

Benjamin Franklin: Guilt and Transformation

THE MOST STRIKING personal feature of *The Autobiography*¹ is the amount of self-advertisement in it. Vaughan's long letter, which concludes Part I, is a prime example. It is key punctuation for the book, as in the excerpt:

All that has happened to you is also connected with the detail of the manners and situations of a *rising* people; and in this respect I do not think that the writings of Caesar and Tacitus can be more interesting to a true judge of human nature and society.²

This is unmitigated puffery, even though the practice of including such material was not exceptional then. Furthermore, there is another, similar letter from Abel James, and, throughout the work, there are varied and insistent testimonials and coy self-recommendations for a man otherwise in the prime of his reputation and self-confidence. While it is true that Franklin faced a unique generic problem in more or less modernizing confessional or spiritual memoirs, still the self-display is at last a thing in itself. Why is it there?

¹ In the welter of adulatory essays on Benjamin Franklin, one study is particularly troublesome: "Franklin's *Autobiography*: Benchmark of American Literature," *The Western Humanities Review*, XII (Winter, 1958), 57-65, subsequently focused as standard critical judgment in Lewis Leary's comprehensive *Guide to American Literature: A Study and Research Guide* (1976). What truly rankles is not that the article was an academic exercise of convenient thematic criticism, but that I myself wrote it. I offer the following reassessment as long over-due rectification.

² Leonard W. Labaree, et al, editors, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*; (New Haven, Conn., 1964), 135. Subsequent page references in the text will be to this standard and accessible edition.

The constant self-proof and low-keyed boasting were necessary to Franklin, as they are necessary to any human being who needs—even as he may disparage praise—to broadcast his worth. In such cases some inadequacy must clearly be overcome by compliment, an underlying guilt has to be overborne by signal achievement, a secret worthlessness operates through a process of audible and even loud revision. Compulsion is at work. The behavior is urgent and compensatory, indicating opposite truths.

Let me make the general psychological principal quite plain. If someone enters a room and announces how good it is to breathe, how marvelous he finds the air, how excellently his ribcase expands today, we may conclude that the natural process must be in some jeopardy—that, perhaps, he has just had a lung removed. Transcendental seizures aside, one does not usually boast of—indeed, one is not ordinarily conscious of—utterly normal capacities and traits. It is only when something is in doubt that we need to assure ourselves of the opposite. The strong person, secure in moral as well as physical attributes, feels under no compulsion to emphasize or even call attention to natural characteristics. Direct or indirect advertisements of oneself, therefore, are unfailing signs of deficiency rather than surplus, of defect instead of virtue. In fact, whatever is insisted upon overmuch indicates weakness in the precise trait for which strength is claimed.³ It follows also that whatever one is endeavoring to conceal and heap over with opposite evidence is, ineluctably, being called to our attention.

So it is with Franklin, except that his prestige and symbolic importance, especially as a Founding Father, have kept these ordinary understandings at bay. To that extent, unfortunately, he has also been de-humanized.

The different kinds of advertisements in *The Autobiography* and in Franklin's life operated as self-proof; at the same time they also exposed the author's motives, guilts. What motives, what guilts?

To begin with, recall that young Franklin ran away from apprenticeship. His very first act of self-identification was to break the law; the

³ In clinical psychology this phenomenon is called "*reaction formation*. Preventing dangerous desires from being expressed by adopting exaggerated opposed attitudes and types of behavior and using them as 'barriers.'" From James C. Coleman, James M. Butcher and Robert C. Carson, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life*, Sixth Edition (Glenview, Illinois), 1980, 122.

apostle of independence began his career in criminal self-assertion. True, the apprenticeship was only to his older brother, but it was legal and actual for all that. The flight was a clear violation of contract, Franklin's second *sub rosa* indenture agreement. He fled both his brother's preventive measures and his father's explicit warnings beforehand. And, indeed, he subsequently felt like a fugitive.

I cut so miserable a Figure too, that I found by the Questions ask'd me I was suspected to be some runaway Servant, and in danger of being taken up on that Suspicion. (73)

We know that the whole matter weighed on him because later, long after his Philadelphia "rise" and great success, he not only reconciled himself to his brother James but agreed to apprentice James' son, thus fully "making amends" to James. This was repayment in exact kind, the familiar correction of "errata", here in the very terms of the original guilt-laden error. It was a species of profound talion, deep attributive psychology corresponding to retributive justice.

The same kind of emotional and moral transaction occurred in his relationship to Deborah Read. The operatives, under one of the great American romantic and comic anecdotes, were vengeance and guilt-compensation. We see how Deborah Read is made to pay in marriage for her derisive laughter at the boy with spare loaves under his arms and sparer prospects ahead of him. And Franklin himself, after an interim jilting of her, pays as a life-long husband; his breach of promise was, at the last, fulfilled in the exact and only way it could be.

Thus, early and determining crises in Franklin's life—formative breaches of engagement, vocational and personal—were resolved by equal and opposite quittance. I contend that, if Franklin were activated by ego and guilt mechanisms like these in his intimate experience, he pursued a similar course in the rest of his life. The famous career of democratic public service represents an extended sequence of "errata" and underlying motives just like the ones determining his private, professional and romantic decisions. The advertisements of himself are meant to distract us from the deeper but insistent issues involved. Indeed, they were meant to distract Franklin himself, seen in this light more as a humanized, neurotic personality than as a fully aware and calculating hypocrite.

Franklin's roles as public servant and democrat, for example, were later *personae* meant to deny his initial hopes of being served by figures of authority and influence, and to cancel his desire to be a special and elite person in his own right. Only Franklin himself secretly knew how much he had been the direct opposite of the later public images he cultivated—and in a measure, eventually became!—although he necessarily repressed that knowledge. All the later public “service”—organizing police and fire departments, libraries, mails, etc., or giving of himself in ambassadorships and unremunerated inventions—made up for his original impulse to special prerogative.⁴ Recall, for instance, the consistent expectations he entertained, as a youth, from the royal governor of Pennsylvania:

I had hitherto kept the Proposition of my Setting up a Secret in Philadelphia and I still kept it. Had it been known that I depended on the Governor. . . .(p. 86)

The Governor, seeming to like my company, had me frequently to his House; and his Setting me up was always mentioned as a fixed thing. (92)

Ironically, the young Franklin was “set up” only in our modern sense; there were absolutely no gubernatorial letters of introduction or credit for him on his arrival in England. The retrospective Franklin tells us, however, that he subsequently forgave Governor Keith for “imposing so grossly on a poor ignorant boy!” (95). But this diversion to his later generosity and, in passing, the quick sentimentalization of his boyish mind conveniently leave out the collusion of that same boy, activated as he was almost solely by preferment. The truth is, he was a youth of expectations; he had been grossly imposable.⁵ The legendary democratic hero, egalitarian and self-reliant, became the model he was only *after* forfeiting his dreams of special prerogative and dependence.

We might well ask if the mature man ever became the full democrat, the truly casual common man. Why did he boast in the full tide of his

⁴ In *O Strange New World* (New York, 1968), 208, Howard Mumford Jones suggests that Franklin's later public service, following his early single-minded personal successes, provided the guilt-ridden pattern for future philanthropic tycoons in America.

⁵ After reading *The Autobiography* fifty years later, Hawthorne wrote “My Kinsman, Major Molineaux,” where the eighteen-year-old protagonist is a replica of preferment-seeking Franklin—and has not only to work out his frustration but to exhaust his guilt.

life that he had "stood before five kings," unless royalty still counted that significantly to him? How much more of the genuine democrat he would have been if he had left it to posterity to discover that quintessential fact of his biography, never deigning to mention it on his own because it meant nothing to him. But it did *not* mean nothing to him. And though he might seem to advert to it nonchalantly, his calling any attention to it at all signaled its lasting and true importance for him. Similarly, though he confessed "chagrin" at being given a military send-off during his colonelship of the local militia, he took pains to elaborate all the homage he was "adverse to" and to remark incidentally that no proprietors or governors had ever received "such Honor. . . only proper to Princes of the Blood Royal" (238-9). Again, the demurrals and denials are revelations of the opposite case. The democratic self-image was as much a compensatory pose as it was a progressively achieved idea⁶—and it was that *pose* first.

It may be opportune to note how the two coalesced for colonial purposes when Franklin became an ambassador to France. In democratic homespun he attracted all eyes of the glittering court of Louis XVI by virtue of conspicuous contrast. He posed at being what he really was⁷—a non-courtier, an American exotic, an unassuming free man working for his inconsiderable but valiant country. The resulting attention he received served his purposes. Only his sophistication, and the disingenuous understanding that a certain scientific and general reputation had preceeded him, mitigated his simple appearance and his artfully artless candor. But, then, there had always been some art in his practical conduct, in the protective and spectacular transformations of his life.

It is certainly germane, while we are on the subject of eighteenth-century geopolitics, to argue that Franklin's later efforts against England were direct reversals of heretofore long and patient labors at rapprochement with Britain. He had never wanted actually to break with the aristocratic mother country, not even over the heated Stamp Act

⁶ Walt Whitman's achieved status of "the good grey poet," after his long self-promotion and pose as such, demonstrates the same neurotic American gamesmanship, or personal transformation in the next century.

⁷ We may recall that in his youth Franklin trundled his printing papers in a noisy wheelbarrow through cobblestoned Philadelphia streets, deliberately attracting attention to himself. The conscious reason behind his early excess could just as easily rationalize his later moderation: "I took care not only to be in Reality. . .but to avoid all Appearance of the contrary." (125)

controversy. Indeed, suspicions in the colonies about his basic English partisanship⁸ were at least understandable and even canny. His subsequent ardor for the rebel cause was in direct proportion to his reluctances and profound loyalism beforehand. His claims about superior American characteristics,⁹ throughout his career, had always been, *faute de mieux*, protestations coming in second place to avowals of his trans-Atlantic English consciousness. That is what allowed him to assign betrayal, in the end, not to himself and fellow colonists but to a Britain that had stubbornly refused to recognize her own. In which case one could repudiate ties—with Old England politically just as well as with New England personally—and, once again, become the second, *other* self.

In any event, the great democratic American hero, public servant and patriot was what he was, in Philadelphia or Paris, by a lifelong chain-process of default. A virtually unbroken system of psychological conversions and restitutions, or self-proof and self-justification, accounted for his whole career.

Along the entire range of his substitutive psychology—literary, religious, political, social—Franklin revealed his essential self even, or especially, as he tried to hide it. His early attraction toward poetry, for instance, is not a trivial consideration in his biography. He abandoned poetry for prose because he came to see his relative incompetence in what was judged as the elitist mode. He then schooled himself in Swift and Addison, dedicating himself to a plain and simple journalistic style with a determination that only secret self-disappointment and re-direction accounted for. His subsequent *New England Courier* attacks on pretentious verse in general and on the particular stronghold for it in elitist Harvard appear as self-exorcising operations as well as forays in straight satire. In his religious life his democratic theism and dissent only served a safe eclecticism and, at last, an avowed Episcopalianism. Meanwhile, his democratic regard, not to say affection, for humankind, activating his public service and altruism, overlay a profound moral and social skepticism. In private he wrote his scientific and philosophical confidant, Priestly, about “Man being badly constructed.” Occasionally he refurbished old proverbs with climactic aggres-

⁸ Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 480.

⁹ As in *The Autobiography*, *ad passim*, but especially 131 and 142.

sion—"Two can keep a secret, if one is dead."—and turned to comic but generalized misanthropy—"Love thy neighbor, but don't put down your hedge." Were not all manipulations of his various audiences, come to think of it, testimonies to his cynicism rather than candid democratic faith? Requisitioning on behalf of Braddock's army, for example, he dared not appeal to patriotism without also referring to the self-interest inspired by royal I.O.U.'s:

If you are really, as I believe you are, good and loyal subjects to His Majesty, you may now do a most acceptable service and make it easy to yourselves. . . .when such good pay and reasonable terms are offered. . . .(220)

Notice, once more, the precise function of the idealism in the broadside: to introduce and overlay an exactly opposite sentiment. This is the social and political psychology that motivated the same Founding Father when, later on, he helped to devise a fundamentally conservative Constitution, heralded as it was by the radical Declaration of Independence. Franklin joined in setting up a system where so many checks and balances would prevail that the miracle would be that any law would ever be passed, left un-vetoed and survive juridically; and where direct voting for upper house Senators, like Lords, and for the crowning Presidency, too, would be non-existent. In other words, having helped Jefferson with the populist Declaration, Franklin then sided with John Adams in constructing actual governmental machinery based on a covert or skeptically complicating mis-trust of democracy.

When we return to *The Autobiography* with holistic understanding like this, we gauge Franklin's expressions of feeling anew. He sums up his London experience with traitorous Ralph this way:

Thus I spent about 18 months in London. Most Part of the Time, I work'd hard at my Business and spent but little upon myself except in seeing Plays and in Books. My Friend Ralph had kept me poor. He owed me about 27 Pounds, which I was now never likely to realize; a great Sum out of my small Earnings. I lov'd him notwithstanding, for he had many amiable Qualities. (106)

If as a youth Franklin was generous to such a fault, was he as a retrospective man also generous-minded to a fault—namely that his indulgence was so clearly undeserved? But the point is, it certainly redounds to Franklin's credit. How can we afford to criticize Franklin without jeopardizing our own tolerance and good nature? Such a tactic represents one of numerous instances in *The Autobiography* when Franklin manipulates not only a contemporary audience but successive generations of readers, doubtless feeling "in after-thinking of it. . . more easily excused. . . for having made some Use of Cunning." (201)

Such displacement or reverse advertisement brings us back to his verdict on Governor Keith.

But what shall we think of a Governor's playing such pitiful tricks, and imposing so grossly on a poor ignorant boy! It was a Habit he had acquired. He wish'd to please every body; and having little to give, he gave expectations. He was otherwise an ingenious sensible Man, a pretty good Writer, and a good Governor for the People, tho' not for his Constituents the Proprietaries, whose Instructions he sometimes disregarded. Several of our best Laws were of his Planning, and pass'd during his Administration. (95)

If there ever was a time for righteous indignation, for longstanding human resentment, Keith's duplicity was the case. Yet Franklin displays a sublime understanding of what was not and never could be understandable or excusable in any man, no matter what his other general public service might have turned out to be. Franklin's magnanimity had no objective correlative. The sentimental emotion, covering an extortion of praise for the author, may temporarily conceal Franklin's motives but then, on mature reflection, reveals the man utterly. At such junctures we might apply Tocqueville directly to Franklin:

those who have written their memoirs have only shown us their bad actions or weaknesses when they happen to have mistaken them for deeds of prowess or fine instincts.¹⁰

¹⁰ W.H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, eds., *The Viking Book of Aphorisms* (New York, 1966), 22.

It may be pertinent to recall that the outlines of *The Autobiography*, and the life, form a classic rogue's tale. We have the indispensable geographic and social mobility, especially the rise from rags-to-riches, including all the opportunisms along the way. There is the early fugitive strain we have noted, later turned into respectability and even grandeur. And the gratifying psychological vengeance of the career, against father¹¹ and elder brother in New England (and the Penn establishment in Philadelphia) and against King and mother country finally in Old England, provide an entire Oedipal constellation. And always vindication, personal and symbolic.

Of course, there was undeniable talent, too. The epoch may have been right for perfecting stoves, bifocals, lightning rods, harmonicas, etc., but no man could be a hypocrite about sheer ability or perceptive timing, for that matter, capacities that extended to social as well as mechanical engineering.

And so the life was a benign rogue's tale or a realistic fairy tale, actualized in history. At the end of it, why could not whole series of personal transformations take place, including even some retrospective generosity and high-mindedness? The myth that would subsequently energize six generations of readers could also affect the subject himself.

What I claim is that Franklin's life reveals that myth in the making, the result of an evident and continuous internal campaign of self-justification and vindication. To an unintimidated attention, the record comes quite clear. If Franklin seems finally less lofty than otherwise, I believe that he also appears as more humanized, even to the extent of manifest but forgivable neuroses. In the end, by virtue of his psychological conversion to his own secondary ideals, he remains one of the superb models of self-transcendence in the history of our literature and national psyche.

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¹¹ He saw his father only three times after he ran away from home at seventeen. Did he not especially resent his father for having given him only two years of formal education? His especial triumph, of course, was to have had one of the truly great careers of self-education in the world. Here, too, the course of his life conformed to frustration and over-achievement, disappointment and compensation, etc.; all I contend is that in the usual pattern filial respect overlay hostility and self-vindication.