Kaori HOSONO

To Kill Half a Dog:
Mark Twain and P. T. Barnum’s Art of
Retrospective Narration

Samuel Langhorne Clemens (alias Mark Twain; 1835–1910) and Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810–1891) had a friendship in the 1870s that was mutually beneficial, in that they used each other’s creative talent. Twain alluded to Barnum himself and true episodes of the showman’s life in his short stories and novels beginning in the late 1860s. He also embraced Barnum’s art of narration and utilized them in his own writing. Moreover, Twain’s ability as a writer attracted Barnum, and he asked Twain to assist him in advertising his entertainment business by writing on related subjects.

Twain and Barnum not only recognized each other’s talent but also shared a bitter experience of ideological conversion. They were once a Confederate sympathizer and a slaveholding swindler, respectively, and then tried to come to terms with their own troublesome pasts through their autobiographical narratives. “America” was a newly established community, and the Euro-American literary tradition began with autobiographical narratives in which narrators showed who they were, that is, their past life, to the community. Examples of this genre include Indian captivity narratives and Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1791). This art of self-reflective narration gained importance right around the time of the Civil War, when the country was divided into two socially and ideologically. Barnum skillfully got on in the world with his art of self-promotion, and Twain often gained inspiration from Barnum’s unique, inventive strategies as a showman.

Some researchers have cast a spotlight on the Twain-Barnum relationship. Adam Hoffman notes that Twain applied “Barnum’s philosophy of self-promotion”
(182) in writing his second travel book, *Roughing It* (1872). Timothy J. Lustig remarks that Jumbo the elephant, who was brought to the United States by Barnum in 1882, prompted Twain to compose “The Stolen White Elephant” (1882). Hamlin Hill, David Sloane, and Mark Storey also suggest that Barnum influenced *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889). However, no studies have focused on their shared experience of ideological conversion, which urged Twain to adopt Barnum’s art of retelling the past. This paper takes up Barnum’s exhibition of Joice Heth, the supposedly 161-year-old black nursing mammy of George Washington, as an example of Barnum’s tactics of revising his own personal history. I reveal that Twain mimicked the showman’s art of promotion in “General Washington’s Negro Body-Servant” (1868). I also examine how Barnum and Twain inspired and benefited from each other, referring to the letters exchanged between the two. The last sections of this paper will zero in on Twain’s ideological conversion and his autobiographical sketch, “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed” (1885), and the “half-dog” joke in *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson and the Comedy of Those Extraordinary Twins* (1894), an example that demonstrates the subtly paralleled but significantly divergent nuances of Twain’s and Barnum’s attempts to reconstruct their own past experiences. A close reexamination of this oft-cited joke will clarify both the similarities and the differences in the two men’s struggles against “inconvenient” pasts.

1. The Showman’s Design: Fabricating a Memory

Though Barnum is best known as a showman, he was also a writer, and he enthusiastically wrote about his life, either dramatizing or hushing up events as suited his message. Barnum often concealed the sources of his renowned exhibitions and insisted that they were his original creations in his autobiographies, *The Life of P. T. Barnum* (1855) and *Struggles and Triumphs* (1869). He obsessively revised his second autobiography and published its third version in 1883. Barnum’s revision continued until 1889, two years before his death (Harris 207). Updating his autobiography, he not only added his latest work in a supplement but also expurgated some passages that had become troublesome for him (Werner 102, 106, 177).

Barnum had no patent on fabricating autobiographies. Until the 1870s, popular works of autobiographies in the United States, including Barnum’s works, often aimed to describe the ideal image of their subjects rather than individuals’ internal
growth (Harris 208). Such convention also allowed, consequently, many American autobiographers to exploit their “true stories” for self-advertisement. What is remarkable about Barnum’s case is that advertising his exhibitions and advertising himself were intricately connected. The showman related his exhibits with meticulous care as he tried to build an ideal public image of himself.

The exhibition of Joice Heth, a 161-year-old former nursemaid of George Washington, is an excellent example of Barnum’s art of self-promotion. When Samuel Clemens, who later took the pseudonym Mark Twain, was born in Florida, Missouri, in 1835, the twenty-five-year-old Barnum had just started his career as an impresario. He purchased Joice Heth, an old black woman who had been put on display as Washington’s nursemaid by R. W. Lindsay, a Kentucky showman (Barnum, Life 1888, 37). Barnum succeeded in making Heth and himself tremendously famous. People besieged Barnum’s exhibit at Niblo’s Garden, New York, to get a look at Heth, who talked about her memories of little George.

Barnum put sensational rumors about Joice Heth into currency to attract spectators (Harris 23). Heth’s origin became the subject of controversy in accordance with his design, and some people even insisted that Heth was an elaborate automaton. After Heth’s death on February 19, 1839, Barnum arranged a public autopsy on her, which clarified that she could not have been over eighty years old. Barnum and his business partner, Levy Lyman, spread further rumors and stirred controversy. Sometimes they insisted that Heth was alive and doing well in Connecticut; on other occasions, they said that her body was treated with a preservative and sent to Europe. Barnum and Lyman even admitted that they had made up the whole story of Heth, but soon went back on the confession and asserted that they were also deceived by the former owner of the curiosity (Saxton, P.T. Barnum 71–73).

A lesser-known autobiographical narrative of Barnum’s, “Adventures of an Adventurer, Being Some Passages in the Life of Barnaby Diddleum,” is a good example of Barnum’s advertising tactics and a proof of his past as a slaveholder. Serialized in the New York Atlas in 1841, “Adventures” describes how Barnaby Diddleum, alias Phineas Taylor Barnum, a novice swindler, succeeded in the entertainment business with the Joice Heth exhibition. The protagonist declares that Joice Heth is his property, that is, his slave, when he purchases her: “aunt Joyce [sic] became the property of Barnaby Diddleum, and, as will be seen in the sequel, contributed very extensively to the principal adventures of an adventurer”
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(22; emphasis added). Barnum was a slave owner who had purchased a black woman. Moreover, he frankly narrates how he made up a story about Joice Heth:

Her great age was a great thing, . . . but how old soever she may be, an old woman, and very few persons care to behold a parcel of dried bones, covered with shriveled skin, which living anatomy has no reminiscences. Reminiscence, ah! That’s the word—that’s the idea. It is association that draw in the gaping and admiring crowd, and cause them to pour their cash into the longing hands of Barnaby Diddleum. . . . Joyce [sic] should be no other than the nurse of the glorious George Washington. (26; emphasis added)

The young showman made a substantial profit by using a commodity in which he had invested, and he openly boasted about his success. Barnum artfully associates Heth’s shriveled body with Washington’s reminiscence, which all Americans share, and falsified an episode of “national memory.”

As Barnum gained fame and a high social status as a successful showman, however, he tried to hide his past impropriety. After the European tour from 1844 to 1847 had made him famous across the Atlantic, Barnum aimed at the management of a “legitimate theater” to offer entertainment that was moral and appropriate even for women and children (Harris 104–06). He even tried to recast his past by rewriting his autobiography. In *The Life of P.T. Barnum*, which was published ten years after the Joice Heth frenzy, Barnum narrates as if he truly believes that she was a real former nursemaid of Washington. He claims that Lindsay showed him a bill of sale of “one negro woman, named Joice Heth, aged fifty-four years,” issued on February 5, 1727, with the name of “William Washington” (*Life* 1855, 149).

The political situation and abolitionist movements before and during the Civil War also affected the way Barnum talked about his past exhibitions (Reiss 183). Barnum recalls that he came to harbor doubts about the righteousness of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, and finally converted from Democrat to Republican (*Struggles* 609–10). When Barnum was elected as a Connecticut state legislator in 1865, he supported the 14th Amendment and delivered an address attacking the state law that made it a condition that voters be white (Root 187). At this point, his past as a slaveholding swindler became inconvenient for him. In his second autobiography, *Struggles and Triumphs* (1869), Barnum drastically reduces the description of his debut as a showman with the Joice Heth exhibition from twenty
pages to four pages. He never mentions in the book the fact that he spread rumors about Heth to attract audiences. Barnum paid keen attention to how he described the exhibition, modifying and erasing the description of Heth.

By exhibiting Heth as a 161-year-old nursemaid of George Washington, Barnum trumped up a false chapter of national memory that enabled him to become the greatest showman. In “Adventures of an Adventurer,” the protagonist describes in detail how he thought up a provocative connection for Heth: “Who shall it be? What great statesman or warrior, whose name is immortal, whose fame has been trumpeted, whose memory is beloved by his countrymen, shall I attach to her?” (Barnum, Reader 26; emphasis added). It was the former owner Lindsay who fabricated Heth as a 161-year-old nursemaid of George Washington, but Barnum developed the false episode of national memory into a social phenomenon with his art of swindling. Soon after the abolitionist movement and the Civil War, however, he was forced to modify his account. Once the Joice Heth exhibition became inconvenient for him, Barnum amended his past as a slaveholder by retelling the memory of Heth.

2. George Washington’s Other Slave

More than thirty years after the Joice Heth sensation, Twain wrote a short story titled “General Washington’s Negro Body-Servant.” Though he did not mention Barnum’s name, Twain was obviously inspired by the Heth exhibition and its aftermath in writing this brief tale. Twain knew very well about the exhibition that took the world by storm in his birth year. In January 1868, he referred to Joice Heth in his speech at the Washington Correspondents’ Club. Besides, Twain was familiar with Barnum himself and his business. In the previous year, he had criticized Barnum’s American Museum in a column in the San Francisco newspaper Alta California (qtd. in Twain, Travels with Mr. Brown 116–18). He also wrote a short comic essay “Barnum’s First Speech in Congress” (1867).

“General Washington’s Negro Body-Servant” is a hoax about the aftermath of the death of a black man, George, who was considered to be a former body-servant of George Washington. According to Twain, “the notable features of his biography began with the first time he died” (“General” 249). That is, when a man who was supposed to be the first president’s body-servant passed away, the report of his death adorned the pages of newspapers because of his unique work experience. Oddly, after the first report of his death, eulogies for the very same person
appeared in other regional papers every few years, and grand funerals took place.

The essence of this comic story is the late George's unbelievably good memory: Twain narrates that "the longer he [George] lived the stronger and longer his memory grew" (251). When the Boston Gazette first reported George's death in 1809, he "remembered all the prominent incidents" such as "the second installation of Washington as a President, and also at his funeral" (249). After a series of fake obituaries, the last death report appeared in a Michigan newspaper in July 1864. According to the article, George could remember the first and second presidential inaugurations and the death of Washington, major battles of the Revolutionary War, the proclamation of the Declaration of Independence, the Boston Tea Party, and the landing of the Pilgrims (251). Although all the obituaries state that George died at the age of 95, the last one reports that he remembered the landing of the Pilgrims in 1620, which meant that he had to be over 260 years old. Twain sarcastically comments: "If he lives to die again, he will directly recollect the discovery of America" (251).

Previous studies have tended to underappreciate "General Washington's Negro Body-Servant" as just one variation of Twain's series of short stories influenced by Barnum, written from the late 1860s to 1870s. However, the account of this hoax can be seen as proof that Twain not only won the hearts of readers by referring to the famous showman's exhibition, but also grasped the showman's art of self-promotion: Twain understood that Barnum intentionally spread confusion to gain fame. The story of George, Washington's former servant, is a retold version of the frenzied uproar of the Joice Heth exhibition, her fake longevity, and the chaotic aftermath of her death. Anonymous reporters repeatedly fabricate the death of George, the black servant, to sell their newspapers, and the authenticity of his existence itself remains uncertain, just like Heth's: writers who had the power to narrate their own stories deprived George and Heth of their identities and exploited them. Twain even ridicules Barnum's attempt to falsify an episode of national memory by saying that, "If he [George] lives to die again, he will directly recollect the discovery of America" (251). Twain keenly comprehended that Barnum enlisted the name of George Washington to appeal to antebellum American audiences who longed for a shared national history.

3. Queer Letters, Strange Partnership

Twain acutely understood Barnum's appropriation of this fake chapter of
national memory and wrote a comic piece, revealing its deceitfulness. For Twain, Barnum was a suitable target of lampoon. Twain was amused at Barnum’s “art of deception” (Cook 3) and took advantage of it. Barnum also did not accept simply being used as a target of satire by a young writer. From the early 1870s, Twain and Barnum built a peculiar symbiotic relationship.

The showman and the writer’s relationship can be traced through their letters. Twain received his first letter from Barnum in 1870. Barnum asked Twain to write “a characteristic letter on the show business” for his advertising pamphlet Barnum’s Advanced Courier (qtd. in Saxton, Selected Letters 164). Twain was an emerging writer who had just earned nation-wide fame with Innocents Abroad in 1869. Barnum did not mind asking Twain, the very person who had satirized him in short stories and columns, for a contribution to help him increase his fame. Unfortunately, Twain’s reply to Barnum’s offer is not extant. In the next year, Twain moved to Hartford, Connecticut, in the vicinity of Bridgeport, where Barnum resided. Eventually, the writer and the showman met at Horace Greeley’s house in 1872 and formed a close relationship.

Barnum repeatedly asked Twain to write works on his entertainment business. Twain published “A Curious Pleasure Excursion,” a hoax about Barnum’s new space-trip business, in the New York Herald in 1874, and Barnum sent a letter thanking him “for taking me into partnership” (Saxton, Selected Letters 182). Barnum also refers to the short story in a letter written on January 19, 1875: “Your comet article in the Herald last year, wherein you had me for an active partner, of course added much to my notoriety at home and abroad” (189; italics original). Barnum then asked Twain to see his “traveling hippodrome” and write a story about it. Twain declined this request: “I couldn’t write the article, anyway, for any price, because it is out of my line; & you know, better than any other man, that success in life depends strictly upon one’s sticking to his line” (“Letter to P.T. Barnum, 3 Feb 1875,” par.2; emphasis added).

Twain and Barnum recognized each other’s talent and were mutually inspired. A remarkable example of their intendedly-reciprocal but often failed interactions can be found in their correspondence about what they called “queer letters”: a substantial collection of begging letters sent to Barnum by swindlers from all over the United States. Some of them tried to sell their dubious curiosities, and others just asked for a job or money. Barnum touches on “this begging-letter business” in Struggles and Triumphs (778).
These “queer letters” were highly attractive to Twain. They could provide good material for his comic stories. He asked Barnum to give him the letters, and Barnum transferred many of them to Twain. A reference to “curious begging letters” first appears in Barnum’s letter to Twain written on July 31, 1874: “I have destroyed bushels of curious begging letters. Hereafter they shall all be saved for you” (Saxton, Selected Letters 183; italics original). Barnum writes to Twain on August 13 that he has saved “quite a stock of queer letters” (184). If Twain wrote a story based on the queer letters, it would be a great advertisement for Barnum’s business. Therefore, the showman diligently transferred the letters to the writer. Barnum wrote twenty letters to Twain from November 27, 1874, to November 29, 1876, and refers to “queer letters” in thirteen of them. Sometimes, he asks Twain to drop in at his place to receive the letters, and at other times he mentions that they are enclosed. 3

Nevertheless, Barnum’s effort at transferring the queer letters to Twain and asking him to write a story about his business came to naught. Twain never completed such a story. He also refused to help advertise Barnum’s business. In a letter written on January 10, 1878, Barnum eagerly asks Twain to assist with his advertising: “This is a begging letter! Awful!! I know your minutes and words are gold & diamonds, but I really want 5 or 10 minutes and as many lines over your fist” (Saxton, Selected Letters 204; italics original). However, Twain rejected Barnum’s request. Four days later, Barnum disappointedly replied to Twain: “All right, Mark. It’s only a matter of taste anyhow—and I am content” (205; italics original). After this, they became less communicative with each other.

Thus, Twain refused to comply with Barnum’s wishes and finally lost touch with the showman during the 1880s. Twain avoided descending to a mere publicist for the showman and carefully employed Barnum and his exhibitions in his fictional works on his own terms. Twain knew that “success in life depends strictly upon one’s sticking to his line” (emphasis added). Still, he occasionally alluded to Barnum himself or proper names related to him in some of his works, such as “The Stolen White Elephant” and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. 4 The two probably met one last time, at the Murray Hill Hotel in New York City at the end of March 1890. This was the end of the interaction between the great showman and the popular writer (Fears 545): Barnum passed away on April 7, 1891.
4. The Campaign against General Grant

Twain never kept his promise to Barnum to write a story based on the “queer letters” and declined Barnum’s request to help advertise his entertainment business, saying that it was “out of my line.” Yet, he had properly learned Barnum’s tactics of retelling the past and wrote an autobiographical sketch titled “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed.”

Twain, like Barnum, also underwent an ideological conversion around the time of the Civil War. Mark Twain was born Samuel Clemens, the son of a slaveholder in Missouri, and he regarded slavery as a standard social system (Twain, Autobiography 213). Upon the outbreak of the Civil War, he joined the pro-Confederate “Marion Rangers,” which was made up of some of the local youths in his hometown, Hannibal. Although to support slavery did not necessarily mean to support secession, he may have had a vague sense of mission to protect the “slave culture” in his hometown (Dempsey 259, 272). A few weeks after joining, however, young Clemens dropped out of the Rangers and left for the Nevada territory with his brother Orion. Clemens retained the outlook that he had in his hometown after he arrived in the West. It was in 1862 when the battle situation turned to the Union Army’s advantage that Clemens eventually started writing pro-Union articles as a writer for the Territorial Enterprise in Virginia City (Pettit 26–30). Twain also changed his attitude toward slavery, and two decades later, he wrote Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), an assault on the absurdity of a society based on slavery.

The ideological conversion that Twain underwent, like an old wound, kept bothering him. From this turmoil, Twain wrote “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed” twenty years after the end of the Civil War. Just as Barnum modified his inconvenient past by revising his autobiography, Twain also tried to come to terms with his past self as a slaveholder’s son and Confederate sympathizer by writing this autobiographical story. It appeared in The Century Magazine as a piece in their “Battles and Leaders” series, which focused on the heroes of the Civil War. The narrator (young Samuel Clemens) emphasizes that he and the Marion Rangers went to war not for their loyalty to the Southern Confederacy but because of their adventurous spirits. They were “young, ignorant, good-natured, well-meaning, trivial, full of romance, and given to reading chivalric novels and singing forlorn love ditties” (“Private History”12). Twain dares to say that the campaign was “simply a holiday” (14) for them.
It is notable that, in 1885, Twain and Barnum held out helping hands almost simultaneously to the national hero Ulysses S. Grant. When U. S. Grant, the former president and Northern general, faced financial ruin, Barnum made an offer “to give bonds of half a million dollars” in exchange for exhibiting Grant’s “unique and valuable trophies” (Croffut 293). In an enlarged edition of the autobiography *The Life of P.T. Barnum*, published in 1888, Barnum records the contents of the letter he wrote to the general on January 12, 1885. In the letter, Barnum assures success: “I trust you will in the honorable manner proposed, gratify the public and thus inculcate the lesson of honesty, perseverance and true patriotism so admirably illustrated in your career” (343; emphasis added). Barnum was well aware of the influence of General Grant, and that to manage the exhibition of General Grant’s souvenirs would bring him not only profits but also the public image of a patriot. Barnum attempted to use the national symbol for self-advertisement, as if replaying the case of Joice Heth and George Washington. Barnum’s plan was not realized, in the end. U. S. Grant decided to publish his memoir to resolve his poverty and made an early attempt to sign a grossly disadvantageous contact with *The Century*. Getting wind of this, Twain himself approached the retired general with better terms and won both friendship and the contract. General Grant’s biography, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, was published shortly after his death on July 23, 1885.

Twain wrote “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed” while working on the publication of Grant’s *Personal Memoir*. “The Private History” was originally based on his humorous speech “My Military History” delivered in Hartford in 1877. By the time he finished writing it in November 1885, however, he had added a fictional ending to the story, such that the narrator kills a civilian by mistake. What Twain felt in revising the short story is not clear, but what the public thought about this unpleasant ending can be surmised: Twain, the former Confederate soldier, confesses to his sin and renders help to the general, the nation’s savior, as compensation for his past. Indeed, Twain emphasizes the resentment he felt when he knew that Grant, “the man who had saved this country and its government from destruction,” was in a difficult situation (*Autobiography* 81). He was apparently conscious of the importance of General Grant as a national hero.

Within Twain, however, there coexisted respect for and a slight antipathy toward General Grant, who aroused in Twain a sense of inferiority over his past as
a Ranger. Justin Kaplan suggests that Twain imagined confronting Grant and beating him on the battlefield (275). Indeed, Twain had briefly titled the autobiographical story "My Campaign against Grant." By managing the publication of Grant’s Memoir and saving the general from a financial crisis, Twain tried to sweep away his mixed feelings about the general and his own regrettable past.

For Twain, recollecting his war experience was crucial in coming to terms with his past as a pro-slavery Missourian. It is notable that “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed” was published nine months after Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Although there has been heated controversy over the sincerity of the message in this monumental work, Twain reveals the evilness of slavery through the eyes of Huck. To use Fred Hobson’s words, Huck Finn is the “first and most eloquent of white racial conversion narratives,” even though Huck himself does not “fully [realize] that he is converted” (6; italics original). In fact, the time Twain tackled Huck Finn, from 1876 to 1884 with hiatuses, coincides with the period he re-envisioned his war experience: from “My Military History” in 1877 to the “Private History of a Campaign that Failed” in 1885 (Peck 4–11).

As Barnum related the Joice Heth exhibition to the national memory of General George Washington, Twain successfully connected his past as a Confederate sympathizer to the memory of a Northern general, and made a profit from it. Both Barnum and Twain were former pro-slavery apologists who experienced ideological conversion following the rise of their social statuses and the trend of their times. The two men’s change of mind was not fake, but they had to come to terms with their own troubling pasts, both internally and socially. The reason that Twain employed the motif of Barnum and his exhibitions as well from the 1880s on may lie here: Barnum disguised not only his curiosities but also his past, and Twain followed in Barnum’s footsteps.

Nevertheless, Twain did not naively adopt Barnum’s tactics. As a showman, Barnum elaborated his past and even put it on display by selling his autobiographies at the American Museum and his own circus. Unlike Barnum, Twain kept failing to write about his past life until he finally figured out how to create his autobiography by dictation in 1904. His self-consciousness and uneasiness about his past always haunted him.

5. Can a Half-Killed Dog Survive?

Twain’s troubled notion of his past ultimately appears as the “half a dog” joke in
his problematic novel *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the tragedy of an interracial changeling. In the novel, a black slave woman, Roxy, exchanges her master’s son with her own baby. Her baby, Chambers, whose father is Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, a prominent figure in the community, is so fair skinned that no one except Roxy can distinguish him from Tom, a legitimate son of the Driscoll family. Two decades later, a lawyer, David Wilson, who had been branded as a “pudd’nhead,” discloses the secret of the changeling.

At the beginning of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Wilson, who had just moved from the North to Dawson’s Landing, a small slaveholding community by the Mississippi River, sees a barking dog and jokes, “I wish I owned half of that dog, . . . [then] I would kill my half” (24). No villager understands his humor, and he obtains the title “pudd’nhead.” Previous researchers have often interpreted the joke in the context of the race conflict in antebellum America or Twain’s troubled notion of identity. According to Harold Aspitz, however, many Twain scholars failed to pay attention to the fact that the prototype of the joke was found in an episode in Barnum’s *Life of P. T. Barnum* (10–11). Before succeeding as a showman, Barnum ran a grocery shop in Bethel, Connecticut. No wonder that young Barnum enhanced his art of narration at the storefront, where customers loitered, jesting and gossiping. One of them was Hackariah “Hack” Bailey, who “imported the first elephant that was ever brought to this country, and made a fortune by exhibiting it” (Barnum, *Life* 1855, 112). Bailey sold one half of the elephant to his partner, “who agreed to exhibit the elephant and account to Hack for one half of the receipts” (113). But, the partner never paid Bailey his portion. At last Bailey became furious and threatened the partner to shoot the elephant: “‘now you may do what you please with your half of that elephant, but I am fully determined to shoot my half!’” (114–15; italics original). Twain was fascinated by Barnum’s first autobiography and read it thoroughly (Paine 410), so no doubt he knew of the “half an elephant” episode and re-created it in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*.

In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, to kill half of a dog means, symbolically, to negate the sin of slavery— that is, white men’s improper treatment of slave women in the past, which leads Roxy to exchange babies. The concealment of the past is a necessary evil to support the social order of the slaveholding community, which the villagers tacitly take part in. In fact, no villagers, including the narrator, refer to the fact that Tom’s real father is Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex. One plausible reason why the villagers cannot get young Wilson’s “half a dog” joke lies here. As
O'Connell points out, Wilson's remark can be appreciated as a joke “only if 'killing half' is not actually possible” (113), but the villagers recognize, if not fully but at least unconsciously, that it is theoretically “possible” in the context of the community's institution of racial slavery. Wilson touches, unwittingly, the unspoken sore spot of the slaveholding community and arouses the villagers' collective sense of “anxiety,” which prompts them to stay away from Wilson, disparagingly, “as from something uncanny” (Pudd'nhead Wilson 24).

Wilson finally reveals the secret of the changeling using his longtime collection of villagers' fingerprints, including the near-twin babies. The lawyer succeeds in clarifying past events by interpreting “visible traces of the past in the present” (Gilman 96). He redeemed his honor by raising the oppressed past, disrupting the harmony of the slaveholding community. Tom Driscoll (born Chambers) is sentenced to life imprisonment for murder but sold down the river as a slave in the end, for he is the property of the successor to Driscoll's fortune. The revelation does no good for his counterpart, the true son of the Driscoll family. To make a fresh start as a white gentleman is impossible for Chambers (born Tom Driscoll), who was brought up as a slave. Not only Roxy but also the Driscoll family virtually lose their son, and get a “white negro” instead. The repressed past recurs in the present, demanding atonement. To kill half a dog is fatal to the other half, and so it is to kill the past itself. To kill the past—to negate the violence against slave women by white men—is also fatal to the present. Three decades after the Emancipation Proclamation, Twain pronounced that no one can escape the shadow of slavery, the national sin.

Unlike the tragic characters in the novel, Twain and Barnum successfully retold their pasts, re-appropriating the national memory of General Washington and General Grant, apotheoses of the glory of the United States. With their art of retelling, the showman and the author attempted to “kill” their past selves while keeping their present selves alive. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between the two. Barnum fabricated his autobiographies and sold them as exhibitions. For Barnum, his autobiographies were well-crafted “curiosities,” presenting an ideal image of the great showman to the public. In contrast, Twain regarded autobiographies as an expression of his inner life. Twain appreciated Barnum's art of self-promotion and adapted it, but he also found it difficult to distinguish his public self and private self clearly and sell the former. Twain was haunted by the past, consumed with anxiety and always under pressure to reconstruct self-images
that would palliate his troublesome past. Though Twain applied Barnum’s tactics and successfully retold his past, making use of national memory, he well understood that the national memory itself was deceptive, bloodstained, and far from glorious. Unlike Barnum, Twain was not an able businessperson shrewd enough to overlook that awareness. Twain was a writer, a thinker, and a kind of philosopher, especially in his later years. The “half a dog” joke by “Pudd’nhead” Wilson, who has the vision to see through the past, is an aphorism for Twain himself and for postbellum America.

Notes

This is an enlarged version of a paper entitled ”George Washington’s Black Slaves: Mark Twain and the Showman P. T. Barnum,” which was delivered on October 12, 2015 at the nineteenth Japan Mark Twain Society annual conference.

1 Barnum opposed the abolition of slavery at least until 1850 (Harris 185). His exhibition was based on the general understanding that it is right to possess and utilize “inferior” others, such as blacks, and people with disabilities or special abilities, that is, “freaks.” Barnum aroused the thrilling confusion of racial boundaries in his entertainment business, such as in his minstrel show and the magical seaweeds that were supposed to be efficacious for whitening black skin color (Lott 76–77).

2 Twain also mentions a showman named “Varnum” in the short story “Some Learned Fables for Good Old Boys and Girls” (1874).

3 Most of the Barnum’s letters to Twain can be found in the Mark Twain Papers at the University of California, Berkeley. Some of them are in Selected Letters of P. T. Barnum, edited by A. H. Saxton, and the Mark Twain Project Online, available at www.marktwainproject.org. Unfortunately, only two queer letters are extant today, as far as my research through the Mark Twain Papers shows. One is from Helon Buck in New York, written on March 4, 1876, and the other is a job-seeking letter full of mistakes from M. L. Badger in Massachusetts, written on November 26, 1876. We can get a glimpse of the varieties of “queer letters” from Twain’s letter to Barnum: “Headless mice, four-legged hens, human-handed sacred bulls, ‘professional’ Gypsies, ditto ‘Sacasians,’ deformed human beings anxious to trade on their horrors, school-teachers who can’t spell,—it is a perfect feast of queer literature!” (“Letter to P. T. Barnum, 19 Feb 1875”; par.1).

4 “The Stolen White Elephant” was published in the same year that Barnum purchased the elephant Jumbo from the London Zoo. Twain also touches upon Barnum and
his elephant in *Following the Equator* (1897). In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, Twain mentions Bridgeport, where Barnum lived (22).

5 At that time, Missouri was in complete chaos: the state government of Missouri took the Union’s side, but pro-Confederate governor Claiborne Fox Jackson organized the Missouri State Guard to resist the invasion by the Union Army. The Rangers were one of the units of the Missouri State Guard.

6 According to Pettit, though Twain changed his loyalties, he still supported slavery and maintained a discriminatory attitude toward people of color at that time (35). Fulton argues that Twain converted to radical republicanism when President A. Johnson was impeached in 1868. See Fulton, *The Reconstruction of Mark Twain* pp. 99–125.

7 By proofreading Grant’s memoir and learning about the general’s movements during the Civil War, Twain came to realize that they might have come across each other in the field just after he withdrew from the Marion Rangers. The murdered civilian in the short story could be General Grant, for Twain knew by reading his memoir that he was temporarily in ordinary clothes while on his march (Kaplan 275).

8 James Cox expounds on the ironic twinship between Wilson and Tom: the former gains fame by exposing the changeling, and the latter is ruined socially by the same act (233–36). George E. Marcus and John Bird note Twain’s obsession with double identity (Marcus 190–210, Bird 157–59). Myra Jehlen, Joe B. Fulton, and Evan Carton explain that Twain expresses the impossibility of dividing whites (humans) and black slaves (property) with the nonsense joke (Jehlen 120; Fulton, *Mark Twain’s Ethical Realism* 127; Carton 170–71). Susan Gillman reads Twain’s bitter sarcasm in his description of the social system in which one drop of black blood marks the fate of a man, as either a person or a piece of property (79–80). Hsuan Hsu suggests that this joke is based on the biblical story of King Solomon (Twain, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* edited by Hsu, 239–40).

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