

ANALYSIS

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (1789)

It is important to notice the distinction between the literary hero of the *Autobiography* and the real Benjamin Franklin. The author selected certain instructive facts of his own life, oversimplifying his actual self in order to offer readers a useful model of conduct. He succeeded so well he created a mythic hero larger than life, a prototype of prevailing values in the 18th century--a symbol of America.

3 TRADITIONS IN *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

PURITAN TRADITION:

Franklin rejected Calvinism and reversed its doctrines of predestination and total depravity--in fact he became a cosmopolitan indulgent of the French. Nevertheless, except with respect to sex, he remained a moralist with a zeal for improvement. Freed of religious ideology, his puritanism became entirely rational and practical, while retaining traces of the old Puritanism: (1) He emphasizes the Puritan duty to follow one's Christian "calling"; (2) affirms the Puritan duty to do good in the world; (3) exalts such Puritan virtues as industry, frugality and simplicity; (4) employs Cotton Mather's method of using anecdote to drive home a point; (5) parallels his narrative to those by Bradford and Bunyan: a pilgrim's progress through perils to a safe haven, while those less virtuous fail; (6) structures his story like a Puritan sermon: his youth in the first part is an education to *principles* that are *applied* during his adult career in the second part.

18th-CENTURY LITERARY TRADITION:

(1) The epistolary form is common in the English novels of the period; (2) also like 18th-century English novels as well as Puritan writing, his major purpose is to instruct the young; (3) like Richardson, Defoe and Fielding he makes didacticism palatable in the form of entertainment; (4) like *Tom Jones*, his narrative affirms middle-class values of self-reliance and practicality, as well as the ambition to achieve success in this world rather than otherworldly salvation; (5) like other men of the Enlightenment, Franklin is circumspective rather than introspective like the Puritans--focused on society rather than God.

EMPIRICAL TRADITION OF SCIENTIFIC EXPERIMENT:

(1) Franklin projects himself as an independent and inquiring individual who learns inductively by observation and experience, and profits by his learning; (2) he learns to question his own reasoning; (3) he learns to be utilitarian, as by rejecting deism because it has no morality and is not useful.

THE LITERARY NARRATIVE

His voice is plainspoken, confessional and humorous. Contrary to those who have seen Franklin as glorifying himself, he confesses to a series of "errata" like a guilty soul confessing to sins: "I should have no objection to go over the same life from its beginning to the end, only asking the advantage authors have of correcting in a second edition some faults of the first." His perspective is objective, he makes fun of himself and he stops his narrative in 1757 before his greatest achievements, which he understates:

"From the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and in which I passed my earliest years, I have raised myself to a state of affluence and some degree of celebrity in the world.... And now I speak of thanking God, I desire with all humility to acknowledge that I owe the mentioned happiness of my past life to his divine providence, which led me to the means I used and gave them success."

His account of family history and his early life is so moralistic and didactic, he sounds like a grandson of Cotton Mather with a sense of humor. Among the books he read growing up, he singles out Mather's

Essays to Do Good (1710), "which perhaps gave me a turn of thinking that had an influence on some of the principal future events of my life." He inscribed on the tombstone of his parents the admonition commonly made by Puritan ministers such as Mather: "Be encouraged to diligence in thy calling." Franklin's puritanism extended from diet and temperance to philosophy. He learned the doctrine of "enlightened self-interest" from his Puritan father: The first moral error he records was leading a gang of boys in stealing enough stones to build a little wharf: "several of us were corrected by our fathers, and tho' I demonstrated the utility of our work, mine convinced me that that which was not honest could not be truly useful."

As a young man, he learned to accept harsh criticism, as when his father ridiculed his poetry: "I escaped being a poet and probably a very bad one." He subjected his prose to criticism by a friend: "I saw the justice of his remarks...and determined to endeavor to improve my style." Franklin improved himself in every way, because he was able to be objective, a characteristic value in Neoclassicism. Exercising restraint, another Neoclassical value, he adopted the Socratic method, "dropped my abrupt contradiction and positive argumentation, and put on the humble inquirer." Though straightforward and disarmingly honest in his *Autobiography*, at the same time he does "put on the humble inquirer." He oversimplifies himself to clarify his message, appeal to the common reader and give his image a mythic resonance. The most obvious evidence of his Neoclassicism in the narrative is his audacious rewriting of lines by Alexander Pope, considered the major poet of the age--to improve their sense!

Franklin displays tolerance, a rigorous conscience and generosity when he reckons it "one of the first errata of my life" to have taken advantage of his brother by running away to escape "the blows his passion too often urged him to bestow upon me." As if *he* is the one who was unfair! "Perhaps I was too saucy and provoking." Like the Puritans of the previous century Franklin portrays himself struggling to overcome temptations--"balancing" between "principle and inclination." He sometimes rationalizes principle away, and is honest enough to admit it, acknowledging one of the limitations of pure reason, as when he decides to resume eating fish when the hot cod out of the frying pan smells "admirably well": "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature*, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do."

When he sails for Philadelphia, which is soon to be the birthplace of the United States, his voyage (1723) recalls the voyage of Puritans to America just a century before: "In our way a drunken Dutchman, who was a passenger, too, fell overboard; when he was sinking, I reached through the water to his shock pate and drew him up so that we got him in again." This event seems deliberately to parallel one early in William Bradford's *Of Pymouth Plantation* (1620): "a lusty young man called John Howland...was, with a roll of the ship, thrown into the sea; but it pleased God that he caught hold of the topsail halyards...till he was hauled up..." In Bradford the outcome was determined by God. A century later in Franklin the man is responsible for his fall by getting drunk and the outcome is determined by human agency--giving your fellow man a hand. By coincidence, the first person to give the young Ben Franklin a hand in the big city is named Bradford. The fellow Franklin saved has a copy of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in his pocket, an allusion suggesting that young Ben is likewise a pilgrim, but he is seeking success in this world rather than salvation in the next, by developing Puritan virtues.

Ten paragraphs are devoted to young Ben's journey and arrival in Philadelphia, by far the longest dramatic episode in the narrative and the most memorable: "I have been the more particular in this description of my journey, and shall be so of my first entry into that city, that you may in your mind compare such unlikely beginnings with the figure I have since made there." Walking along Market Street with rolls of bread under his arm, by chance he passes his future wife young Deborah Read standing in a doorway. She "thought I made--as I certainly did--a most ridiculous appearance." Thereafter... "I took care not only to be in *reality* industrious and frugal, but to avoid all *appearances* of the contrary." As soon as the Governor of the province, Sir William Keith, reads a letter written by Franklin, "He said I appeared a young man of promising parts and therefore should be encouraged. The printers of Philadelphia were wretched ones, and if I would set up there, he made no doubt I should succeed; for his part, he would procure me the public business, and do me every other service in his power."

Franklin illustrates his education with anecdotes, such as his near involvement with two "strumpets" who turn out to be thieves: "So though we escaped a sunken rock which we scraped upon in the passage, I

thought this escape of rather more importance to me." Another example is the decline of his friend Collins, who gambles, drinks and threatens until Ben throws him into the Delaware River. By contrast he tells of a maiden lady of 70 who leads "the life of a nun"--"another instance on how small an income life and health may be supported." Again by contrast, the apprentice printer David Harry was very proud, lived expensively, ran into debt, neglected his business and failed.

Another "one of the first great errata" in his own life was his handling of a business responsibility to a man named Vernon. Later, with Mrs. T, "being at this time under no religious restraint, and presuming on my importance to her, I attempted familiarities (another erratum), which she repulsed with a proper resentment...that hard-to-be-governed passion of youth had hurried me frequently into intrigues with low women..." While he was away in London, friends persuaded Miss Read to marry someone else, a potter: "With him, however, she was never happy, and soon parted from him, refusing to cohabit with him, or bear his name, it being now said he had another wife. He was a worthless fellow..." Eventually, "I pitied poor Miss Read's unfortunate situation, who was generally dejected, seldom cheerful, and avoided company. I considered my giddiness and inconstancy when in London as in a great degree the cause of her unhappiness, tho' the mother was good enough to think the fault more her own than mine, as she had prevented our marrying before I went thither." He married Deborah Read in 1730, at the age of 24. "We throve together and ever mutually endeavoured to make each other happy."

Franklin uses the same psychological metaphors--or archetypes--used by Bradstreet, Hawthorne and the Victorians: "a merchant's clerk...had the coolest, clearest *head*, the best *heart*, and the exactest morals of almost any man I ever met with." Few in literature surpass Franklin himself in "exactness of morals": "It was about this time [1728] I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time..." After all his confessions of errata, this ambition is comical, "But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I imagined..."

His list of 13 virtues and precepts is very much in the Puritan tradition and was imitated for generations by parents and teachers and Sunday schools, until after the 1960s. By the end of the 20th century, such discipline was common in dieting and athletics and physical fitness, but morality was out of fashion. The lax will laugh at Franklin--he laughed at himself, especially about humility--but his regimen obviously worked. His last precept, "Imitate Jesus and Socrates," unites Christianity and Classicism, faith and reason. In the second part of *The Autobiography*, his later career, one passage in particular illustrates the transition from 17th-century theological Puritanism to the Enlightenment embodied in Franklin: His anecdote of being aboard a ship that barely averted wrecking on the rocks. Back in the 17th century a Puritan would have attributed such an escape to "deliverance" by God. Franklin says, "This deliverance impressed me strongly with the utility of lighthouses and made me resolve to encourage the building more of them in America, if I should live to return there."

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