed in ghosts so short a time ago. But they did." He produces by way of this division between those who believe in ghosts and those who did not, a split between the past and present while flooding the hilltop with ghosts. The shift to dis-identify with the past emerges precisely at the instant in which Twain has become most like a ghost; he is dead in this scene because not only has he come, like Huck, on shore under another identity of "Mr. Smith" to inquire about both his friends and himself, but he has returned to a transformed site in which he has been radically severed from a fixed idea of how it once was. The anecdote of the young woman, "Miss —," who believed so strongly in ghosts that she has become one herself, functions to keep Twain from identifying with, or even recognizing, the ghost of the young boy who still occupies this boy's town. The scene thus exploits a perverse element of the past; he is simultaneously different from—more modern than—those in the past that once believed in ghosts and drawn into the promise of the restoration with a now lost relation to the past. This, as we have seen, leads the doubled temporal relation in which the past and present are not so much divided as side by side.

Twain has entered his boy's town with something like the historicist desire to isolate and posit as an object of analysis those "incredible" days in which people still believed in ghosts. Joan Copjec warns us that any effort to produce, within criticism, a closed world will cause "each historical moment to flood



with alien, anachronistic figures, spectres from the past and harbingers of the future.”¹⁷ It is, as Copjec argues, precisely the production of the periodizing line that causes revenants of the past to transform Holiday’s Hill into a haunted hill. Rather than being spooked and taking this as evidence of a need for a stabilizing historical continuity or a better frame with which to understand discontinuity and rupture, perhaps we would be better off recognizing that these figures speak to the coexistence of the multiple and competing desires alive in our subjects of interest. In an important sense these ghostly figures are, collectively, our subject.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Louis A. Renza for bringing to my attention the scene from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in which Huck overhears a group of men at a ferry landing telling and laughing at the same joke multiple times.

2. See Lloyd Pratt, *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2010); Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York UP, 2007); Thomas M. Allen, *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007).

3. Pratt, *Archives of American Time*, 15.

4. Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change: American Literature, 1865–1914* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967), 199.

5. Mark Twain, *Autobiography: Volume 1* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2010), 206. Parenthetical citations follow.

6. Louis A. Renza argues that what I am calling the meta-discursive moments register Twain’s desire for a private relation to his autobiography that can only be conceived as a form of repetition compulsion that needs to continually begin again and thus resists appropriation by the public. My reading proposes that Twain preserves parts of past narratives in his repetitive project. “Killing Time with Mark Twain’s Autobiographies” *ELH* 54, no. 1 (1987): 157–82.

7. Sigmund Freud famously discusses the logic of the joke as engaged in a form of “compression” in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960).

8. Bruce Michelson, *Literary Wit* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2000), 59. See Twain’s account of how timing and, specifically, the use of a “nub, point, snapper” at the end of a “rambling and disjointed” story makes for a good joke in “How to Tell a Story,” in *Mark Twain: Tales, Speeches, Essays, and Sketches*, ed. Tom Quirk (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 391–96.

9. Thinking in terms of celebrity culture requires that one accept a clear split between a public, or in someone like Loren Glass’s terms, a “symbolic” identity, that enables the author to achieve the creation of a literary persona. Yet once again we find in these accounts synchronic versions of history and recourse to a simplistic understanding of authorship as necessarily alienated. See Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United*



States, 1880–1980 (New York: New York UP, 2004). See also Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (Sterling, VA: Pluto P, 2000).

10. Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 2.

11. Joel Fineman, “The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 56–57.

12. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 1.

13. Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, ed. James M. Cox (New York: Penguin, 1984), 64. Parenthetical citations follow.

14. Following Toni Morrison’s canonical account of the figure of blackness in (white) American literature in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), one might be tempted to read Twain’s figure of the “Negro drayman” as a signifier of displaced anxiety or, perhaps, one might understand the figure as an outsider with exceptional visibility due to being located in modernity’s liminal space.

15. See James M. Cox, “Mark Twain: A Study in Nostalgia” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana U, 1955), 72.

16. Sigmund Freud, “On Transience,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth P and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London, 1957), 303–7.

17. Joan Copjec, “Introduction,” in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), vii–xiii.

