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Volume Two of the *Autobiography of Mark Twain* continues the heroic effort to make available a complete, unexpurgated version of Twain's entertaining memoirs. The culmination of dozens of false starts by Twain at writing his life story, and necessarily "incomplete" because they have no plot or narrative plan, the manuscripts that comprise the autobiography were left in a confused state either before or after Albert Bigelow Paine became the first of several twentieth century editors to mine them for publication in 1924.

As recounted by Harriet Elinor Smith in her introduction to Volume One, Twain's false starts led him in January, 1906, to adopt a method of dictation in which he would on many mornings talk extemporaneously for about two hours in the presence of a stenographer, Josephine Hobby. Hobby would then produce a typescript of the monologue, and Twain would proof it, sometimes more than once. Twain found it conducive to talk, rather than write. He also felt comfortable talking to or performing for a woman; like many Victorian men, he idealized women. Finally, Twain found it comforting to proceed without a narrative plan. The dictations could focus on whatever was on his mind, or whatever was prompted by the headlines, a photo he had seen, or a letter that had come in the mail.

Twain did not intend to publish these memoirs in his lifetime. He hoped that in dictating his "story" he might tell hard truths about himself, others, and the world around him — truths that might damage reputations, or that might call down abuse on his own children. His plan was for the work to be published one hundred years after his death, long after everyone who might be damaged by his observations would have died.

The dictations continued until 1909, although Twain's initial enthusiasm began to wane in 1907. In the end, he compiled some 5000 pages of manuscript, in addition to the false starts themselves. Volume One, published in 2010, was comprised of the false starts, the first several months of Twain's dictations, and the textual apparatus, including a deftly recounted summary of the complex textual history of Twain's false starts and his autobiographical dictations. Volume Two is the record of Twain's dictations from April 1906 to February 1907. It includes two hundred pages of explanatory notes, in addition to four hundred and fifty pages of dictations. The web version at the Mark Twain Project Online adds extensive textual commentary on each dictation, as well as other scholarly materials.

Twain is always entertaining. Some of these dictations could be read as stand-alone comic monologues. Many more reveal an increasingly tired man glad not to have to write another book to pay the bills. But because most dictations begin in an essentially random fashion, there is no narrative thread that connects the dictations. There is no life story in Twain's "autobiography." The dictations are connected only by the

“voice” of the narrator himself. Given that he is in a performative mode at all times, his *Autobiography* is best understood as yet another installment in the long line of Twain’s memoir-based narratives, beginning as early as *Innocents Abroad* (1867).

However, what worked for him as a monologist does not necessarily work for the reader. Twain speculates at one point before he begins the dictation process that a “person’s acts and words are merely the thin visible crust of his world.... Every day [of a person’s thoughts] would make a whole book of eighty thousand words” (Vol 1, 221). In the face of the sheer quantity of lived, felt, and thought experience, Twain throws up his hands. He was tired by 1906, and depressed over the recent death of his wife. The dictation process demanded no preparation and no planning; Twain imagined that he could simply offer us his unmediated thoughts about his life. He believed this fantasy of unmediated representation of thought with varying degrees of conviction. One day he says, “This autobiography of mine is a mirror, and I am looking at myself in it all the time” (12). Two days later, he says that he has “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” (27). Do not expect to hear the “inner” Twain in these dictations.

Twain looked to Rousseau and Casanova as autobiographers who told the whole truth, revealing not only inner thoughts but also shameful, secret acts. He aspired initially in these dictations to do the same, but the shameful acts will not “go on paper.” Meanwhile, his attempt to reveal the inner life through unmediated dictation is compromised by his method. Starting anew on most days, Twain picks up a thought and simply runs with it. His tendency—and it reveals a lot about him—is to luxuriate in the telling and to bend the narration to entertain or to teach a moral. The method permits him to avoid prolonged confrontation with difficult memories. Remembering a fundraiser at Vassar, when he was “unexpectedly” called to the stage to say a few words, Twain reports that he “manufactured” blushes as he was led to the stage. “I do things like that with an art that deceives even the hardened and experienced cynic” (17). All this book is similarly a stage, and Twain is constantly manufacturing a performance.

Twain performs in these dictations. He was at times energized by the premises of delayed publication, lack of narrative form, and unmediated oration. He angrily rails against Congress for passing the Disability Pension Act of 1890, and Roosevelt for extending it in 1904. He pillories several editors and publishers who “swindled” him. He scorns the idea that there is life beyond death, and that there is a god who rewards virtue. He can be bitter, savage, and biting. He pushes at the cultural and social norms of the nineteenth century. He mocks Elizabeth Stuart Phelps for presenting a sentimental heaven for small-minded people in her popular 1868 novel, *The Gates Ajar* (194).

Yet at the same time, as an entertainer always aware of his audience, he is still hesitant to reveal his own beliefs too straightforwardly. There is an irony in the way that Twain in Volume Two repeatedly idealizes written texts by children, uneducated women, and lower-class men. He says that “untrained, inexperienced amateur authorship” has “merits, and very noticeable ones” (166). When “the heart speaks it has no use for the conventions; it can rise above them, and the result is *literature*” (413). The problem for Twain is that his own head and heart are always aware of the audience: that is the nature of performance. And the entertainer or moralist in him gets in the way of unmediated representation. “Humor must not *professedly* teach, it must not *professedly* preach; but it must do both if it would live forever” (153). He is always *professedly* designing.

That is not to say that these dictations are not revealing. They are. But the reader has to sort through the dictations to make any meaning out of them. By refusing to do the ordering himself and by drawing up short of deep personal reflection, Twain forces us to always be cognizant of his performing self. We are not able to be seduced by a narrative whose plot gives meaning and structure to the lived experience. This “dead man talking” simply enjoyed for a while this mode of listening to himself talk. But that does not guarantee that the entire text is worth reading. Autobiography may “package” life, but the package is precisely why we read the genre. Postmodern methods of digitally recording and storing our entire lived experience (see, for example, Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmell, *Total Recall* [2009]) will generate a lot of data about life, but that data still needs distillation and focus if it is to mean anything. It needs interpretation by the author to even *begin* to make sense of the “eighty thousand words” per day of thinking, much less the acting and speaking and interactions and context.

Twain is at least more fascinating than most human beings when he starts talking, even if he refuses to package his story. At one point, he tells an anecdote about a private dinner hosted by the Emperor of Germany, Wilhelm II. Twain was the “chief guest.” At the dinner, he learns with satisfaction that the Emperor had read and liked his books. Observing the emperor hold forth on a variety of subjects, Twain remarks jokingly that he and the Emperor were similar: “I prefer to do all the talking myself” (310). Several months later, Twain returns to the anecdote and hesitatingly reveals something embarrassing. At a dinner where guests always deferred to the Emperor’s opinion, Twain blithely offered his own view on a military matter. He violated “etiquette by intruding a remark which [he] had not been invited to make (431). This is not akin to Rousseau’s revelations about erotic spanking.

The anecdote is layered in complex ways, although readers are not really encouraged to peel them apart. What, for example, do we make of Twain’s insistence that he and the Emperor were alike? He repeats the idea in the second dictation: “If I had been in

the Emperor's chair ... I should have ... done a world of talking" (430). The text we have in our hands is precisely a very long monologue, and the reader is a guest who ought to be "familiar with the rules of the game" (431). Emperors and authors hold the stage; guests and readers hold their tongue. And Twain *does* hold the stage in the half million words of an "autobiography" that offers no plot and no argument and no narrative thread. The performance might be construed as exactly that of a bombastic emperor. Did Twain intend this to be a joke? Irony? Revelation?

Twain claimed that his autobiographical method was revolutionary. He believed that he was breaking a kind of "etiquette" by speaking frankly to the reader "as if" he were already dead and as if random talk were more revealing than a narrative. "This autobiography of mine differs from other autobiographies—differs from *all* other autobiographies" (12). In fact, we can see here the immense divide between the Victorian writer and the modernist writer. Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, and others venture down a road that Twain seems able to imagine: I will tell you all of my thoughts, and all of my deeds, and in doing so you will see "me" more clearly. But Twain cannot go down that road. He cares too much for what the "common herd" (12) thinks. He does not want the women at Vassar to think that he expects and *enjoys* being asked to take, and hold, the stage. His autobiography not only lacks the kind of form that many classic autobiographers choose to give their life story; it lacks the freedom of expression that many modern autobiographers employ in order to reveal the deeper self.

The episode connects Twain to another influential American autobiographer: "I did not think that I should ever literally *stand before kings*, which, however has since happened; for I have stood before *five*, and even had the honor of sitting down with one, the King of Denmark, to dinner," Benjamin Franklin wrote in his *Autobiography* (64). Did Twain intend for us to unpeel this as another layer in the episode? If so, it is yet another indication that his project is less a Rousseauvian exercise in revealing the dark, hidden interiority of self, and more a shrewd Franklinian attempt to present a virtuous self to the world, whether in a formal narrative or in random autobiographical musings.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

