WOLFGANG HOCHBRUCK

The Private History of Ambivalent Nostalgia: Mark Twain’s Civil War

Abstract: The texts that Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain wrote about his Civil War experience put him in various shifting and unstable positions, ranging from boy soldier to Confederate Veteran. Rather than try to find an elusive historical truth, the article treats all of these adopted roles as poses, reacting to a variety of personal and societal demands, and telling more about the textuality of the war than about Twain’s biographical history, or his personal convictions. Among the texts under investigation are the well-known “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed” together with its lesser-known variations, as well as several public speeches from the 1870s to the “Lincoln Birthday Dinner Address” of 1901.

To call Twain’s political or historical positions and convictions ambivalent is not exactly something new. Arlin Turner claimed in 1968 that Twain showed a tendency to swing from a mode and mood of “affectionate acceptance” to “disillusionment and castigation” (Turner 1968, 494) when dealing with his native South. More recently, Lawrence Howe has made the interesting claim that Twain was at once subversive regarding institutions and traditions especially where they exacted forms of control, yet that at the same time he had a “conservative reverence for authority” (Howe 1998, 14). Following Howe’s lead, I will touch on another subject on which Twain seems, at first glance, to have held ambivalent views, that is, his ways of dealing with the American Civil War, and his own roles in it. Comparably little research has been done in this particular field of Twain studies, where earlier studies are often tainted by relying too much on Albert B. Paine’s biography of Twain, while more recent articles are usually very knowledgeable about the man, but sometimes neglect taking a closer look at those Civil War data related to Twain’s life (his-)stories.

A cursory survey of Twain’s texts already shows attitudes as well as roles that appear shifting and unstable. I hope to clear up some of the apparent ambivalences by pointing out how the texts in question, seen from a neo-historicist viewpoint, are likely to uncover more about the textuality of the war than about Twain’s biographical history, or his personal convictions.¹

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the MLA in Washington DC in 2000; thanks to an invitation by Shelley Fisher Fishkin. I am grateful for the remarks and revisions suggested by my friends Martin Schüwer and Tom Whalen.
The roles Twain assumed and the metaphors he used in the allegedly autobiographical representations of “himself” in the war range from the pathetic boy soldier of “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed” to the pompous Confederate Veteran of the “Lincoln Birthday Dinner Address.” Together with roughly a dozen other stories, speeches and addresses, these two texts each exemplify one of two sequences of literary emplotments of the Civil War which Twain created and then used and reused throughout his writing career. These two narrative sequences were, as I will try to show, more systematic than has been acknowledged so far. However, since they operated in differing directions, and at cross purposes at times, they created a meta-fictional ambiguity that makes comprehensive conclusions about Twain’s positions on the war, and his own role in it, ultimately conjectural (if not impossible). In this context, the most fascinating aspect of Twain’s writing on the war is the retroactive fictionalization of his “self,” i.e. of “Samuel Clemens.”

Writing or speaking about his war experiences, Twain could not – and would not, perhaps – escape positioning himself in relation to the changing contemporary discourses signifying “Civil War” (or “War Between the States,” or “War of the Rebellion,” denominations already significant of the discourses they headed). Few of the signifiers within the overall semiotic system these discourses constituted were directly derived from the actual memory of the war in the concrete sense of memorized experience. One of the problems in dealing with Civil War memory has always been that there were several systems of collective memory and public remembrance located within and sponsored by one market economy.

Many of the constitutive signifiers of these systems were attributable to pre-war homo- as well as heterostereotypes of the conflicting sections, pre-determining perceptions of Self as well as Other, and also pre-determining the experience and subsequently the memory of self and other as actual participants. To this conglomerate of perceptions, the industrial process of cultural reconfigurations of the war added newspaper reports, prose, poetry, drama, as well as the lithographs and photographs copied and re-copied and widely distributed during and after the war. The endless stream of military and political histories of the conflict that already started trying to superinscribe sense and consequence to the events during the war of course drew on this amalgam of images and metaphors. In turn, they reinforced and perpetuated it, until facts and fictions, literary stereotyping and experiential innovation freely intermingled, supporting each other and of whatever claim could be sensibly connected to them.

Several of the configurations of meaning commonly encountered in literature about the Civil War from the period, most notably the persistent myths of the “loyal darkie,” the sentimental and often intersectional love story, and the romantic cavalier, predated the war. Re-writing the war and its aftermath to conform to cultural expectations extended their trajectory from the ante-bellum period well into the 20th century. On occasions, individual texts like John William De Forest’s Miss Ravenel’s Conversion from Secession to Loyalty (1867) provided moments of contrast and even disruption, but then that text fell through with the general public.
The post-bellum system of making sense of the war experience, complete with its ante-bellum preconfigurations and the increasingly industrialized scope and form of its reproduction, generates what, for want of a better term, I would like to refer to as the *Public Cultural History* of the Civil War. Constantly reinforced and modified by authors and orators, the central and inclusive metaphors of this ‘history’ gradually shifted from the propagandist image of the respective Union or Secessionist “other” to reconstruction and eventually reconciliation. The matrix of the *Public Cultural History* of the Civil War provided a framework with extremists, such as irreconcilable members of the Grand Army of the Republic and unreconstructed rebels, demarcating the political fringes, and with new immigrants and Africamericans constituting an old/new “other” that both sections could more or less agree on.

Within the framework of the *Public Cultural History* of the War, Samuel Clemens originally adopted a typical dissident position. Having left Missouri, and having opted out of the evolving conflict, his dissidence as a writer and orator matched his dissidence as an abstainer. He occupied a position *without* – not apart and distant, but as if he had shut the door behind himself. This position has a clearly defined relation to the *within*: the house is still close at hand, but the on-looker is outside, looking in through the glass darkly.

In this physical as well as ideological sense, Clemens had stepped outside the war and gone West. His physical move away was not, if I am correct, an oppositional act, but a re-placement, a relocation to the fringe that made detached as well as dissident observation possible. Interestingly enough, his sentiments – at least as far as deductions can be made from his notes, letters, and newspaper reporting during the war – appear decidedly more unionist than rebel. His notebooks and letters show no pro-confederate sentiments. The only time he comes close to expressing “Southern” sympathies, he limits them to his home state, Missouri: “they’ve been and gone and done it [sic]. Old Curtis, you know. He has thrashed our Missourians like everything. But [...] they had to chase ‘em clear down into Arkansas before they could whip them” (Twain 1988, 165).

“They” here apparently refers to the forces of Union Generals Samuel Curtis and Franz Sigel. Their army had beaten Confederate forces, including many pro-southern Missourians, at Pea Ridge in Arkansas early in March 1862. Ironically, many of the Union soldiers involved were, like Twain, from Missouri, though most of them were German immigrants.

If Twain’s letter in this case still places him among an assumed pro-Southern Missourian “us” as opposed to “them,” later letters and notebooks as well as his later accounts in *Roughing It* show Sam Clemens and his friends supporting if
not the Union forces exactly, then at least the civilian United States Sanitary Commission and its fund-raising campaigns in the West (Twain 1988, 591; Twain 1996a, 314-9). And when Major Edward C. Perry raised the transport ship Aquila, including the still-dismantled star of the San Francisco harbor defenses, the Monitor Camanche, from the bottom of the Bay, and was then made the featured guest at a dinner party given by grateful citizens of San Francisco, Twain acted as their speaker.

Already this early text, however, is significant for his later handling of the subject. In an ironic turn, the position of the speaker in the address is not necessarily one of a Union man, or overly supportive of the war effort. Twain gives some praise to Perry’s bravery in battle, makes an oblique joke at “greybacks” (interpretable both as lice and Confederates), but throughout assumes the outside position as described above, claiming to be not an ordinary citizen but a representative of Perry’s “savage friends in San Francisco,” who, in their savagery, are comically (over-)identified with the regional Native American Indian population. Signing himself: “Mark Twain, High-you-muck-a-muck” (Branch 1967, 177). Clemens/Twain becomes a figure on the fringe, a trickster whose liberties with facts and political positions need to be taken with good humor.

In several stories written around the time, Twain also stepped outside of the romantic sentimentalism then dominating the literary mainstream, regardless of political section. “Lucretia Smith’s Soldier” (Twain 1996b), likewise “Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins” (Twain 1996c) and, somewhat later, “A Curious Experience” (Twain 1882), are parodies, satirical of the kind of literature most frequently encountered in magazines during and shortly after the war. Not content with ridiculing standard sentimental formulae, Clemens also critiques contemporary historiography in what could be called a metafictional preamble to “Lucretia Smith”:

I am an ardent admirer of those nice, sickly war stories which have lately been so popular, and for the last three months I have been at work upon one of that character, which is now completed. It can be relied upon as true in every particular, inasmuch as the facts it contains were compiled from the official records in the War Department at Washington. It is but just, also, that I should confess that I have drawn largely on Jomini’s Art of War, the Message of the President and Accompanying Documents, and sundry maps and military works, so necessary for reference in building a novel like this. (Twain 1996b, 89)

The depiction of Aunt Rachel in “A True Story Just as I Heard It” (Twain 1996e) in 1872 showed that seven years after the cessation of hostilities, Clemens still kept a position outside (but not away from) the myths and metaphors at large in the Public Cultural History of the war: Introduced at first as if she were a typical ‘loyal darkie,’ the loyalty of the seemingly familiar “Aunt” becomes unstable in the course of her own tale. At the end, the first person frame narrator “Misto C –” has been thoroughly humbled. He has even been turned into an object mirroring the experience of so many bought and sold slaves, being used in place of an oven when Aunt Rachel re-enacts the scene in which she recognized the only one of her seven children who she ever saw again after that day before
the war when mother and children were sold separately by their owners. In addition, by making the one lost son who returns to his mother a soldier in a U.S. Colored Troops regiment, Twain cut through the all-white consensual silence then existing and effectively obscuring Africamerican participation in the struggle for their freedom.

That he held Africamericans in at least somewhat higher respect than many of his contemporaries already becomes apparent in an early text Twain wrote for the San Francisco Territorial Enterprise in response to the participation of the local Africamerican community in a Fourth of July parade. Again, the most important aspect of the text is the autocritical position: The narrative “I” quickly undermines his own racist assumptions:

And at the fag-end of the procession was a long double file of the proudest, happiest scoundrels I saw yesterday – niggers. Or perhaps I should say “them damned niggers,” which is the other name they go by now. [...] I was rather irritated at the idea of letting these fellows march in the procession myself, at first, but I would have scorned to harbor so small a thought if I had known the privilege was going to do them so much good. (Twain 1981, 246)

Rather than attack positions different from his own, the assumed “I” is turned inward upon himself – a narrative move that already precludes the possibility of fully identifying this narrative “I” as Samuel Clemens, even where he signs himself “Mark Twain.” To support this note of caution, it should be taken into account that similar patterns are evident in the “Vicksburg During the Trouble”-episode in Life on the Mississippi (Ch. XXXV) and from the Grangerford/Shepherdson-chapter in Huckleberry Finn.

The “Vicksburg”-narrator deconstructs himself by gradually revealing the callousness he adopted during the siege:

Coming out of church, one morning, we had an accident – the only one that happened around me on a Sunday. I was just having a hearty handshake with a friend I hadn’t seen for a while, and saying “Drop into our cave tonight, after bombardment; we’ve got hold of a pint of prime wh—.” Whisky, I was going to say, you know, but a shell interrupted. A chunk of it cut the man’s arm off, and left it dangling in my hand. And do you know the thing that is going to stick longest in my memory, and outlast everyth ing else, little and big, I reckon, is the mean thought I had then? It was “the whisky is saved.” And yet, don’t you know, it was kind of excusable; because it was as scarce as diamonds, and we had only just that little; never had another taste during the siege. (Twain 1996d, 382; emphasis in the text)

The introduction of an arm torn off by an exploding shell as an “accident” takes up the euphemistic word-choice which announces itself in the title; the formal and courteous “you know” creates a bizarre contrast to the content of what is being said. “Cave” and “bombardment” turn into grotesque stand-ins for equivalent terms under peace conditions, but the apex of the passage is the reaction to the “accident” and the focus on the saved whisky. Its prominence first turns the victim of the shell from a “friend” into “the man” and then reduces him to the

4 Thanks to Martin Zehr for pointing out this text to me.
severed limb. Partitioned off and dangling in the hand of the narrator, this arm will never get hold of the whisky “saved” from the customary Southern hospitality by a Union shell.

The first person narrator in the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is, of course, Huck himself, drawn by narrative chance into the war of destruction between the families. Huck gets too close to really remain an outsider. The episode can be read as an allegory of the internecine guerilla warfare in the Civil War West. Neil Schmitz already referred to these chapters as “the Civil War section of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” (Schmitz 1995, 74). Traumatized by his experience of seeing Buck Grangerford and another boy murdered, Huck is still able to continue his journey because he maintained a physical if not emotional distance from the events observed from the vantage perspective of a tree.

Maintaining his dissident distance from the Public Cultural History of the war in the early 1880s when campaign histories, reminiscences, and biographical accounts were flooding the market, Twain, in Huck Finn, provides a counter-discourse enfilading the transformation of the war into a chivalric contest between valiant adversaries worthy of each others’ respective steel. Buck’s insistence on seeing the homicidal Shepherdsons as courageous and honorable echoes the re-glorifications of the war as presented to the reading public, and countered by only a few authors like Twain, George Washington Cable, and, of course, later in the decade, Ambrose Bierce.

A dissident reading of the Grangerford/Shepherdson-chapter is backed not only by the content, but also by the original place of publication. It first appeared in Century Magazine, back to back with reminiscences and memoirs of the Civil War, most of which were later collected in the four-volume Battles and Leaders of the Civil War-edition.

The texts addressed so far constitute one sequence of Twainian metaphorization of the Civil War. Since only qualified survival ensures the ability to transform event into narration, it is significant that this sequence culminates in stories that involve narrators in troubling and dangerous situations which endanger their very narrative positions.

The other sequence of narrative emplotments of the war, and of “himself” in it, becomes apparent first in 1877, when Samuel Clemens started talking about what were supposed to be his own war experiences in public addresses. Three aspects of this first address, on the occasion of a visit by the Boston Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company in Hartford, Connecticut, are of importance: First, the 1877 date puts Clemens inside the typical framework of veteran memory; typical in that a memory gap of several years had occurred between the actual experience and the talking about it or the publication of a memoir. There had been enough time for the participants to conveniently forget the worst, and to

5 Twain 1884, 268-79 – this chapter, already with the illustrations by Kemble, is followed by Warren Lee Goss’ “Recollections of a Private II. Campaigning to No Purpose” (280-4). Goss in turn is followed by Lew Wallace, “The Capture of Fort Donelson. February 12-16, 1862” (284-308).
read up on enough military non-fiction and historiography so as to be inoculated with the myths and metaphors circulating. There had also been enough time for the events to acquire the patinaed glow of nostalgia.

Second, the text was printed first in the *New York Times* of Oct. 7, 1877, as “Mark Twain’s War Experiences” (Twain 1877, 10). It is this role as Mark Twain, rather than as Samuel Clemens, which in a way puts the author outside the veteran frame again, since this meant that Clemens’ war memoir would be filtered through the modes of representation expected of Mark Twain.

Consequently, his audience was treated to a liberal dose of military burlesque, fraught with comic hyperbole. A band of no less than eleven boys is mixed in with military unit denominators like “regiment,” “brigade” and even “division,” and the election of the author/narrator to “Second Lieutenant and Grand Mogul” of the group signals a proximity to children’s play and fairy tales. The un-military nature of the enterprise is signified through motifs that were standard for the “First Blood”-type of post-war military memoir. Disciplinary problems of all sorts and notably the presence or rather absence of umbrellas for protection against rain were standard fare for such narratives. Twain adds another motif for comic hyperbole:

Some of the other town boys got to grumbling. They complained that there was an insufficiency of umbrellas. So I sent around to the farmers and borrowed what I could. Then they complained that the Worcestershire sauce was out. There was mutiny and dissatisfaction all around, and, of course, here came the enemy pestering us again – as much as two hours before breakfast, too, when nobody wanted to turn out, of course.” (Twain 1877, 10)

The absence of political aspects in contemporary veteran memoirs is parodied in the figure of Mexican War-Veteran Colonel Ralls. He makes the little company “swear to uphold the flag and Constitution of the United States, and to destroy every other military organisation that we caught doing the same thing. [...] Well, you see this mixed us” (Twain 1877, 10).

Coincidentally, the time-lag between Colonel Ralls musings over the war he participated in and the Civil War he obviously does not understand equals that between the end of the war and the time of the speech, 1877. History becomes the product of rhetorical contingency; friends and enemies are made or unmade through narrative chance.

The third important aspect of this speech is that through the comical rhetoric of confusion, Twain renegotiates his position with one or the other of the sectional forces. The initial siding with “a detachment of the rebel General Tom Harris,” a proto-Confederate militia formed in Missouri in late Spring of 1861, is upended in the laconic conclusion of the swearing-in ceremony as performed by Colonel Rall: “We couldn’t really tell which side we were on” (Twain 1877, 10).

The two literary and rhetorical Civil Wars of Samuel Clemens and Mark Twain coincide in “The Private History of a Campaign That Failed” (Twain 1885). A lot of the military burlesque from the 1877 address is retained and elaborated on; at the same time, the elements of critique and satire inherited from “Lucretia Smith,”
Huck Finn and the “Vicksburg”-episode assert themselves, negotiating the borderlines within the text and creating an ambiguity irreducible to one meaning. There is satire of the romantic mode in the un-military figure of “Peterson d’Un Lap,” there is the burlesque of military maneuvers in the maps Twain drew to accompany the original printing in Century, showing the first and second positions respectively of farmer Mason’s dogs in the “Engagement at Mason’s farm” where they bit some of the boys. There are boys at play, and there are some intertextual references to Ulysses Grant’s Memoirs published by Twain earlier that year. And there is, of course, the shooting of the unarmed stranger, most strongly reminiscent of the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons. For a moment the military world and the burlesque fringe overlap. Interestingly enough, Twain’s construction of the shooting of the unarmed stranger who passes the boys’ camp at night does not foreclose the possibility that this man may indeed have been a federal scout in civilian mufti, a standard practice in both armies. But this is not the point. The point is that there is no escape from the war inside its frame, however wide that frame may have been drawn. The ridiculous and the murderous are always only one step away from each other. After this murderous experience, there is only the choice to stay and become a horror to self and others, or to opt out.

One element that is notably absent is that of the Africamerican: Only in the illustrations by E.W. Kemble for the Century Magazine printing does an Africamerican feature, standing, not coincidentally, between the boys and the Mexican War veteran Mason. This serves also as a reminder of the different sectional purposes, and as an obstacle to a nostalgic reading of the respective pasts present in the image (cf. Twain 1885, 200).

In the “Private History” version, the boys are again “mixed [...] considerably,” and unable to “make out just what service [they are] embarked in,” but, asserts Twain, levelling a satiric blow at the secessionist politicians in 1861 Missouri, “Colonel Ralls, the practiced politician and phrase-juggler, was not similarly in doubt; he knew quite clearly that he had invested us in the cause of the Southern Confederacy” (Twain 1885, 195). The textual creation of something decidedly different from the usual and stereotypical image of the Confederate volunteer imbues the narrative with an ambiguity that is notably absent from other literary renditions of Civil War memoirs. Most of these are of the conventional “First Blood”-type, with no doubt cast over the issue of the righteousness of the respective cause.

What needs also be noted is another mixing: Twain takes up the narrative position of “Misto C –” from the “True Story” again, putting himself into the place of the narrated, but this time spelled out with his full name. Whereas so far Samuel Clemens had been writing as “Mark Twain,” now “Samuel Clemens” is supposed to appear as the object of ‘Mark Twain’s’ autobiographical account – a construction of mirrors that bounce the subject of the narration back and forth between them.

The overall construction of the “Private History” is literary in form and purpose, its usefulness for biographical research limited. However, though truth and historical fact are unwieldy and anachronistic terminology in research post the post-structuralist semiotic turn, I propose the assumption that the uncertainty
of purpose he describes, and the realization that something far grander than the Northeast Missouri counties were at stake, may have catapulted the historical Samuel Clemens out of the evolving war.

But if the ambiguities of 1861 put Clemens on the outside of the war, the mutually assertive assumptions of 1877 and even more so of 1885 placed him inside again. Setting for himself the role of one who “didn’t do anything,” and turning history into literary comedy probably led to the omission of Twain’s “Private History” from the Battles & Leaders-Volumes – which did, however, retain one of Kemble’s sketches, showing a boy with a straw hat and an oversized flintlock, trying to stand at attention. The boy is also almost identical to Kemble’s depiction of Huckleberry Finn. This – fictional – illustration thus comes to stand at the beginning of a ‘factual’ account by former Confederate States staff officer Thomas L. Snead (Snead 1956, 262). It is very similar to the illustration depicting the “Lt. Sam Clemens,” as Richard Peck already pointed out (Peck 1989, 10; Twain 1885, 196).

Interestingly enough, the story, or rather its reception, did not mark its author as a deserter. This may have had something to do with the role Twain was assuming. Acting as a mildly humorous apologist, he established and defended the case of the abstainers from war early on in his narration: “Thousands entered the war, got just a taste of it, and then stepped out again, permanently. These, by their very numbers, are respectable, and are therefore entitled to a sort of voice” (Twain 1885, 194). The idea of deserters being entitled to respect through sheer quantity is an ironic stroke of genius, notably in view of the tens of thousands of Confederate soldiers who went home during the last months of the war. Whatever feelings there may have been in favour or against those who “stepped out again,” there are apparently no negative reactions to this aspect of Twain’s story on record.

Given Twain’s defense of the abstainers, it must come as somewhat of a surprise that in all following versions of his personal tale, he redefined his role again; this time as that of a Confederate veteran. For the first time on the record in a Dinner Address to Union veterans in Baltimore in 1887, he pronounces himself the symbolic “rebel veteran from Missouri” (Twain 1976a, 219–21; see also Kaplan 1966, 296). If on that occasion the tone is humorously ironic, Twain repeated similar statements in several later addresses in 1899 and 1900. Now he had been “in the Confederate Army,” and even “second lieutenant in the Confederate service” (Twain 1976b, 263; Twain 1900, 428; Twain 1976c, 334).

Historically speaking, even if Clemens had been appointed lieutenant and sworn in by somebody in June of 1861 to defend States Rights or whatever, technically he still was not a Confederate. The Missouri State Guard and other pro-secessionist, irregular formations were not enrolled into Confederate service until later in the fall of that year. It is interesting to note that all biographers and critics discussing Twain’s/Clemens’ war-service so far appear to have let this technicality pass unnoticed (cf. Schmitz 1995; also Cox 1961, 194, and even Parish 1993, 147). Seen against the light of the “mixed” volunteers of the 1877 and
1885 versions of the tale, however, it may in fact be more than just a technicality, at least as far as these earlier transpositions into literary textualization are concerned. The fact that “Lieutenant” Clemens of a Missouri militia turns into latter-day Confederate Twain signifies that this is an impression he constructed for himself, and which in turn was ironically re-constructed for him.

The evidence of the 1901 Lincoln Birthday Dinner address is strongest for the construction of a post-bellum Confederate Twain. What he said on the occasion as chairman, introducing another “one-time rebel,” Henry Watterson, sounded unisono with the propagandists of the Old and New South.

We of the South were not ashamed of the part we took. We believed in those days we were fighting for the right – and it was a noble fight, for we were fighting for our sweethearts, our homes, and our lives. Today we no longer regret the result, today we are glad that it came out as it did, but we of the South are not ashamed that we made an endeavour; we did our bravest best, against despairing odds, for the cause which was precious to us and which our consciences approved; and we are proud – and you are proud – the kindred blood in your veins answers when I say it – you are proud of the record we made in those mighty collisions in the fields. (Twain 1976d, 382)

It is quite possible and even likely that by 1901, the time-lag since the war had all but obliterated public memory (meaning: knowledge, or awareness) of the ambiguous situations in the Border States in 1861. If it is true that one could publicly only be (or have been, rather) one or the other, Union or Confederate, in order to be understood, then Twain had no option but to become a “have been” Confederate.

However, I would suggest that “confederate” in this case may have been even more of a metaphor than it is, and always has been, anyway. Using this metaphor on various occasions, Twain once more placed himself outside and inside simultaneously, this time with reference to the Commemorative Community of Civil War veterans, by always following the “I was in the Confederate Army” with an “I was in it for two weeks;” qualifying the second lieutenancy with a “for a while” (Twain 1976b, 263; Twain 1900, 428; Twain 1976d, 382). And if, as the New York Times noted in its report of the Lincoln’s Birthday Dinner, Mark Twain’s “tone and manner changed” as he started delivering the above “We of the South”-passages, and if “the audience soon stopped laughing and took the speaker seriously” (New York Times, 1901) – maybe they shouldn’t have. Louis J. Budd’s statement about Mark Twain “hiding out in public” (Budd 1985, 138) still holds more than a kernel of truth, apparently. From the text alone, and given Twain’s record as a speaker as well as his own meta-theatrical musings over modes of delivery, dead-pan narration, etc., I wonder whether the whole passage, delivered in front of a cross-section of the surviving Civil War generals, may not have been deeply ironic, at least as far as the speaker was concerned.

To claim that it was not may be equally logical. There are no more obvious jocularities in the second part of that address. Also, Lawrence Howe’s charge against Twain concerning his “reverence for authority” may well be justified – depending on which definition of “authority” is applied. To the showman, the foremost authority is the audience, and so at least as long as said “authorities” were actually in front of him, Twain paid a certain amount of reverence. Already
by 1890, the texuality of Civil War memory had been constructed so as to memo-
rialize a war that both sides had won; and the common fight in the Spanish-
American War in 1898 had sealed that understanding. In that war, a handful of
former secessionist generals had even commanded U.S. volunteer forces, notably
Joseph Wheeler, who was one of the distinguished guests at the Lincoln Birthday
Dinner, and Fitzhugh Lee – so it was perfectly in tune with the common basis of
Public Cultural History to proclaim oneself a former Confederate even at a highly
Unionist event like a Lincoln’s Birthday Dinner. Whether Twain was ‘humoring’
his audience in more senses than one is up for discussion, but will ultimately re-
main indeterminable.

As I have tried to show, Samuel Clemens’ (auto-)history of the Civil War ex-
isted only and always in conjunction with the texuality of that war, or more
precisely with what I call its Public Cultural History, its forms and functions
influenced – if not determined – over time by the Commemorative Community.
This community included first and foremost of course the veterans themselves,
and also their descendants’ and their respective organisations, but by 1900 it also
included, and increasingly so, the general readership and their expectations.

In his assumed role as “Mark Twain,” Samuel Clemens repeatedly renegoti-
ated the borderlines of the Public Cultural History, and the credulity as well as
the benevolence of the Commemorative Community. The result are a number of
literary and rhetorical poses and ambiguities that are unable to be reduced to
fixed positions. The narrative positions inside and outside create gaps and fis-
sures in the stories that cannot be filled by known sources. The degree of nostal-
gia in Twain’s storytelling is as indeterminable as his position (or positions) to-
wards war and the military.6

Constituting himself in relation to the Civil War and its memory, Twain always
chose and assumed roles in language games that placed him on the fringe, outside
and inside, sometimes both. Cultural materialists call this dissidence, but as I have
tried to show it is a mobile dissidence, dependent on audiences and on the shifts of
parameters within the system of (public) culture and literature, and their market.

So even if “Mark Twain” metaphorized himself into a Confederate rather than
a Missouri State militiaman in the late 1890s, when the political difference seemed
to have been reduced to a technicality, he assumed this role as a metaphor. The
very fact that self-styled, para-fictional “Twain” was talking and writing about the
Samuel Clemens who invented him, was only the beginning of the ironies sur-
rounding this metaphorization. The interpretive and commemorative communities
and audiences eagerly appropriated “Samuel Clemens” in his Confederate disguise.
The author Twain/Clemens, very likely aware of the meta-fictionality of his con-
struction, appeased the demands set before him by the literary market. But at least
he never extended Lieutenant Clemens’ confederacy longer than the two weeks
that his own bio-historical “campaign in Missouri” had lasted.

6 Though Twain appears to have held rather ambivalent if not anti-militarist views later in his
life, Philip W. Leon has drawn attention to the fact that he paid more than ten visits to West
Point between 1876 and 1891, see Leon 1996.
Works Cited


Twain, Mark (1877). “Mark Twain’s War Experiences: His Graphic Recital of Them at the Dinner to the Boston Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company.” *New York Times*. October 7, 10.


The Christian Herald, 1900, 428-30 [“Being an address at a banquet of ex-Confederate and Union soldiers in New York city, October, 12, 1890”].