

# Benjamin Franklin's Youth, His Biographers, and the Autobiography

**B**ENJAMIN FRANKLIN IS ONE OF THOSE rare figures whose achievements attract attention from both historians and literary scholars and critics. Historians have always been interested in Franklin's legacy, but in the past thirty years or so, with the revival of interest among literary scholars in American writing of the eighteenth century, Franklin has reemerged as a major figure in American literature. Recently there are signs that these two groups of scholars are paying increased attention to each others' work. *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, for example, has broadened its reach, adding essays on Franklin by literary scholars and critics to its more customary articles by historians and biographers.<sup>1</sup> Collections of essays on Franklin have appeared that include contributions from historians and from literary scholars.<sup>2</sup> And Ormond Seavey's book-length study of Franklin attempts to combine historical scholarship, biography, depth psychology, and literary analysis.<sup>3</sup>

This is, however, a recent trend. Traditionally historians have slighted the productions of literary critics and scholars, and many literary critics have paid only slightly more attention to the work of historians. The work of both groups has suffered as a result. Literary critics have often ignored the need to ground their readings of Franklin's works in historically plausible contexts and facts; historians have in their turn interpreted Franklin's writings without a due regard for their literary contexts, tones, and rhetorical purposes.

Nowhere is the gap between historical and literary approaches more apparent than in the biographical accounts of Franklin's youth. All of

<sup>1</sup> For examples of both types of articles on Franklin, see especially *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter, *PMHB*) 110, no. 2 (1986), *PMHB* 111, no. 4 (1987), *PMHB* 116, no. 2 (1992).

<sup>2</sup> Melvin Buxbaum, *Critical Essays on Benjamin Franklin* (Boston, 1987) and J. A. Leo Lemay, *Reappraising Benjamin Franklin: A Bicentennial Perspective* (Newark, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Ormond Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and the Life* (University Park, Pa., 1988).

the major twentieth-century biographies of Franklin are by historians or by scholars trained in literary history. To a reader familiar with the twentieth-century biographies of major American writers written by scholars trained as literary critics, the portraits of the young Franklin produced by his biographers seem old-fashioned, curiously dated, almost like a print version of nineteenth-century daguerreotypes. In most accounts of Benjamin Franklin's youth he emerges as a young man wise beyond his years—sober, industrious, devoted to improving himself financially, intellectually, and morally. In the eyes of the standard biographers Franklin's youth was a time of steady, incremental growth to maturity. Virtually without guidance the young Franklin learned through observation and trial and error, being a "shrewd youth," the importance of hard work and of virtuous appearances and behavior and, as he learned these lessons, he gradually gained success.

Franklin's biographers recognize their subject's occasional errors and imperfections—he details most of them himself in the *Autobiography*—but they dismiss these as virtually inevitable given the young Franklin's genius and his situation. Unlike Cotton Mather, Franklin had no famous, learned father guiding his path, no education at Harvard, no preordained role in life that matched his talents. Franklin's biographers interpret his erratic youthful behavior, such as his rebellion against his brother James and his intrigues with low women, as the natural overflow of genius and passion in a boy learning how to make the most of his situation. In essence Franklin's love of life and his excess of talents led him into a few rash acts, but he learned from each of his mistakes; he gradually curbed his weaknesses and erased his faults as he rationally discovered how to progress incrementally toward his eventual, inevitable success.

Such is the reading of Benjamin Franklin's youth produced by most of his major biographers. This standard interpretation persists despite the fact that it runs counter to most twentieth-century assumptions about children's psychological development. It persists in the face of attempts to revise it. It persists even though the facts of Franklin's childhood, insofar as facts can be separated from an interpretive context, seem to contradict it or at least make it highly unlikely. The spate of critical articles by literary critics which has appeared in the last twenty-five years detailing the artfulness of the *Autobiography* seems to have had no effect. Almost as though they were trapped in a spell like that of Coleridge's ancient mariner, Franklin's biographers continue to retell the same tale of Franklin's childhood, boyhood, and young manhood.

In my view the spell caster is Benjamin Franklin himself, and the spell is cast by the artistry of the *Autobiography*. An examination of the accounts of Franklin's youth provided by his biographers, the account of his youth provided by Franklin in his *Autobiography*, and other source material for Franklin's youth suggests this explanation. To a twentieth-century reader the interpretations of Franklin's youth provided by his biographers are not merely surprisingly uniform but also highly implausible. They seriously understate the young Franklin's unhappiness and rebelliousness, and they seem to be based upon an eighteenth-century, neo-Lockean view of childhood development. They are also surprisingly similar to Franklin's own interpretation of his youth in the *Autobiography*. I contend that Franklin is such a powerful interpreter of his own life that, lacking definitive contrary eighteenth-century sources, most of his biographers have unconsciously adopted Franklin's reading of his story in their biographies.

The general agreement among Franklin's biographers holds only for his early life. After Franklin enters politics in Philadelphia the documentary record becomes too rich to allow for a monolithic reading of Franklin's complexities, and Franklin's biographers present widely varying interpretations of the motives behind the adult Franklin's behavior. With two partial exceptions, however, Franklin's twentieth-century biographers produce surprisingly similar readings of his early life. Carl Becker's classic sketch of Franklin in the *Dictionary of American Biography* sets the tone for the modern interpretation of Franklin's youth. Becker stresses Franklin's precocity and maturity: "At this early age [17], Benjamin was already an expert printer, and had begun that close application to reading, writing, reflection, and self-improvement which, continued through life, was one secret of his intellectual eminence and of his practical success."<sup>4</sup> In what is still in some respects the best biography and what has surely been the most influential biography of Franklin in the twentieth century, Carl Van Doren essentially adopts and then expands upon Becker's account of Franklin's youth. Like Becker, Van Doren sees Franklin as dedicated from his early youth to industry and self-improvement. For Van Doren the child is less the father of the man than he is a miniature version of

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Franklin, Benjamin."

him. In his detailed discussion of the young Franklin, Van Doren regularly either minimizes Franklin's vagaries or blames them on his situation and his friends. Thus Van Doren sees Franklin's attempts to discredit Christianity by trapping his opponents with Socratic questions as a method Franklin used to improve his manners;<sup>5</sup> he views his vegetarianism as a way to save money;<sup>6</sup> he dismisses Franklin's desertion of his brother James as a natural consequence of incompatible tempers;<sup>7</sup> and he excuses Franklin's unauthorized dipping into the money entrusted to him by Vernon as a consequence of his compassion for his unfortunate friend, John Collins.<sup>8</sup> Van Doren's influential biography fixes the image of the young Franklin as a precocious semi-adult who learns, step by step without guidance or assistance, how to succeed through his wits and industry.

Contemporary biographies of Franklin change this picture remarkably little. Ronald Clark's interpretation of Franklin's youth, published forty-five years after Van Doren's, departs hardly a jot from the lines laid down in Becker and Van Doren. For Clark, Franklin's upbringing is "happy and unremarkable";<sup>9</sup> his persuading his father to make him a printer by threatening to run off to sea is "... a natural progress ... since Franklin had already taken to books as some men take to drink";<sup>10</sup> even Franklin's decision to run away from home without informing his parents either of his welfare or whereabouts is dismissed as "a venture not particularly uncommon even today."<sup>11</sup> Virtually nothing in Clark's reading of Franklin's youth goes beyond the standard formula. This is equally true of Esmond Wright's more recent biography, *Franklin of Philadelphia*.<sup>12</sup> In Wright's curiously external account the young Franklin's life seems to have no complexities to unfold. He simply progresses steadily and naturally from the Puritanism of his childhood to his secular success in Philadelphia. Wright sticks closely to the facts and makes virtually no attempt to explain the behavior of young Franklin. It is

<sup>5</sup> Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald W. Clark, *Benjamin Franklin: A Biography* (New York, 1983), 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, 1986), 14-55.

almost as though Wright assumes that Franklin lacks an inner life altogether.

The superficiality of Clark's and Wright's treatments of Franklin's youth can perhaps be blamed on brevity. In trying to write complete lives of Franklin in single volumes, both insure a brief look at the early years. In contrast Arthur Bernon Tourtellot spends more than 400 pages in an exhaustive study of Franklin's boyhood in Boston. All scholars can benefit from the information about the Franklin family and eighteenth-century Boston that Tourtellot brings to bear on his subject. Yet despite his unprecedented thoroughness, there are no real revelations in Tourtellot's work. Tourtellot extends and confirms, fleshes out in great detail, the standard view of Franklin's boyhood. In summing up Franklin's character, he hits the same notes as Becker and Van Doren. Franklin was precocious, industrious, disciplined, and contented: "He had read widely and wisely; he had developed disciplined habits of thought and inquiry, and he had learned, sometimes painfully, the need and nature of personal diplomacy. Always self-confident, occasionally to a fault, and never either dejected or apprehensive, he felt ready to be on his own, to make his own way, and to govern his own life."<sup>13</sup> Thus Tourtellot epitomizes Franklin's character on the eve of his flight from Boston.

In this harmonious chorus there are a few dissident notes. Franklin's nineteenth-century biographer, James Parton, discovers signs that Franklin underwent some type of moral conversion in his young manhood.<sup>14</sup> Bernard Fay's early popular biography also sees Franklin, after some struggle, consciously choosing morality over vice as part of his development into the ideal bourgeois.<sup>15</sup> These early suggestions by Parton and Fay are simply ignored by most later biographers of Franklin. Of the major biographers, only Alfred Owen Aldridge digs more deeply than Becker and Van Doren. Aldridge argues that Van Doren conceals Franklin's lustiness, vanity, and occasional callousness;<sup>16</sup> he also notes a tension in Franklin between his desire to be a moral superman and his rebellious

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Bernon Tourtellot, *Benjamin Franklin The Shaping of Genius, The Boston Years* (Garden City, N Y, 1977), 434

<sup>14</sup> James Parton, *The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (2 vols, New York, 1864), 1 70-71, 168-77

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Fay, *Franklin The Apostle of Modern Times* (Boston, 1929), 114-15

<sup>16</sup> Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin Philosopher and Man* (Philadelphia, 1965), xi

emotions.<sup>17</sup> In spite of these corrections of the record, however, Aldridge's summary of Franklin's childhood finally sounds familiar; he sees it as ". . . a normal, active period in which his natural exuberance led him to gradually increasing awareness of the wonders of animal life and the complexities of human nature."<sup>18</sup> Although Aldridge's account modifies the shading of Van Doren's portrait in significant ways, it does not alter its basic outlines.

It seems odd that Tourtellot, Clark, and Wright, all of whose biographies appeared after Aldridge's, did not in some way respond to his doubts about the standard interpretation of Franklin's youth, but none of them take up the issues raised by Aldridge. They also ignore more tendentious interpretations of Franklin's life that have appeared elsewhere. For example, in his study of Franklin's relationship with Presbyterianism, Melvin Buxbaum insists that Franklin's behavior in his youth and young manhood was largely governed by his hatred of and rebellion against Puritanism.<sup>19</sup> More dramatic, perhaps, are the Freudian readings of Franklin's early life offered in articles by Betty Kushen and Hugh J. Dawson.<sup>20</sup> None of the dissenting views seem to have had any impact on Franklin's biographers. The portrait painted so skillfully by Becker remains standard: Franklin's youth was a period of incremental development as the young man learned to make the best of the world in which he found himself. Gifted with native sagacity and industry, Franklin discovered through experience and observation the blessings of virtue and work. These led him to prosperity and eventually to fame in science and politics. From his earliest years Franklin accepted his situation with equanimity and calmly learned to make the most of his opportunities. Even as a youth Franklin found himself at home in the world, curious about it, contented with it, and confident of his abilities to make the best of it.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>19</sup> Melvin H. Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians* (University Park, Pa., 1975), 2-74.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh J. Dawson, "Franklin's Memoirs in 1784: The Design of the *Autobiography*, Parts I and II," *Early American Literature*, 12 (1977/78), 286-93 and "Fathers and Sons: Franklin's 'Memoirs' as Myth and Metaphor," *Early American Literature* 14 (1979/80) 269-92; Betty J. Kushen, "Benjamin Franklin, Oedipus, and the Price of Submission," *Literature and Psychology* 25 (1975), 141-57.

The intriguing similarities among the accounts of Franklin's youth provided by his biographers demand explanation. Repetition of the same interpretation of Franklin's youth by so many biographers over so many decades is clearly a highly unusual event. Scholars and critics inevitably differ in their interpretations of written sources. Indeed, it is a commonplace of contemporary reading theory that meaning is produced in the interaction between reader and text. Thus different interpretive communities (more extreme versions suggest each different reader) will inevitably produce different readings of the same material, readings which reflect the assumptions and expectations that the readers bring to a text. A text is less a repository of meaning than a field of potential meanings that is created only when readers engage a text. In light of these ideas the similarity of interpretation found in the biographers' readings of Franklin's youth clearly creates an anomaly that demands explanation. The first step in investigating this anomaly is to examine the primary sources upon which the biographers base their interpretations.

The first thing that strikes a reader about the primary sources is how few of them there are for this period of Franklin's life. Because Franklin grew up in an obscure family, almost nothing of his survives from his childhood and little from his young adulthood. There remain the Silence Dogood essays, written by Franklin anonymously at age sixteen for his brother's newspaper, a few early letters between Franklin and his parents and sister Jane, a journal written during Franklin's Atlantic crossing on his return from England, and a few early writings on religion and virtue—"A Dissertation of Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain," "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion," and "On the Providence of God in the Government of the World." These are virtually the only papers remaining from Franklin's boyhood and young manhood that shed direct light on his youthful beliefs, psychological states, and behavior. Then there is, of course, the *Autobiography*, written in Franklin's middle and old age and the source of most of our knowledge about his early life.

The *Autobiography* provides the most information about the young Benjamin Franklin, but it does so within an interpretive framework designed by the successful middle-aged Franklin and revised by the world-famous, elderly sage. Of course, all facts exist only in some interpretive matrix or other, and one of the central functions of new biographies is to remove facts from their original interpretive matrices and place them in fresh settings and arrangements in order to produce more profound and more persuasive insights. Each new biographer struggles to place

his knowledge about his subject's life into an interpretive framework that will more convincingly explain his subject's life and achievement than the works of his predecessors. The only justification for a new biography, unless there has been a major new factual discovery, is that it better explains its subject than previous attempts. The anomaly here is that the biographers treat Franklin's youth largely within the same interpretive framework—one initially provided by Franklin himself. But when a reader tries to remove the facts of Franklin's youth from the interpretive restraints provided by the *Autobiography*, an interesting thing happens: a picture of the young Franklin develops that is quite different from the standard one.

All of the following pieces of information about Franklin's youth are taken either from his few surviving early papers or from his *Autobiography*. When a reader examines them without the interpretative context provided by Franklin (and accepted by his standard biographers), some new and very different patterns suggest themselves. (1) As a boy Franklin was intended by his father for the church; in preparation for this Franklin was enrolled in a grammar school in which he did extremely well. However, because of his numerous family and limited income Franklin's father removed him from the grammar school and placed him in a school of writing and arithmetic. Franklin remained in this school a year, doing well in writing but failing arithmetic. (2) Franklin declined to be apprenticed to his father's trade (tallow chandler and soap boiler) and was reluctant to choose another, even after his father offered him a wide range of choices. Franklin's father then apprenticed him to his brother James, a printer, in part because of Benjamin's threats to run off to sea if he were dissatisfied with his trade. (3) In his teens Franklin rejected his parents' Congregationalism and openly became a Deist in Puritan Boston. (4) At sixteen Franklin wrote and secretly submitted to his brother the Silence Dogood essays, satirizing Massachusetts' religious leaders, its leading politicians, and Harvard College. He also revealed in these satires at least a casual knowledge of Boston's seamier side, its prostitutes, drunken seamen, and thieves. (5) While still in his teens Franklin developed a reputation in Boston for libel and satire. (6) After quarreling with his brother James, Franklin broke his secret indentures to him and, after failing to find work in Boston, ran off to New York and Philadelphia, leaving his family uncertain of his fate. (7) On a return trip to Boston, hoping to borrow money from his father to set up his own printing shop, Franklin visited the shop of his brother James and



humiliated his former master by a display of his wealth in front of James' apprentices and employees. (8) After his father refused to lend him money, on the grounds that he was too young to run his own business, Franklin, in the course of his return, used for his own and his friend Collins's support money entrusted to him to repay a debt owed to a family friend. (9) Tricked into sailing to London, Franklin broke his engagement(s) to Deborah Read; in London he continually found himself too poor to return to America because he and his friend James Ralph spent their money on London amusements. (10) In London Franklin made sexual overtures to Ralph's mistress, who was under Franklin's protection. (11) In London Franklin also adopted a mechanistic version of Deism; in support of it he wrote a pamphlet arguing that all actions are determined, that human life is governed by an attempt to seek pleasure and avoid pain, and that as a result vice and virtue are empty distinctions. (12) In London Franklin met a merchant named Denham who took a fatherly interest in him, lent him the money to return to Philadelphia, and employed him as a clerk until a severe illness killed Denham and threatened Franklin's life. (13) In Philadelphia Franklin had affairs with "low women" and fathered an illegitimate son whom he raised as his own. (14) After his return to Philadelphia, Franklin, now in his twenties, underwent a shift in his public behavior and professed values. He resolved to behave virtuously; he started worrying about the opinions of others; he wrote a private manual of devotion; and he wrote essays arguing for the efficacy of prayer, the significance of virtue, and the guidance of the world by a benevolent God. (15) During this period Franklin took Deborah Read as his common-law wife; he gained a reputation as an industrious tradesman; he formed a self-improvement association of ambitious, public-spirited tradesmen; and he gradually became noted as a promoter of benevolent civic and charitable projects.

Although this is not much information for over thirty years of a man's life, there is enough here to make the standard interpretation of Franklin's youth look very unlikely to twentieth-century eyes. The picture suggested by these facts is of a discontented, rebellious young man whose life undergoes a dramatic shift in his twenties and early thirties. After he returns to Philadelphia, Franklin at some point, gradually or suddenly, enters a new course of existence. He changes his religious beliefs and values, or at least those he publicly espouses. And he changes his behavior. The scapegrace prodigal of the early years gives way to an industrious tradesman, a promoter of self- and civic-improvement plans, and a sup-

porter of virtuous behavior. Franklin's self-image and ambitions alter drastically, and he alters his behavior and beliefs (at least publicly) to fit them.

Although there is probably not enough information available to sustain a conclusive argument about the causes of this dramatic change in Franklin's behavior, there is definite evidence that some dramatic change in behavior—and probably in belief—did occur in Franklin's mid-twenties, and there is fertile ground for speculation on its origins and dynamics. However, Franklin's biographers have ignored—indeed, have denied—the existence of any such shift in Franklin's life. Even most of those who notice tensions in the young Franklin have generally forborne developing a theory to explain them. Yet theories of childhood development are generally the very bases of twentieth-century biography. The romantics taught us to be interested in childhood, and depth psychologists have provided competing theories for understanding it. The facts of Franklin's youth suggest several interpretations that would seem to be obvious possibilities for adoption by his biographers. For example, in a field dominated by Puritan scholars, a biographer might take up Parton's hint and explore the possible Puritan origins of Franklin's conversion. Franklin's dramatic shift in values and behavior could be read as a secular version of the traditional Puritan conversion experience. Like many Puritan conversion experiences, it occurred at a low point in Franklin's life, it involved a mentor who practiced the true faith (Thomas Denham), and it may have been prompted by Franklin's brush with death. And like the Puritan conversion it led to an alteration in both belief—Franklin's subsequent belief in the efficacy of virtue—and in behavior. There is also evidence of occasional backsliding. Alternatively Franklin's biographers could take up some of the Freudian themes suggested in the articles by Kushen and Dawson. Franklin's abandonment of his parents' religion, his overt rebellion against the father substitute, his older brother James, and his flight from home can be seen as the consequences of an unresolved Oedipal conflict. Franklin's adoption of the merchant Denham as a substitute father figure may be Franklin's method of coming to terms with paternal authority figures;<sup>21</sup> indeed, Franklin's imperfect change of beliefs and behavior may suggest that his basic conflict remains imperfectly

<sup>21</sup> See Seavey, 136-40, for an extended examination of this possibility.

resolved, and it may not finally be resolved until after the success of the American Revolution.<sup>22</sup>

A biographer with a social orientation might take yet another approach to the young Franklin's apparent rebelliousness. He might read Franklin's youthful behavior as a consequence of the social situation in which he found himself in early eighteenth-century Boston. Franklin knew that he was a prodigy; he writes that he cannot remember when he could not read, and he taught himself the arts of disputation and writing. However, he found himself relegated to the monotonous and menial life of a tradesman while rich dullards found education and professions at Harvard. Franklin's attacks on the authorities, his rejection of approved, established religion, his restlessness, early hedonism, and occasional rebellion may plausibly be seen as the natural responses of a brilliant and passionate young man to a confining social structure that threatened to choke his talents in their infancy. His change in Philadelphia may have sprung from his realization that, in spite of his disadvantages, he could succeed by learning to use his talents within the less rigid social structure of his adopted city rather than in opposition to it. Franklin's ambivalent attitude toward established social institutions may also help explain his later political career.

This last reading strikes me as the most persuasive account of the origins of the young Franklin's rebelliousness and of the shift in attitude and behavior that occurred in his twenties. It best fits his time, place, behavior, and personality. However, I am uncomfortably aware that there is too little ground, given the scanty primary sources, to insist on any one explanation of Franklin's youthful behavior as clearly superior to the alternatives. An interpreter is left with the uncertain guides of experience and instinct. What is clear from the evidence is that some shift occurred that transformed a brilliant young scapegrace into an ambitious, public-spirited citizen, and that most of Franklin's twentieth-century biographers have ignored rather than explained this change. Their biographies have minimized those very aspects of Franklin's youth that should have been most interesting to them as twentieth-century scholars, and they have consistently adopted an interpretation of Franklin's youth that fits neither the facts nor twentieth-century assumptions about childhood development.

<sup>22</sup> See the articles by Dawson and Kushen for this argument.

The biographers' portrait of Franklin's early development as an incremental process in which the young man chooses rationally from among conflicting experiences after observation of and reflection upon them is an essentially eighteenth-century one. John Locke details in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* the process by which parents can gradually teach their children to develop virtuous habits, to submit their desires to the guidance of reason, and to pursue virtue and avoid vice.<sup>23</sup> Locke's view of mental development as an incremental process in which a child is gradually trained by his mentors to prefer reason and virtue to passion and hedonism becomes standard in the period. The account given by Franklin's biographers of his boyhood, an account that shows Franklin learning through experience and self-reflection the worth of self-control, industry, and virtue, is founded upon Lockean assumptions about human nature and childhood education. Its immediate source is Franklin's self-portrait in his *Autobiography*. Essentially the view of human nature and education in the *Autobiography* is Locke's as adapted by Franklin to his unique situation. It is this eighteenth-century interpretation that most of Franklin's biographers reiterate. In the absence of strong contemporary evidence Franklin's biographers have taken from the *Autobiography* not merely most of the facts about Franklin's early life but also his interpretation of them.

This is what Franklin wanted. Franklin wrote the *Autobiography* to fix the interpretation of his life, and he has largely succeeded in that goal. It is, however, ironic that even biographies published in the 1970s and 1980s have continued to echo Franklin's vision of himself. The last thirty years have produced an explosion of scholarship and criticism on the *Autobiography*, work that has firmly established the artfulness of Franklin's text. However, either Franklin's biographers do not read literary critics or Franklin's persuasive rhetoric continues to be more powerful than that of his commentators, for the revelations of Franklin's artfulness have had virtually no influence on his biographers.

Franklin's art does hide itself from casual observation, and its artless appearance has strengthened the potency of its effects upon its readers. As an autobiographer Franklin sets out to create a picture of his youth as the quintessential American boyhood and young manhood. In so doing

<sup>23</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. John W. and Jean S. Yolton (Oxford, 1989).

he inevitably embodies in the structure of his self-portrait both eighteenth-century assumptions about human psychological development and the eighteenth-century conviction that a central function of literature is to create idealized models for the instruction of and imitation by its readers. In the two hundred intervening years assumptions about childhood psychological development have radically changed, as have theories about the relationship between text and reader, but Franklin's text has continued to mold its readers' responses to his youth.

There is not space here for a thorough analysis of Franklin's unobtrusive art in the *Autobiography* and, given the number of such analyses that appear yearly, there should be little need for yet another.<sup>24</sup> However, it may be useful to mention and illustrate the principal persuasive strategies that Franklin employs in the account of his youth in the first part of his *Autobiography*, for with them Franklin creates an interpretive framework and a structure that persuade the reader to accept his version of his youthful development as an incremental process moving smoothly from precocious youth to sage maturity.

Franklin treats his younger self as though he were a character in an eighteenth-century picaresque novel as told by a tolerant, omniscient narrator. Fielding and, to a lesser extent, Smollet are obvious models. The elderly Franklin who relates the adventures of his younger self knows the outcome of the story and the psychology of his younger self as surely as Fielding's narrator understands the character of Tom Jones and his eventual fate. The elderly narrator uses this authority to interpret his younger self's behavior and to place it in a positive context for the reader. Thus when Franklin as a boy persuades his friends to steal stones so they can build a fishing wharf, this is evidence not of natural depravity (as the Puritans would have it) but of misplaced but valuable public-spirited leadership. It turns into a valuable step in Franklin's progress because his father "convinced me that nothing was useful that was not

<sup>24</sup> I am indebted in numerous ways to previous commentators on the *Autobiography*, but it is impossible, given the number of influences on my reading of the text, to indicate separate strands of indebtedness. However, I should mention that I developed my analysis before reading J. A. Leo Lemay's provocative recent article "The Theme of Vanity in Franklin's *Autobiography*" in *Reappraising Benjamin Franklin*, 372-87. Consequently, even though my discussion treats some of same issues that concern Lemay, both the similarities and the differences are coincidental.

honest.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly Franklin downplays the rebelliousness inherent in his conversion to vegetarianism while he was being boarded by his brother as one of his apprentices. Franklin mentions, but minimizes, the irritation this must have caused his brother and stresses instead the time and money his abstemious appetite provided for reading and books. Franklin presents his most overtly rebellious action—his secret departure from Boston at age seventeen, breaking his indentures to his brother and abandoning his parents—as a prudent move necessitated by his earlier indiscretions in disputing accepted religious beliefs and attacking the colony’s leaders. The narrator assigns to the young protagonist sufficient self-knowledge to recognize that he needs a fresh start. In this fashion the narrator consistently reinterprets the young Franklin’s actions in the light shed by his eventual success and provides an account of his character that ascribes to the young Franklin precociously mature motives for his behavior. A comparison with Fielding’s Tom Jones is revealing. Just as Tom’s extremes of generosity, kindness, high spirits, and sexuality lead him into youthful scrapes and misunderstandings but guarantee his eventual success when tempered by experience and maturity, so the young Franklin’s faults spring from a surplus of intelligence, energy, enthusiasm, and public spiritedness that require the leaven of experience to be turned in useful directions. The narrators guide the readers’ understanding of their characters with interpretive commentary on the motives behind their apparently irresponsible actions. In Franklin’s case the narrator interprets his younger self’s faults as the excess of his virtues and suggests that in addition to experience he needs a more open society to provide scope for his talents. Since the narrator and reader know in advance that Franklin will find such success in Philadelphia, the foreknowledge of a happy ending tends to make the narrator’s interpretation convincing.

The narrator consistently emphasizes the young Franklin’s ability to learn from his mistakes. He minimizes their importance by referring to them as errata rather than sins or crimes and by showing the ways in which they stem from misplaced virtues. The narrator sharply contrasts the young Franklin’s ability to learn from his mistakes with other characters who do not and who frequently lead the young Franklin into error. For example, on his second trip from Boston to Philadelphia when

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. K. Zall (New York, 1986), 7.

Franklin spends the money that an acquaintance named Vernon entrusts him to collect, the narrator refers to it as "one of the first great Errata of my Life." He does not call it embezzlement; instead he shifts much of the blame to his drunken friend Collins whose wastrel expenses Franklin defrayed out of generosity.<sup>26</sup> Through this experience Franklin learns the limits of generosity and something of the dangers of unwise friendships. The narrator contrasts the young Franklin with a gallery of characters—his employer Keimer, Governor Keith, his friend James Ralph, his business partner Hugh Meredith, and his potential printing rival David Harry—who are faultier than the young Franklin and who lack his ability to learn from their errors. The portrait of the young Franklin that emerges from this series of contrasts is of a young man who is less faulty than most of the people with whom he deals, whose generosity and high spirits lead him into error but who is more sinned against than sinning, who learns from each of his mistakes and tries to correct them, and who gradually transforms himself into the rationally benevolent, hardworking, public-spirited citizen and sage who is telling the story. The narrator's generous interpretation of his protagonist's character and motives and his contrasting portraits of the young Franklin's friends and business associates reflect his vision of the young Franklin learning incrementally through experience how to be virtuous, successful, and wise.

For Franklin's readers to accept the strategies outlined above, they must first trust the narrator of the story. Franklin's handling of the narration is masterful. He presents himself as a sage, wise in the ways of the world, eager to share his experience and knowledge with his son and his posterity, but ironically aware that offering his own life as a guide will inevitably be correctly seen by others as a vain act. By turns familiar, self-important, garrulous, and ironic, the narrator is consistently experienced and tolerant. Franklin uses the first two paragraphs of the work to establish the authoritative voice which he then employs throughout Part 1 of the *Autobiography* to guide the responses of his readers.

The narrator of the *Autobiography* introduces himself simply as a father who wants to relate some anecdotes of his youth to his son. He then modulates his tone slightly; the father slides into the role of a somewhat pompous paterfamilias who hopes that his descendants can learn from

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

and imitate his happy, prosperous life. No sooner is this imposing but limited figure suggested than the narrator shifts his tone again; he next presents himself as a humble old dodderer who tells his life story out of an old man's desire to relive his past and who does so in writing because he wishes to indulge his garrulity " . . . without being troublesome to others who thro' respect to Age might think themselves oblig'd to give me a Hearing, since this may be read or not as anyone pleases."<sup>27</sup>

After briefly establishing this sympathetic figure who undercuts the pomposity of the paterfamilias, Franklin again modulates his narrator's tone until he reemerges as a complex authority figure whose worldly wisdom validates the truth of his interpretations. As a step toward this end the narrator makes the startling announcement that he is writing his life partly to gratify his vanity. The announcement is startling to an eighteenth-century reader because in the eighteenth century vanity is one of those embarrassing faults that everyone accuses everyone else of but that no one admits possessing. Satirists of every stripe from the opening of the Restoration to the close of the neoclassical age denounce vanity as the most foolish (of what should any mere human be vain?) as well as the most dangerous of vices. All writers and publishers of personal works—memoirs, voyages, and letters—are suspected of vanity and most deny the charge up front. The vanity of Colly Cibber's memoirs and Lord Chesterfield's letters of advice to his illegitimate son entertained generations of literary wits. So Franklin's admission of personal vanity as a motive for his work brings into the open what every reader suspects but no author usually admits. Franklin's narrator then turns this admission to his advantage by universalizing it. He points out to his readers the fact that all people are vain and all claim to dislike vanity in others despite their own share. The narrator's calm perception of this universal human hypocrisy establishes his authority as a sage, for he understands his readers better than they understand themselves.

If Franklin's reader is angered by the potential cynicism of this insight, the narrator disarms him by neutralizing it. Tolerance rather than bitterness or fortitude is the lesson Franklin's narrator learns from his knowledge of human frailty. Casually turning 1800 years of Christian ethics topsy-turvy, he announces that vanity is often good, not evil, in its effects,

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



leading its possessor to do good for others as well as for himself: "And therefore in many cases it would be not quite absurd if a Man were to thank God for his Vanity among the other comforts of Life."<sup>28</sup> Franklin's narrator straight-facedly observes that pride (euphemized by the less threatening synonym vanity) is not really a sin after all but a blessing for which one should give thanks. Jonathan Edwards, praying to be the most humble sinner on earth, the Earl of Rochester, sneering at the groundlessness of human pride, Alexander Pope, denouncing the twisting effects of pride on reason, and Samuel Johnson, delineating the tragic ends of human beings who trust to pride, all are wrong. This audacious remark fails to outrage the reader because it is so casually delivered, so witty, and so obviously true. It establishes the ethical principle that guides the *Autobiography*: consequences matter more than motives in determining the rightness of an action. It reveals momentarily the original thought and judgment that lie behind the narrator's imperturbable surface. And it firmly fixes the ground of his authority. Franklin's narrator is a man wise enough to see through conventional wisdom, bold enough to reveal uncomfortable truths, yet still tolerant enough to judge human nature gently. He understands himself, his world, and the characters who people it better than the reader and analyzes them with more sophistication.

Franklin's purposes in writing the *Autobiography* guide his pen as he draws his self-portrait of himself as a youth. The outline (actually a sketch of topics Franklin intends to cover) that Franklin wrote for the proposed *Autobiography* reveals that from its commencement he planned to conclude with his remarkable record of public service, and this intention controls his account of the development of his character. The outline puts far more stress on the adult Franklin's public service than it does on his business success, his scientific achievements, or his writing.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the topics Franklin added to the outline when he resumed writing the *Autobiography* in Passy (the section now known as Part 2) reveal that he intended to present his role in the American Revolution as the culmination of his career as a public servant.<sup>30</sup> Although Franklin did not live to complete the *Autobiography*, the outline suggests that he had a definite plan in mind for the work's structure: first an early section on his boyhood

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>29</sup> Franklin, "The Outline of the *Autobiography*," *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, 170-172.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 172.

and youth dealing largely with personal matters; then a shift in emphasis to the methods he used to achieve prosperity; next a section on his emergence as a Philadelphia philanthropist, politician, and public servant (including his experiments in electricity almost as an aside); and finally a lengthy section on his role in the events leading up to the American Revolution, culminating (in the topics added in Passy) in the Revolution itself and his diplomatic triumphs in France.

Even though the actual text of the *Autobiography* stops well short of the Revolution, it reveals with equal clarity that Franklin intended to demonstrate the ways in which his education and experience prepared him to become a (many contemporaries would have said *the*) central figure in the struggle for American rights and, eventually, independence. As an eighteenth-century writer Franklin believes that all literature should instruct as well as please; he designs his *Autobiography* as a means of instructing his successors—that is, future generations of American youth—in the art of transforming themselves into virtuous young adults, successful businessmen, and, eventually, public-spirited citizens of the new republic. For Franklin, who proposed that government officials serve without pay, the future of the republic depends on the existence of men willing to give time to public service and capable of serving virtuously and capably. Since these will not be gentlemen with mentors to tutor them in virtue and the responsibilities of rank, not the gentry Locke addresses in his treatise on education, but self-made Americans, they need an updated treatise. Franklin's *Autobiography* is, among many other things, that treatise in the pleasing form of a narrative of his life. Franklin intends his story to serve as a type of education by example, so he uses all of his narrative art to control the reader's responses to his text, especially in the sections dealing with his youth.

Franklin gradually alters the relationship among the reader, the narrator, and the protagonist in the *Autobiography* as he moves from his youth to his young manhood to his mature adulthood. The changing relationship is reflected in the *Autobiography*'s tripartite structure. Part 1, which deals with his boyhood and youth, establishes the sharp distinction between narrator and protagonist. Part 2 discusses the methods Franklin used to try to attain those virtues which he had discovered in Part 1 are necessary for success and happiness. The relationship between the narrator and his younger self is filled with ambiguous irony that darts in multiple directions. The narrator laughs, of course, at his younger self's belief that he can attain moral perfection. Only a young man suffering from equal amounts

of hubris and naiveté could believe: "As I knew, or Thought I knew, what was right or wrong, I did not see why I might not *always* do the one and avoid the other."<sup>31</sup> The dry irony with which the narrator presents his younger self's arrogance (the phrase "or Thought I knew" is the narrator's sly revelation of his awareness of his youthful self's presumption) turns to humor as the younger Franklin first discovers, much to his surprise, that he is much faultier than he imagined and then sets down the details of the scheme by which he intends to reach moral perfection. When the narrator reveals that his younger self finally resigned himself to imperfection, to remaining a "speckled axe," the narrator's laughter at his youthful rationalization is obvious. At the end of Part 2, however, Franklin sharply reminds the reader that the narrator does not share his younger self's lack of self-knowledge. In a remark reminiscent of the opening lines of the *Autobiography*, Franklin admits not only that he never gained humility (achieving only the useful appearance of it), but also that if he imagined he had conquered pride, he "should probably be proud of my humility."<sup>32</sup> Since this remark by the narrator on the impossibility of ever conquering pride is as true of his readers as it is of Franklin, it reminds us once again that Franklin understands not only his own imperfections but those of human nature generally—and accepts them equably. Thus Franklin reasserts his authority over his audience.

Yet despite the distancing effect of the multifaceted irony, the narrator is clearly closer to the protagonist in this section than in Part 1. Despite the humor, the narrator commends the effort his younger self made and asserts: "I was by the Endeavor made a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been, if I had not attempted it. . . ." <sup>33</sup> The younger Franklin's attitude was absurd, but his desire to improve himself morally was praiseworthy and his attempts to do so were valuable. The narrator views this endeavor as a crucial step in his achievement of maturity, and he respects his younger self's ambitions even as he smiles at his presumption. The distance between narrator and protagonist still exists, but the protagonist has moved closer in attitudes and behavior to the narrator. As a consequence, Franklin feels less need to provide a definitive interpretation of his younger self's behavior.

<sup>31</sup> Franklin, *Autobiography*, 66.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

In Parts 3 and 4 of the *Autobiography* the protagonist is almost fully mature, and the gap between narrator and protagonist vanishes. As it shrinks so does the narrator's effort to fix the reader's interpretation of his younger self's behavior. There are still a few moments when the narrator steps back from his account of his actions and evaluates his behavior for the reader. For example, there is the famous scene in which George Whitefield's eloquence persuades Franklin to give all of the money in his pocket to a cause of which he rationally disapproves, and there is Franklin's discovery during the French and Indian War that his trust in the competence and probity of British military leaders is misplaced.<sup>34</sup> The first incident shows that even the adult Franklin can sometimes behave irrationally and the second that he still possesses elements of naiveté. But these are essentially in-jokes with the reader, reminders that all human beings, even the fully mature Benjamin Franklin, are sometimes irrational and occasionally over-trusting. For the most part the narrator and the protagonist are one and the same in Parts 3 and 4 of the *Autobiography*. As a consequence, the tone in this section seems flatter than in Parts 1 and 2 and some of the personal interest disappears. Given Franklin's purposes, however, the artistic loss is a necessary one because the function of this section is to show how effectively an American who has learned to harness his talents, control his behavior, and pursue (even if imperfectly) virtuous ends can act in the public sphere.

This is Franklin's primary goal in the *Autobiography*. He wants to show how he transformed himself from a precocious, well-intentioned, but unguided youth into a—or perhaps the—quintessential American so that others may use his model as an example. Behind Franklin's narrative art is his desire to persuade his readers to accept his version of his boyhood and youth so that they may imitate it and learn to be useful citizens for the new nation. The willingness of Franklin's biographers to accept this presentation of his own youth as the definitive portrait of an eighteenth-century American boyhood and the extent to which readers all over the world view Franklin's story as that of the archetypal American demonstrate his effectiveness as a writer.

Of course, some readers have always resisted Franklin's narrative.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 88-89, 114-122.

Readers and writers with strong visions of their own have chafed against his interpretive authority and his text's attempt to delineate the American character and values. In the "Economy" section of *Walden* Thoreau outdoes Franklin's youthful parsimony only to repudiate all of Franklin's values; Melville comments with ironic ambiguity on the worldly limitations of Franklin's reputed wisdom; Mark Twain assumes that the *Autobiography* is the ultimate sly hoax by a teller of tall tales; and D. H. Lawrence seems unable to decide whether he is more outraged or amused at Franklin's apparent imperturbable self-satisfaction. However, the doubts of these writers have had little effect on the standard version of Franklin's youth delineated by his major biographers. The *Autobiography* appears to pose a case of a strong text largely determining its own interpretation.

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