Joseph Dennie on Benjamin Franklin

A Note on Early American Literary Criticism

Attacks on the late Benjamin Franklin, as has recently been demonstrated again, were not unusual during the decade following his death, indeed, were a not uneffective contribution to the political quarrelings of that period. But for a young man who early in the nineteenth century set himself up as Philadelphia’s leading man of letters publicly to attack so well-established a favorite son was a significantly daring adventure. Certainly it was spectacular. And that, we suspect, was what young Joseph Dennie meant it to be.

If at thirty-two he was to capture the national capital by the charm and penetration of his polite wit, it would be necessary, Dennie admitted, to appeal to “men of virtue, influence, genius, learning, and wealth.” It was to them, therefore, that he dedicated his activities as editor of the weekly Port Folio in 1801, to men of sense, of polished taste, of affluence. Dennie never confused liberality with liberalism. He refused to attempt to “please the populace . . . by infusing into every ill-balanced and weak mind, a jealousy of rulers, a love of innovation . . . or the reveries of liberty, equality, and the rights of man.” No hewers of wood and drawers of water would read in his periodical “the Fairy-Tales of France, that all men are kings and emperors, and nobles, and judges, and statesmen.” He recognized “the lower classes of our motley vulgar” as “composed of the scoundrels of all nations . . . perpetually restless and rebellious.” One of the principal objects of his new publication would be to “combat revolutionary doctrine” of all kinds—in politics or manners. He admitted privately that he wished he had been born in

England, where he could really have found appreciation for his talents.\(^3\)

It is no surprise, then, to find that by the time the *Port Folio* had been in existence eight weeks, Joseph Dennie had risen in attack against the late Dr. Benjamin Franklin, who to many Philadelphians of the common sort represented in his success what they, through diligence and perseverance, might achieve. Dennie, bred in New England and led toward learning at Harvard College, was only too ready to agree with John Adams’ later pronouncement that “Franklin’s practical cunning united with his theoretick Ignorance render him one of the most curious Characters in History.”\(^4\) Franklin certainly did not stand for the kind of culture to which the young editor aspired. Nor was Philadelphia in 1801 so completely dominated by partisans of Thomas Jefferson, newly elected President of the United States, that a young man might not find honor among the established and well-to-do by speaking his mind boldly. Therefore, on February 14, 1801, in his column entitled “An Author’s Evenings. From the Shop of Messrs. Colon and Spondee,” Dennie struck with some bitterness\(^5\):

> ——— “For you
> I tame my youth to philosophic cares,
> And grow still paler by the midnight lamps.”
> Dr. Armstrong

I remember, when I was a boy, somebody put into my hand the life and essays of Dr. Franklin. At the time this man lived, and particularly when his *philosophy*, and his newspaper ethics and economics were diffused over the continent, it was the fashion for Vanity to “rejoice and be exceeding glad” in the possession of such a treasure. I have heard somewhere of a book, for the use of apprentices, servant maids, &c. entitled, “The *Only* Sure Guide to Love and Esteem.” In like manner it was thought that there was no other road to the temple of Riches, except that which run through—Dr. Franklin’s works; and that, as quacks boast of an infallible cure for the itch, the doctor could communicate a nostrum for the preservation of prudence, and the cure of poverty. Every miser read his precepts with rapture, and Franklin was pronounced not only wise, and good, and *patriotic*, and all that—but an *original writer!* Such a strange opinion as the last never could have been entertained, except in a country, from its newness, paucity of literary information, and the imperfection of its systems of education, puzzled to distinguish an original from

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\(^4\) John Adams to William Tudor, June 5, 1817, quoted from *American Historical Review*, XLVII (1942), 806-807.

\(^5\) *Port Folio*, 1, 53-54.
a copy. For, the fact is, that "our Benjamin" was no more distinguished for the originality of his conceptions, than for the purity of his life, or the soundness of his religious doctrine. As a writer, he plundered his thoughts and his phrases from others—and as a deist, he supported his religion with the arts of infidelity; with the rank garbage of Mandeville, Tindal, and Chubb; with the crumbs which fell from those poor men's tables. It may be recollected, that among other things which appear in his "Essays," there is a scheme for an "air bath," and hints for procuring quiet sleep, by rising in the night, and beating up your bed, and walking about your chamber, &c. This profound discovery was ushered into the world with the greatest pomp, copied into innumerable newspapers, and praised as a most ingenious invention. Every American, who had read or spelt through two or three almanacs, or two or three papers in the Spectator, talked of the doctor's genius, and philosophy, and simplicity in writing. Ignorance and unskilfulness, as they are wont, naturally wondered at what bore the semblance of specious novelty. Like those children, described in Shenstone's Schoolmistress,

"They in gaping wonderment abound,  
"And think he was the greatest wight on ground."

Unfortunately for the doctor's philosophy and invention, as they respect the discovery of the above opiate, both of them are as baseless as his reputation. If a man, whose brain is labouring, with thought, or agitated by the spells of hypochondria, or fired with the rays of Fancy, should rise from a sleepless couch, and patrol his chamber like a centinel, and then return to bed, he may still ask in vain for the poppies of Morpheus. For the experience of almost every sedentary scholar will prove that there are moments, nay hours, when the billows of the brain will not, at bidding, subside. The soul of a man of genius is, often, broad awake at midnight hours, and to attempt to stupify it into sleep, by the above and similar tricks, is worthy of Franklin, and of Frenchmen, and of their philosophy. It becomes all three to treat the mind as they would a bit of wax or a lump of dough, and presumptuously strive to mould it into any and every fantastic shape. But this occasional vigilance of our mental faculties is an ordinance of the Creator of Mind, and wisely intended as a hint, as a goad to the sluggishness of our grosser powers to arise to action. When sleeplessness is experienced, let a man leave his bed, and light his lamp, and read or write, or meditate, as was the custom of Mr. Pope, and tire the body in that way, and not stalk about like the ghost of Banquo, or stand at open windows, to terrify the owls, and to "make the night hideous." This trick of Benjamin has been repeatedly tried, and he, who made the experiment, has a right to declare it fallacious. Strolling about one's chamber will not close the mental eye: all such schemes are a bubble, and it is a risible proof of the emptiness of modern philosophy, that its vain followers imagine mind may be managed upon mechanical principles; and, as an ingenious friend once expressed it, that we can throw off speculation from the soul, as a miller throws a sack of corn from his shoulder.

Thus much for the truth and utility of Franklin's scheme, to sleep at will. Now, "mark how a plain tale shall put down" all the glory of the invention. Americans are so little in the habit of literary research, and so arrogantly confident ours "is the first and most enlightened country in the world," that, without examination, they eulogize extravagantly every thing that is their own; and as Dr. Benjamin had the double honour to be born in Boston, and print in Philadelphia, therefore he must be an Addison in stile, and a Bacon in philosophy. I have heard and read
encomiums by dozens, on the invention of the above scheme to cheat the senses into a slumber. But, even this receipt to procure drowsiness, though childish, trivial, and false, is not new. The doctor stole it from an old and obscure writer; and,

As saints themselves will sometimes be
Of gifts, that cost them nothing, free,

he bountifully imparted it to the American world, and this same world, so liberally "free" to give, and so thoroughly "enlightened" to discern, discovered that he was a philosopher, who could beat up a bed, and walk about in his shirt, and stand at a window without catching cold, and then fall a sleep, and snore till morning. The proof of plagiarism may be found in Aubrey, a writer nearly obsolete. He published "Miscellanies," which, like the Noctes Atticae of Aulus Gellius, are quoted frequently by the learned, more for the quaint and curious than for the true and useful. He is speaking, in his loose and rambling way, of Dr. Harvey, the celebrated discoverer of the circulation of the blood. "He was very hotheaded, and his thoughts, working much, would oft times keep him from sleeping. His way was to rise out of his bed, and walk about his chamber, in his shirt, till he began to have a horror or shivering, and then return to bed, and sleep very comfortably." Here is the grand discovery, described in the words of an old, weak, and credulous writer, and what is curious, Franklin's boasted essay is almost a literal transcript of Aubrey's anecdote.

It is proposed to devote some future speculations to the subject of Dr. Franklin. Something shall be said of his stile, his economics, politics, philosophy, &c. As his stile has been compared to Addison's, as his electricity is boasted of as his sole invention, as his strings of proverbs have been called wit, and his beggarly maxims humour, it is time to have these things diligently scrutinized. The inquiry shall be fairly but faithfully pursued. From a diligent review of his character, conduct, and writings, the author of this article has acquired the right to affirm, that this pseudo philosopher has been a mischief to his country. He was the founder of that Grub-street sect, who have professedly attempted to degrade literature to the level of vulgar capacities, and debase the polished and current language of books, by the vile alloy of provincial idioms, and colloquial barbarism, the shame of grammar, and akin to any language, rather than English. He was one of our first jacobins, the first to lay his head in the lap of French harlotry; and prostrate the Christianity and honour of his country to the deism and democracies of Paris. Above all he was the author of that pitiful system of Economics, the adoption of which has degraded our national character. Far, very far, be it from the writer of this article, to attempt to vilify that clear sighted prudence, which at once discerns the remotest possibility of penury, and wisely guards itself against the evil. But there is a low and scoundrel appetite for small sums, acquired by base and pitiful means; and, whoever planted or cherished it, is worthy of no better title than the foul disgrace of the country.

Of economy there are two kinds, the liberal and the sordid. The first is perfectly consistent with the habits and generosity of a gentleman and a cavalier; it legitimates every expense, and is the lord high treasurer of every real delight, and the natural and necessary ally of tranquility, honour, and independence. I believe this species of economy was well understood by many of the ancient gentlemen of France, and that it is at home among the high minded Castilians, the munificent, punctual, upright and fair dealing merchants of England, and many of the high and honourable among our own countrymen. Whether Dr. Franklin, his associates, or his
disciples understood, or practised this last species of economy is not a question, among men of "long views," of "prisca fides," and of habitual liberality.⁶

Perhaps there was reaction among Philadelphians, even among Dennie’s most antidemocratic supporters, against so forthright a denunciation—Franklin, a "mischief" and a "soul disgrace" to his country, who had degraded its literature as well as its economics. At any rate, the proposed second article on Franklin did not appear in the Port Folio. Two months later, in another column, called "The Farrago," Dennie seems to have explained why:

I proposed to animadvert next on the influence that arithmetical minutiae gradually obtained over the heart. I was about adventuring to censure even the great Dr. Franklin, for insisting too much upon the mint, anise and cummin of computation. I wished to brand avarice, and to deny the doctrine of "uttermost farthings." But I recollected that every penurious parent, who prescribes, as a horn-book lesson, to his son, that "scoundrel maxim" a penny saved is a penny got, would cry—shame! The world, quoth Prudence, will not bear it; 'tis a penny-getting, pound-hoarding world—I yielded; and shelter myself in my garret against that mob of misers and worldlings I see gathering to hoot me.⁷

Nevertheless, in the course of editorial comment on other things, Dennie did find occasional opportunity for slighting reference to Franklin’s "hackneyed deism, and muckworm economy," or to his indelicacy and smirking immorality.⁸ He called literary borrowings "Franklinisms."⁹ He criticized Franklin as a deist, mentioned him contemptuously as "Dr. Franklin who has the pence table by heart, and knows all the squares of multiplication."¹⁰ He advised that "ever since the era of Dr. Franklin, the love of proverbs has waxed exceedingly fervent, among our countrymen," with a resulting "debasement

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⁶ These remarks of Dennie’s in 1801 are curiously like the strictures against Franklin which Leigh Hunt wrote into his Autobiography some half a century later, when he called Franklin’s maxims "Scoundrel maxims," and suggested that his materialism placed him "at the head of those who think that man lives 'by bread alone.'" See The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt, with Reminiscences of Friends and Contemporaries (New York, 1850), I, 129–132. The similarity of their remarks seems the more singular when we remember that it was Dennie who first introduced youthful Leigh Hunt to Philadelphia as a poet in 1803; see Lewis Leary, "Leigh Hunt in Philadelphia: An American Literary Incident of 1803," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXX (1946), 270–285. Both Dennie and Hunt knew that informed readers would recognize the phrase "scoundrel maxims" as from Thomson’s Castle of Indolence.


⁸ Port Folio, I (May 23, 1801), 165.

⁹ Ibid., I (October 10, 1801), 325.

¹⁰ Ibid., II (January 23 and March 20, 1802), 24, 87.
of the dignity and elegance of diction” and an increase in “the woeful insipidity of the simple style.” He attacked William Duane, “the opulent favourite of Jacobinism” (by which Dennie meant, the editor of the democratic *Aurora*), for copying “so servilely the frugality of grandfather Franklin” in printing his newspaper in “so cheap and slovenly a stile.” Finally, when he presented a letter of Franklin’s some months later, Dennie warned:

> It will excite, it is presumed, no ordinary degree of attention. It will be read by some with eagerness, because it is from the pen of Dr. Franklin; and, in the opinion of his disciples, it is no superstition to venerate every thing from him, as a precious relick. It will be read by others, as a curious specimen of the doctor’s liberality of sentiment on religious subjects . . . the germ of deism, the embryon of rancour against church establishments, the feverish symptoms of a male-content. . . .

Remarks of this kind, of course, had their local and well-recognized political implications, but it may be a mistake to explain them away only as adjuncts to early nineteenth-century party warfare. Nor is it quite fair to castigate Dennie, as both his contemporaries and ours have done, as a time-server, bound only to the opportunity of the moment. He had a trained taste in literature, and a sincere love for it. He had been the first American critic to recognize Wordsworth; he early encouraged young Leigh Hunt; he printed original poems from his friend Tom Moore and from Thomas Campbell. But Dennie’s was an aristocratic conception of literature, far removed from the native colloquialism and implicit nationalism which had found first popular articulation in the occasional writings of Benjamin Franklin. His was a sincere reaction against any attempt “to degrade literature

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14 See, for example, Harry R. Warfel, *Noah Webster, Schoolmaster of America* (New York, 1936), 291-292; or *Aurora General Advertiser*, (July 2, 1801), 2, where Dennie is attacked:

Does he aim at reformation—
Ah! know ye not, Jo Denny:
What’ere he may prate
About the state;
He means but to turn the penny.

Or the attack by the anonymous author of *The Philadelphian Pursuits of Pleasure, a Satirical Poem* (Philadelphia, 1805), who, among other things, said of Dennie:

superficial formal, pert, and quaint,
Thy style is like a harlot daub’d with paint.
to the level of vulgar capacities” or “to debase the polished and current language of books, by the vile alloy of provincial idioms, and colloquial barbarism.”

Exigencies of politics aside, Dennie was by training and natural inclination a Tory in literature, concerned with established standards and polished correctness. Bred amid the slow-moving conservatism of late eighteenth-century New England, he reflected as an editor the literary atmosphere in which Washington Irving would rise to popularity, while more vigorous and pattern-breaking Cooper was reviled by many of his countrymen; in which proudly nativistic Philip Freneau could be forgotten, while Bryant was hailed as the morning star of American poetry. Perhaps America needed someone like Dennie—after him came the completely nonvulgar flowering of New England, when literature in America for a period stood still as she tidied herself of the crudities which republicanism had brought, as she borrowed bright and ready-made garments from other lands. It was not until the middle of the century that Whitman, yawping boisterously along paths to which Emerson had pointed, reaffirmed faith in the “motley vulgar” whom Dennie distrusted, and whose distrust was in some part expressed in his attack on Benjamin Franklin.

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