The Urban Idyll of the New Republic: Moral Geography and the Mythic Hero of Franklin's Autobiography

"The country possesses all the virtue" since farming is "the most honourable of all Employments . . . being the most useful in itself, and rend'ring the Man most independent."¹ The sentiments expressed in these remarks are familiar, but their author is neither Thomas Jefferson nor Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur nor John Dickinson. These are the words of Benjamin Franklin, a man whose autobiography presents a virtual paradigm of engagement and satisfaction with urban life. That Franklin, who once called himself "always an Inhabitant of Great Cities," could also be attracted to what has been termed "the agrarian myth" or "the pastoral ideal" suggests something of the power this way of thinking has exerted on American ideas.

Franklin's support of agriculture as the foundation of a nation was, of course, a reflection of his era. Influenced by the economic theories of the French physiocrats, who asserted that farming was the true source of a nation's economic well-being, Franklin held as well that the citizens of a country could best maintain an honest livelihood by being rooted to the land.² In ascribing a moral dimension to agriculture, Franklin was articulating a conviction that became important to native ideology in the late eighteenth century. As European ideas about the primacy of agriculture were disseminated across the Atlantic,

Americans seized upon the notion as a means to define the national identity by yoking it both to the pastoral ideal of antiquity and to what Chester E. Eisinger has called the freehold concept. In the figure of the independent, noble husbandman, native spokesmen such as Jefferson and Timothy Dwight found a talisman for uniting democracy, individualism, and national virtue with rural life close to nature. Through the nineteenth century and even into our own day, this rural ideal has persisted. As Perry Miller, Leo Marx, Richard Hofstadter, and others have shown, our culture continually has tended to perceive environment through a pastoral filter and to level an uneasy eye at the urban world.

Other historians, however, have asserted that such a picture of America's mental landscape has distorted our sense of the past and have argued, quite rightly, for the importance of the city not only as a source of economic, political, and social advancement but as a token of value in the nation's ideology. Nor is this position distinctively modern. When Henry Tappan in 1855 wrote that "cities [are] the centers of intelligence, enterprise, and education," he articulated a conviction shared by many of his contemporaries—contemporaries who also acquiesced to his conclusion that "the human being dwelling alone, or in sparsely settled districts, without any communication with cities, remains unacquainted with his own capabilities and . . . deteriorates in prejudice and ignorance." Defended as superior to the country in promoting individual growth, the city also has been supported as the true bastion of democracy. As one writer for the *Atlantic Monthly* proclaimed six years after Tappan's remark, "cities have been the nurses of democratic institutions and ideas" and so "are the natural fruits of a democracy."

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Though clearly different from the rural ideal, this urbane view shares an important underlying assumption with its pastoral counterpart: both are based on a belief in a boundary, symbolic and moral if not always literal, between the rural and urban worlds. However, while that assumption of difference has been important to native perceptions, it has not constituted the only response to these two realms. Developing parallel to this idea has been an important strain of thought that has sought to efface the conceptual and actual boundaries between city and country. Conceiving the native landscape as a place of special opportunities, proponents of this perspective have linked urban and rural to describe or envision America as a healthy, harmonious society combining the best of both worlds.

While the role of this urban-pastoral ideal has not gone completely unnoticed, historians either have tended to treat it incidentally in passing or have identified it as a product of late-nineteenth-century American culture. Yet as Thomas Bender has demonstrated, already in the 1820s and 1830s we find evidence that Americans were motivated by a belief that “art and nature, cityscape and landscape, organization and spontaneity . . . would enrich American life if they could be combined.” Nor is it surprising that such an interest became accentuated in the early nineteenth century, given the dual facts of increasing urbanization and the growing romantic fondness for nature. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume that this mentality developed solely because of urban growth and the new interest in organism, for these two factors only stimulated a way of thinking already widespread in the late eighteenth century.

The ideal of an urban-pastoral synthesis appears, for example, in

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1861: 418. Although not studied as extensively as anti-urbanism, positive responses to the city in America have been amply documented by several historians including Carl Abbott, Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West (Westport, Conn., 1981); and Andrew Lees, Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820-1940 (New York, 1985).


Pierre L’Enfant’s design for Washington, D.C., in which he sought to create, as he explained, “a great metropolis” that also would be a “complete heden [sic] garden.” The synthesis also appears in the beautification projects in Philadelphia, Boston, and Newport, where citizens began establishing municipal gardens and laying out public walks lined with trees. The impulse toward synthesis even infused itself into the thinking of that arch agrarian Jefferson, despite his professed aversion to cities. Besides approving L’Enfant’s plan for the Federal City, Jefferson later asserted in a letter to C. F. Volney that Americans must begin “building our cities on a more open plan” to ensure the moral and physical health of those environments. To effect that purpose Jefferson proposed a checkerboard pattern in which every other square of the urban grid would remain free of buildings. Because “every square of houses will be surrounded by four open squares” in this design, “the atmosphere of such a town,” he explained, “would be like that of the country” while still remaining urbane. “I have accordingly proposed,” he continued, “that the enlargements of the city of New Orleans, which must take place immediately, should be on this plan.”

Although Jefferson’s position in this letter seems rather incongruous with the conventional image of him, the date of the letter helps explain the apparent contradiction. Written in 1805, it came at a time when Jefferson, as Leo Marx has demonstrated, virtually abandoned his earlier hope that America could remain a predominantly rural republic. The checkerboard plan represented an adjustment on Jefferson’s part, a reformulation of pastoralism that now linked it to the city. Though a purely pastoral position was no longer tenable, an urban-pastoral one was, precisely because of the reciprocity implicit between city and country. Jefferson’s reciprocal plan assumes that while the open spaces will create a city of greater physical, social, and moral health, the city will give to pastoralism a credibility it can

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10 The Machine in the Garden, 133-44.
no longer have on its own. What makes the plan feasible is Jefferson's faith in the American landscape; the design is possible, because there is enough land in the new republic to build cities on a broad and open plan.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century and first decade of the nineteenth, such sentiments spread rapidly, influencing especially the wave of nationalistic literature that included Philip Freneau's and Hugh Brackenridge's *Rising Glory of America* and David Humphreys's "Future State of the Western Territory." The latter, for example, predicts that in the near future the transmontane region shall watch its "cities rise, and spiry towns increase, / With gilded domes and ev'ry art," while "cultivation shall . . . robe with verdure all the genial soil." For Humphreys any doubts about the compatibility of "robed verdure" and "gilded cities" are swept away by the growing belief that America is inaugurating a new golden age for humankind.

A similar idea appears in Joel Barlow's *Vision of Columbus*, in which Barlow has the aging explorer experience a vision of America as a benevolent blend of cultivated fields and active urban centers—a future that ostensibly has been attained in Barlow's own day. Unlike the despotic urban Europe he has known, Columbus views a free, peaceful America where "Gardens, vales and streets and structures rise," where "fields . . . bloom" and "towns and empires claim their peaceful sway." In this world, "Each rustic . . . turns the furrow'd soil," seeing his "rights secured," while the "growing throngs" from cities, which Barlow calls "seats of art," spread the developments of civilization to "bid dire diseases cease, / Or sound the tidings of eternal peace." In the poem's last book, moreover, Barlow allows Columbus to see how this bountiful union will continue beyond the author's own time owing to the "future progress of society with respect to commerce, discoveries, the opening of canals," and to further advances in "philosophical, medical, and political knowledge" until—through America's leadership and example—the harmony will embrace "all nations."  

Taken together these examples, even in their brief form, begin to

suggest the general contours of the ideal. Viewing pure pastoralism as inadequate in itself, the urban-pastoral vision conceives of an alternative "middle" realm in which the city melds harmoniously with the countryside or contains within its own boundaries urbanity, complexity, and sophistication combined with the physical or social attributes of rusticity. This synthesis might take a number of forms, from a preservation of open green spaces in the urban topography to an "organic" relationship among the inhabitants. Because of this orientation, the ideal retains an oppositional element, but it substitutes for the rural-urban dichotomy a distinction between the overcivilized city—frequently associated with Europe—and the redeemed city that maintains contact with pastoral values.

Though this ideal had numerous supporters by the last two decades of the eighteenth century, it had not, however, reached the stage where it could function fully as a mythology for the American urban ethos. Something was missing—something that could personalize the belief that this country offered unique opportunities for forming a new type of urban society. In embracing the ideal of an urban-pastoral synthesis, Americans had constructed the universe—the moral geography. Yet there was no urban counterpart to the noble husbandman to seize the imagination. The problem was, what kind of hero could embody the values of the ideal in a way commensurate with the promise of the native landscape? Put another way, the question involved the identity of the nation itself: Was the American character capable of combining the virtues of democratic pastoralism with a progressive, energetic, and communal urbanity? In the same year that L'Enfant was beginning his design for the Federal City, Benjamin Franklin was adding the final strokes to a self-portrait that would provide answers to those questions. The Autobiography presents more than an exemplum of the self-made man, who, through luck and pluck, succeeds in harnessing the forces of the urban economy. In reconciling his own attraction to pastoral values and his commitment to city life, Franklin created in his memoirs an urban hero and a symbolic landscape that function on the cultural level as synecdoche and model of the urban-pastoral ideal.

This is not to suggest that Franklin composed the Autobiography guided throughout by an overarching mythopoeic design. The opening section, written in 1771, is directed to his son, and while commentators repeatedly have discounted this address as a rhetorical gesture, Frank-
lin reasserted in a letter to Mathew Carey fifteen years later that private familial instruction had been his original purpose.\textsuperscript{13} By contrast, the remaining three sections, written at different times and in varying styles, were "intended for the Publick" as Franklin himself explains in their pages. Despite the memoirs' ostensible fragmentation, however, the concern Franklin displayed throughout his life for the image he projected—a concern expressed overtly in the \textit{Autobiography}—makes it highly unlikely that he viewed his self-portrait as a patchwork of variform narratives. We know that before his death he revised the sections, possibly with an eye toward thematic unity, and as J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall have pointed out, Franklin's outline for the \textit{Autobiography} proves "the book was planned as a whole when Franklin began composing it."\textsuperscript{14}

The best evidence for the mythic unity of the \textit{Autobiography} is the text itself. Its structure constitutes a pattern of sequential expansion that affixes a cultural significance to the character Franklin creates. While Robert Sayre has noted that the autobiographical form inherently gives its subject a cultural dimension, numerous students of the memoirs have argued that the character who emerges from its pages preeminently embodies the values and position of Americans at the time.\textsuperscript{15} That Franklin himself conceived much of the \textit{Autobiography} in similar terms is indicated by his decision to include at the beginning of section two the famous letter in which Benjamin Vaughan asserted that the \textit{Autobiography} could well encapsulate "the internal circumstances of your country." "All that has happened to you," continued Vaughan, "is also connected with the detail of the manners and situation of a rising people."\textsuperscript{16} This archetypal Franklin, however, does not reside solely in the last three "public" sections introduced by this letter. Beneath its overt purpose, section one also contributes to Franklin's creation of a mythic hero whose character is intrinsically

\textsuperscript{13} "To Mathew Carey," August 16, 1786, \textit{Writings}, 9:533-34.


\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography}, eds. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York, 1985), 59. The edition cited here and for subsequent quotations is the authoritative Norton text, adapted by Lemay and Zall from their genetic text edition of Franklin's autobiography.
related to the urban-pastoral ideal and whose ever-widening potential makes the very open-endedness of the *Autobiography* part of the mythopoeic pattern.

To present himself as an exemplary embodiment of this new urban hero, Franklin devotes much of the first section to fashioning a landscape that conforms to the basic moral geography of the ideal. Finding his early life in Boston tense and restrictive, he decided at nineteen to leave his native city, as he tells us, to "assert my Freedom" from the tyranny of apprenticeship under his brother, James. This movement toward freedom, however, figures more than a retreat from servitude. Much of the life defining the Boston he left behind had proved to be oppressive, according to Franklin. In recalling his Boston past, he conveys the impression of a society burdened by an artificially inflated economy and onerous laws resulting in the temporary imprisonment of his brother and an injunction against the printing of his paper. Boston appears as a repressive environment choking off individual opportunity—an image which Franklin extends to his family. Thwarted by his father in his desire to go to sea, subject to beatings and other improprieties from his brother, he presents the Boston of his youth as a place precluding freedom and promoting frustration.

Far from incorporating the urban-pastoral promise of America, Boston resembles more the London described later in section one. Having worked there for a time as a pressman, Franklin delineates this Old World city as a restrictive society where he "just rubb'd on from hand to mouth" and where, while working at Watt's Printing House, he was harassed by his co-workers, who were repeatedly "mixing my Sorts, transposing my Pages, [and] breaking my Matter" because he refused to pay an extra sum for the compositors' beer, which he never drank. Like Boston, London offered few opportunities. Unable to prosper, Franklin had to enter a "new business" as a tradesman, a career which abruptly terminated when his mentor died. The similarity between London and Boston also extends to the way each threatens virtue, in that the only moral "errata" Franklin ascribes to himself occurred in these two cities. To free himself of his Boston apprenticeship, he had taken advantage of a private agreement with his brother—an action, he realizes, which "was not fair in me to take" and so constituted "one of the first Errata of my Life." In London, likewise, he found himself wasting his money, attempting "Familiarities (another Erratum)" with a young woman living at his
lodgings, and forgetting his commitments at home. Through such an association, the Boston of section one emerges as an alien manifestation, an aberrant extension of Europe in conflict with the dominant values of the Autobiography and the democratic promise of America. Like London, it is a time-burdened, rigid city threatening the individual with social restraints and moral snares.

In recounting his decision to depart, however, Franklin makes clear that he does not repudiate completely the civilization he has left behind. Conveying a certain fondness for his Boston heritage, he describes his father with admiration as a man of “sound Understanding, and solid Judgment” and proudly gives the history of his family’s immigration to America. Franklin willingly accepts certain elements of his old city because they comport with the values of the Autobiography in a way that envelops his life within a native paradigm. Just as his family, like thousands of other Americans, had moved to the New World “to enjoy their Mode of Religion with Freedom,” Franklin departs from Boston out of a similar desire for independence. His voyage to the embryonic Philadelphia of 1723 thus parallels an archetypal pattern of the culture: the American journey to new cities in a fresh landscape.

As Franklin recounts that journey, he expands his moral geography to encompass other mythic elements of America’s historical terrain. Before he can reach Philadelphia he must undergo, as did the first wave of colonists, a series of privations at the hands of raw nature: a squall off Long Island which “tore our rotten Sails to pieces,” a feverish night in the scuttle of his ship, and a thorough soaking from a rainstorm during a fifty-mile hike from Amboy to Burlington. After devoting almost five pages to these events, Franklin then describes his appearance upon entering Philadelphia on a Sunday morning in what is by now one of the most famous passages in American autobiography:

I was in my working Dress, my best Clothes being to come round by Sea. I was dirty from my Journey; my Pockets were stuff’d out with Shirts and Stockings; I knew no Soul, nor where to look for Lodging.

17 Autobiography, 33-38, 16-17.
18 Ibid., 7, 5.
What is significant about this description, as Franklin himself notes, is the figure he cuts. Subject to the effects of the wilderness, he has been purged of most of the elements of his past. His possessions consist only of the few articles of clothing stuffed in his pockets and a Dutch dollar. Thrown upon his own resources—"I knew no Soul, nor where to look for Lodging"—he is entirely self-reliant.¹⁹

The figure which Franklin makes here bears a striking resemblance to many characters of American writing but especially to the simple yeoman of eighteenth-century pastoralism. Like that noble rustic, the Franklin of this episode seems to be a tabula rasa, a new man divested of those elements of his European past irrelevant to his "New Country," as he calls Philadelphia. In both cases the cardinal metaphor of value becomes the promise of fresh beginnings made possible by westward expansion. In the Autobiography, Philadelphia assumes the role of the middle landscape, offering, as a city of the West, new freedom to the individual.

The connection between Philadelphia and the pastoral ideal extends beyond the former's location. The ambiance of the city itself resembles that of the farmer's cultivated milieu. As Franklin presents it, Philadelphia seems to possess an almost natural fecundity and rural flavor. Bread, to his surprise, is plentiful and inexpensive, while wants seem few—Franklin is "refresh'd" by a roll and "a Draught of the River Water," an elemental meal. The inhabitants are friendly, as evidenced by the youth who conducts him to suitable and "reputable" lodgings and by Franklin's immediate acceptance in the company of other simple but "clean dress'd, People," whom he joins in "the great Meeting House of the Quakers near the Market." In Philadelphia Franklin does not encounter a frantic pace or a competitive spirit. Far from engaging in immediate exertion, he finds the city a place of refreshment and rest, as though it were a somnolent country village. This Sunday tranquility prevails even the next day, glossing Franklin's account of his efforts to find work. Relating his dealings with the two printers of the town, Keimer and Bradford, Franklin explains how he "endeavour'd to put his [i.e., Keimer's] Press . . . into Order fit to be work'd with; and promising to come and print off his Elegy

¹⁹ Ibid., 17-20.
as soon as he should have got it ready, I return'd to Bradford's who
gave me a little Job to do for the present, and there I lodged and
dieted."\textsuperscript{20} The movement back and forth between various jobs is
rendered in a placid cadence, punctuated by a domestic image of ease
and relaxation.

This calm atmosphere prevades the entire Autobiography, giving the
work, as several commentators have noted, a surprisingly relaxed tone
even with all the activity involved.\textsuperscript{21} The effect results largely because
Franklin records achievements, especially his business successes, with-
out going into the emotional struggles behind them. The ideal of
serenity, at the time associated increasingly with country life, becomes
in Franklin's pages an important characteristic of the developing urban
milieu. By such a strategy Philadelphia emerges as a cityscape of
idyllic pliability and congeniality, promoting a life of "constant Fel-
licity."

In accommodating himself to this new milieu, of course, Franklin
must not only compete with the other printers but face corruption in
the form of Keimer's duplicity. Yet we never get the sense that this
competition is straining or that Keimer's scheming poses a danger,
because Franklin presents the old printer as a comic figure whose
failure quickly dispatches him from the scene. What prevents that
failure from dampening the hopeful mood of the memoirs is the way
Franklin attributes responsibility for Keimer's demise, not to social
conditions, but to Keimer's incompetence. Since he lacked industry,
"kept his Shop miserably, sold often without Profit for ready Money;"
and failed to keep accounts, Keimer created his own misfortune.\textsuperscript{22} If
we feel little remorse at his fate, it is because he appears as a ridiculous,
low character whose narrowness and greed are out of place in the
developing world of Philadelphia.

For Philadelphia is a place of opportunity, offering possibilities
commensurate with the edenic myth of the fresh start. Whereas in
Boston Franklin was nothing more than an unappreciated apprentice,
he is now a man of skill who can sell his services openly in the town.
Part of the reason he can do so is that the low quality of work done by the other printers makes Franklin's expertise a unique commodity; but that reciprocity is precisely the point. Just as Philadelphia provides opportunity because, like the unimproved landscape, it needs amelioration, Franklin willingly works to make the most of the chance. Possessing initiative, industry, and instinctive wisdom, he belongs in the same way that the good farmer belongs to his land. In both instances the environment animates the central figure who uses his talents to achieve success and independence.

This beneficial relationship between the individual and his environment constitutes a central motif of the *Autobiography* because of Franklin's ability to depict himself as a man eminently suited to his surroundings, an inspirational figure at once larger than life and common enough to encourage imitation. It has been said that Franklin, throughout his life, not only sought to cultivate an image of himself as an exemplary American but actually embodied a range of cultural values that made him representative. Peter Gay has called him "the savage as philosopher," a man who epitomized "the virtues of nature and the triumphs of civility," and that duality clearly obtains in the *Autobiography*. Yet the rugged, uncouth backwoodsman is probably too extreme a figure to identify with Franklin because the latter's naturalness is always domesticated with a morality as seemingly simple as it is durable, while being attuned to a milieu marked by substantial refinement. Instead of the urbanite wearing buckskin, the Franklin of the memoirs is more the city dweller clothed in homespun, who combines learning, sophistication, and business acumen with the virtues of the noble husbandman.

Owing to the opportunities afforded by Philadelphia, Franklin's virtuous temperament and his business accomplishments become interdependent. Because of the work required in this young city, Franklin learns to cultivate his moral character. "In order to secure my Credit and Character as a Tradesman," he explains, "I took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* of the Contrary. I dressed plainly; I was seen at no Places of idle Diversion." While such virtue carries material benefits in that, "being

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esteem'd an industrious and thriving young Man," Franklin receives more business, the relationship between the material and the moral is reciprocal. If virtue abets economic gain, economic independence is a means "thereby [of] securing Virtue, it being more difficult for a Man in Want to act always honestly, as . . . it is hard for an empty Sack to stand upright." Through his own example, Franklin suggests that one can retain those values associated with rural life even while participating in the economic world of the city.

The pastoral elements of Franklin's character are perhaps most visible in the section of the *Autobiography* devoted to his "bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection." In his study of the yeoman dream in America, Rex Burns has explained how in the eighteenth century the ideal husbandman was associated with several major traits: competence, morality, independence, and industry. Notable in Franklin's project is the way it encompasses those very qualities. His methodically tenacious approach to the plan displays competence, and the virtues themselves define a moral life of temperance, sincerity, justice, and tranquility. "Frugality and Industry" in turn become the means of "freeing me from my remaining Debt, and producing Affluence and Independence." Franklin even alludes to the similarity between his moral goals and those traits conventionally ascribed to the virtuous farmer by couching his plan in an agricultural metaphor. By devoting "a Week's strict Attention to each of the Virtues," he explains,

I could go thro' a Course complete in Thirteen Weeks, and four Courses in a Year. And like him who having a Garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad Herbs at once, which would exceed his Reach and his Strength, but works on one of the Beds at a time, and having accomplish'd the first proceeds to a second; so I should have, (I hoped) the encouraging Pleasure of seeing on my Pages the Progress I made in Virtue.

Although Franklin never gains moral perfection, that failure does not deny value to his program because, he asserts, "I was by the

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Endeavour made a better and a happier Man than I otherwise should have been, if I had not attempted it."26 The very attempt possesses significance as a yeomanly effort of virtuous labor.

Indeed, Franklin identifies an inclination toward virtue as the basis for both individual well-being and communal participation. While it is partially true that his precepts, as Norman Fiering has argued, are directed toward personal growth and character building, almost all of them possess public implications as well. "Silence" entails "Speak[ing] not but what may benefit others or yourself"; "Frugality" means "Mak[ing] no Expence but to do good to others or yourself"; "Sincerity" requires "Us[ing] no hurtful Deceit"; "Justice" demands "Wrong[ing] none"; and "Chastity" precludes "us[ing] Venery . . . for . . . the Injury of your own or another's Peace or Reputation." Even the private virtues of temperance, order, and resolution take on social coloration: temperance, as Franklin explains, "tends to procure that Coolness and Cleanness of Head" that allow one to practice order and resolution, which in turn lead to the frugality and industry that procure independence.27 Personal moral growth and independence thus become the means for turning outward to promote the well-being and advancement of urban society.

In the last two sections of the Autobiography Franklin displays the beneficial results of such a philosophy in what stands as a vade mecum for urban life. By keeping his wants to a minimum, in the pattern of the virtuous farmer, he is able to prosper in his trade, become independent, and hence "turn my Thoughts a little to public Affairs." In 1736 he becomes Clerk of the General Assembly and the year after is appointed Postmaster General of Pennsylvania. Two years later he initiates action to form the province's first fire company, and in 1744 he helps found the American Philosophical Society. Some time in the late 1750s, while serving as a member of the Pennsylvania Assembly, he proposes a bill for paving and lighting the streets of Philadelphia. And the accomplishments go on. Franklin, meanwhile, becomes a figure of mounting prestige, enjoying, as he says, a "Degree of Reputation among the Learned" and the confidence and esteem

26 Autobiography, 66-73.
Sections three and four of the memoirs become a compendium inculcating the message that personal fulfillment and civic growth are one. The conflict between individualism and the demands of society—the Gordian Knot of pure pastoralism—Franklin unravels in reciprocating coils of personal and social progress wound around the eighteenth-century ideal of enlightened self-interest. His world is a careful blend of myth and reality, an urban middle landscape directed by its resilient central figure and appealing as much for what it omits as what it includes.

By the close of the Autobiography, as it turns out, that world includes quite a bit. Repudiating Boston earlier, Franklin now symbolically embraces it. He mends the rift with his dying brother, assuming guardianship of James’s son, and becomes intellectually indebted to the city of his birth, learning about electricity from Archibald Spencer. We see Franklin cultivating intercolonial friendships and even promoting the Albany Plan for unification of the colonies, all the while extending his influence to cosmopolitan proportions. Traveling from Philadelphia to New York and finally to London, he becomes the envoy of the colonial message that insists upon the right of local sovereignty free of autocratic meddling. The last section of the Autobiography, that is, functions as a symbolic, unfinished journey pointing to an ever-widening scope for the American promise—a journey which the post-Revolutionary reader, drawing on his knowledge of Franklin’s subsequent international activities and the success of the early republic, must complete.

By its very open-endedness, the Autobiography identifies itself as a document commensurate with the optimism about America’s urban destiny that emerged in the late 1770s. Like L’Enfant’s plan for the Federal City, the memoirs embody an urban-pastoral vision inherently connected to the image of America as a special place. But unlike L’Enfant, who foresaw a capital whose shapely marriage with the natural terrain could symbolize the national dream, Franklin provides an exemplum of pastoral urbanity manifested in the social atmosphere of a city and the character of its inhabitants. Presenting a version of urban pastoralism centered on a symbolic hero, Franklin’s book stands
as the culmination of a century which believed that in America a new type of city was possible, combining the best of the rural and urban and inhabited by citizens drawing on individual talents and inspired by the promise of the indigenous landscape and fresh beginnings.

In identifying the specific shape of urban pastoralism in the *Autobiography*, what needs to be emphasized is that Franklin’s text possesses significance as a pivotal document as much as a seminal one in American mythology. Frequently the *Autobiography* has been identified as the generating principle behind the American dream of success, and its importance in that regard is not to be denied.\(^{29}\) The Franklinesque motif repeatedly appears in the cultural mythology of the nineteenth century from the popular Horatio Alger stories to the more sophisticated treatments in Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn*, Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” and Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*.\(^{30}\) But it is important to recognize that these nineteenth-century


\(^{30}\) James A. Justus discusses the Franklinesque elements in *Arthur Mervyn* in “Arthur Mervyn, American,” *American Literature* 42 (1970): 304-24. Three critics have cited the parallels between Franklin’s *Autobiography* and “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”: Julian Smith, “Coming of Age in America: Young Ben Franklin and Robin Molineux,” *American Quarterly* 17 (1965): 550-58; A. B. England, “Robin Molineux and Young Ben: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of American Studies* 6 (1972): 181-88; and Denis M. Murphy, “Poor Robin and Shrewd Ben,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 15 (1978): 185-90. Moreover, Murphy argues that Robin’s midnight adventure is “a delusive mockery of the Franklin ideal.” While such parallels are suggestive, Smith, England, and Murphy exaggerate them, in that Robin’s position differs sharply from Franklin’s. As I point out above, Robin, like Mervyn and Carrie Meeber, journeys from country to city, while Franklin moves from an older city to a developing one. Additionally, Franklin expects to earn his place in Philadelphia, while Robin anticipates favor through patronage. While one could argue that Hawthorne sought to undermine the message of the *Autobiography* by suggesting that in his own age of increasing urbanization it was no longer possible to tame the city through individual effort, the setting Hawthorne chose makes such an interpretation problematical. If reversal were his point, a contemporary setting would have been more appropriate. Rather than read Hawthorne’s story as a direct satire of Franklin’s success saga, we should consider it a qualification of a particular urban ideal of which the *Autobiography* is one embodiment. For Hawthorne’s treatment of urban pastoralism in “My Kinsman” see my “Pastoralism and the American Urban Ideal: Hawthorne, Whitman, and the Literary Pattern,” *American Literature* 54 (1982): 329-53.
adaptations also involve a modification of the pattern and moral geography of the *Autobiography*, since they often take their central figure on a journey from country to city. While such works, in effect, reverse the mythic pattern of pastoralism, the *Autobiography* does not so much invert that design as create a different, parallel pattern, which transplants the American hero from an old oppressive city to a new city beyond the horizon. In this sense, the memoirs can be seen as a document historically flanked on one side by the versions of urban pastoralism preceding it, which posited an opposition between the balanced society of the new republic and corrupt urban Europe, and on the other by the nineteenth-century literature of Western promotion, which repeatedly juxtaposed an overcivilized urban East to the cities of the West, where the marriage between rural and urban supposedly was being effected.\(^{31}\) Like these projections, Franklin’s memoirs united the urban-pastoral ideal to the quintessential myth of the open landscape, where the American dream of a fresh start in an idyllic city finally was to reach fruition. Along with the pronouncements and plans leading up to and flowing from it, the *Autobiography* helped form the core of a mythology for a new century in which Americans would embrace with even greater enthusiasm the pastoral conception of their urban future.

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\(^{31}\) The role of the urban-pastoral ideal in the literature of Western promotion before the Civil War is discussed in my “Urbanization and the Western Garden: Synthesizing City and Country in Antebellum America,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 81 (1982): 413-28.