

ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY  
CHARACTER ASSASSINATION OF  
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

by

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A DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

Early in his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin proclaims that the chief benefit of the autobiographical form is that it affords one the opportunity to replicate oneself. In his self-replication, Franklin creates an American mythos of success that shaped America's imagined nationalist identity. Franklin's construction of the American success hero was informed by his philosophy of tangible character-building via the traits we traditionally associate with Franklin, such as industry and frugality. Yet, one of the most evident, but perplexingly overlooked features of Franklin's *Autobiography* is his extensive use of irony as a rhetorical and literary device. Franklin's use of irony indicates an awareness that his hero was first and foremost a written creation, which infuses his narrative with a complexity that belied the matter-of-fact prescriptions for success lying on its surface.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, autobiographical emulators of Franklin appropriated his narrative to suit their own purposes, ignoring or suppressing his irony in the process. These appropriations result in a fracturing of Franklin's original character into multiple Benjamins. Franklin becomes, then, not just his own creative project, but a national creative project. This dissertation presents a lineage of Franklins created by the multiple appropriations of his story over the nineteenth century, tracking how each replication of him participates in the reshaping of the Franklinian hero into a kind of synecdoche that denies the complexity and irony present in the original sources, thus "assassinating" the original Franklinian character and, in the process, the early American concept of "character" itself.

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## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
EPIGRAPH: FROM PUFF DADDY’S “IT’S ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS” .....	1
INTRODUCTION: ICON AND VILLAIN.....	2
1. BENJAMANIAD: FRANKLIN’S EMERGENCE AS AMERICAN MYTHIC HERO .....	11
a. Introduction .....	11
b. The Makings of Myth .....	13
c. Autobiography: The Form of America .....	18
d. The Tabula Rasa and the Colonial Zeitgeist .....	24
2. THE HERO IN THE CULTURE: BECOMING REPRESENTATIVE AND LOSING AGENCY .....	36
a. Introduction.....	36
b. A Hero of His Own Times.....	38
c. Ben Backward and Forward: Representing the Past and Creating the Future .....	44
d. Building Character, Literally .....	48
e. Taking “Character” Public to Build a Nation .....	55
f. An Early Formulation of Highbrow and Lowbrow.....	60
g. Irony and Reading the Myth .....	66
3. THE ROMANTICS: FRANKLIN AS TARGET .....	74
a. Introduction.....	74

b. “Rip Van Winkle” as Anti-Franklin .....	80
c. Mid-Century Culture: Issuing an Everlasting “Nay” to the Practical .....	84
d. The Highbrow: Emerson and the Yea-sayers .....	87
e. Representative Men as Franklinian .....	90
f. Melville’s Benjamin .....	99
g. Pulled Thus Hither and Thither, How Dost One Knowest Thou, Benjamin?.....	110
4. MADE CAPITAL: DOUGLASS, FRANKLIN, AND THE MID-CENTURY MARKETPLACE .....	113
a. Introduction .....	113
b. Abolitionist Hero?.....	120
c. Not Quite Benjamin: <i>The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass</i> .....	125
d. Getting Warmer: <i>My Bondage and My Freedom</i> Moves toward Myth.....	131
e. Frederick Benjamin: Douglass as Founding Father in <i>The Life and Times of Frederick        Douglass</i> .....	141
f. Conclusion: Douglass’s Benjamin.....	157
5. UP FROM THE SLAVE NARRATIVE: BOOKER T. WASHINGTON AND THE LAST AMERICAN HERO .....	160
a. Introduction .....	160
b. Historical Context .....	166
c. Who Wrote That? .....	167
d. Recalling Franklin: Self-making the Updated American Way .....	171
e. Washington as Darwinist Mythic Hero.....	176

f. Conclusion: A Franklin Renaissance?.....	184
6. THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS AND THE ASSASSINATION OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN .....	187
a. Introduction .....	187
b. Devolution in the Age of Darwin.....	188
c. Unity: Mont Saint Michel and Chartres .....	194
d. To Chaos: The Education.....	201
e. Conclusion: Killing Franklin.....	210
CONCLUSION: “AIN’T NOBODY’S HERO”; OR, FRANKLIN IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY .....	214
WORKS CITED .....	223



ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CHARACTER

ASSASSINATION OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

[W]hat you can't have now, leave in your will

But don't knock me for trying to bury, seven zeros over in Rio Dijanery

ain't nobody's hero but I wanna be heard

On your hot 9-7 everyday, that's my word

Swimming in women wit they own condominiums

Five plus fives, who drive millenniums

It's all about the Benjamins, what?

--Puff Daddy, "It's all about the Benjamins"

## INTRODUCTION: ICON AND VILLAIN

Benjamin Franklin may be the most recognizable of all America's founding fathers. His pudgy, pink countenance, framed by his trademark round spectacles and scraggly, thin, fading-glory gray hair, is familiar to most Americans. Having his mug on the \$100 bill doesn't hurt. From that alone, he has garnered quite the standing in hip-hop culture, where dropping his name arrogantly associates one with status, refinement, and fashionable and conspicuous excess, all of which are at odds with Franklinian modesty and frugality. In other facets of our culture, however, he hasn't even fared that well. Our preconceptions of him are often reflected by a smile of approval or a smirk of disapproval for typical reasons: that he was a womanizer and/or inventor of the American self-interested capitalist.

Tom Hodgkinson, mouthpiece for the new "idleness" subversive movement, wonders "if that hard-working American rationalist and agent of industry Benjamin Franklin knew how much misery he would cause in the world" (1). Hodgkinson's ire at Franklin is based on his belief that ol' Ben is responsible for making us get up early and for the oppressive work ethic that hangs around our necks like an albatross (1). In the popular (and entertaining) "Drunk History" viral internet series, Franklin (played by actor Jack Black) is featured in two clips now viewed over two million times on YouTube. One of these clips calls his discovery of electricity his greatest

contribution and satirically presents Franklin selfishly sending his son William out to conduct the dangerous kite experiment, just in case the electrical charge from the lightning bolt coursing down the kite string packs a fatal punch. The other refers to the famous episode from *The Autobiography* in which Franklin attempts to use his financial leverage over James Ralph's girlfriend to coerce her into having sex with him. The video's "drunk historian" draws the conclusion that "Franklin liked to fuck."

Additionally, popular author Gretchen Rubin's recent book *The Happiness Project* cites Franklin's "Project at Achieving Moral Perfection" as an influence. On her website Rubin describes her book as "a memoir of the year I spent test-driving the wisdom of the ages, the current scientific studies, and the lessons from popular culture about how to be happy--from Aristotle to Martin Seligman to Thoreau to Oprah" (Rubin). The website, which has become a kind of self-help resource for those in pursuit of happiness, contains a page featuring downloadable schedules and charts entitled "How you, too, can copy Benjamin Franklin." Rubin explains how she herself imitated Uncle Ben:

One thing I've been doing all year is keeping an elaborate Happiness-Project self-scoring chart. I lifted the idea from Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. He recounts how he identified thirteen virtues he wanted to cultivate, then made himself a chart with those virtues plotted against the days of the week. Each day, he'd score himself on whether he lived up to his goals. I've made a similar scoring chart—a kind of calendar with all my resolutions, in which I can give myself a √ (good) or an X (bad). (Rubin)

These sources, though certainly not authoritative, provide a barometer of the cultural status of Ben Franklin. And while they might say more about our culture than they do about

Franklin, it is apparent that since his immediate reception, both in actual life and in his writings, his reputation has taken a bit of a hit. Either he's an asshole, a fraud, a leech, a hypocrite, or he's not cool at all. But most of these critical judgments of Franklin have been levied unfairly.

Hodgkinson and Rubin just don't get Franklin. Both fail to contend with his extensive use of irony as a literary device and, as a result, read him as an utterly humorless and rigid, if—in the case of Rubin—useful influence on our attitudes and well-being. And by the way, what screams “happiness!” any less than a chart with which one keeps tabs on one's progress in its pursuit? The fact that she doesn't get that is just tragic. Franklin would have to let Poor Richard respond to both Hodgkinson and Rubin. As for the “Drunk History” series, despite its obvious attempts to satirize him, Franklin might appreciate the most of all these contemporary sources. At least it employs humor in its portrayal of him.

In his own time, Franklin was considered one of the world's most brilliant intellects, certainly the greatest scientist of his era and one of its greatest philosophers. He was also recognized as one of the greatest wits of his day. Yet the nineteenth century was not kind to Franklin. Over the course of that century, Franklin descended from cultural hero to villain. Even in the world of academia and the intelligentsia, Franklin's reputation suffers from the perception that he promoted an American character with little depth, that he was a monomaniacal pursuer of accumulation at the cost of soul, a grandfather of greed, and the originator of ruthless capitalism based on un-checked self-interest.

Lately, however, intelligently insightful defenses of Franklin have appeared. Two of the most recent Franklin biographies published, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* by Walter Isaacson and *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* by Gordon S. Wood are motivated by the desire to recover Franklin's reputation from the undeserved damage to which it has been

subjected. That Isaacson and Wood believe that Franklin needs defending is a telling commentary on the incompleteness of the picture that those critical of Franklin tend to paint.

Those who attack Franklin generally do so by attributing to him a philosophy of Puritan self-improvement or ruthless capitalism. There are, however, essential problems with assigning a philosophical position to Franklin. First of all, he didn't write philosophical treatises, per se. What we have to examine are texts such as letters, opinion pieces or essays about social issues, his autobiography, and the "Poor Richard" writings. Franklin's interests were diverse and, as such, his thoughts somewhat inconsistent. In the case of the *Autobiography* and the Poor Richard material, we cannot with any real certainty attribute the philosophic stances of either to Franklin himself, as he is certainly posturing in one and possibly in the other, which is evident from the contradictions between what he says and what he does that can be easily identified in both. In the *Autobiography* he even admits explicitly to manipulating appearances in order to shape perception. Moreover, perhaps the most important reason we should be cautious in our inclination to pin down Franklin, or to "formulate" him on a pin like Eliot's "Prufrock," is his use of ironic humor. Such witty irony makes it impossible to conclude that what he says can be taken as an accurate representation of his philosophy.

Franklin's irony is nearly omnipresent, and therein lies the problem with reading him. How do we take his ironic voice? The stakes of reading Franklin, it follows, are coming to terms with irony as a political and literary device. Why does Franklin rely so heavily upon irony? It is certainly not accidental, for Franklin never did anything without calculation. Perhaps he simply thought that way. Or perhaps Franklin's use of irony results from something more profound, such as an acute awareness that simple success stories do not conform to real life circumstances, and are therefore incapable of expressing the many facets and contingencies inherent to success

or failure. Writing in absolutes, whether doing so sincerely or satirically, simply does not account for the complexity of American ideas about success. Perhaps employing irony is the only way to do so.

Readers of Franklin don't always get this. They read his work as inhabiting one or the other of two poles, sincerity or satire. They take the instructive maxims of Poor Richard without acknowledging the effect that irony has on them, or they read him as a farcical wit. In truth, he's simultaneously neither and both.

How, then, do we read his irony? Postmodern theory might suggest that irony "deconstructs" language and undermines itself. That is, its effect on language is to negate any pretense it has to representing truth. If irony is capable of negation, these theorists might say, then nothing constructed by language can be trusted and no truth is possible. But that's not a very courageous or productive way of dealing with irony. On the contrary, irony gives us a way to deal with the complexity of the world. The world cannot be reduced to linguistic constructions. Irony was invented to point this out. Franklin's irony forces us to understand the problems inherent in thinking in absolutes about life, yet it doesn't render language or the world meaningless. To read Franklin without apprehending his ironic voice as an acknowledgment of life's complexities is to misread him.

Yet attempts to reduce Franklin to a single simplistic philosophy abound throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The Franklin problem is one of appropriation. Or perhaps I should say "misappropriation." Like the Bible, he can be many things to many people. Trouble is, he may not be any of the things others want him to be. An exhumation of his corpse would certainly reveal that he has been ripped limb from limb by his successors, each pushing

and pulling him this way and that, eager to claim him as inspiration and predecessor who invented their particular worldview.

What makes Franklin's character so malleable? There are several factors involved. Perhaps primary among these is the problem of availability based on the elusive character of Franklin that he himself fostered in the character-constructing nature of his *Autobiography* and his Poor Richard alter-ego. The *Autobiography*, or what Franklin called his "Memoirs" were first published in France in 1791 and entitled *Mémoires de la vie privée de Benjamin Franklin*. The work consisted only of what is now known as "Part One" of the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and was translated into the French from an unrevised and unauthorized copy of a draft of Franklin's manuscript. The first English language edition of Franklin's *Memoirs*, published in 1793, was a translation of the problematic French edition. It was a cheap, incomplete production and was significantly different from the original Franklin manuscript. The next edition published in English, in 1818 by Franklin's grandson, William Temple Franklin, included more of Franklin's manuscript. However, this text can likewise hardly be considered authoritative, as it was edited with a heavy (and creative) hand by W. T. Franklin, who, in many parts simply reprints portions of the version retranslated from the French rather than following the original manuscript.

John Bigelow published the first authoritative English version of the *Autobiography*. Bigelow bought the original manuscript in France, including what now makes up "Part Four," and in 1868 published the most authentic version of Franklin's *Autobiography* yet. Thus, until 1868 there was no reliable text available.

Moreover, there are also issues of reliability for autobiography itself as a text capable of conveying truth. Roy Pascal's seminal 1960 study, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, which

argues that autobiography ought to be evaluated as an art form rather than a historical document, effectively put to rest all preconceptions that autobiography could be considered to represent the truth of a life.

Then there's the issue of what kind of self Franklin and history created out of the raw materials Franklin made available. The Franklin of posterity has come to represent the polarizing mythical American success hero, the original precursor to the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches characters. Franklin's *Autobiography* tells this story, and Poor Richard perpetually advocates the kind of lifestyle that Franklin seems to think would lead one from poverty to success, or to becoming a "self-made man." It was a story that so profoundly tapped into the cultural desire for success that it would become a highly influential model for American masculinity. The major nineteenth and early twentieth century autobiographers Frederick Douglass, P. T. Barnum, Booker T. Washington, and Andrew Carnegie would emulate his model in their lives and in the telling of their own stories. The autobiographical story of ascent from humble beginnings to a place of prominence has motivated iconic Americans from Andrew Carnegie to Lee Iacocca, who, in their own autobiographies, cite Benjamin Franklin's story as their inspiration. It has also led many others, like Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan, to exaggerate the disadvantages of their origins in order to fit the self-made man archetype. This marriage of form and content has become an integral part of our social fabric.

And therein lies its problematic present status. The *Autobiography* is generally only embraced in today's world by business tycoons and politicians who want to cast themselves as heroes of American dream in order to fend off charges of socially destructive ruthlessness and selfish greed.



This dissertation will track the systematic shaping and ultimate character assassination of Benjamin Franklin in the nineteenth and early twentieth century through the writings of America's preeminent philosophical thinkers and autobiographers that emulate Franklin in form and content. I will examine the mid-nineteenth century works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Herman Melville, who respectively attempt to re-invent Franklin and satirize him. I will pay particular attention to the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. Douglass takes up Franklin's self-made man narrative to serve his rhetorical purposes, which are to assert the right to self-making in America and to remake himself as a post-emancipation "founding father."

I will then look at Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*. *Up from Slavery* appropriates Franklin in order to signify a rise of African Americans. Washington attempts to use Franklin to provide a model for success based on hard work, self-sufficiency, and merit that would be foundational to black uplift and also to resonate with white audiences from whom Washington sought financial contributions. Washington's text, completely devoid of irony or humor, contributes to the dismissal of Franklin's wit in contemporary evaluations of him. And the cynical response to *Up from Slavery* indicates the cultural rejection of the Franklin archetype at the turn of the twentieth century. I will finish by looking at how *The Education of Henry Adams* in effect signals the beginning of the universal rejection of the Franklin archetype as too presumptuous of order and justice in the world.

Over the course of my discussion I will focus on moments that stand as the landmarks in culture that make Franklin's character vulnerable, starting with the American Renaissance, when writers are reflecting on the American experiment and evaluating whether or not it has lived up to its promise. The early 1850s marks a bifurcation of American culture that will be identified as a key development in the shaping of American character by critics for a century to come. The

major American writers of the American Renaissance are basically reacting to the success story as Franklin authored it. R.W.B. Lewis's appraisal of a dialectical split between "yea-sayers" and "nay-sayers" is a useful characterization of what I'm talking about. Lewis places Emerson and Thoreau in the "yea-sayers" group and pegs Hawthorne and Melville as "nay-sayers." Emerson is attempting to re-invent Franklin, whereas Hawthorne and Melville are trying to expose him as a fraud. Franklin is reduced by his recruitment into both these camps. Likewise, his appropriation by writers of narratives with agendas as disparate as Frederick Douglass and P. T. Barnum also has the effect of reducing him.

In the early parts of the twentieth century, Franklin is again singled out and lambasted as a villain by cultural critics Van Wyck Brooks, D. H. Lawrence, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom view him as soulless and hypocritical, and associate him only with ruthless capitalism and psychologically repressive self-discipline.

In each of these instances, Franklin becomes a kind of synecdoche, as distinct and sometimes contrasting parts of his myth are taken by other influential Americans to represent the whole man. The effect of treating Franklin as a trope is that it not only reduces the whole of him to mere parts, but in reducing each one of these parts Franklin becomes various, not a multi-faceted renaissance man but a symbol of progressively minimized Benjamins. This is how a man who represented all of America—its possibilities, potential, and promise—becomes reduced to, by the time of D. H. Lawrence, a simplified and repressive soul who sought to deny human complexity.

The ease with which Franklin is appropriated by figures with such opposing worldviews and purposes, however, indicates that he and his text are anything but simple. Rather, it seems to prove just the opposite, pointing instead to his ambiguousness

## CHAPTER 1

### BENJAMANIAD: FRANKLIN'S EMERGENCE AS AMERICAN MYTHIC HERO

#### a. Introduction

Achilles, Aeneas, Beowulf, the Red Cross Knight, King Arthur. Ben Franklin became to early America what each of these mythic heroes was to his culture. He is a symbol, exemplary of the best principles of his nation. He is myth. Franklin reflects the shared values of early Americans and, by writing his story, gives a form to these values. He also provides the new country a concrete myth upon which to build a culture. And in typical American style, Franklin wrote his own story, creating his own legend where his mythic hero predecessors had to leave the imaginative work to others.

Of course Franklin isn't just myth; that is, he isn't just an idealization created by an authorial voice or by a cultural milieu. He does have a basis in actual experience as a central figure in American Revolutionary activity and in the early American republic. His contributions as a politician were vital and as a diplomat, unequalled. His opposition to the Stamp Act began to turn the tide of public opinion to revolution rather than reconciliation. He served on the Second Continental Congress, which determined to declare independence from Britain. During the war, he procured the help from France—both in money and in manpower—that led to a victory for the colonies. He is the only one of the “founding fathers” to have signed all three of the documents that established the U.S. as nation independent from British rule: the Declaration of Independence, The Treaty of Paris, and the United States Constitution. He is the quintessential

Renaissance man: political activist, businessman, scientist, inventor, statesman, community organizer, and writer. His most significant contribution, however, would be less tangible.

It's one thing to declare independence; it's another to become the symbolic representation of what the values of the independent country will be. Just ask Thomas Paine.<sup>1</sup> Both Paine and Franklin played a major role in the colonies' decision to declare independence, but afterwards Paine went to France, where his insurrectionary personality landed him in prison and nearly cost him his life. Paine did return to America before his death, but the religious agnosticism he espoused in *The Age of Reason* made him a subject of widespread public scorn. Called everything from an Atheist to a monster, Paine isolated himself on a small farm in New Rochelle, NY, and descended into despair and alcoholism. So while he might have made the spark that led to revolution, he died a lonely and obscure alcoholic. To add insult to injury, his grave isn't even marked.

Franklin went to France after the Revolutionary War, too, but he was—at least part of the time—penning the story that would make him an invention, an idea, and arguably the most important of any of the founding fathers where it comes to defining and shaping the development of American character. In post-Revolution America, Franklin became an archetypal, larger than life figure. Franklin's statement in the opening of his autobiography that he has ascended “from the poverty and obscurity” into which he was born to “a state of affluence and some degree of celebrity in this world,” at once asserts himself as the hero of an emerging American mythology of success and sets the script, defining the parameters of the “American Dream” (1). This dream that had drawn so many and would draw so many more to America would, as Uncle Ben himself articulated it, thereafter place its protagonist at the foot of a mountain scalable by pluck not luck,

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<sup>1</sup> Paine's *Common Sense* might have been the catalyst to the war, but Paine was later ostracized for his views and died poor and obscure. The location of his remains remains unknown to this day.

armed only with an abundance of optimistic belief that, in America, hard work and merit would invariably ensure success.

While America consists of diverse cultural influences and ideologies, this Franklin-constructed rags-to-riches success story is one of the—if not *the*—most important mythologies underlying the national collective American psyche. It remains to this day repeated as a unifying slogan, even if its infallibility is now questioned.

Franklin came to be this figure because the characters he created—both Poor Richard and his autobiographical self—exemplified the qualities that brought early colonists to America. His rags-to-riches success story perfectly reinforced the worldview they wanted to embrace and see borne out. His exemplary story seemingly stood as proof that the American experiment was legitimate: via diligent industriousness and disciplined frugality it appeared that one could indeed truly make oneself. America, thanks to Franklin, was as advertised.

Franklin may not have singlehandedly founded this American mythos, but he becomes its representative figure. As such, he is a creator of culture. More precisely, he is an inventor of a distinctly American culture. As an inventor, if he had a need or identified a lack, he invented something to satisfy it. At the time, America, being a new country, needed a unifying mythology; so Franklin invented one.

#### b. The Makings of Myth

Myths underlie and reinforce culture, build nations, and then hold them together. Nations, more important than referring to geographic locations, are what Benedict Anderson calls “Imagined Communities.” Anderson asserts that the people within a nation must develop “deep attachments” to “cultural artefacts,” since “the members of even the smallest nation will never

know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (48-49). Mythology makes it possible for the people of a nation to feel connected to each other. Myths, then, are founders and maintainers of the particular culture from which they originate. Leading scholars on myth define the term with some slight variations, but each definition contains certain basic elements. Importantly, myths need not necessarily be believed literally, only adopted symbolically, for them to fulfill the basic demands of their function. And in the early stages of a newly forming culture, myths are invented in order to serve the important function of unifying its disparate elements.

William C. Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist argue in “Autobiography and the American Myth” that cultural myths “direct individual energies toward a common goal, by evaluating forms of behavior, delineating appropriate roles, and making it generally possible for individuals to relate their lives to a larger pattern of value and purpose” (504). In *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Levi-Strauss claims that “the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction” (229). That is, myth brings the people of a certain culture together by resolving individual conflicts. Roland Barthes, whose *Mythologies* shows how modern myths are created to reflect the values of a particular culture, explains that myth “has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification” (142). Myth takes, in other words, nationally unifying human constructs and creates the illusion that they originated naturally. In saying that myth is a form of “speech,” Barthes means that myth communicates the dominant values and attitudes of a particular culture and, in that way, galvanizes the culture. William Doty explains in *Myth: A Handbook* that myth “involves perspectives, behaviors, and attitudes that a culture considers central and essential.” Furthermore, myths are culturally constructed: “Myths appear not as authored by individuals, but derived from collaborative social experience over a period of

time.” Ultimately, Doty explains the function of myths thusly: “Myths coalesce social values or projections that have been found worthy of repetition and replication” (19). Finally, Joseph Campbell claims in *Creative Mythology* that myth provides a sense of metaphysical roots and historical continuity, defining moral order and social roles among individuals to contribute to the success of the group as a whole, and guiding individuals toward common notions of personal fulfillment (605-623).

The common denominator of all of these assertions about the definitions and functions of myth is that they emerge in order to build culture, define it, and then hold it together. Myths are thus the “cultural artefacts” that members of a nation become deeply attached to in order to maintain a cohesive “imagined community.”

Franklin was not the only figure to construct texts that could have formed the basis for an American mythology. Since the epic had traditionally been the form of many other western myth-making texts, other early American writers attempted to create mythologies within its generic conventions. Timothy Dwight tried his hand at it with *The Conquest of Canaan* (1774), which garners fame as the first American epic poem, but for little else. Most notably, however, there’s Joel Barlow’s epic poem the *Columbiad*, published in 1809. The *Columbiad* presents Christopher Columbus as America’s heroic Aeneas-like mythical founder.

Barlow’s epic poem opens,

I sing the Mariner who first unfurl'd  
An eastern banner o'er the western world,  
And taught mankind where future empires lay  
In these fair confines of descending day;  
Who sway'd a moment, with vicarious power,

Iberia's sceptre on the new found shore,  
Then saw the paths his virtuous steps had trod  
Pursued by avarice and defiled with blood,  
The tribes he foster'd with paternal toil  
Snatch'd from his hand, and slaughter'd for their spoil. (1.1-10)

Barlow valorizes and romanticizes Columbus's role in founding and foreseeing the greatness that could be America. But there are several aspects to his epic that prohibit it from capturing the American spirit. First of all, it's just not very good aesthetically, perhaps exemplifying the baggiest kind of what Henry James called in his "Preface" to *The Tragic Muse* "loose baggy monsters" (x). But that's actually the least of Barlow's problems. "Singing" as he does, of "empires," "scepters," "avarice," "bloodshed," and "slaughter," he is mired in the imagery of the past. Being derivative of European forms isn't going to make one successful in America, and neither is telling a story of paradise lost. The American story is of paradise found.

Americans certainly didn't want to think of their country as Europe recreated, but as something entirely new. This focus on the "new" is exemplified by colonial settler J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, who in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) wrote, "[H]e is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced" (54). On the contrary, America would have to be represented in its nationalistic texts as something entirely original—a place of opportunity to make oneself in any way one chose. Crevecoeur, after asking "what is an American?" answers that the American "is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions" (56). As such, America needed a new form of expression distinct from European formal traditions. This push for originality (i.e. new and different from the



European) would characterize much of the urgency behind the first century of American writing, from Franklin to Emerson to Melville, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Dickinson.

Moreover, the mythology of America would have to be based on fact and truth. It had to at least have the appearance of being a testimony to the truth of the assertions about individual opportunity, not merely an imaginatively constructed account of it. Admittedly, autobiography is an imaginatively rendered text comprising the raw materials of memory, since the imagination can't account for a "true" history, and memory is, too, often unreliable. But autobiography, because it mines memory rather than strictly imagination, nonetheless allows readers to believe more comfortably in its verity than they could in a work of fiction. It matters little, where the reader is concerned, whether memory is more or less reliable than imagination, only that it is perceived to be.

Compared to *The Columbiad*, the opening lines of Franklin's *Autobiography* establish it as a text uniquely suited to American mythology. He does not "sing" of anything, but rather is direct and strikes a tone much more practical and matter of fact than Barlow. He speaks not of "future empires," but implicitly of the empire of the self. His "I" establishes himself as his subject, as opposed to Barlow's which places himself in the position of narrator of another's story. He declares that he is writing a truth, or the "circumstances" of his life. Rather than speaking to the American "tribe," he speaks to his son and those of his "posterity." His son, he asserts, may want to know something of his history, not so that it roots him in a tradition or shapes his identity, but simply because it is "pleasurable." No doubt it is a modest—not destructive—pleasure, suited to a Puritan worldview. As for posterity, they may want to imitate "the conducting means" Franklin made use of so that they can make themselves in the way Franklin did (1).

Most importantly, Franklin is telling a tale of paradise found. Barlow laments that his hero Columbus “saw the paths his virtuous steps had trod / Pursued by avarice and defiled with blood, / The tribes he foster'd with paternal toil / Snatch'd from his hand, and slaughter'd for their spoil. (7-10). Barlow is attempting to elevate Columbus to the status of hero, promoting his vision and version of America as a way to assert “true” values over whatever absence of values led to the human and environmental atrocities the country has witnessed since 1492. Franklin, on the contrary, tells a tale of ascent. This narrative form, starting from a state of impoverishment and ending with affluence, resonates in the American mind with much more force than the paradise lost story, for it represents America as the land that lived up to its promise of individual opportunity.

### c. Autobiography: The Form of America

Autobiography provided the perfect form for Franklin’s mythic self- and nation-building project. It emerged with America. Franklin is, in fact, inventing autobiography simultaneously as he invents an important America mythos. American culture, after all, with its purported indebtedness to individuality and diversity, is particularly ripe breeding ground for autobiography. The links between autobiography and America lead William Dean Howells to declare in 1909 that the form is “the most democratic province in the republic of letters” (798).

While the American success autobiography represents a diverse array of voices, it emerged alongside a dominant American ideology and, as a result, has been recognized as a “cultural act.”<sup>2</sup> Thus it articulates the shared values of a culture. And for a country created on the privileging of individual self-interest, it’s no surprise that autobiographical writings by those whose self-interest led to fame and fortune would form the most clear articulations of this

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<sup>2</sup> See William C. Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist, “Autobiography and the American Myth.” (501)

foundational and unifying myth. What could be more self-interested than autobiography? In addition, autobiography is new, creative, and experimental, which appealed to early Americans.

Franklin's marriage of autobiography and America can be explained by looking briefly at what autobiography is and where it comes from. Critics have offered up varying definitions with some more or less common denominators. James Olney argues that "autobiography may be understood as a recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in his life—the present—, looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how that past history has led to this present state of being" (47). James M. Cox condescends toward those who would seek to be too abstract by adding, "We at least think we know what we mean when we speak of autobiography and biography and we are equally sure that others mean the same thing when they speak of them" and offers up a basic definition: Autobiography is "a narrative of a person's life written by himself" (145). He expands or complicates his definition from there to a text that combines the generic conventions of both history and fiction. William Spengemann, cautioning that, "Autobiography does not communicate raw experience, for that is incommunicable," calls the form "a metaphor for the raw experience" (501-502). Spengemann's definition sounds an awful lot like fiction, and he admits that the two forms have formed a "striking coalition" (501).

James Goodwin has formulated a clear and effective definition by breaking the term "autobiography" down to its linguistic roots: *auto* (self), *bio* (life), and *graphy* (writing). It is, in remedial terms, "the life written by the self" (3). This definition needs more qualification, however, and genre has stepped in to fill the gaps by dictating that autobiography combines history (in the form of recollections of events) and imagination (in the form of processing these memories and crafting them according to the author's purpose). Autobiography, then, is simply

the written history of one's life, rendered by the imaginative mining of one's own memory, or in short, a self-portrait in writing. Any good definition of the form starts here.

However, this definition is at once excessive and insufficient. It is excessive in that an autobiographer cannot represent the entire history of his or her life. Obviously one cannot represent one's death from memory, and the limitations of memory (as well as time and space) prohibit one from representing the life in its totality. The autobiographer must be selective. The definition is insufficient in that it doesn't account for the myriad ways in which one could play with form in order to self-represent. Take Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* or Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* as examples. Stein complicates the form by writing about herself from the first person perspective of her lover, Alice B. Toklas. The "I" narrator is not the autobiographical subject. Mailer represents himself as a writer trying to write a great novel, through fragments of short works—essays, journalism, stories—and commentary. Both works belong under the heading of autobiography, but also call into question what autobiography is by challenging its conventions.

Georg Misch, who asserts that the "the history of autobiography is the history of human self-awareness," dates the origins of the form back to Roman civilization in works of self-examination by, among others, Marcus Aurelius (8). Historically, St. Augustine's *Confessions* is generally regarded as the first autobiography in the Western canon. The *Confessions* lay the groundwork for a tradition of religious works through the ensuing centuries that employ the Catholic ritual of confession to facilitate conversion, made public to serve as a model to inspire others to do the same. The confessional represents one mode of traditional autobiography among three. The other two are the apology and the memoir.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Goodwin, p. 7.

Though autobiographies as we now know them pre-date America, James M. Cox and James Goodwin have pointed out that autobiographies that pre-date Franklin fit more neatly into the categories, “confession,” “apology,” and “memoir.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the first use of the term “autobiography” to 1809, and attributes its usage to the English poet Robert Southey. Though Franklin first called his life story his “Memoirs,” neither confession, apology, nor memoir is sufficient to describe a text like Franklin’s

The memoir might be described as the personal recollections of the experiences of its hero’s engagement with exterior concerns. Its purpose is to foster an understanding of a particular cultural or political development or event, rather than to represent an individual’s psychology or life in its totality. Hence, memoirs are often written by public figures—military or political leaders or leaders of movements. Memoirs, then, could be limited in scope to not encompass a life, but an episode in history. Of course, any good autobiography will illuminate the social conditions of the time in which the writer lived and produced the work, but much like “histories,” the beginning and end of the memoir could be defined by the public event or movement that sparks and centers the story, not the beginning of the writer’s life or his or her first memories and the arrival at a goal or a moral. Historic examples of this form include English parliamentarian Edmund Ludlow’s *Memoirs of the English Civil War* (1698-9), the Duc de Saint-Simon’s *Memoires* reflecting upon his time in the court of Louis XIV (posthumously published in 1829), and Giovanni Giacomo Casanova’s *Memoirs*, which recount his adventures in the major capitals of Europe in the eighteenth century (posthumously published in 1830).

The term “apology” comes from the greek “apologia,” or “defense.” The literary apology, as it refers to writing about oneself, seeks to “plead off from a charge or imputation,” stands as the “defence of a person . . . from accusation or aspersion,” or serves as a [j]ustification,

explanation, or excuse, of an incident or course of action” rather than a statement of regret for having transgressed (Apology). The most famous apology dates all the way back to the third century b.c. Plato’s “Apology” represents Socrates’ defense of himself before the Athenian government, and sets the generic conventions for apologies to come. Other notable literary apologies include the *Apology of Women Writing*, an early feminist writing in which Marie le Jars de Gournay (1565-1645) defends herself as a writer and sexual being, and *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber*, in which the eighteenth century Englishman recounts his time as an actor and playwright for his theatre at London’s Drury Lane.

In the confession, the author “bares the soul or the heart in an attempt to reveal those truths about the self that are intrinsic and, possibly eternal” (Goodwin 7). The most prominent examples of “confession” are those of St. Augustine (c. 398) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1782). St. Augustine’s *Confessions* traces the theologian’s personal journey from youthful sinner to exemplary Christian. *The Life of St. Teresa, Written by Herself* (c. 1567) presents a similar narrative of religious conversion and redemption. St. Augustine’s *Confessions* establishes an influential narrative structure of progress from a degraded state to a redeemed one that is emulated by religious figures and will be later appropriated by secular westerners like Franklin. Rousseau’s *Confessions*, on the other hand, rejects the narrative of progress as a claim to self-worth, instead urging readers to engage in moral and philosophical self-exploration in order to show that the human condition is possessive of both virtues and flaws. He writes, “let them listen to my confessions, let them blush at my depravity, let them tremble at my sufferings; let each in his turn expose with equal sincerity the failings, the wanderings of his heart, and, if he dare, aver, I was better than that man” (Rousseau).

Along with Franklin's *Autobiography*, Rousseau's *Confessions* stands as the first example of autobiography written from the perspective of the post-Enlightenment or "modern" self. Both texts reflect the modern notion that every individual—and thus the expression of every individual—has inherent, fundamental value. Rousseau's introduction testifies to the innate originality and worth of every individual implied by the mere presence of the modern autobiography: "I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself" (Rousseau). While Rousseau is attempting to illuminate what it's like to be human and to point to the characteristics we all share, Franklin constructs a more Augustinian ideal that spans an ascent from a lower to a higher state and that could be revered and imitated. The differences between Rousseau's and Franklin's autobiographies highlight the philosophical differences between the more contemplative, abstract French thought and American practicality. America will, of course, be more influenced by the latter than the former.

The earliest American writings contain elements that, in Franklin's creative powers, will become what Sacvan Bercovitch calls "auto-American-autobiography,"<sup>4</sup> or a narrative self consciously constructed by a writer with the intention of asserting an ideal American. These include Columbus's letters, John Smith's *General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*, William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, John Winthrop's *Journal*, Sarah Kemble Knight's *Journal*, Jonathan Edwards's *Personal Narrative*, *The Captivity Narrative* of Mary Rowlandson, and so on. Since then, the form has continued as a dominant form of American expression, despite a relative lack of critical recognition.

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975. p. 35.

#### d. The Tabula Rasa<sup>5</sup> and the Colonial Zeitgeist

The reasons for the cultural popularity and preponderance of autobiography in America are multiple. First off, as a result of the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, individuals began to believe that they could conduct their own relationships with God unmediated by church officials. Gradually, these attitudes about the sovereignty of the individual spread to arenas beyond the religious, and sparked the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment marked a shift in conceptions of the self, convincing people that they could take a more active role in defining themselves and that their individual experiences, and the individual experiences of others, had innate value. Thus, when Europeans began arriving on the shores of the new world, the preferred mode of representing what they found was a personal account of what they experienced. These accounts were, of course, influenced by expectations and pressures imposed by investors and the general public on the explorers and settlers to be successful and to relate extraordinary and exotic adventures from the new, largely unknown world.

Even before Enlightenment individualism, we can see the seeds of self-making in America being sown. Christopher Columbus's writings advertise America as a land of opportunity for self-definition. In his first letter back to Spain, Columbus describes his assumption that he will discover "great cities." But happening upon only small hamlets inhabited by people he could happily subdue without resistance, he remarks that he found "nothing of importance" (11). This land containing "nothing of importance" represents to Columbus a metaphoric blank, a blank land that is ripe for the making. It is "fertile to a limitless degree," he explains, and possesses geographic advantages like "many harbors . . . beyond comparison" and

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<sup>5</sup> "Tabula rasa": Latin for "blank slate." The term was used by philosopher John Locke to describe his theory of the child's mind at birth. Starting as a "blank slate," all men are indeed created equal.



“many rivers, good and large” (12). It is a place, Columbus clearly thinks, onto which history can be and needs to be written. Or, as the case may be, it is a place where history needs to be re-written.

Columbus of course had motive to submit such a glowing report. His expedition to the New World would have only been possible with financial support. After being dismissed and mocked by the Italian, British, Portuguese, and French, Columbus finally found investors in King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. The investment offered by Ferdinand and Isabella came with high expectations: national glory (they would take great pride in the success on the high seas of the Spanish Armada not a century later) and, of course, a profitable return. Columbus, therefore, felt intense pressure to justify their investment and also to show up those who turned him down. Therefore, his personal accounts of what he found and experienced would invariably be idealizations.

John Smith’s *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* combines both the fantastic and the practical to paint a portrait of America as a place for those seeking adventure or opportunity to start anew and succeed according to their own merit. Smith’s account asserts a model of masculinity based on self-reliance, ingenuity, and toughness. The colony would have perished under its old leadership, but Smith, a new kind of man, steps up to save the day: Smith, “by his own example, good words, and fair promises set some to mow, others to bind thatch, some to build houses, others to thatch them, himself always bearing the greatest task for his own share, so that in short time he provided most of them lodgings, neglecting any for himself” (93). And fantastically, the story is replete with such amazing feats as taking on 200 angry Indians single-handedly, and being captured and narrowly escaping (with

the help of Pocohontas) the certain fate of becoming dinner at some bizarre cannibalistic Indian ritual.

The story of John Smith would appeal to any independent, self-reliant spirit. America would be a place where real men could exert themselves to the limits of their ability. He tried to present it as an unbiased account. When *The General History* was published, Smith claimed credit only as an editor and contributor. By all appearances, Smith had merely put together a collection of various accounts written by various colonists to tell the story of his trials and tribulations. Smith purported to have combined some of his own writings with fellow colonists George Percy, Thomas Studley, Robert Fenton, and Edward Harrington to compile the account.

Yet, as Wayne Franklin points out, Studley and Harrington died four days apart early in the first year of their arrival on the mid-Atlantic shore, and there is no record of a Robert Fenton having been a part of the expedition at all (57). Smith's experiences, as it turns out, were written by Smith himself. What we have here, then, is an elaborate, fabulous, and downright impressive example of American identity constructing through writing. Smith judges his superiors as European out-of-touch aristocrats more interested in living off the labor of others than making their own mark.

Like Columbus, John Smith, too, had a personal investment in making the New World sound as exciting and ripe for the taking as possible, as well as to glorify himself for his readers. He had been such an agitator on the voyage from England to America that he had been sentenced to be executed upon landfall. But his judges, finding that he had been listed on the charter as an officer, had to spare him. As a lifetime adventurer, he had a natural inclination to be and to be seen as heroic. In addition, he would have wanted, like Columbus, to justify the faith in him shown by his supporters and to vindicate himself against those who opposed him. Smith

accomplished both and more in his personal narrative, though little of his fantastic tale of heroism can be verified other than that it is self-aggrandizing, which serves only to highlight the fact that written self-making need not adhere to the facts.

While Smith certainly did some of the things he writes about, he doesn't become legend until he writes of his exploits and a willing audience reads of them. Smith uses the tropes of the blank slate and writing to conceive of, invent, make sense of, and articulate his very *self*. He describes the New World as a place where one can “tread and plant that ground he hath purchased by the hazard of his life” and “build a foundation” of the “rude earth . . . by God's blessing and his own industry, without prejudice to any” (66). Like Columbus, he uses the tropes of filling in the blank space to illuminate the process of identity constructing.

When the first British settlers of New England, led by Separatist William Bradford, considered coming to the New World, they did so because they considered it a symbolic blank upon which to construct a history. Bradford writes in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, “The place [we] had thoughts on was some of those vast and unpeopled countries of America, which are fruitful and fit for habitation, being devoid of all civil inhabitants” (108). The Separatists, Pilgrims, Columbus, and others arrived at the idea that the natives represented a void not because they weren't present; they certainly were, in the millions. Their presence, though, didn't seem significant because they had not written their history. Thus they didn't imaginatively exist.

This refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the Indians says much about the importance of writing. And one could not merely write; the narratives produced had to be of a certain set of conventions. Bradford and his Separatist brethren ran Thomas Morton off because he wrote “sundry rhymes and verses,” which was child's play and not consistent with the history the

Pilgrims wanted to write.<sup>6</sup> It would have to be, rather, a productive, prudent, purposeful writing. Writing that would eventually take shape with the construction of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*.

Bradford, too, had an interest in representing himself as successful. His task in writing was, to borrow a phrase from Milton, to “justify the ways of God to man,” or to justify the ways of God to man as he interpreted them in any case. He chose very carefully what to include in his personal narrative. Bradford even omits the death of his wife—likely a suicide—not because it isn't an important event in his life, but because it doesn't fit with the success narrative that he constructs.

Hence, in much of early American writing, we can see a narrative pattern developing in the accounts written by settlers and adventurers who feature themselves as heroes. It is a narrative movement, as Spengemann and others have argued, that moves from metaphysical degradation, or a fallen state, to redemption, or a re-entry to the Garden of Eden. These writers manipulate the shape of their texts to reflect this metaphoric rise that comes to serve as an advertisement for America. In their idealizations and artfulness, these authors represent themselves as heroes who have fulfilled the promise of Western thought, and communicate the message that their readers, too, can become agents of their own virtual apotheosis. The master narrative, in effect, is there to be written. It just needs an exemplary hero. As we can see from these narratives, however, the model citizens they offer up are as much written creations as a actual ones, which creates a disparity, ultimately, between the actual opportunity and the realized one.

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<sup>6</sup> The conflict between Morton's Merry Mount colony and Bradford's Plymouth colony literally began over writing. Morton nailed a perplexing and incendiary poem to a tree with the purpose of agitating his neighbors.

The concepts of writing and re-writing are apt, for American self making quickly comes to be conceived of in terms of a writing and revision exercise. The story one tells matters much more than what one does. This writing as self-creation metaphor was not lost on Franklin. He understood very well that to write a self was equitable to building a character. His writings, then, especially his autobiography, become a created self—an alternate Benjamin Franklin. The writing of a life becomes metaphorically the same as a life. Thus, while the Poor Richard tracts serve to underscore and in some ways establish a Franklinian practical, common sense philosophy, his autobiography becomes the text most important to the perception of his “self.” It is the text that most clearly articulates that, in America, self-making was open to everyone, not restricted by prescribed social roles or even the continuity of a previously established identity.

The notion of writing as self-creation reverberating around the Enlightenment imagination that would lead to the Franklinian autobiography will acquire its philosophical underpinnings with the publication of John Locke’s famous “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” (1690). Locke posits the idea that the human mind at birth is a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, with no *a priori* content.<sup>7</sup> This theory influenced burgeoning humanists and individualists because of its social and class implications, namely that “all men are created equal.” It followed that if all men were created equal, then one should have the right to self-determination and one’s economic or social status should depend on one’s work and merit, rather than on heredity. The problem for Europeans who were coming around to such a viewpoint, however, was that deep-rooted systems and institutions held long established economic and social hierarchies in place which restricted the rights of the individual to self-determination. These structures informed their sense of self. For such individuals, migration to America, which

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<sup>7</sup> Belief in Locke’s theory of the *tabula rasa* is the ultimate exercise in pragmatism. It was a supremely useful belief for those who felt oppressed or exploited in Europe and felt that a new start in America would benefit them.

had, in the minds of Europeans, no systems or institutions in place, became an attractive option because it provided the opportunity to make a new self. Later, self-determination would form the basis for the burgeoning nationalism that swept American colonists toward a declaration of independence from the hereditary and, thereby, unreasonable or irrational system of power extant in Britain and the rest of Europe.<sup>8</sup> The *tabula rasa* metaphor for the human mind would become so powerful that it would come to represent in the imagination of immigrants the physical landscape of the North American continent itself. It, too, could and should be seen as a blank slate upon which a new history, a new *nation* based on a new conception of self-determination, could be written, colonists thought.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, for eighteenth and nineteenth century writers and philosophers, memory was not as fallible as it is conceived by their twentieth century counterparts. Eighteenth century philosophers simply did not doubt their selfhood in the same way we do in the post Freudian and post-modern world. Many of the eighteenth and nineteenth century thinkers echo the Cartesian “I think; therefore, I am” affirmation of selfhood. John Locke’s theory that every human being was born a “tabula rasa,” or blank slate, and was thus capable of uninhibited self-making provides the philosophical foundations for the American democratic proclamation that “all men are created equal.” Locke explains:

As for our own existence we perceive it so plainly that it needs nor is capable of any proof . . . I think, I reason, I feel pleasure and pain; can any of these be more evident to me than my own existence? If I doubt of all other things, that very doubt makes me perceive my own existence. . . Experience then convinces us,

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Paine would emphasize the injustice of hereditary power and limits on self-determination in *Common Sense*.

<sup>9</sup> Early colonial settlers considered Native Americans a nuisance, not as possessors of the land upon which the dreams of European immigrants rested. Terms for the land such as “The New World,” testify to the way Europeans felt about America.

that we have an intuitive knowledge of our own existence, and an internal infallible perception that we are. (lxxxiv)

One philosopher whose doubts about the infallible, self-evident notions of selfhood forecasts those of twentieth century philosophers was David Hume. Hume believes that what he considers his identity is not a unified consciousness but consists of only separate, disconnected perceptions. “[I]dentity,” he writes, “is nothing really belonging to these different perceptions, and uniting them together; but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them, because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them” (Hume). We convince ourselves by the use of our imaginations that our identity is whole, discernable, and contiguous, when in reality it is not. For when we are unconscious—that is, without perception—we cease to exist. Moments of unconsciousness interrupt the continuity of self. Thus, we do not possess the unified selfhood or identity that we perceive that we do.

By and large, however, people in the eighteenth century did not doubt the unity of their identities, their notions of self. As Bishop George Berkeley argued, “I know that I . . . exist as certainly that I know my ideas exist. Farther, I know what I mean by the terms ‘I’ and ‘myself’; and I know this immediately or intuitively” (326). They also didn’t doubt the reliability of their memories in establishing a unified self. Thomas Reid declares, “The conviction which every man has of his Identity, as far back as his memory reaches, needs no aid of philosophy to strengthen it; and no philosophy can weaken it, without first producing some degree of insanity” (344). According to Reid, it was crazy to question the sanctity of one’s memory or one’s status as a contiguous self. The intensity of his defensiveness, however, could signal an anxiety over what could happen in the event one did question one’s identity. It also shows that he believed self-doubt or disbelief in the truth of memories equaled a kind of insanity.

Memory, then, in the eighteenth century, could be relied upon to generate confidence in one's selfhood and, it follows, to produce a text—an autobiography—that captured the essence of that self. This mindset makes it only logical that a country based on the principles of individual opportunity regardless of one's status at birth would want to create a national literature that seemingly provided "true" examples of the success that could be achieved and the methods for achieving that success.

In addition to a faith in the memory as a dependable resource, there was another reason autobiography became a legitimate form: a general distrust of art in early America. Calvinist dominated early American religious beliefs convinced the public that art, because it stirred the imagination, was dangerous. Early Americans equated the creation of imaginative art with the manipulation of reality, which could be used to trick and to steer people away from the practical and righteous toward the fanciful, the frivolous, the abstract. This was the realm of the arch-deceiver, the devil. Early novelists, then, had to emphasize the didactic qualities of their work in order to make it palliative to the public. In Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), the villain, "Carwin," is referred to very suggestively as the "double-tongued deceiver" (181). Carwin is a ventriloquist who plots the rape of Clara and manipulates reality by "artfully" disguising and "throwing" his voice in order to frighten Clara and her brother Theodore and, thus, stir their imagination. The result is that Theodore is driven insane and murders his wife Catherine.

In Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*, the part of arch villain is played by Major Sanford, whose duplicitous "envenomed tongue," seduces Eliza Wharton. Eliza is, of course, "ruined" both socially and physically and dies as a result of Sanford's evil charms (84). These and other early American works of fiction replay the original Garden of Eden seduction by the



serpent, whose artful wiles stir the imaginations of his victims. And the results are always destructive—the moral of these stories being, among other things, beware of art; it is the method employed by the serpent in the garden.

Of course there's a certain amount of pornographic titillation in these novels as well. The near-rape of Clara and the seduction of Eliza are typical to the genre—often referred to as the “seduction” novel as well as the “sentimental” novel—and provide readers with the raw materials to allow their imaginations to roam around the sexual landscape of the plots while simultaneously and ironically warning them against doing just that. So there's always an element of the hypocritical lurking below the surface of the righteous, a way to be dirty under the guise of the clean that indicates that what this is really all about is a struggle between impulse and self-control. This kind of irony is characteristic of the American psyche and is evident in autobiography, especially Benjamin Franklin's. There's a wry smile behind our seriousness, a recognition that the principles we espouse are primarily lip service, the most extreme and destructive example being the designation of a slave as three fifths of a person in a country whose Constitution that declares “all men are created equal.”

The fear of art had a practical application as well. Early American colonial leaders, especially the Puritan ones, believed that unity of purpose was essential to their survival. Thus they urged their fellow colonists to stay focused on the task at hand, rather than letting their minds wander. Thomas Morton, perpetual thorn in the Puritan and Pilgrim side at both the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies, is also cast as a pagan devil. Morton became the leader of a settlement he called “Merry Mount,” near the Plymouth colony in Massachusetts. Morton, a self admitted reveler and capitalist who was prone to throwing large parties as well as trading with the Indians, offended his religious neighbors. He presented a real threat to the

Pilgrims on the grounds that trading weapons to the Indians would make them more dangerous and a perceived one on the grounds that their “free-spiritedness,” which conflicted with the repressive rigidity of the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay settlers, might tempt some of their neighbors to defect and would thereby incur God’s displeasure. Further provocative actions by Morton such as nailing poems to trees in the area caused William Bradford to accuse Morton of “having more craft than honesty,” a clear allusion to the devil and a denunciation of art in favor of the practical (Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*). And like the general suspicion of art, the religious misgivings about it stemmed from a secondary, more hidden purpose. The Puritans and Separatists were interested in promulgating their beliefs and becoming dominant in America. Art threatened their hegemonic plans to control culture.

Lastly, Americans also saw themselves as a nation of ascent. They had left the old world and the old ways behind. Europe provided no opportunity for a more perfect union. It was mired in corrupt politics and a hierarchic society that was diametrically opposed to the privileging of the individual. Thomas Paine had written in *Common Sense*, “O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose, not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression” (citation). Tyrants oppressed people in the old world who weren’t born into privilege, prohibiting the rise of the individual to empowerment. America would need to be a new world, a world where paradise could be regained, not lost. America’s mythology would have to reflect the story of the hero’s individual ascent, it would have to be presented as truth rather than art, and its form would have to be new, not derivative.

Enter Franklin’s *Autobiography*.

Franklin’s version of independence is a revision of that which motivated New England’s first colonists, but is made possible by the same underlying notion about America—that the land

itself is a blank slate upon which any individual has the right to compose a history. The account written by early American colonists teems with excitement at the opportunity to re-invent, to compose a new history. Everywhere one looks there are allusions to a new world order based upon opportunity free from old world conventional restrictions. Franklin serves as a synthesis of these various voices.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE HERO IN THE CULTURE: BECOMING REPRESENTATIVE AND LOSING AGENCY

#### a. Introduction

To a large degree, Franklin is responsible for asserting himself as the strongest candidate for the role of mythic hero. Through his *Autobiography* and many tracts published as “Poor Richard,” he constructs a character that both reflects and shapes the American nation, national character, and individual character within America. Franklin is a “representative man” in the classic Emersonian sense. He even professes in the opening pages of the *Autobiography*, that “my posterity may like to know, as they may find some of [my life] suitable to their own situations, and therefore fit to be imitated” (1). Becoming the hero of the American myth of success and thus building both his own character and the character of the new nation could indeed seem like Franklin’s chief purpose.

Yet, in a profound way much of the influence Franklin’s legacy wields over America is no fault of his own. Over the nineteenth century, Franklin became like a synecdoche, as parts of what he says are taken to represent him in totality or he is reduced to only parts of what he wrote in his *Autobiography* or as Poor Richard. Like the Bible, Franklin’s primary texts (the *Autobiography* and the Poor Richard writings) are subject to appropriation, lending themselves as they do to a variety of interpretations and even misinterpretations. By his contemporaries and his successors, he is pushed and pulled to fit the worldviews of others and to justify their actions.

He is treated a bit like a text to be written on. He becomes a Benjamin different than himself, only part of himself, or perhaps more accurately, he became multiple Benjamins.

What made Franklin so malleable or so apt to be treated as a cultural trope? First off, Franklin cast himself as a figure that embodied the American value system. He stood as a living representation of the potential of the individual given the freedom to make himself. Despite having grown up in the working class without the advantage of education, Franklin had left an indelible mark, amassing wealth, making discoveries, inventing things, and serving his new country as both a politician and social servant. He was an exemplary combination of Puritan discipline and capitalist industriousness. His success showed that the American democratic experiment could work. In many ways, he serves as a synthesis of the various American types fighting over cultural authority.

Secondly, he wrote an autobiography that suggests his values and work ethic might be emulated and which allows him to be taken as an everyman. Of course, Franklin is not an everyman, but an extraordinary, exceptional man. Yet his autobiography makes it seem as if he could be everyman, and that every man might be him only by imitating “the conducting means which [he] made use of” (1). It might be counterintuitive to consider that an autobiography, which is sometimes written in order to “set the record straight,” could contribute to a multiplicity of interpretations that make Franklin applicable to multiple ideological viewpoints or rhetorical occasions, but Franklin’s *Autobiography* does just that: if its irony is ignored, it seems so devoid of interiority that it can come to represent different types of characters or different types of struggles. Different types of readers looking for precedent or justification for their own worldview can find their man in Franklin. Franklin’s text might advocate discipline and suppress interiority in favor of an Aristotelian emphasis on actions, rather than thoughts, as self-defining,

but what really lies at the heart of his story is opportunity to make oneself to suit one's own vision, independent of the traditional delineators of social identity. Thereby his wish to live again in order to correct his "errata" was granted. He was not only able to reconstruct himself. Others also reconstructed him by emulating his narrative. Literary successors with as disparate aspirations as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, P. T. Barnum, Andrew Carnegie, and Booker T. Washington have been seduced and/or inspired by his connection of everyman and exemplary man in a way that ultimately concludes that every man can be exemplary. Conversely, for making the same connection, he has been berated by critics and writers such as Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, D. H. Lawrence, Van Wyck Brooks, and William Carlos Williams.

#### b. A Hero of His Own Times

Two contemporaries of Franklin, Benjamin Vaughan and Abel James,<sup>1</sup> realized the potential nation building importance of Franklin's *Autobiography* to America and American letters after seeing only what now makes up Part One, praising Franklin for what he had written and urging him to continue with his life's story. Vaughan recognized that Franklin's *Autobiography*—not just Franklin himself, but the *Autobiography* specifically—reflected the American philosophy. And James cited the potential for Franklin's work to "promote a greater Spirit of Industry and early Attention to Business, Frugality and Temperance with the American Youth" (58). Their message is clear: Franklin's *Autobiography*, James and Vaughan claimed, would serve to both represent America as it was and shape it for the future. They recognized it as a true founding document.

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<sup>1</sup>Vaughan was an American political emissary who worked unofficially with Franklin during the post-Revolutionary War negotiations between England and the United States. James was a Philadelphia merchant who came into possession of parts of Franklin's early manuscript upon becoming executor of Margaret Read's estate.

In a brilliant rhetorical move that lends credibility to his autobiographical project, Franklin allows Benjamin Vaughan to do his talking for him, further building his character. Vaughan's letter at the beginning of Part Two may speak to Franklin's motivations for writing his *Autobiography* more accurately and explicitly than Franklin does himself and also speaks to the unique power and appeal of autobiography in general, and in America in particular. Vaughan writes to Franklin that he wants to "*solicit* the history of [his] life" because it is "remarkable" and "might do good." Vaughan's ultimate hope for Franklin's text seems to be that it would "encourage more writings of the same kind with your own." If so, he says, "it will be worth all Plutarch's Lives put together" (75). In this sense, Vaughan proved to be a prophet.

First, Vaughan urges Franklin to tell his story before someone else does. This is certainly one motivation for writing autobiography and was a factor for Franklin. He can explain events or situations that might have the potential to damage his reputation if revealed by someone else under different rhetorical circumstances. For instance, rather than have his "Inclination" to visit prostitutes revealed by someone intending to slander him, Franklin can pre-empt conjecture along those lines and justify his actions, which he does. Franklin explains that the "serious courtship" with the friend of the Godfreys aroused in him "that hard-to-be-governed Passion of Youth," which he claims "hurried me frequently into Intrigues with low Women that fell in my Way" (56). See, it wasn't Franklin himself who was responsible for making such a morally questionable decision. His visits to prostitutes can be attributed to "that hard-to-be-governed Passion of Youth," which is the grammatical subject and thus the agent which "hurried me" to prostitutes who just so happened to have "fallen" in his way. There are instinctual and coincidental factors operating in Franklin's description of the events that he can control if he

seizes authorship of his own story and that seem to somehow make him less culpable for actions that might otherwise be frowned upon.

Next, in a move that foreshadows Wilhelm Dilthey's claim that autobiography is "the germinal cell of history" (89), Vaughan directly connects the idea of autobiographical self-making with nation-making and advertising. Telling your story, Vaughan argues, will "present a table of the internal circumstances of your country, which will very much tend to invite to it settlers of virtuous and manly minds" (59). It is as if Vaughan were saying, "You, Ben Franklin, are America . . . And," furthermore, "America wants more men like you." For Franklin to tell his story, then, will attract more Ben Franklins to America, as well as make Ben Franklins out of the men who are already in America. By situating the Vaughan and James letters at the beginning of Part Two, Franklin blocks charges of conceitedness, and makes a more legitimate case for the usefulness of his story than he would have had without them. It's as if to say, "see, I'm not just doing this on my own. Others are begging it of me because it is something my country needs." Franklin isn't exactly a reluctant hero, but he's not a self-important or self-proclaimed one either.

After Vaughan's letter, Franklin's presentation of himself in Part Two of the *Autobiography* is that of a man constantly attempting to shape himself into an American ideal. Franklin immediately begins Part Two with assertions of his indomitable industriousness and how it enables him to build character that will benefit him individually and his country collectively. He relates the example of the library he started in Philadelphia, which led to the positive results he outlines:

Reading became fashionable, and our People having no public Amusements to divert their Attention from Study became better acquainted with Books, and in a



few Years were observ'd by Strangers to be better instructed and more intelligent than People of the same Rank generally are in other Countries. (63)

Here, Franklin shows how an idea for self-improvement and a motivation of self-interest turns into a methodology for building national character. For Franklin, reading, writing, and rhetoric are paramount to his national and personal project. It is apt, then, that one of Franklin's public service projects was the founding of a library, an act that Vaughan claims has made Americans smarter than their European counterparts. Vaughan goes on say that Franklin's story is representative of the United States, a nation of "*rising* people."

But most importantly, to Vaughan, Franklin's *Autobiography* can serve as an example to others. "Your life," he says, will provide a model "for the forming of future great men. This is a reiteration of what Franklin said in the introduction to Part One. Vaughan, however refers to *The Art of Virtue*, a book Franklin intended to write as an instruction for American youth on how literally to build character, which, as Vaughan says, leads to "improving the features of private character" and aids "all happiness both public and domestic," again here connecting the constructing of the individual with the constructing of the national. Furthermore, Franklin's book, Vaughan continues, can prepare young men for self-sufficiency and help them develop the habits that will make them into industrious, prudent, and wise men. In short, Vaughan says to Franklin, your book will "invite all wise men to become like yourself" (60). Thus Franklin has been able to assert without doing so himself that he is a man who transforms personal wealth to commonwealth, a true self-sacrificing founding father. Brilliantly, the inclusion of these letters makes his case that individual self-improvement is also a social service.

Vaughan also makes a pitch for the value of autobiography as a form, saying "The nearest thing to having experience of one's own, is to have other people's affairs brought before

us in a shape that is interesting; this is sure to happen from your pen” (60). Vaughan encourages Franklin to keep writing because telling his story will appeal to readers in a way fiction cannot. “Your affairs and management will have an air of simplicity or importance that will not fail to strike,” he says. Vaughan is explaining to Franklin that his autobiography will be a good and compelling story. Readers will enjoy it and, as a result, it will be an effective instructional text.

Then Vaughan says something of particular interest to students and writers of autobiography: “I am convinced that you have conducted [your affairs and management] with as much originality as if you had been conducting discussions in politics or philosophy; and what more worthy of experiments and system, (in its importance and its errors considered) than human life!” (60). Vaughan is arguing that Franklin’s life has been conducted with originality, therefore it’s creative. That Vaughan says Franklin’s life has been as creative as discussions Franklin has led “in politics or philosophy,” shouldn’t be troubling to us when considering the usefulness and prudence of autobiography. Since Franklin is an original, creative person, he’s as compelling as any fictional character. Thus autobiography can be as interesting to read as any work of fiction. And reinforcing the *tabula rasa* metaphor, Vaughan asserts that life and life-writing can be approached like an author constructing a text.

What’s most interesting in what Vaughan has to say here is in his reinforcement of Franklin’s purpose which is to create self and national identity. Human life, Vaughan suggests, is worthy of experiments and consideration of those experiments. As it turns out, perhaps Vaughan is fonder of fiction than he himself supposes and likewise Franklin more than he lets on. For what Vaughan is talking about here, and what Franklin is doing, is creating a life and using that life to—as William Doty claims about myth—“coalesce the values of a culture” and, moreover, create a nation. If human life is an experiment, as Vaughan says, then the telling of it—the

recording of that experiment—is a creative act very closely resembling a fiction. Vaughan’s hope for the created text that is both Franklin’s life and Franklin’s *Autobiography* is that it “induces more men to spend lives fit to be written” (61). Franklin, as if he needed the encouragement, renews his efforts to complete a version of his life story in 1784, after the Revolutionary War.

Part Two of the *Autobiography* contains Franklin’s most pointed efforts to instruct others on the creation of self, which he hopes will come to fruition as the creation of a nation. It includes his famous “bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection,” which developed out of his desire “to live without committing any Fault at any time” (66). To accomplish this superhuman feat, Franklin makes a list of thirteen virtues he will work toward mastering by devising a systematic list of each of the virtues.

I made a little Book in which I allotted a Page for each of the Virtues. I rul’d each Page with red Ink so as to have seven Columns, one for each Day of the Week, marking each Column with a Letter for the Day. I cross'd these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day. (70)

In devising a schedule for self-education and self-improvement that would, incidentally, someday inform the academic quarter system, Franklin determines to tackle one virtue per week, completing a full course in thirteen weeks and repeating the course four times per year. Thus, he commits to “conquer all that either Natural Inclination, Custom, or Company” might have led him into (66). Committing to such a program, Franklin seems to be asserting, is a fundamentally American thing to do.

c. Ben Backward and Forward: Representing the Past and Creating the Future

Franklin's persona in the *Autobiography* is that of "representative man." He is, for his contemporaries, the culmination of the Puritan and individualistic attitudes that preceded him. Living as he did during the Enlightenment period, he was more focused on the physical world in which he lived than the afterlife, more practical and prudent than abstract, and more civic than religious-minded.

In *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*, Daniel B. Shea poses the question:

Is [Franklin's *Autobiography*] the last Puritan autobiography, a translation of the narrative of salvation into secular terms? Or is Franklin the first authentic American autobiographer, displaying in his rise to success a mythic embodiment of the New World's possibilities? (234)

Shea's question, broken down to its essence, basically asks whether Franklin is tied to a present that is now past, or if he ushers in a new future based on possibility. Franklin, however, shouldn't be reduced to either, for the Franklin archetype represents both possibilities posed by Shea. And moreover, his ironic wit in the *Autobiography* indicates that he holds a worldview that doesn't limit him to either and transcends each. The problem with Shea's question is that even if we see Franklin as the latter, or "first authentic American autobiographer, displaying in his rise to success a mythic embodiment of the New World's possibilities," he will still at some point be considered a relic of the past. At any point in which "the New World's possibilities" are questioned, Franklin becomes an easy target.

This is not to say that Shea's question isn't insightful or useful. Franklin, after all, is very connected to both of Shea's proposed roles. He was schooled in the tradition of the former and participating in the formation of the latter. He was raised in a Protestant family that had immigrated to America "where they expected to enjoy their Mode of Religion with Freedom" (5). His father had initially intended for his son to become a preacher, sending Benjamin to school to acquire the training he would need to enter the clergy. Franklin, however, never took his father's religion seriously. So Franklin turns to jokes. With characteristic humor, Franklin quips that—since he was the tenth son and churchgoers are supposed to give ten percent of their income—his father devoted him as "the Tithe." Joking aside, the value of Josiah's brief hope for Franklin to become a preacher was that it offered him a chance at education. Education was pricey, and was an expense not offered to all Josiah Franklin's children. In his typical fashion, Franklin took full advantage of the opportunity, however brief, quickly acquiring "Fair writing" and rising from the middle rank of the class to "the Head of it" (6). But because of the expense and the inability to provide education for all his children, Josiah would pull Benjamin out of formal schooling after only two years.

It wouldn't have worked out for Franklin to have pursued the ministry, anyway. It was a discipline that required acquiescence to authority. And in the same way that the Franklin family left England to avoid the social and religious dictates of authority in England, Benjamin runs away to avoid the prescriptive authority of his father. He desires to make his own way. In doing so, he rejects the isolationism and radical intolerance of his religious training, adapting instead only what he found to be useful: Puritan acquisitiveness and self-discipline. Historian Henry Steele Commager observes that Franklin took the "virtues of Puritanism" and discarded its "defects" (26). In applying the useful aspects of Puritanism to the pursuit of wealth, he becomes

the epitome of Max Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. That is, he makes acquiring wealth a moral activity analogous to salvation and spending time doing something that doesn't eventually lead to profit akin to a cardinal sin.

In Part Two of the *Autobiography*, Franklin explains the evolution of his principles from the spiritual to the secular. Naturally he was influenced by "some of the Dogmas of [Presbyterianism], such as the Eternal Decrees of God, Election, Reprobation, etc. appeared to me unintelligible, others doubtful" (65). Franklin came to value the "Propriety" and "Utility" of religion and, in this sense, his view is consistent with Deism. He believed in the benefits of morality and self-discipline and that virtue would be rewarded and vice punished in our day to day lives, not paying any mind to divine justice not immediately administered, but postponed until the afterlife.

Conversely, he eschewed religion for possessing aspects that were "without any tendency to inspire," or to "promote or confirm morality," but instead which "serv'd principally to divide us and make us unfriendly toward one other" (65). Perhaps his greatest affront to the contemporary practice of religion would be his description of church services as boring and useless. His friend the minister Jedediah Andrews, with the kind of diligent effort and perseverance that Franklin admired, persuaded Franklin to attend one of his services to hear a sermon. Franklin appraised what he saw harshly and derisively: "[H]is Discourses were chiefly either polemic Arguments, or explications of the peculiar Doctrines of our Sect, and were all to me very dry, uninteresting and unedifying, since not a single moral Principle was inculcated or enforc'd, their aim seeming to be rather to make us Presbyterians than good Citizens" (66). The whole thing seemed like a waste. "Disgusted," Franklin declares that he "went no more to the public Assemblies" (66).

Franklin was much more interested in the immediately useful, and the “bold and arduous Project of achieving Moral Perfection” he describes in Part Two represents a significant shift in America toward the practical, rather than the spiritual. Franklin’s “Project” possesses all the characteristics of a religious pilgrimage redefined to apply to the social, economic, and political. It is a pilgrimage where wealth and fame rather than internal confidence in one’s own salvation stand as the ultimate goal. At the end of Franklin’s rainbow sits not the gates of heaven, but a pot of gold.

As such, Franklin’s texts, both the *Autobiography* and the writings of Poor Richard, could easily be seen as foundational for a nineteenth century poised to place its emphasis on acquiring wealth. Yet there is still an element of irony present in Franklin’s writing that creates distance between the surface message and the subtext. The effect of irony is to distance the writer from what he or she has written. For Franklin, who began his writing career by assuming the persona of “Silence Dogood,” writing about embarking on such a “Project” as “achieving Moral Perfection,” doesn’t mean that he actually committed to it with the same “arduousness” that he does in his autobiography.

Sometimes this discrepancy between words and action drew the ire of his contemporaries. Political writer and pamphleteer William Cobbett called him a “crafty and lecherous old hypocrite of a grandfather whose very statue seems to gloat on the wench as they walk the State House Yard” (343). Cobbett might have been a Brit with an axe to grind (though Franklin was loved by most Brits), but we cannot write off so easily the criticism of John Adams. Adams, sent to France along with Franklin to negotiate the Treaty of Paris, complained of his fellow diplomat, “I found that the business of our commission would never be done unless I did

it . . . The life of Dr. Franklin was a scene of continual dissipation . . . As a legislator of America, he has done very little” (qtd in Isaacson 352).

So this difference between what Franklin said and what he did was troubling to some. But to recognize the irony present in Franklin’s writings is to indicate that there are other possible readings of Franklin than advocator of greed or hypocrite. Franklin’s ironic wit could mean that he felt some level of discomfort about his place at the epicenter of American masculine character development. Or it could mean that he recognizes the preposterous pomposity and impossibility of his “project at achieving Moral Perfection,” and thus that he knows he can’t be the kind of model that James and Vaughan claim he can be. Either way, the reactions of his contemporaries suggest that, even in his own lifetime and despite his reputation as a true wit, that he is being taken as being too matter-of-fact.

#### d. Building Character, Literally

Given the basis of the criticism from his contemporaries, it is clear that Franklin is capable of constructing an author persona separate from himself. In truth, if there is anything we should learn from Franklin it is that character is a construct. Franklin understood the self—at least the public self—as a performed self. That’s why Adams’s and Cobbett’s accounts of him contrast so sharply with his own self representation. Evidence that Franklin viewed character as a construct is everywhere, not only in the historic facts of his life, but in his various modes of self-representation.

Whether in actuality, in writing, or even in portraiture, Franklin is very conscious and calculating when considering how his actions reflected on his character. And one of his greatest talents is the cultivation of his public image. Upon starting his own business, he finds it



appropriate to reassess his public character. He writes, “Before I enter upon my public Appearance in Business, it may be well to let you know the then State of My Mind, with regard to my Principles and Morals, that you may see how far those influenc’d the future Events of My Life” (45). He explains that the religious foundation provided by his parents was at one time useful in the development of his character. However, “remote from the Eye and Advice of [his] Father,” his experience convinces him that “this Doctrine though it might be true, was not very useful” (46). The change in his worldview leads him to conclude that “nothing could possibly be wrong in this World, and that Vice and Virtue were empty Distinctions” (46). Franklin disposes with arbitrary codes as prescriptive for behavior, focusing rather on the actions that lead to our advantage or disadvantage. Determining that “Truth, Sincerity, and Integrity in Dealings between Man and Man, were of the utmost Importance to the felicity of Life,” precisely because they lead to advantage, Franklin sets down his first code of conduct, the precursor to the “Project of Achieving Moral Perfection” and the “Art of Virtue.” He writes, “I form’d written Resolutions, (which still remain in my Journal Book) to practice them ever while I lived,” adding “Revelation had indeed no weight with me as such” (46).

Once he opened his own print shop, he made it a special point to work hard and to make sure that the community saw him doing it. Public displays that created the appearance of a strong work ethic like showing up to work early, leaving his lights on until late at night, and carting around his own paper rather than having his employees do it “began to give us Character and Credit,” he writes.

And he takes great care to avoid anything that could potentially damage his reputation. He resolves to leave Keimer’s business for good once his boss publicly reprimands him. Keimer happened to be out in the street one day when Franklin pokes his head out the window to

investigate a loud disturbance outside the courthouse. He explains that “Keimer . . . called out to me in a loud Voice and angry Tone to mind my Business, adding some reproachful Words, that nettled me the more for their Publicity, all the Neighbors who were looking out on the same Occasion being Witnesses” (42). For someone so conscious of attempting to cultivate a good reputation as Franklin was, this was an affront that called his character into question in a public forum, and thus could not be tolerated. Franklin points out that he had “a tolerable character to begin the World with” and he had gone to great lengths to build and enhance his character. He explains that he left Keimer’s after the instance of public rebuke because “I valued it properly, and determin’d to preserve it” (46).

Franklin’s self-representation in the *Autobiography* stands as his greatest example of character building. When an article in his older brother James’s *New England Courant* offended the local Assembly, James was jailed and Benjamin took over the management of the paper. Writing and serving as managing editor for the newspaper provided Ben with the know-how to run his own paper, and with his differences with his brother becoming more than he could stand,<sup>2</sup> he ran away to Philadelphia,<sup>3</sup> determined to do just that. Arriving in a new city, Franklin is free of a contracted apprenticeship and of all other semblances of authority. He has become like “Christian” in the story that captivated him as a boy, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a lone pilgrim on a quest, in Franklin’s case with a secular spin, of course.

He arrives in Philadelphia a wearisome traveler. He explains that he is “more particular in this Description” of this part of his journey so that readers can compare his “first Entry into that

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<sup>2</sup> Franklin writes that his brother James’s antagonism toward and resentment of him was of such an extent that James often beat him.

<sup>3</sup> Franklin set out for New York, but finding prospects at printing shops slim there, continued, at the advice of a New Yorker, on to Philadelphia.

city . . . with the Figure [he has] since made there” (20). He paints his self-portrait upon his first arrival in Philadelphia thus:

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. I was fatigu'd with Travelling, Rowing and Want of Rest. I was very hungry, and my whole Stock of Cash consisted of a Dutch Dollar and about a Shilling in Copper. (20)

He is indeed, literally and metaphorically, as R. Jackson Wilson calls him, “pure possibility.” In *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis describes his situation thus:

The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; and individual standing alone, self-reliant and self propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. ...His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. (Lewis 5)

And here indeed is Franklin, possessing nothing, knowing no one, and having little prospects, he is a man without character, at least as far as onlookers might see.

We have seen how important the idea of writing as self-creation is to Franklin, but if we revisit the quote from the opening lines of the *Autobiography* that exemplify his belief in writing, we'll see that there's an additional element in place: “[T]he Thing most like living one's Life over again, seems to be a Recollection of the Life; and to make that Recollection as durable as

possible, the putting it down in Writing” (1). Franklin isn’t just talking about writing; when he says that writing is like “living one’t Life over again,” and “a Recollection of Life, he’s also talking about revision. It is in this revision of life that Franklin’s process of “building character” takes place in its most effective form. In the form of writing, one can literally construct one’s own character.

The notion of “character” is very important to Franklin. The term “character,” of course functions in several ways, having both personal and linguistic meaning. It describes the process of making the marks on a page that are used to build words, the pieces placed in the printing press, the persona one cultivates in order to acquire cultural capital, and the inhabitants of a story. Often, Franklin employs the term as a double entendre. He characterizes the mentorship of his uncle as an opportunity to “learn his Character” (6). Here Franklin uses the term “character” to mean both his uncle’s shorthand system and his cultivated persona.

Franklin includes figures from his past with bad character, a move which serves the purpose of lampooning those who crossed him, and moreover as examples to contrast with models of good character. People like Collins, Ralph, Keith, and Keimer allow him to show that lack of character leads to relative failure.

Franklin encounters his childhood friend Collins early on in his story. He writes that Collins “had the Advantage of more time for Reading, and Studying and a wonderful Genius for Mathematical Learning in which he far outstripped me” (26). Yet Collins isn’t reaching his potential—in fact he is self-destructing—because he is a drunk. Moreover, he passes up opportunities that Franklin and others present to him that might allow him to pull his life together and get on track for success. Yet his destructive behavior continually pushes would-be patrons away.

Later on, Franklin arrives in England with the very Collins-esque Ralph. Arriving with “no credit,” the two young men are presented with the same set of opportunities. Both Franklin and Ralph are living like dilettantes to the extent to which they can afford it. But we get the impression that Franklin is less committed to such free play than Ralph is. It is Franklin, after all, who is telling the story. Franklin is financing the two of them, and one gets the sense that as his money begins to run out, he is ready to commit to a more serious approach, while Ralph doesn’t seem to possess similar responsibility.

When Franklin does talk about the work each of them is doing, he tells us that while Ralph is pursuing more frivolous work as an actor or writer, Franklin is working at printing houses and outperforming his co-workers, the “great Guzzlers of Beer” at Palmer’s, then Watts’s. In a scene full of symbolic meaning, Ralph takes Franklin’s name rather than risk damaging his own reputation when he takes a teaching job outside of London, which “he deem’d a Business beneath him” (35). Ralph can take Franklin’s name, but the clear catch here is that the name does not make the man. Franklin would never admit to considering any kind of profitable work “beneath him.” Moreover, Ralph isn’t disciplined and focused enough to rival, much less be, Ben Franklin.

Similarly, at Keimer’s, Franklin works with an indentured servant who also happens to be “an Oxford Scholar.” The man is accomplished and bright, but “idle, thoughtless, and imprudent” (42-43). Like Ralph, he has not applied his education to his life as he should. Franklin is also critical of his business partner Meredith, whose drinking and gambling was “much to our Discredit” (52).

Keimer also crosses Franklin, humiliating young Ben by yelling at him from the street. As he had done with Collins and Ralph, Franklin avenges himself, writing “[Keimer] was an odd

Fish, ignorant of common Life, fond of rudely opposing received Opinions, slovenly to extreme dirtiness, enthusiastic in some Points of Religion, and a little Knavish withal” (45). And Franklin mentions in passing that he receives a letter from William Riddlesden, a “rascal” and a “knave,” or a man of no character from whom Franklin pledges to receive no letters, or “characters.”

The most explicit linking of “character” and “credit” in the *Autobiography* is the episode in which Franklin is victimized by Governor Keith. Keith has repeatedly promised to set young Franklin up in business and proposes to send Franklin to England bearing “letters of Credit” on his name, with which Franklin can acquire the equipment he needs to get started. These letters attest to and stand in for the absent “character” of the Governor, both literally and figuratively. Arriving in London on Christmas Eve, 1724, at the age of 18, Franklin learns that there are no letters, or “characters,” on their way from Keith. Franklin is informed about him by his new friend Thomas Denham, a man of outstanding and exemplary character. Denham, Franklin says, “let me into Keith’s Character, told me there was not the least Probability that he had written any Letters [or ‘characters’] for me, that no one who knew him had the smallest Dependence on him, and he laughed at the Notion of the Governor’s giving me a Letter of Credit, having as he said no Credit to give” (32-33).

Franklin explains that he sees the benefit of being someone like Denham, as opposed to being a laughing-stock like Keith or a rascal with a bad reputation like Riddlesden. Keith would like to have character to give; having none however, “he gave Expectations.” Franklin adds, “It was a Habit he had acquired” (33)<sup>4</sup>. In typical fashion, Franklin puts Keith out of his mind and resolves, largely due to Denham’s advice, to make the most of his time in England, setting himself to practical pursuits. Franklin isn’t overly critical of Keith, but mentioning his name connected with this shameful episode is damaging enough.

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<sup>4</sup> Franklin will cite “Habit” and “Inclination” in Part Two as prohibiting people from achieving “Moral Perfection.”

Franklin represents himself as always having severed ties to those with little, no, or questionable character. He wouldn't want to risk someone else's lack of good character reflecting negatively on him. He also wants to present himself as a contrast to those with bad character. This is why he models his character on a variety of influences from which he carefully picks and chooses to foster public perception of him. Nothing is or will be as important to the America constructed by Franklin than the notion of America as a place in which character can and should be built.

e. Taking "Character" Public to Build a Nation

Had Franklin not written and published an autobiography, he would have been well-known as a "founding father." But he wouldn't have become the hero of the mythic American success story. So, while an important public figure, the Benjamin Franklin we know today is largely a product of the *Autobiography*. Interestingly enough, the *Autobiography* as we know it was not published until several decades after Franklin's death. What are we to make of the fact that the *Autobiography* was published posthumously? "Benjamin Franklin" is not so much the man who lived from 1706 to 1790, but the character living on in the *Autobiography* and in the multiple other autobiographies and rags-to-riches stories that mirror his or adopt similar narrative strategies. In effect, the answer goes back to Franklin's pronouncement about Whitefield: "litera scriptura manet" or "the written word remains." The written word, however, remains unseen if it is never published. Franklin wasn't, as Wilson says, "above all else, a writer." Above all else, he was a printer and publisher.

He isn't just a printer and publisher, but this occupation is at the heart of his being. Walter Isaacson calls Franklin "a civic-minded person." And indeed much of his life's activity,

from his political involvement to his life as an inventor can be considered “civic” in some sense. After Franklin retired from business in 1748 at the age of 42, turning his printing shop over to his partner David Hall, he invents the lightning rod, conducts electrical experiments and publishes his findings, establishes the first public fire department, hospital, and university, serves as alderman, postmaster general, and colonial representative in England, negotiated Indian treaties, and formed a militia. But his turn to civic-mindedness also relates to the publication of his writing. In both cases he actively shapes himself and he takes that self public to shape the world around him. In both cases this shaping and reshaping of self through writing only becomes civic once it is published. And what is published—especially the autobiographical writing—is, by nature, revision. Indeed, revision might have been a more important concept to Franklin in constructing a self than merely writing. When he writes of having an opportunity to “a Repetition of the same Life from its Beginning,” he is referring to his autobiography, and thus talking about living again in writing. Yet the most important thing to not here might be his request for “an Advantage Authors have in a second Edition to correct some Faults of the first” (1).

One way—the only way—Franklin can live his life over, as I’ve suggested, is by writing an account of it. The term he uses, however, for faults he would like to correct, “errata,” refers to mistakes made in the typesetting and printing process. In addition, he calls the repeated life a “second Edition,” not a second composition.<sup>5</sup> This metaphor refers to more than just a second chance at living; it makes the comparison of a second life (as well as the first life) to the printed book that tells the life story, not simply the writing of the life. While writing certainly plays an important role in the formulation of the mythical “Benjamin Franklin,” the processes of printing and publishing are just as, if not more, important.

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<sup>5</sup> Franklin also conflates composition and printing. About his work at Palmer’s, Franklin says “I was employ’d in Composing for the second Edition of Wollaston’s Religion of Nature” (34). Clearly Franklin means by “composing” the printing process (setting type), not the actual writing of the document.



For Franklin to turn his self-building into nation-building, he has to take his creation public. As Wilson shows, Franklin very carefully cultivates his public persona down to the attire he selected and the poses he struck when sitting for portraits. His choice to wear a coonskin hat in the famous French portrait, when he had never theretofore been known to have worn such a hat, points to his careful calculation in self-representation.<sup>6</sup> As nation-making, Franklin's pitch for cultural authority in his *Autobiography* is successful in that it is influential. We have taken his creation and internalized it as part of our collectively-imagined identity. For his belief in the idea of America as a place which could be mutually prosperous for all its people was rooted in a belief in the capacity for individual improvement. He believed that self-interest was civic-minded. Franklin believes that everything in human history could be used to our advantage, just as everything in an individual's history could be turned to that individual's advantage, regardless of the difficulty or the disadvantages posed by our—or an individual's—circumstances.

For this reason, we have to look not only at Franklin's skill as a self-creator in his writing, but also in making his writing public. By trade, Franklin is a printer and publisher. This is how he made his fortune, gained local credibility, and transferred that local credibility into worldwide fame. Franklin's descriptions of the instruments of the trade are powerfully metaphoric:

I had seen Types cast at James's in London, but without much Attention to the Manner; However I now contriv'd a Mold, made use of the Letters we had as Puncheons, struck the Matrices in Lead, and thus supplied in a pretty tolerable way all Deficiencies. I also engrav'd several Things on occasion. I made the Ink, I was Warehouse-man and everything, in short quite a Factotum. (43)

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<sup>6</sup> See Wilson, R. Jackson. *Figures of Speech*. New York: Knopf, 1989. Ch.1.

Franklin is describing the process of building letters of type. He first identifies a need, the wanting of “Sorts”—a need which cannot be filled at the time in America. Then in characteristic Franklin fashion, finds a way to fill it. Having seen little of the process of casting type, Franklin uses his extraordinary ingenuity to design a mold and puncheons with which to cast the type—or to build characters, if you will. He also does engraving, makes ink and serves as warehouse-man. Franklin builds his own character here into a “factotum,” or a Jack-of-all-trades. This example Franklin provides is a microcosm of his life as a whole, and a significant moment in the development of America, since there is no such previous assertion of American selfhood in the sense that Franklin is making in his autobiography. As he is printer, caster of type, engraver, ink maker, and warehouse-man in the Philadelphia print shop, he is businessman, inventor, public servant, statesman, and writer in the larger world. He is constructing and asserting American selfhood on a global scale as the mythic incarnation of pure American possibility.

In addition to the connections of living with writing that Franklin makes when describing how to build character, he admits to mistakes to show that he is not perfect. Doing so makes Franklin’s narrative persona more believable yet, interestingly, more perfect. He is everyman in that he makes mortal mistakes, superman in that he always comes out on top having justice served, confidence man in that he has managed to establish narrative reliability, and funny man in that he always delivers a kind of “wink wink/nudge nudge” humorous closing jab, all rolled into one.

In the instance of the falling out with his older brother, James, who gets locked up for printing material deemed “seditious” in his newspaper, the *New England Courant* releases Benjamin from his indenture so that he can serve as the figurehead “printer” of the newspaper and so that the printing of the can go on as usual. James does, however, force Benjamin to sign a

new, secret indenture. Franklin signs the new indenture, but sees an opportunity to permanently break it, thinking that if he simply left, James wouldn't pursue his claim because doing so might renew his legal trouble. Franklin writes:

It was not fair in me to take this Advantage, and this I therefore reckon one of the first Errata of my Life: But the Unfairness of it weigh'd little with me, when under the Impressions of Resentment, for the Blows his Passion too often urg'd him to bestow upon me. Tho' he was otherwise not an ill-natur'd Man: Perhaps I was too saucy and provoking. (16-17)

Franklin calls breaking his indenture with his brother an example of "errata." But this is the kind of "mistake" almost anyone in Franklin's position would make. Most, like Franklin, would consider his having exercised leverage to liberate himself from his domineering brother as "tak[ing] Advantage," but wouldn't see it as so bad and certainly wouldn't judge him harshly for doing it. In fact, this is a win for cosmic justice even though it's a violation of legal justice. And time and again Franklin makes sure to stick it to those who have crossed him in an example of "look at me now and look at you now" justice. Later, when his attempt to "take advantage" of the financial vulnerability of a Ralph's fiancé by suggesting she trade "affections" for money blows up in his face, he writes, "in the loss of a friendship, I found myself relieved from a Burden" (36). In addition, a passage like this serves to establish Franklin as a "human" character, rather than a persona, and reveals his often overlooked sense of ironic humor. And the whole passage functions in the scope of the narrative as an example of how, in the life he is re-living in a written revision, Franklin is able to create a mythical, more perfect life as a model for others to emulate.

Others cannot know Franklin unless they can access the “self” he created in his writing, and they can only do so if Franklin makes his story public, first by printing and then by publishing. His story is a journey from private self-improvement to public model. Part One of the *Autobiography* can serve as an exemplary microcosm of this process just in its narrative arc alone, beginning as it does with his private struggle to “make it” and ending with the founding of the first library in Philadelphia, his first true act of public service.

f. An Early Formulation of Highbrow and Lowbrow

John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was one of the first texts of note that Franklin ever read.<sup>7</sup> Writing about a century after the publication of Locke’s essay, Franklin becomes a kind of synthesis of these early American optimistic paeans to opportunity and individualism. He is like Columbus in that he sees the young nation as a place upon which to write one’s own history. Like Smith, he places himself at the center of his text, asserting his self-making text as a model of masculinity for the new world, taking the medium of writing as his way of doing so. Like Winthrop he advocates a disciplined and prudent approach to success, only taking what for Winthrop had been religious and making it secular.

His occupation of such a position places him at once at the center of an early developing dialectic in America that Van Wyck Brooks would later identify as American “highbrow” and “lowbrow.” Compared to J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s formulation of the plowman as the exemplary masculine American, Franklin’s assertion of the educated writer as the optimum American self-maker seems “highbrow.”

Franklin was not the only American figure engaging in this self and nation-defining exercise. Just about simultaneously with Franklin’s self-creating act, Crevecoeur engaged in a

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<sup>7</sup> Other formative readings were Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and Plutarch’s *Lives*.

version of identity making that resembles Franklin's in some ways but forms a dialectical relationship with it in others. Crèvecoeur fought and was wounded in the Canadian militia before moving to New York in 1759. His first American act was to change his name from Michel-Guillaume St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, a gesture symbolizing rebirth and the first step in remaking himself. Crèvecoeur biographer Thomas Philbrick explains, "Lieutenant Michel Jean de Crèvecoeur, scion of the Norman aristocracy and officer in His Most Christian Majesty's army, vanishes, and in his place appears J. Hector St. John, itinerant surveyor and merchant" (18). Later he revised his appellation once again to J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, signifying that self-creation is also a process of active self-rewriting or revising, or that one self can be erased in order to create another.<sup>8</sup>

Answering the famous question he himself posed, Crèvecoeur connected the opportunity for self-making provided in America to work. He writes, "From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. —This is an American" (599).

In Crèvecoeur's definition of an American, the "toils of a very different nature" that the Americans are now able to undertake are toils motivated by a new conception of self. Rather than for the profit of an owner, boss, or wealthy landowner, the American is motivated by self-interest. In this way, Crèvecoeur's ideas of self-making resemble Franklin's. Yet Crèvecoeur's choice of literary metaphors indicates a key difference from Franklin. While changing his name may represent a linguistic re-constitution, Crèvecoeur employs another trope that stands as a more romantic example of self-making. Crèvecoeur identifies self-interested labor here with nature, coupling the instinct for labor with self-creation. Thus he presents a pre-Thorstein Veblen

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<sup>8</sup> Like many who migrated to America, Crèvecoeur had other motives than a belief in the project of America: his European wife died under mysterious circumstances. Later, he also opposed American independence, which could indicate that his commitment to the "new" nation is another instance of pragmatism.

conception of work as something that human beings are instinctively inclined to do. He reinforces his connection of work, natural instinct, and merited reward, writing that “the rewards of [the laborer’s] industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labor; his labor is founded on the basis of nature, *self interest*” (598). This is a sales pitch, an advertisement for Crevecoeur’s vision of the American dream which, while based as much on burgeoning capitalist exchange systems in America as the right to self-definition, is based more on farming tropes—plowing, planting and harvesting—than writing. The key to success is based not simply on the ability for people who move to America to decide what they want to do; it’s based on the reward for one’s labor—that is, on the ability to reap what one sows that presupposes that one actually does want to sow. That’s because in America the “ample subsistence” goes to the rightful recipient: the toiler himself.

Crevecoeur’s assertions do two important things as far as this study is concerned. First, he argues that since farming is the identifying work, *anyone* can make it in America. Secondly he links work ethic to self-interest and links self-interest to profit. His mythical American “freedom” has a moral element: the American man is free as long as he is committed to working and having his work contribute to the burgeoning capitalist economy of America, which fits with Weber’s analysis. Crevecoeur has made work an instinctive act, decidedly moral, and unavoidably capitalist.

Conversely, Gustav E. Mueller situates Franklin as decidedly lowbrow by juxtaposing his practicality against the metaphysical Jonathan Edwards.<sup>9</sup> For an illustrative example, Mueller points out the two men’s conflicting ideas about lightning. In the *Personal Narrative*, Edwards writes “scarce any thing, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and

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<sup>9</sup> Mueller’s illustration is based on the split between highbrow and lowbrow originally articulated by Van Wyck Brooks in *America’s Coming of Age* (1915).

lightning ... I ... hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder.” To characterize Franklin, Mueller simply writes “Franklin invented the lightning rod.” Edwards, interested in the spirit world or the soul, saw divine, unconquerable power in thunder and lightning; Franklin saw a potentially powerful resource for its earthly use that he might harness with his lightning rod. In this equation Franklin appears just as adept at embodying the lowbrow.

Franklin then exemplifies both the highbrow and lowbrow aspects of American culture. Nowhere is his ability to represent both sides of a supposed dialectic so clear as in the portrait and engraving made by the French artist Charles Nicolas Cochin. The pose and perspective of the engraving calls to mind a Roman bust. Franklin’s body faces stage left. His head is turned slightly right, toward but not facing forward, making it necessary for him to cut his eyes in order to face directly at the artist or, after the fact, those who gaze upon him. He is donning a fur cap and his signature round bifocals. The point of Franklin’s attire and posture, R. Jackson Wilson points out, is “to convince the French not only that he was a figure of New World innocence and simplicity, but also that he was a man of profound learning, and an authentic philosopher” (22). By becoming both simpleton and philosopher, Franklin represents both highbrow and lowbrow simultaneously. Wilson argues that the portrait “was a masterpiece—of posing if not of art. The picture held in balance two potentially contradictory assertions of personality: . . . naïf . . . and savant” (23). Franklin is, of course, just as much neither as he is both. More precisely, he is contriving a combination of both. He might be a little bit of each, but to calculate so pointedly suggests a mischievous sense of irony is at work.

Hence Franklin combines the lowbrow of Crèvecoeur with the highbrow of Edwards to formulate an aesthetic, imaginary self. He could be doing nothing but the same in his

*Autobiography*, first by privately writing and revising his “self” into existence, then by making his “self” public by printing.

In contrast with both Crèvecoeur and Edwards, Franklin is implying that writing and printing for publication creates the self. This is fundamentally different from his peers because it presupposes that literacy and a social connection or networking that makes printing and publication possible is the key to self-making. Crèvecoeur’s American needs no intellectual or networking dimension, only a spirit of self-sufficiency and an instinct for workmanship. Edwards’s spiritual philosopher is out of touch. Franklin’s *Autobiography*, reliant as it is on wit, style, nuance, strikes a balance between both.

He may not have benefitted much from formal schooling, but from a young age, Franklin was a student of language. He very much saw mastery of language as empowerment, and his self-education plays an invaluable role in the creation of his autobiographical identity. In the *Autobiography*, Franklin writes, “From a Child I was fond of Reading, and all the little Money that came into my Hands was ever laid out in Books” (9). He presents himself as a voracious reader of everything from Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* to Defoe’s *Essays on Projects* to Cotton Mather’s *Essays to do Good*. Franklin attributes the education he attained from reading with having “an Influence on some of the principal future events of my Life” (9).

Any proclivity Franklin had, however, for the abstract or the aesthetic—in the form of fiction or poetry—is dispensed with rather early on, helped by his father, who set his son on a more “practical” track. Inspired by the books he read voraciously, young Benjamin tries his hand at poetry. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin calls the poems he wrote as a teenager apprenticing for his brother “wretched stuff,” even though they “sold wonderfully.” Whether they were really wretched or if Franklin just says so to disclaim them, his father put an end to his poetic ambitions



before they went too far. “But my Father discourag’d me by ridiculing my Performances,” Franklin recalls, “and telling me Verse-makers were generally Beggars” (10). Franklin made sure he would end up no beggar.

Instead, Franklin would begin to focus his reading on more practical material. He begins this more “useful” reading with “another Bookish Lad in the Town,” with whom he could read and conduct discussions or arguments over what they had read. Having a reading and debating partner would help Franklin see the benefit of reading with others. As a result, he would later in his life create other reading groups such as his “Junto.” It was these kinds of debates that led Franklin to turn to writing as a way to organize his thoughts and argue more clearly and effectively. Franklin also began to imitate articles and essays from Addison and Steele’s *Spectator*, carefully revising and amending faults and errors in order to teach himself “Method in the Arrangement of Thoughts” (12). By the time he was sixteen years old, Franklin had begun to publish letters in his brother’s newspaper. Knowing that his brother “would object to printing any Thing of mine in his Paper if he knew it to be mine,” Franklin used the pseudonym “Silence Dogood.”

Franklin published fourteen essays in a series as Silence Dogood, the first such series in America. The concept behind the creation of Silence Dogood tells us much about Franklin’s style and approach. It shows that, even early on, he had a propensity for assuming the persona of a morally rigid prude. This does not mean he was a morally rigid prude, only that he had been exposed to them and could channel their voices, which is not surprising given that he grew up in Boston, where the Puritan influence was strong. As his choice of names suggests, he chose the Silence Dogood persona with more than a modicum of ironic wit. He was, then, even from the

beginning of his writing career, assuming a Stephen Colbert-like satiric persona in order to mock that persona for the sake of entertainment and social commentary.

g. Irony and Reading the Myth

The rigid approach to living that Franklin outlines in his *Autobiography* and particularly in his “bold and arduous Project at achieving moral Perfection” was just what Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan were hoping to see from Franklin when they “solicit[ed]” the history of his life. James and Vaughan asked him to finish writing his life story in order to “promote a greater Spirit of Industry and early Attention to Business, Frugality and Temperance with the American Youth” and to “present a table of the internal circumstances of your country, which will very much tend to invite to it settlers of virtuous and manly minds” (58). By all accounts he satisfied his patrons. He produces a text that was read as just that. But doesn’t it also do so much more than that? As Tom Lutz asks, “doesn’t Franklin’s [Project of arriving at Moral Perfection] cry out for an ironic reading as well?” (74). For a man who was so humorous, are we not to take his “Project” as another instance of Franklin’s ironic wit? This preposterous project is, after all, painfully didactic and self-righteous. It might have been written by Silence Dogood.

Franklin’s behavior hardly corresponds to his professed virtuousness. In the one attempt at “familiarities with Ralph’s fiancé, he violates the prohibitions outlined in at least three of his “Thirteen Virtues,” a de facto secular version of the “Ten Commandments”: “Justice,” which commands him to “Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty”; “Chastity,” which dictates “Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dulness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation”; and, “Humility,” which compels one to “Imitate Jesus and Socrates” (83-84). As for “justice,” no matter what we think

of Ralph, he deserves more consideration than Franklin affords him. Regarding “chastity,” one could argue that Franklin desires a sexual relationship with the woman to benefit his health, but the more likely culprit is natural arousal. And starting such a relationship with the woman would certainly risk “injury of . . . [her] peace or reputation,” not to mention his. Lastly, Franklin’s dismissal of the whole episode is hardly in accordance with his desire to engage in humility.

Admittedly, this episode in Franklin’s life takes place before he embarks on his “Project...,” but he is writing about it from the advantage of a distanced perspective. From such a perspective we might expect a little more magnanimity from one so committed to self-improvement. And given, as Franklin himself has suggested, an opportunity to live his life over again in the writing of it might make Franklin own up to instances of misconduct with a bit more honesty and penitence.

What might be least virtuous in his portrayal of this scandalous occurrence is Franklin’s neglect of his own wife. He leaves open room for readers to conclude that Ralph’s questionable character somehow justifies an attempt to seduce his fiancé. Yet he doesn’t report that he spent years apart from his wife, remaining in Europe—where she couldn’t go because of her paralyzing fear of the ocean—despite her becoming seriously ill and pleading that he return to her. Nor does he admit that he was travelling around Europe when she died.

What keeps us from indicting Franklin for misconduct in his handling of the Ralph/fiancé scandal? Humor. Franklin’s wink and nudge rhetoric inclines us to dismiss the whole thing as easily and flippantly as he does. Franklin gets exposed as a seducer and loses a friend. He even loses money; yet, he comes out smelling like a rose. He jokes that Ralph now refused to pay him back: “he let me know he thought I had cancel’d all the Obligations he had been under to me. So I found I was never to expect his Repaying me what I lent to him” (36). Franklin is unhurt by the

remonstrance. “This was however not then of much Consequence, as he was totally unable” (36). Like Governor Keith, Ralph can’t give something he doesn’t possess in the first place. He is, therefore, powerless and “inconsequential.” Franklin’s vice, meanwhile, is effectively cancelled out by his very skillful use of humor.

If humor can cancel out a questionable act, does it not soften the potency of his prescriptions for our approach to life? After Franklin’s most succinct articulation of his formula for self-improvement, he is cracking jokes. At the end of Part Two, when Franklin is reflecting on his “Project at achieving Moral Perfection,” he makes the following humorous comment about a particularly difficult vice to overcome:

In reality there is perhaps no one of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as Pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself. You will see it perhaps often in this History. For even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my Humility. (76)

This joke about the impossibility of becoming humble doesn’t necessarily mean that Franklin didn’t hope to become more virtuous, or that he didn’t want to create a text that allowed his readers to become so. But it does mean that he realizes that things are not as easy as they might sound and neither are they as necessary as we say they are. After all, Franklin fell far short of achieving moral perfection, but he seems to have done just fine anyway.

Thus, if the *Autobiography* is didactic, then it is ironically so. Perhaps the best example of this kind of ironic didacticism is evident in the character of “Poor Richard” Saunders, Franklin’s fictional author of the long running annual *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. Consider “The Way to Wealth,” the introductory address to readers in the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the

*Almanack*. The premise of “The Way to Wealth” is that Poor Richard, Franklin’s famous provider of endless maxims, is reflecting on his own worth as a writer who is profitable yet disrespected by other writers. Poor Richard says that he has heard “that nothing gives an author so great pleasure, as to find his works respectfully quoted by other learned authors,” admitting, however, that “this pleasure [he has] seldom enjoyed” (451). He laments that “no other author has taken the least notice of [him]” (451). On the other hand, however, Poor Richard remains undiscouraged because his writings “produce . . . some solid pudding.” That is, they sell.

Hence, Franklin sets up an important dichotomy that will come to characterize popular American notions of merit and will lead to the embracing of social Darwinism in the late nineteenth century. That dichotomy pits pleasure—in this case the gratification of being respected by other writers—against profit. Franklin is willing to forego the appreciation of his peers, who would presumably be more impressed by depth of thought than commercial potential, for what’s more important in America: profit. He says: “I concluded at length that the people were the best judges of my merit; for they buy my works” (451). This is a very important judgment Poor Richard makes, and the implications are far-reaching. His conclusion is that profit equals merit, while pleasure merely satiates one’s own vanity. And the public serves as the barometer of merit, not the appreciation of other authors, who might be more adept at judging the value of art.

Yet, “The Way to Wealth,” like most of Franklin’s writings, is more nuanced than that. He makes fun of his own conclusion in the turn he takes in the rest of the essay, a turn colored by Franklin’s characteristic ironic humor. After dismissing the appreciation of his author peers as a legitimate measure of merit, he jokes that he has heard members of the general public quoting his work and adds that “I have sometimes quoted myself with great gravity,” as if either of these

somehow makes up for the fact that other authors don't recognize value in his work independent of the marketplace (451). He then introduces the preacher, Father Abraham, as testimony that he is, in fact, quoted by someone authoritative other than himself. Father Abraham is doling out advice to a crowd gathered outside an auction. Times are tough, according to the crowd. Since Father Abraham is recognized as a man of considerable authority, one among the crowd asks him, "Pray, Father Abraham, what think you of the times? Won't these heavy taxes quite ruin the country? How shall we be ever able to pay them? What would you advise us to do?" Father Abraham launches into a list of Franklinian didactic maxims, starting with "*a word to the wise is enough, and many words won't fill a bushel*" and "*God helps them that help themselves*" and ending with "*experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other, and scarce in that*" (452, 457). The irony is that the crowd agrees with Father Abraham, thereby proving the merit of Poor Richard's writing, yet "the vendue opened, and they began to buy extravagantly, notwithstanding his cautions and their own fear of taxes" (457). Even though no one takes his advice, Poor Richard's "vanity was wonderfully delighted" that he had been quoted. It is as if to say: I know my advice is worthless, and you do too. Yet Franklin still won't break face. He closes the essay by saying that he himself followed his own advice as it was re-iterated by Father Abraham: "though I had at first determined to buy stuff for a new coat, I went away resolved to wear my old one a little longer. Reader, if thou wilt do the same, thy profit will be as great as mine. I am, as ever, thine to serve thee, [signed] Richard Saunders" (457).

This use of ironic humor can serve as nothing but a source of great pleasure to the author. The whole thing is a big joke in which the writer and reader take enormous satisfaction for having been in on.

What then are we to take from this joke in which writer and reader are willing participants? First we need to identify that the message is not that we focus on selling our work or satisfying our own desire for pleasure while disregarding other, more abstract signs of merit. The joke is that we must agree to a certain set of principles, even if we know we're not going to follow them and, ultimately, aren't human beings sort of funny for behaving so bizarrely? With a wink and a nudge, we listen to the advice of Father Abraham (or of Benjamin Franklin), and like the people who "heard it, and approved the doctrine, and immediately practiced the contrary," we do the same (457). The joke, then, is on Father Abraham, who, as Lutz points out, is "an old dodderer, a blowhard without an original thought in his head" (67). For the old blowhard Father Abraham is the one sucker who has listened to and taken to heart the advice of Poor Richard.

Without question, Franklin's humor is self-denigrating. The embodiment of industry and frugality (and eleven other virtues) is not necessarily what it seems. But as Franklin understands, it's the *seeming* that counts, as well as the humor. As if in America it's more important to appear to do or be industrious, frugal, and so on, than it is to be these things. And our cultural response to Franklin shows that one can't, after all, make oneself. Meaning isn't made so much in the writing or even in the printing and publishing, but in the reading of the self-making text. We can only, as Father Abraham's audience does, make a public appearance of a self. In private, we are who we are. But Franklin's *Autobiography* has created the illusion that America is a blank slate upon which we can make ourselves. Our culture, by and large, has read in his *Autobiography* a schema to a logical fallacy, namely that the road from "poverty and obscurity" to "a state of affluence and reputation" is paved simply by hard work and perseverance.

Thus, Franklin's *Autobiography* not only presents to us this beacon of American potential and promise; Franklin also seems to suggest a method for reading autobiography. Paradoxically, that method, shaped by Franklin's propensity to use irony, is: "Don't take it too seriously."

This is an extraordinary move for a man upon whose shoulders the American myth will come to reside. Franklin's story is filled with irony, as if he is sharing a secret with the reader that all of this is, well, a bit "put on." He wittily appears to acknowledge that his autobiographical "self" is a construction, recognizing that not only not everyone can be Benjamin Franklin, but that not even he can be the Benjamin Franklin that he has created in his autobiography. These admissions aren't always explicit, but take the form of humorous anecdotes that follow such absurdities as his "Bold and arduous Plan to achieve Moral Perfection."

Effectively, his text sends the message that, rather than having to follow the model he has established, you don't have to adhere to the codes of behavior prescribed by the myth in order to participate in it. Franklin knows that attempting to attain "Moral Perfection" is not only "bold" and "arduous." It's impossible. And if his ironic wit doesn't sufficiently express Franklin's position, there's always the fact that the reality of his life doesn't always conform to the events related in his autobiography, or the ironic fact that his self-building and America-building document was primarily composed in France, where he preferred living. The point is, not only do you not have to be Benjamin Franklin, you don't even have to believe in the American myth of success in order to participate. You can participate in the myth by writing your own self into the heroic role, or even just by reading Franklin's *Autobiography* and cheering on its hero. And most interestingly, you can participate just by laughing at the absurdity of believing in the myth of success.



By implication the kind of success that Franklin is exemplifying, then, is only attainable in the imagination, which means it will never really stand up to the realities of human existence. In America, no one will really explore this tragic paradox until F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose characters Jay Gatsby<sup>10</sup> and Charlie Wales<sup>11</sup> discover that American success as constructed by Franklin, unaffected as he is by complications, is an illusion either unattainable or subject to implosion. And we had better be able to, as Franklin did, keep a sense of humor about that.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

<sup>11</sup> "Babylon Revisited" (1931)

## CHAPTER 3

### THE ROMANTICS: FRANKLIN AS TARGET

#### a. Introduction

Franklin's influence on America during his lifetime was primarily accomplished by his writings as "Poor Richard." It was the most widely read of any of his writings, which included essays and scientific tracts. *Poor Richard's Almanack* contained all the usual content of other typical almanacs: a calendar, weather forecasts, and interpretations of astronomical and astrological signs. For instance, the title page of the 1753 *Almanack* describes its contents:

Poor Richard improved:

Being an

Almanack

and

Ephemeris

of the

Motions of the Sun and Moon,

The true

Places and Aspects of the Planets,

The

Rising and Setting of the Sun,  
And the  
Rising, Setting and Southing of the Moon,  
For the  
Year of our Lord 1753:  
Being the First after Leap-Year  
Containing also  
The Lunations, Conjunctions, Eclipses, Judgment  
of the Weather, Rising and Setting of the Planets,  
Length of Days and Nights, Fairs, Courts, Roads, & c.  
Together with useful Tables, chronological Observations,  
And entertaining Remarks.  
By Richard Saunders, Philom.

Though it did perform all of its professed functions—to inform and satisfy the curiosity of its audience—the most popular content of the *Almanack* was the “Dear Reader” introduction and the short aphorisms, proverbs, poems, and witty words of wisdom included on nearly all of its pages. These gems served to establish and articulate a kind of American worldview and philosophy that would be passed down in comedic tempers of those like Mark Twain. So, while Franklin continually espoused the “virtues” of “industry” and “frugality” that people associate with his programmatic pursuit of success in proverbs such as “Would you live with ease, Do what you ought, and not what you please,” he also penned humorous anecdotes like “Fish and visitors stink after three days.”

This is not to say that one can't be both serious and humorous, for satire is often the most biting and effective way to criticize. But the possibility that one is occupying a persona rather than divulging one's innermost philosophy creates distance between self and message. It is important to remember that Poor Richard is, after all, a persona and not Benjamin Franklin. For instance, the letter to readers that opens the 1733 *Almanack*, the second annual edition Franklin published, begins thus:

Courteous Reader,

I might in this place attempt to gain thy Favour, by declaring that I write Almanacks with no other View than that of the publick Good; but in this I should not be sincere; and Men are now a-days too wise to be deceiv'd by Pretences how specious soever. The plain Truth of the Matter is, I am excessive poor, and my Wife, good Woman, is, I tell her, excessive proud; she cannot bear, she says, to sit spinning in her Shift of Tow, while I do nothing but gaze at the Stars; and has threatened more than once to burn all my Books and Rattling-Traps (as she calls my Instruments) if I do not make some profitable Use of them for the good of my Family. The Printer has offer'd me some considerable share of the Profits, and I have thus begun to comply with my Dame's desire.

In explaining the impetus for publishing the *Almanack*, Poor Richard makes many assertions about his personal life that clearly separate him from Benjamin Franklin. If the facts about the narrator's life don't match that of the author, readers must avoid the trap of conflating the two by committing the "autobiographical fallacy." Ascertaining what the real Franklin thinks when reading Poor Richard is, indeed, trickier than it looks.

It seems that Franklin is simply being satirical. He's espousing maxims while from the voice of a character who doesn't himself instinctively follow the maxims. Poor Richard's naïveté is part of his charm. And the satirical irony always present in his voice makes it seem as if we just shouldn't believe anything he says about himself if it doesn't mesh with what we know of Franklin himself. No one believes that because Poor Richard claims that he is poor or that he only published the Almanack to get his wife off his back that Franklin himself is poor or published anything out of any other motivation than personal drive.

Yet, we take the messages communicated by the maxims more seriously. Why? The humor seems to dictate that we do—or will do—just the opposite, like the crowd listening to Father Abraham in “The Way to Wealth.” They “heard [the harangue], and approved the doctrine, and immediately practiced the contrary, just as if it had been a common sermon.” If anything, we can recognize and apprehend the irony and conclude that Americans do not respond well to the “common sermon.” Thus what we have is a kind of satiric op-ed piece about how Americans don't do well at following good advice. Perhaps, however, what we have, rather than advice or commentary on the failure of Americans to heed it, is a joke about advice itself, or about those inclined to give it. If Franklin is lampooning those who give advice, then he's being somewhat self-denigrating. It's as if to say, “Here, reader, is a little advice that I think will improve your life . . . On second thought, scratch that, because I don't actually even believe myself that doing any of this stuff is really good for you, only that it's kind of funny to suggest that it is. Ha ha! Get it?” Thus, these principles espoused by our culture can be the butt of jokes. In the end, what we see Franklin doing is proving that we can laugh at ourselves. Perhaps this is a strike at the British, who seem stodgy. In comparison, we need not take ourselves too seriously. No matter what we decide the irony indicates about Franklin, we simply can't read the maxims

without attributing some effect to the humor any more than we can take seriously the pronouncements of poverty.

Why, then, is this so hard to do when it comes to the words of wisdom that come from Poor Richard. Might we not think when Poor Richard writes in 1735: “Early to bed, and early to rise, / Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise,” that the irony somehow undermines the message? After all, Poor Richard is, by his own admission, not only “poor,” but also an idler. “I do nothing,” he says, “but gaze at the stars.” His wife does all the work. In this sense, Poor Richard might be a more fitting a predecessor to Rip Van Winkle than he is to Andrew Carnegie. He did, in fact, also write that “Success has ruined many a man.”

Despite the ironic image of Franklin that Poor Richard helped to construct, according to countless witnesses including John Adams, while Franklin was in France he was always a bit of an idler. So perhaps as much as believing that “All things are easy to Industry, All things difficult to Sloth,” Franklin secretly pined for an excursion into the woods with his gun and his dog for a twenty year nap. And such a fantasy wouldn’t make Franklin a hypocrite, only a man of both complexity and simplicity.

Clearly, what we have with Franklin is a manipulation of his own image in different rhetorical circumstances to achieve various purposes at various times. Being a child of the Enlightenment, Franklin is incredibly self-aware. He thus self-consciously invented a self that embodied the values of his time. The sophistication of his self-representation was effective to his contemporaries, to whom he was an admired figure. We might only recall the views of Abel James and Benjamin Vaughn from the opening of “Part Two” of the *Autobiography* to see in order to see how highly in the country’s esteem he was held.

After his death and the publication of the first English edition of his *Autobiography* in 1793, even his political antagonists, like William Smith and John Adams spoke reverently of him. Adams, who once criticized Franklin's work as a diplomat in France, explained having "taken the trouble to expose the turpitude of his intrigues [in France]" to political necessity, Adams derogatory tone, however, would later change to one of reverence. "Franklin," he wrote in 1811, "had a great genius, original, sagacious and inventive, capable of discoveries in science no less than of improvement in the fine arts and mechanical arts" (qtd in Isaacson 477). Furthermore, Adams explains, Franklin had "a vast imagination . . . wit at will . . . humor that was delicate and delightful . . . satire . . . [and] talents for irony, allegory, and fable that he could adapt with great skill to the promotion of moral and political truth" (qtd in Isaacson 477). Adams's understanding of Franklin takes into consideration his brilliance, inventiveness, and his wit, even if the endgame is still moral improvement.

In the generations following his death, however, those who hadn't known him personally could only engage with him through his writing, reputation, and the writings of others. The *Autobiography* published in 1793 was a dreadfully unreliable version translation from the French first edition, which was itself a translation of Franklin's original manuscript. Therefore, the Franklin posterity came to know was never free of an interpretive or translated layer.

In 1818, his grandson William Temple Franklin published another unreliable English edition. Over the next several years, the first real attacks on his character in America came in the form of satire or ideological criticism during the Romantic Period. "Rip Van Winkle" provided an initial blow in 1819, painting Franklin as witless and hypocritical.

b. “Rip Van Winkle” as Anti-Franklin

The Romantic Period of American literature may have had its glory years from 1850-1855 with Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman all publishing what are now considered American masterpieces, but Romanticism really begins with Washington Irving. Romanticism emerged once the War of 1812 had established America’s sovereignty, when American writers were free to turn a critical eye toward their newly formed country. Among the first examples of American Romanticism, Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle” hold a enduring place in the American canon. In the characters of Ichabod Crane and Brom Bones, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” explores early formations of the highbrow/lowbrow psychic split in American culture. “Rip Van Winkle,” however, possesses more relevance when it comes to Franklin. Published in 1819, takes as one of its major themes the idea the conflict between the practical and the experiential. Now that the country’s independence is no longer in jeopardy, Irving argues, there’s an alternative to the overly serious, practical approach to life that focuses on accumulating wealth. Additionally, there’s a psychic space from which to be creative and a past to talk about, which makes storytelling now as legitimate social act as politics or entrepreneurship.

There was a lot at stake for literature in America in the nineteenth century. Franklin, while a reader, had eschewed the creative for the useful. Writers in the nineteenth century began to defend the usefulness of the created fictional story. There was a need, writers argued, for a distinctly American literature. As Nina Baym and Sergio Perosa have pointed out in their studies of the American novel,<sup>1</sup> American writers of the nineteenth century sought to distinguish themselves from their European (and British in particular) counterparts. They could formulate a

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1984). Sergio Perosa, *American Theories of the Novel: 1793-1903* (New York: NYUP, 1983).



distinct American literature by working with American raw materials, and thus formulate and reflect an American personality unique and different from England's. "Rip Van Winkle" paves the way.

The focus on landscape by American writers contributed to a shift from the didacticism to Romanticism in American literature. The introductory paragraphs of "Rip Van Winkle," which describe in great detail the physical characteristics of New York's Hudson River valley, illustrate this point. If America's vastness and geological characteristics differed from Europe's and indeed stoked the American imagination in the way early American writers conceived of it, then to derive inspiration from it and to feature it as a convention of storytelling would separate American from British literature. Literature, like wine, might be made finer by proper knowledge and use of the *terroir* from which its product grows. Vivid descriptions of the landscape, then, began to characterize American literature. As a "storyteller" like Irving himself, Rip finds self-actualization by becoming a "chronicler of old times 'before the war,'" and by taking as his setting the unique American physical landscape (40).

"Rip Van Winkle" features as its protagonist a character who seems on the surface like the anti-Franklin. As opposed to Franklin's emphasis on acquiring wealth to build moral character, Rip has an "insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor," a trait that Diedrich Knickerbocker critically calls the "great error in Rip's composition" (30). Knickerbocker's indictment of Rip resembles—at least in sentiment if not style—what Franklin might have said about him in the *Autobiography*.

Indeed, there is much in Irving's story to suggest that he was engaging directly with Franklin to propose an alternative to Franklin's new self-made man American masculine ideal.

The associations—often in opposition but also at times startlingly similar—connect the character of Rip to that of Franklin in the *Autobiography* in provocative ways.

Most strikingly, Rip’s indolent posse is referred to as a “junto,” the term Franklin uses in the *Autobiography* to refer to his reading group. Other than in these two texts, the term was seldom spoken or written. In 1820, “Junto” was used primarily by the British and the term had very specific applications. According to OED the term had “chiefly applied to the Cabinet Council of Charles I, to the Independent and Presbyterian factions of the same period, to the Rump Parliament under Cromwell, and to the combination of prominent Whigs in the reigns of William III and Anne” (“junto”). Its only famous usage besides Irving’s in America, according to the OED, was in Franklin’s *Autobiography*. It seems like a term that Irving could not simply use coincidentally.<sup>2</sup>

Rip takes to the woods for twenty years, which is likewise no coincidence, since these are the twenty years surrounding the American Revolution. Thus Rip was asleep when Franklin was most active. For all intents and purposes Rip set out to escape the “torrent of household eloquence” that “incessantly” issued from the “termagant” Dame Van Winkle, who excoriates him for “his idleness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family” (31). Franklin was certainly no idler in the sense that Rip was; he presents himself in his *Autobiography* as a diligently committed and industrious worker. But it is not a stretch to suggest that Franklin’s common-law wife Deborah Read (or Dame Franklin, as it were) might have provided a critical voice in Franklin’s life. Certainly, he spent as much time away from her as he could. His extended stays in Europe, where Read could not go because of her fear of traversing the ocean, indicate some desire on Franklin’s part to “escape” from her. While he had business overseas, his

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<sup>2</sup> “Junto” is also the name of a character in Ann Petry’s novel *The Street* (1946). Petry’s usage is a clear reference to Franklin. *The Street*’s protagonist, Lutie Johnson, models herself after Franklin and, contrary to the narrative track of the myth of success, fails because of it.

stays far outlasted their usefulness. Also, considering that Franklin was a known flirt, his wife might have been unhappy on occasion and expressed her displeasure.<sup>3</sup> She did request he come home on many occasions, including once when she was very sick. Her many summonses were rejected by Franklin, who was even out of the country when she died.

Then, on the other hand, there are the noticeable oppositions between Rip and Franklin. Rip is childlike. He possesses little self-assuredness, at one point, when he returns from the woods, even doubting his very identity. Franklin had many facets to his identity, Renaissance man that he was. Despite his multiplicity, he never comes across as doubting the unity of his “self.” Rip is prone to drink. Franklin was famously opposed to it, which his indictment of his British co-workers, who indulge all day long, testifies to. And, of course, Rip is prone to idleness and averse to profitable labor, while Ben represents himself in the *Autobiography* as a character motivated by accumulation in the interest of self-improvement.

Based on these attempts on the part of Irving to evoke and oppose Franklin, we might conclude that Irving was trying to assert a different American archetype in opposition to Franklin’s hard-working, disciplined producer. He seems to be offering up a contrasting model upon which American men could formulate their conception of masculinity. And as Leslie Fiedler has pointed out in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), he has descendants. There is a strong tradition in American literature of heroes who run off, escaping from the masculine responsibility with which they feel society has burdened them. Many of them run off with exotic male “others”: Natty Bumppo with Chingachgook, Huckleberry Finn with Jim, and Ishmael with Queequeg. Incarnations of this male runaway appear in more contemporary times as well, as the man who seeks deliverance from masculine responsibility lives on in characters

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note here that evidence of marital infidelity on the part of Franklin is only circumstantial.

such as Sal Paradise in *On the Road*, any number of Cormac McCarthy characters, “the Dude” in *The Big Lebowski*, and Peter Gibbons in *Office Space*.

Irving’s story, at the forefront of the male escape theme in American literature, effectively stands as a new literary iteration of the formulation of an American dialectic that is even somewhat different and more complex than a clichéd bifurcation of American culture into highbrow and lowbrow that I introduced in the last chapter. Here, between Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” and Franklin’s *Autobiography* and writings of Poor Richard, we have something more like a split between the individual whose self-serving takes the shape of social improvement and that of the individual whose personal desires focus on his own pleasure rather than a sense of social responsibility. It’s a basic “freedom to” versus “freedom from” construct, with Franklin representing the freedom to produce, build, and progress and Rip representing the freedom from the pressure to produce, build, and progress.

This dialectic plays out throughout the nineteenth century. The process of its evolution results in the systematic character assassination of Benjamin Franklin by the century’s leading thinkers, critics, writers, and businessmen. The first and most notable tussle over Franklin takes place between Ralph Waldo Emerson, who places himself in the role of Franklin’s Romantic heir, and Herman Melville, who satirically portrays Franklin by name as shallow, buffoonish, and “didactically waggish” (66). In this nineteenth century cultural dialectic confrontation between “yea-sayer” and “nay-sayer,” Franklin is reduced in complexity by his recruitment into both camps.

### c. Mid-Century Culture: Issuing an Everlasting “Nay” to the Practical

Following Irving's lead, American writers began to adopt the conventions of Romanticism, with its use of landscape, emphasis on intuition and emotion, and concern with the metaphysical. As such, writers associated most with Romanticism in the nineteenth century—Emerson, Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Whitman—came to oppose the practical and materialist bent associated most with Franklin. Romantics valued metaphysical exploration over the useful.

The Romantics turned their attention to the metaphysical world because there were such problems with the actual, tangible one. The American value system that Franklin reflected in his writings was predicated on the ability of the individual, if given the right to self-determination, to build a better self and, by extension, a better world. Thinkers and writers toward mid-century began to wonder if the freedom early Americans had supposedly prized so dearly had resulted in the establishment of the more perfect “asylum for mankind” that Thomas Paine had waxed so eloquently about.

There were many reasons causing anxiety for those who reflected on the American experiment. By 1830 or so, industrialization and urbanization reached the point economist W. W. Rostow called the “take-off,” or the “great watershed in the life of modern societies” when the traditional value system is usurped by new forces of economic progress, which “expand and come to dominate the society” (4). As Leo Marx and others have pointed out, the Romantics were anxious about the fate of the human spirit in a world of increasing mechanization. Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville all produced short stories set in disturbing urban landscapes that feature

characters rife with anxiety, or who are being forced to deal with the destructiveness of technological or scientific advancement that humanity can no longer control.<sup>4</sup>

More tangibly, issues of Indian removal and the Mexican War troubled conscientious Americans in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The issue of slavery, however, most troubled those who dared reflect on the failure or success of the American experiment. Emerson spoke out against slavery as early as 1844.<sup>6</sup> His “Address on the Anniversary of Emancipation in the British West Indies,” given at Concord, includes a notion about slavery that would later be echoed in a speech by John F. Kennedy: “The civility of no race can be perfect whilst another race is degraded. It is a doctrine alike of the oldest and of the newest philosophy, that man is one, and that you cannot injure any member, without a sympathetic injury to all the members” (R. W. Emerson, Address on the Anniversary of Emancipation in the West Indies). Slavery was unquestionably the metaphorical big elephant in the American room.

Disturbingly, all of the Enlightenment reason and rationale that had instigated America’s split from England had failed to deal effectively with the race and slavery question. And its persistence as an American institution directly undermined the lofty pretense of freedom and equal opportunity for all that had been the ostensible foundational principles upon which America was built. In addition, writers wondered how you could have a democratic American literature when literature itself is necessarily elitist, given the leisure time required for composition and the economic conditions required for publication.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) and “The Man That Was Used Up” (1850), Hawthorne’s “Wakefield” (1835), “The Birthmark” (1843), and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844), and Melville’s “Bartleby” (1853) and “The Bell Tower” (1856).

<sup>5</sup> These issues influenced Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government,” which advocates withdrawing all forms of support, explicit or implicit from a government that perpetrates unconscionable activity.

<sup>6</sup> Though Emerson opposed slavery and spoke out against it, he distanced himself for the most part from politics or public affairs.

Thus, given these essential contradictions, a new generation of writers and thinkers turned their backs on the Enlightenment and toward a new avenue of inquiry into the world. They are trying to both comprehend and forge an American identity. But distance themselves from Enlightenment however they might, they could not know or build America without coming to terms with Benjamin Franklin.

d. The Highbrow: Emerson and the Yea-sayers

By the 1840s, the tumultuous cultural climate in American sparked a veritable explosion of critical social theory and literature. The decade between 1845 and 1855, which F. O. Matthiessen called the “American Renaissance,” saw the publication of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and My Bondage and My Freedom*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables*, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Representative Men*.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was at the epicenter of one prominent side of this “renaissance” of criticism and creativity. Emerson’s creativity was born of necessity, the necessity for examination of the society in which he lived. His loss of faith in Christianity and his opposition to slavery led to fundamental doubts in the “American experiment.” He responded to what he considered a crisis of identity in America and the resulting anxiety felt by some Americans of the early-to-mid-century by asserting an essential belief in humanity that locates him firmly in the camp of the so-called “yea-sayers.” Human goodness was innate, Emerson thought; the world, however, corrupted us. To combat the corruptive forces of the world, Emerson called for Americans to forge an “original relation to the Universe” (1110). “Our age is retrospective,” he

complains in *Nature*. “It builds the sepulchres of the fathers” (1110). That is, we rely on the ideas of others rather than ourselves.

Being original rather than derivative would enable us to exist in a state of “perpetual youth” and of “self-reliance,” thus reconnecting us to our intuitive selves. Emerson retained the Enlightenment view that human beings were essentially good, but he thought that social influences had interfered with our ability to be ourselves. Rather, we were influenced by earthly materialism. If we only could restore the spirit of our essential selves, then America would be able to fulfill its democratic promise.

In order to restore the original spirit we all possess, we need only to go into nature. In *Nature*, Emerson writes, “In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith” (1112). Emerson’s philosophy attempts to incorporate the desire for emotional catharsis with lofty ideals while articulating a new conception of “highbrow” American culture. What it amounts to is a replacement for religion based on Enlightenment reason, rationale, and optimism. It is spiritual enlightenment that leads to self-reliance, and self-reliance that leads to a collective ideal democracy.

In formulating his basic philosophy, Emerson effectively rewrites or presents a revision of Franklin. His motivations are the same: an interest in individual self-improvement and nation-building. He wants to facilitate each by developing a philosophical justification for his ambitious project. In the formulation of his philosophy, he is both reacting to and attempting to rewrite the formula for the Franklinian—and thus, the American—success story. Rather than have the evidence for success—wealth and fame—flaunted, Emerson seeks collective spiritual



enrichment. Yet it is still pitched in the context of individual success leading to social benefit. Nowhere is Emerson's national project more characteristically Franklinian than in *Representative Men*.

*Representative Men* was published in 1850. It was the product of lectures on "great men" over the five years preceding its publication, and reflects Emerson's philosophy that great genius inspires others to their own form of greatness. The lectures and the book was likely influenced by Emerson's longtime friend Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841), which profiles heroic men throughout history and stakes a claim for their importance to society at large. Like the men Carlyle includes, Emerson's representative men are not emblematic of society, but exist to provide an example or an inspiration to others on how to approach life with original energy. Emerson repeats two men Carlyle included in his book, Shakespeare and Napoleon.

Emerson outlines the purpose of *Representative Men* in the section "Uses of Great Men." He explains that his focus is not on the common man but on "the excellent" (3). Emerson believes those who are "excellent" enrich the lives of others. To enrich the life of others, it follows, is the greatest sign of excellence and the highest form of existence. It deserves to be public recognition and celebration.

Franklin is absent from Emerson's profiles of great men, which includes Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe. The omission may not be as conspicuous as it seems, for evidence of Franklin's legacy is present throughout Emerson's book.

In many ways, it seems that Emerson is trying to *be* Franklinian, or at the very least a revision of Franklin. His project is strikingly similar. He is taking advantage of the opportunity afforded by the individual right to self-making in America to advocate formulating an

intellectual, original kind of self that would then shape the American nation. Like Franklin, Emerson preached self-reliance and originality. And like Franklin, Emerson's message, which centered on spiritual rejuvenation by emphasizing the essential goodness and the sanctity of the self, tapped into a strain of the American psyche, making him a cultural icon. Perhaps most importantly, Emerson, like Franklin, recognized a need for such a cultural icon and wrote himself into that role. While Emerson does not become as active in politics or public service, he does attempt to improve his nation by influencing its philosophical views.

Though one of his most popular books during his lifetime, *Representative Men* is not generally considered one of Emerson's major works. Unlike nearly a dozen other essays, it is not anthologized—or even excerpted—by any of the major American literature textbook publishers.<sup>7</sup> Yet, an argument could be made that it is his most important work. It is important to the scope of his work as a whole, for while it maintains Emerson's overall ideas about the course individual Americans need to follow in order to form “a more perfect union,” it presents a more grounded, though still fundamentally idealistic and optimistic, view than Emerson's earlier works like “Nature” or “The American Scholar.”

In addition, *Representative Men* may be the most autobiographical of Emerson's writings. While it is not a traditional autobiography in the sense that it starts with his birth and tracks his life, the book is clearly more than a series of biographies of “great men.” Besides, Emerson had already, in 1835, given a series of biographical lectures in which he focused on Michelangelo, Martin Luther, John Milton, George Fox, and Edmund Burke. Rather, Emerson, by telling the stories and summarizing the philosophy and social impact of the men he chose to write about, was trying to write a book about himself. If autobiography is as James Goodwin has asserted, a text in which the author “bares the soul or the heart in an attempt to reveal those truths

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<sup>7</sup> I am including in this indictment Norton, Heath, Bedford, and Penguin.

about the self that are intrinsic and, possibly eternal,” then Emerson’s *Representative Men* just might fit the generic description (Goodwin, *Autobiography: The Self-Made Text* 7). Indeed, in his biography of Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes calls *Representative Men* “his own biography,” and proclaims that “There is hardly any book of his better worth study by those who wish to understand not Plato, not Plutarch, not Napoleon, but Emerson himself” (197). Pamela Shirmeister makes the argument that Emerson would have agreed with Holmes, pointing out that in “History” (1841) Emerson insisted that “the student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books, the commentary” (xi). The essays in *Representative Men*, thus, do not have to be about Emerson, nor does he necessarily have to equate himself with his subjects in order for them to be autobiographical. What makes them autobiographical, however, is that they are “equally text and commentary” (xi)

e. *Representative Men* as Franklinian

Emerson admired Franklin. After graduating from Harvard in 1821, he wrote in a letter to his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson that Benjamin Franklin was “one of the most sensible men that ever lived. [He was] a transmigration of the Genius of Socrates—yet more useful, more moral, and more pure, and a living contradiction of the buffoonery that mocked a philosophy in the clouds” (*Journals* 375-376).<sup>8</sup> Emerson may have been more right about Franklin than he even realized, for, though Poor Richard was the epitome of the buffoon philosopher, Emerson sees that Benjamin Franklin was able to convert a philosophy of the clouds—a philosophy, that is, of America—into a practical example of success. And this is what Emerson admired most. When someone possessed merely a right philosophy without applying it practically, Emerson was not

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that in the Plato chapter in *Representative Men*, Emerson includes so much emphasis on Socrates that it seems he conflates the two at times. To compare Franklin favorably to Socrates is, then, quite the complimentary endorsement.

as admiring. For instance, Emerson was both friend and mentor to fellow Transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau, yet he had one problem with Thoreau, which he elaborates on in his sermon at Thoreau's funeral:

I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans! (Thoreau)

Strangely enough, these are some of the more biting funny lines in Emerson's whole catalogue. They express his love for Thoreau, but also his disappointment in him. Emerson laments what he calls Thoreau's "lack of ambition," or, in other words, Thoreau's failure to ever make his philosophy useful. But Thoreau is like that eccentric "do-gooder" relative of ours who calls us to task for our pettiness, our selfishness, our mistreatment of others. We acknowledge his place in our American family, but he rubs us the wrong way. He rubs us the wrong way because he forces us to confront, if we listen, discomfiting questions. He did put some of Emerson's philosophies into practice, going to "live deliberately" at Walden and serving a night in jail for tax evasion, but basically Emerson evaluates Thoreau's life as amounting to only a hill of the beans he grew at Walden. To Emerson, Thoreau was full of potential, but because he did nothing practical, no representative man.

Emerson's view of Franklin was much different. Unlike Thoreau, Franklin put philosophy to use. Given that he was a recent college graduate when he praised Franklin to his aunt, Emerson's thoughts may be taken to reflect the general perceptions of Franklin in the

1820s, in spite of Irving's criticism of the Franklin type. Certainly, such a view of Franklin would contribute to his already legendary status in American culture.

Combined with Irving's rebuke of the Franklinian model of American in "Rip Van Winkle," Emerson's invocation of Franklin as a paragon of sensibleness and simultaneously as a philosophic but practical thinker suggests that Franklin had, within decades of his death, become a polarizing figure in the American circles. It also indicates that Franklin was still at the center of American cultural consciousness.

Emerson's admiration for Franklin seemingly conflicts with perception that the Transcendental philosophy that he founded in an effort to refocus America on spiritual rather than material pursuits is a direct reaction to Franklin's materialism. In part, this perception is true. Yet, Emerson adopts some Franklinian ideas as foundational principles in his emerging philosophy. Though it might be tempting to explain away the sentiment toward Franklin that Emerson expressed in the letter to his aunt by asserting that the relatively young Emerson had not fully developed his philosophy, it in many ways clarifies how Franklin influenced Emerson's thought. Ultimately, while it may seem that Emerson is asserting a kind of anti-Franklin position, Emerson himself would disagree. He may be arguing for a spiritual emphasis over a material one, but his argument takes Franklinian shape and adopts Franklinian principles of virtue.

Emerson and Franklin have other connections besides their desire to synthesize and shape America through promoting self-reliant virtue. Many of their similarities are fundamental. They share an optimistic, idealist view of the American project, which they see as a belief in humanity in general. And Emerson adopted Franklin's view of the philosophy of success and self-improvement. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson echoes Franklin's self-improvement methodology

and the benefits of unwavering self-confidence. They also demonstrate and profess a core belief in the transformative potential benevolence and virtue.

In trying to become a kind of cultural synthesis himself, Emerson is responding to what he perceives in the second quarter of the nineteenth century as a crisis in self and thus national identity. To Emerson, the American experiment is off track. We have become imitative, which is the equivalent of a spiritual deadness. In our tendency to imitate, we have become like those of our predecessors who have allowed natural human progress to cease.

Emerson believes in a kind of primary truth, or a unity of identity. We have merely been separated from that truth by the corrupting forces of the world that we ourselves have created and which he would have us realize. The primary culprit is capitalist greed. He charges in *Representative Men* that “[w]e are put off with fortune” (4). That is, humanity is distracted from its progressive track by the pursuit of wealth.

It is easy to conclude that there’s more spiritual substance to Emerson than Franklin, who writes very little of his own emotional interior. It is indisputable that capitalist-minded Americans have taken him as a materialist. Yet, even without the irony, Franklin seems only to be advocating the virtues of acquisition. As Max Weber noted, Franklin associates acquisition with virtue, not acquisition just for its own sake, or for the cultivation of an illusory boost of self-esteem.

Jesse Bier argues that Emerson’s Transcendental philosophy inherits the notion of a “higher usefulness” from Franklin or, as he puts it more clearly, in Emerson we see “a modification and heightening of Franklinesque practicality” (180). Bier bases his thesis on Emerson’s essays “Self-Reliance,” “Compensation,” and “Experience,” and from Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” and *Walden*. Throughout his essay, Bier connects Emerson’s “pragmatic

idealism”<sup>9</sup> to Franklin’s cost-benefit-analysis accounting approach to maintaining a higher, more virtuous life philosophy.

The connection could be traced back to the original New England Puritan/Calvinist ethic that Weber identified. Franklin secularized the principles of industry, frugality, and self-discipline from the early New England religious settlers. Emerson, then, attempts to re-spiritualize in a non-sectarian way what Franklin turned secular. Thus they are trying to accomplish the same thing, the formation of a more virtuous America. All that separate the two are the conflicts between the spiritual and non-spiritual approach.

The Puritans saw themselves creating a purer form of Protestantism. They knew that, if they were to be successful in a new and largely unknown world, that they would have to be disciplined, industrious, diligent, opportunistic, and persistent. They would re-create a truer religion by creating new types of individuals focused on these principles. The whole project is based on self-recreation. If Franklin tried to teach us anything, it is that America’s national identity has to be one of perpetual self-creation. Emerson gets this. To get us back on that track of progressively evolving civilization, which he identifies as the project of America, Emerson calls for a “rebirth” or a “re-form.” In “Nature” he explains that in order to rejuvenate our spirit, we must go into nature with the “spirit of infancy,” or without our worldly corruptions. Because it is “representative,” the natural world can show us ourselves in our own purest condition, and thus show us truth. “Nature,” he writes, “is an interpreter, by whose means man converses with his fellow men” (1119). Nature, it follows, can cure us of our corruption. In *Representative Men*, Emerson’s notions about what cures us of our corruption evolve to become encompassed in those men he identifies as representative.

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<sup>9</sup> A term originally coined by Frederic I. Carpenter in *American Literature and the Dream* (New York, 1955), 19-29.

In *Representative Men*, Emerson uses the term “representative,” as he explains in “Uses of Great Men,” to mean something like “exemplary” and/or “inspirational.” Recalling the way he spoke of nature from the essay of the same name, he argues that “[m]en are . . . representative; first, of things, and secondly, of ideas. As plants convert the minerals into food for animals, so each man converts some raw material in nature to human use” (7). Emerson is interested in “representations”; his whole philosophy depends on it. In “Nature,” he argues that “[e]very appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture” (1118). If in nature all things the human thinks or feels are represented, the artist’s task, then, is to translate nature. As the artist does so, he or she translates what it is like to be human.

If it is Franklin’s project to found, then it is Emerson’s to restore. In *Representative Men*, Emerson shows us how great men can be a restorative force. He expands the power of nature to include the greatest individuals humanity has seen. Men, like nature, he contends, can be “representative,” or interpreters. In effect, men can be a symbol of other men. The implications here are that the potential for one “representative” individual to experience a transformation makes it possible for any individual to experience the same. This, for Emerson, is how individual self-building can become nation-building. His project, then, corresponds to Franklin’s. What it boils down to is essentially an attempt to define, or re-define, American culture. And no definition of American culture can avoid the role of Benjamin Franklin played in giving American ideas a narrative

Franklin offered himself up, admittedly, as a model to be emulated. He writes: “my posterity may like to know, as they may find some of [my life] suitable to their own situations, and therefore fit to be imitated” (1). He does so not because he believed, as Carlyle argues in *On*



*Heroes and Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, that he was a god-like figure existing independently and above his world, but because he sees himself as *of* his world. That is not to say, perhaps, that he could not have existed in any other time, but that he was at the right time and place. Franklin, then, in his autobiographical self, creates a figure that serves as an articulation of the ideas and ideals of his day. There was a lively discourse taking place around him over the course the country would take. In the years leading up to the appearance of this discourse, voices emerged that expressed the principles underlying the culture. Franklin supplied a narrative that captured the essence of what was at stake in America. What was a thoughtful and important exchange of ideas he gave a dramatic shape to.

Emerson is simply expanding what Franklin has laid out. He began the giving the lectures that would become *Representative Men* in 1845, only four years after the publication of Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*. Emerson was an admirer and friend of Carlyle's but rather than adopt the Carlylian thesis that heroes are "original" and independent of their times, Emerson takes the Franklinian view that human greatness is contained in one's ability to embody one's own times.

Emerson argues that we should not imitate the great man, but see in him our own heretofore unrecognized potential as he represents it to us. He can, then, be as Franklin presented himself, as exemplary. Once exposed to the great man, we see our own potential and become great ourselves. He writes that he accepts the saying of the Chinese Mensius, who asserts that in the presence of the sage, "the stupid become intelligent and the wavering, determined" (11). Emerson saw his time as more embroiled in debate than Franklin's. Franklin was at the epicenter of a beginning. In turning our focus toward representative men, Emerson was attempting to become the epicenter of a rebirth. Emerson writes about Plato that in him "a balanced soul was

born” (37). To Emerson, Plato balanced the two principles underlying philosophy: unity, or identity; and variety. He explains this dialectical relationship by linking identity with “being,” “necessity,” “rest,” etc., and variety with their counterparts: “intellect,” “freedom,” and “motion,” etc. He further makes associations to cultures:

The country of unity, of immovable institutions, the seat of a philosophy delighting in abstractions, of men faithful in doctrine and in practice to the idea of a deaf, unimplorable, immense fate, is Asia; and it realizes this faith in the social institution of caste. On the other side, the genius of Europe is active and creative: it resists caste by culture; its philosophy was a discipline; it is a land of arts, inventions, trade, freedom. (36)

Between these two principles of philosophy separated by geography, Emerson argues that Plato becomes a “synthesis.” Emerson makes much about the individual who is able to serve as a synthesis between two sides of a dialectic. This, indeed, is what makes Plato “representative.” It is also what makes Plato a particularly important figure to Emerson, because it is what makes him, ultimately, an American figure.

Several times over the course of the essay, Emerson attaches Plato to the project of America itself. Like Plato, Emerson wants to pitch America as a country that synthesizes the best of east and west. Emerson writes of Plato that he seems “an American genius” because “[h]is broad humanity transcends all sectional lines” (28). Emerson equates the track of Plato’s development to that of Europe and America.

The first period of a nation, as of an individual, is a period of unconscious strength . . . As soon as, with culture, things have cleared up a little, and they see them no longer in lumps and masses, but accurately distributed, they desist from

that weak vehemence, and explain their meaning in detail . . . In a month or two, they meet some one so related as to assist their volcanic estate and, good communication being once established, they are thenceforward good citizens. It is ever thus. The progress is to accuracy, to skill, to truth, from blind force. (32)

This is how Emerson envisions his own role in America, as an agent, that “some one so related as to assist their volcanic estate,” of the transformation from “blind force” to “accuracy, skill, and truth.” What he is describing is a path of infinite advancement, which follows the narrative arc of Franklin’s articulation of America. Though his methodology is a combination of the philosophic and poetic, Emerson’s proposition cannot be accomplished without appropriating the mythical Franklinian hero, whose own path is ascent from something low but with potential to something representative.

Still, however, Emerson represents an abstract, transcendent (if you will) kind of cultural thought, whereas Franklin stands as a model of practicality and usefulness. Franklin is rooted to the material world while Emerson hovers above it, the one a realist, the other an abstract philosopher-theorist. Emerson’s work, then fails to make Franklin a philosopher because his own emphasis of ideas over practicalities can easily be construed as an evasion of reality. And a man with such lofty ideals and detached revolutionary efforts could never champion someone like Franklin.

#### f. Melville’s Benjamin

Melville, like Irving in “Rip Van Winkle,” satirizes Franklin for comic effect. While Irving had a socially critical agenda, the implications of the satire in his story are not nearly as dark as they are in Melville’s *Israel Potter* and *The Confidence Man*. This is a symptom of the

tone of Melville's work in general, which, though witty in its own right, has been cited as among the darkest in American literature. Since Melville himself identified in Hawthorne's work a "landscape of the soul . . . shrouded in a blackness, ten times black," critics have noticed an equally, if not more profound, bleakness, or "blackness" in Melville's work.<sup>10</sup>

Melville's work is always characterized by a deepest and most profound search for ontological and metaphysical truths. William C. Spengemann writes in his introduction to *Pierre* that Melville possesses "a fundamental desire to lend absolute meaning and value to contingent human existence" (viii). He is not, therefore, inclined to accept an absence of meaning and commits to diligent exploration in search of it in his work.

Generally he arrives at rather bleak or dark conclusions about both humanity and the cosmos. In his work, Melville criticizes American/Western culture and its various mid-nineteenth century developments such as industrialization, urbanization, imperialism, expansionism, capitalism, slavery, wage slavery, and so on. Respected critics like Lawrance Thompson, Harry Levin, and Perry Miller have called Melville a "god-hater,"<sup>11</sup> or a possessor of "the dark wisdom of our deeper minds," and "the heroic natural man at odds with the unnatural, with civilization, with convention, with hardness of heart . . . who destroyed himself in an unequal combat." Melville's project overall, not that it can be reduced to such single mindedness or "monomania," seems to be to call our attention to the question of whether or not the progression of human civilization represents actual progress or if it is, at every turn, moving us one step closer to destruction.

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<sup>11</sup> Lawrance Thompson. *Melville's Quarrel with God*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966. Harry Levin. *The Power of Blackness*. Ohio University Press, 1980. Perry Miller. *The Responsibility of Mind in a Civilization of Machines*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979. p.284

In *Israel Potter*, a “historical fiction,” Franklin appears by name. Set during and (mostly) in the few years after the American Revolution, *Israel Potter* centers on a frontier farmer and fur trader of the same name whose enterprising and independent nature motivate him to join the colonial fight for independence. Israel possesses Franklinian traits. He is determined, cunning, and capable—characteristics that make him fight resiliently and heroically at Bunker Hill, despite being wounded multiple times. So, inspired by the American cause, Israel wants to continue to contribute to the war effort. He volunteers for further service at sea as part of the naval forces, where he is captured and taken to England. There, he escapes and embarks on a series of extraordinary adventures in which he meets, among others, King George III and Benjamin Franklin.

*Israel Potter* is, to use a common parlance, a “myth-busting” novel. Melville constructs a national American mythology that distinguishes it from its British counterparts, but then undermines that myth and engages in social criticism. The myth Melville constructs is based on historical figures like Franklin, Ethan Allen, and John Paul Jones whose unique character traits and geographic associations combine to form a romantic unified version of Americanness. Ethan Allen contributes a kind of frontier rugged vigor and self-confidence. Naval hero John Paul Jones contributes boldness and bravado. And Benjamin Franklin, of course, provides practicality and inventiveness. The British, on the other hand, are portrayed as apathetic, incompetent, and unjustifiably arrogant and aloof.

Yet, as Kris Lackey points out, after building up American character as bold, enterprising, and energetic, Melville gradually undermines this mythic identity. Lackey writes, “Melville took his quarrels with contemporary society to his fictional recreation of Revolutionary heroes, qualifying their virtues to highlight incipient flaws in American ideology” (34). Melville

effects such a critique by some overt condemnations of the extreme and dangerous nature of American greed and self-righteousness and in a clever rhetorical strategy in which he “omits references in his primary source to differences between British and American class organization so as to weaken the political contrast” (Lackey 34). Thus, he makes American character out to be as flawed as British, and perhaps even more dangerously so.

Melville’s portrayal of Franklin in *Israel Potter* follows this pattern. Israel meets Franklin in his Paris apartments. Copious papers and documents cover Franklin’s desk and walls, representing his varied learned interests. On one wall hangs a map of the New World. Comically, the map shows “vast empty spaces in the middle, with the word DESERT diffusely printed there. . . [The] printed word, however, bore a vigorous pen-mark, in the Doctor's hand, drawn straight through it, as if in summary repeal of it” (38). So, while Melville portrays Franklin as having the characteristics we associate with the positive aspects of America, such as an inventiveness, adventurousness, and industriousness, he also exposes his insidious greed and will to dominate.

Otherwise, Melville describes Franklin in the least flattering of terms, mocking his commitment to Puritan-like accounting and self-deprivation. Franklin is referred to condescendingly as the “wise man” and the “homely sage.” He sings the praises of plainness and avoidance of luxury or pleasure. He lectures Israel about the virtues of a scant lifestyle and commends “plain sensible folks” for their prudence:

My honest friend, if you are poor, avoid wine as a costly luxury; if you are rich, shun it as a fatal indulgence. Stick to plain water. And now, my good friend, if you are through with your meal, we will rise. There is no pastry coming. Pastry is poisoned bread. Never eat pastry. Be a plain man, and stick to plain things.

Melville is of course referring to the scene in Franklin's *Autobiography* when his British co-workers label him as the "water-American" for his propensity to drink water rather than participate in their six-beer-a-day diet. When Melville isn't portraying Franklin as a darkly sinister kind of figure, he's lampooning him with satire.

Melville's use of satire is only ramped up in his next novel, *The Confidence Man*, published in 1857. The connections between *The Confidence Man* and Franklin are less overt. They are more or less located in the rhetorical strategies Melville employs and the way Melville attacks foundational American ideals attributed to Franklin, in addition to Melville's humor, which is, admittedly, much darker than Franklin's. Melville's employs the rhetorical strategy of satire to show the unreliability of language, which ultimately cancels out the very principles it is employed to articulate.

Richard Chase calls *The Confidence Man* "in fact one of the subtlest of all satires on the American spirit, a buoyant book despite the cunning with which it examines the national temperament" (122).<sup>12</sup> Most critics see *The Confidence Man* as a book that is, to borrow a term from Edgar Dryden, "ontologically subversive." That is, it exposes human existence—at least in America—as a kind of paradox. That paradox is that cynicism can only be avoided, the novel points out, by having confidence in others; yet, at the moment when the stakes are highest—in which one's very faith in humanity is on the line and confidence is extended in order to preserve that faith—confidence is betrayed, leaving the one who afforded it victimized. With this then, Melville takes swipes at Christians in general, Puritans in particular, Emerson and the Transcendentalists, Romantic poets, P. T. Barnum, industrial and urban progress, the press, and

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<sup>12</sup> Leon Selzer argues that *The Confidence Man* cannot be considered satire because it "cannot legitimately be regarded as corrective." Selzer proposes that we instead see Melville's rhetoric as "absurd." Mainly, however, he is talking semantics because he still sees the rhetorical structure of the novel as having a reality-negating effect. See "Camus's Absurd and the World of Melville's *The Confidence-Man*." *PMLA* 82 (March 1967): 14-27.

consumers, just to name several. In doing so, he indicts quintessential Americanness, which is shaped, ultimately, by Franklin.

In all this, he comes to the rather sad conclusion that anyone with any faith in humanity gets screwed. Only those whose hearts and minds are filled with hateful cynicism will be able to escape the con. The only characters who successfully do so are the confidence man himself<sup>13</sup> and “the misanthrope.” Thus, the ironic moral is that the only hope for humanity lies with the most hopeless among us.

It’s a dark message, but one that makes Melville’s satire, while piercing and bitter, sometimes humorous.<sup>14</sup> There is some disagreement, however, as to whether the argument *The Confidence Man* serves as social criticism or expresses outright nihilism. The work of Thompson, Levin, and Miller suggests that a kind of nihilism is behind Melville’s message. Warner Berthoff, however, argues that the novel reflects an optimistic turn in Melville’s oeuvre, asserting that the novel’s uncertainties actually promote discourse about social ills and advocate kindness.<sup>15</sup> All of this critical disagreement led John Bryant to conclude that no critical position on the novel will ever prevail.<sup>16</sup>

The foundation of nationalism is a kind of confidence—confidence that ideals and symbols connect people across time and space, class, race, and gender. In *The Confidence Man* Melville attempts to make the point that one can never really extend confidence without being betrayed or victimized in some way, at least where human-constructed institutions are concerned.

The human construction that takes the brunt of Melville’s wrath is language itself. Language is

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<sup>13</sup> Though, interestingly enough. The most successful confidence man of the nineteenth century, P. T. Barnum, was himself conned—and nearly ruined—by Chauncey Jerome of the Jerome clock company.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion on the difference between satire and humor, see Vern Wagner’s *The Suspension of Henry Adams: A Study of Manner and Matter*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969. p. 17

<sup>15</sup> Berthoff, Warner. “Herman Melville: *The Confidence-Man*.” *Landmarks of American Writing*. Ed. Hennig Cohen. New York: Basic Books, 1969. 121-133.

<sup>16</sup> See Bryant, John. “*The Confidence-Man*: Melville’s Problem Novel.” *A Companion to Melville Studies*. Ed. John Bryant. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986. 315-350.



no mere means to communicate or express one's thoughts; it is employed to trick, exploit, and oppress.

Therefore, the book exposes language as being inherently contradictory. If one can use the same words to tell the truth that one can when perpetrating a humbug, language, in a sense, cancels itself out. This is "the Devil's Joke." The confidence man proclaims that "[c]onfidence is the indispensable basis of all sorts of business transactions. Without it, commerce between man and man, as between country and country, would, like a watch, run down and stop" (133). This goes not only for the exchange of money, but for all value-based transactions using human-constructed symbols, of which language is the most highly sophisticated of all. If we cannot trust language to communicate truth, in what can we place our confidence? Yet, language might be the most easily counterfeited system of exchange.

Franklin gets this, too. His portrayal of the Governor Keith fiasco gets right to the heart of the very same vexing problem. Keith persuades seventeen year old Benjamin Franklin to sojourn to England in order to gain more printing experience and expertise, as well as equipment, promising that he will help Franklin set up in business when he returns. Keith assures Franklin that he will provide "letters recommendatory" so that Franklin will get along swimmingly across the pond, along with "letters of credit" with which Franklin will be able to purchase "press, types, paper, &c" (80).

Franklin gives Governor Keith his confidence. After all, he has no reason not to. Upon arrival in England, it becomes clear that Keith did not return the favor. He had sent along no letters of any kind, whether of the "recommendatory" or credit guaranteeing variety. Only after arriving in England had Franklin "began to doubt his sincerity" (83). Franklin's new friend Thomas Denham confirms his growing suspicions about Keith. Franklin writes of Denham,

He let me into Keith's character; told me there was not the least probability that he had written any letters for me; that no one, who knew him, had the smallest dependence on him; and he laugh at the notion of the governor's giving me a letter of credit, having, as he said, no credit to give. (84)

Keith can offer neither character nor credit, both stand-ins for “confidence.” By speaking to Franklin in the same way he would have if he were he sincere, he betrays Franklin’s confidence and, more importantly, undermines confidence in the sanctity of language. If we don’t have any faith in any linguistic transactions, what are we then left with. It would be a more catastrophic situation than if we lost faith in currency.

Franklin’s response to Keith’s betrayal indicates that he comprehends as much. Yet he is not devastated. He responds to the unsavory and imposing situation he finds himself in—having no confidence and no credit—by simply dismissing the episode with this unfazed assessment:

[W]hat 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 everybody; 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 passed during his administration. (85)

Franklin realizes that having confidence in language sets one up for the con. Passages from both *Poor Richard* and the *Autobiography* prove as much. When *Poor Richard* writes in “The Way to Wealth” about hearing Father Abraham lecture to a group of people outside an auction based on his own writings, he feels pride even though “The people heard it, and

approved the doctrine, and immediately practiced the contrary.” And at the beginning of the *Autobiography*, almost immediately after Franklin has asserted that reading the following pages might enable others to imitate his rags-to-riches ascension, Franklin admits,

I shall indulge the inclination so natural in old men, to be talking of themselves and their own past actions; and I shall indulge it without being tiresome to others, who, through respect to age, might conceive themselves obliged to give me a hearing, since this may be read or not as any one pleases. (2)

Just as in “The Way to Wealth,” Franklin asserts the seriousness of his project, then admits that perhaps it’s not all that important. It does, after all, consist of language. Yet Franklin knows that belief in language’s infallibility is not a prerequisite for using it, or, on the other hand for believing in its power to transform the individual and the nation.

Melville understands the infallibility of language the same way Franklin does. He even employs similar ways of dealing with it: by demonstrating how it undermines itself. He just responds to it differently. Whereas Franklin acknowledges and embraces its power, as does Emerson, Melville acknowledges but fights against it. Melville’s take here, though, contrary to Franklin’s, is a dark one: that stories provide us with illusions that prohibit us from accessing truth.

The way the con game works shows not only how language can be manipulated, but how language use makes truth inaccessible. The pattern is established early in the novel with the “black guinea,” but is perhaps most perfectly in the encounter between “the man with the weed”<sup>17</sup> and Mr. Roberts. Mr. Roberts has witnessed the scene in which the confidence man poses as the crippled “black guinea” to beg for charity. “The man with the weed” approaches

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<sup>17</sup> All of these characters, with the exception of Mr. Roberts, are incarnations of the Confidence Man. “The man with the weed” is how the narrator identifies the incarnation distinguished by “a long weed on his hat” (26).

him alone, claiming to be an old acquaintance. Mr. Roberts is certain he has never seen the man with the weed before, but this plays into the con perfectly. Mr. Roberts admits having doubted the legitimacy of the black guinea's claims, and, as a result, to having denied him charity. The man with the weed claims he has already spoken to the crowd and vouched for the black guinea, saying "I think I abated their distrust" (26).

The man with the weed, now introducing himself as "John Ringman," plays mind games with Mr. Roberts, arguing that perhaps his memory is failing him if he doesn't remember their past acquaintance. He makes his first request for "confidence" when he argues "didn't you admit . . . that some things in this memory of yours is a little faithless? Now, those who have faithless memories, should they not have some little confidence in the less faithless memories of others?" (27).

Ringman has planted a hybrid seed of doubt and guilt in Roberts's mind. Roberts begins to doubt the accuracy of his memories and feels guilty for disbelieving the black guinea. He is, thus, vulnerable to a con because he's wary of making another decision based on distrust. To remove the remaining doubts from the mind of Roberts, Ringman talks constantly, quelling Roberts's interruptions and objections and giving him little room for reflective thoughts. Ringman then tells Roberts that he, too, is a mason, which gives them a commonality.

Launching into a hard-luck story, Ringman elicits the confidence and sympathy of Roberts. Roberts gives him a bank note, but that's not good enough for the confidence man. He knows he has Roberts right where he wants him. Once Roberts has committed to displaying confidence in him, the confidence man pounces even harder. He sets him up for another scam, giving him a stock tip, and makes an op-ed style argument about confidence in general. "You must admit," Ringman says to Roberts, that just now, an unpleasant distrust, however vague, was

yours. Ah, how subtle a thing is suspicion, which at times can invade the humanest of hearts and wisest of heads” (31-32). Hence, having lied to Robarts, Ringman convinces him not only to extend confidence (and, of course, charity) but to believe in future cons. Belief in the manipulation of language in the form of both rhetoric and outright lies has set up Roberts for further vulnerability in the future.

If only Mr. Roberts could listen to Melville instead of the confidence man. Through satire Melville is trying to expose the paradox of all confidence in human constructions. Confidence plays a particularly important role in America, where the capitalist ethic is centered on exchange and competition between individuals. At one point Melville has his confidence man, in the guise of “the cosmopolitan” Frances Goodman, exclaim in frustration with the staunch resistance “the misanthrope”, “Ah, now, irony is so unjust; never could abide irony; something Satanic about irony. God defend me from Irony, and Satire, his bosom friend” (142). This is how Melville makes his argument that only irony and satire expose the con.

If not specifically satire, then Melville is a promoter of fiction as the only way to express truth. He writes, in one of the chapters that could be considered a kind of omniscient narrator commentary, that:

fiction, where every character can, by reason of its consistency, be comprehended at a glance, either exhibits but sections of character, making them appear for wholes, or else is very untrue to reality; while, on the other hand, that author who draws a character, even though to common view incongruous in its parts, as the flying-squirrel, and, at different periods, as much at variance with itself as the butterfly is with the caterpillar into which it changes, may yet, in so doing, be not false but faithful to facts. (75)

It is nature, the novel argues, that produces “inconsistent characters.” Fiction gets at reality because it admits that it creatively manipulates and uses language, and because its greatest practitioners, via their insight into the way language operates and ingenuity of craft, achieve “the revelation of human nature” (76). And this, to expose the illusions of nature and humanity, for Melville, is the utmost anyone can do.

g. Pulled Thus Hither and Thither, How Dost One Knowest Thou, Benjamin?

All of these dialogues with and revisions of Franklin by the practitioners of American Romanticism are attempts to appropriate or manipulate the father of the American success story. Irving’s proposal of an alternative to the industrious American serves to paint Franklin into a corner. To Irving, Franklin is the embodiment of the new American model of masculinity that has gained cultural authority. To Emerson, Franklin provides a model for how to take philosophy and apply it to practical matters; through Franklin, Emerson thinks, one can develop a kind of life philosophy, living what one thinks or modeling one’s philosophy by the way one conducts oneself. And to Melville, Franklin represents a symbolic hero of a shallow American mythology that Melville tries to expose.

In at least the way Emerson and Melville represent or take influence from Franklin, there’s evidence that they understand his irony and therefore see that he is a complex figure in a way that less analytical readers might not and will not. Emerson, of course, attributes Franklin with having and practicing a spiritually enriching philosophy, rather than just being a practical materialist with no interest in anything spiritual. In Melville’s case, he understands that Franklin was complex and that his expressions of self are tempered with irony and humor. Melville writes, “This casual private intercourse with Israel, but served to manifest him in his far lesser

lights; thrifty, domestic, dietarian, and, it may be, didactically waggish. There was much benevolent irony, innocent mischievousness, in the wise man” (82). Having done Franklin what he thinks is an injustice, he sets the record straight: “Having carefully weighed the world, Franklin could act any part in it. By nature turned to knowledge, his mind was often grave, but never serious. At times he had seriousness—extreme seriousness—for others, but never for himself” (82). He even goes further, feeling an obvious responsibility to apologize for the way he has portrayed Franklin in the novel. Ultimately he goes out of his way to qualify his characterization and praise Franklin:

Printer, postmaster, almanac maker, essayist, chemist, orator, tinker, statesman, humorist, philosopher, parlor man, political economist, professor of housewifery, ambassador, projector, maxim-monger, herb-doctor, wit:—Jack of all trades, master of each and mastered by none—the type and genius of his land. Franklin was everything but a poet. But since a soul with many qualities, forming of itself a sort of handy index and pocket congress of all humanity, needs the contact of just as many different men, or subjects, in order to the exhibition of its totality; hence very little indeed of the sage's multifariousness will be portrayed in a simple narrative like the present. (82)

Yet this is a little like a lawyer in a courtroom who knows that what he says will be stricken from the record. Nothing said can ever be taken back. It's out there. Having portrayed Franklin as “thrifty, domestic, dietarian, and, it may be, didactically waggish,” the founding father can thus be thought of as such.

And there's the rub. Each of these representations serves to reduce Franklin from his complex self to a simpler figure. Perhaps this is the crime of language. Paul de Man says about

the autobiographer that the translation of life into words “defaces” the life. Fault aside, Irving, Emerson, and Melville make it possible for those who follow them to reduce Franklin’s complexity to synecdoches. Rather than a complex whole, Franklin becomes a caricature of humorless, un-ironic parts, all of which allows a mistaken assessment of him. In 1868, *Nation* magazine asserted that “[m]ankind divides into two classes . . . natural-born lovers and natural born haters of Benjamin Franklin” (qtd. in Isaacson, 476). Unfortunately for the legacy of Franklin, both classes base their estimations of Franklin on narrow and limited perceptions.



CHAPTER 4  
MADE CAPITAL: DOUGLASS, FRANKLIN, AND THE  
MID-CENTURY MARKETPLACE

a. Introduction

Emerson and Melville both seem to recognize in Franklin more complexity than those who follow them, who, like Frederick Jackson Turner, boiled Franklin down to an exemplar of common sense, ignoring his literary brilliance and complexity. Turner writes in *The Dial* in 1887 that “[Franklin’s] life is the story of American common-sense in its highest form, applied to business, to politics, to science, to diplomacy, to religion, to philanthropy. Turner goes on to say that as an “apostle of the practical and the useful,” he stands alongside Washington and Lincoln as the three greatest Americans. Most notably, Turner proclaims that, in American style, they “achieved their success not so much by brilliancy of the higher intellectual powers as by their personal character” (275). Though intended to flatter, Turner’s commentary downplays Franklin’s “higher intelligence” in favor of his “character,” which makes him more of a simple good natured fellow than an exceptionally brilliant and charismatic one. In Turner’s judgment, Franklin accomplished astounding things not because he was smarter and more capable than everyone else, but because he was hard-working, trustworthy, honest, etc...—all the things we associate with good personal character. Turner, like so many of us, wants to explain Franklin successes rationally, to attribute to them a simple cause and effect relationship within the context

of the American worldview, a worldview seemingly committed to the illusion that hard work invariably leads to success. As if out of sheer willful stubbornness, we want to ignore that Franklin did extraordinary things because he was extraordinary. Franklin didn't just out-virtue us, he was an extremely rare combination of smarts, creativity, charm, and talent.

Emerson and Melville seem to at least in some way recognize the complexity and brilliance of Franklin, so how does he become so inextricably associated with practicality? While he may have inspired philosophical thought or characters in the fictional or metaphysical nineteenth century world of ideas, Franklin is most obviously and frequently appropriated by purveyors of the most "real" or common and seemingly grounded of all literary forms, autobiography. Simply put, efforts to represent Franklin as a complex figure interested in the philosophical as well as the material lose out to texts that served to simplify him by their resemblance to his narrative conventions in the *Autobiography*. Perhaps—and this is true even for Emerson and Melville—the practical, common sense Franklin serves writers' rhetorical purposes more effectively than the brilliant, ironic, complex Franklin.

It certainly makes sense that in a country with so many people so invested in creating the perception that the country lives up to its founding principles that Franklin's model of success would become a foundational text. And it plays out that, over the course of the nineteenth century, his narrative becomes the blueprint for the American success autobiography. Most vividly, we can recognize Franklin's narrative in one of the most famous and influential autobiographers of the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass. Douglass was profoundly engaged in the practical matters of his day, whether by force or choice. Therefore it is logical that Douglass would adopt the Franklinian model of practicality and common sense, rather than his stylistic irony and wit.

At the same time, there is evidence that much of the American public in the nineteenth century eschewed the more metaphysically focused work of the Transcendentalists and Romantic writers. Correspondence between and by Melville and Hawthorne reveals frustration with the public, who seemed either interested in literature for sheer entertainment or vapid sentimentality. Hawthorne's angst about selling fewer books than the likes of E. D. E. N. Southworth, Susan Warner, and Catherine Maria Sedgwick led him, in a letter to his editor, to exclaim infamously that "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed."

In her memoirs, *Bits of Gossip*, published in 1904, Rebecca Harding Davis calls "Emerson, Hawthorne, and the other members of the 'Atlantic' coterie,"<sup>1</sup> "memorable ghosts," writing critically of them that "while they thought they were guiding the real world, they stood quite outside of it, and never would see it as it was" (32). Fair or unfair, Davis has a point. Having spent most of her life in Alabama, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania, she met the writers and intellectuals she calls the "Atlantic coterie" on a tour of New England during the Civil War. Making their acquaintance proved to be a formative experience for her. She was struck by the way in which Emerson and his milieu spoke of the war, which she felt signaled a level of sheltered detachment from war and other grim realities of American life. She writes, "Whether Alcott, Emerson, and their disciples discussed pears or the war, their views gave you the same sense of unreality, of having been taken . . . at too long a range" (36). They were, in other words, impractical.

Davis's impression of Emerson et al. represents a viewpoint that the practical and impractical are at odds in America and that never the twain shall meet. The critic Max Eastman

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<sup>1</sup> Davis did not meet Melville or Irving.

argues that people can be divided between the “practical,” or those “chiefly occupied with attaining ends,” and the “poetic,” or those interested in “receiving experiences” (qtd. in Whipple 4). T. K. Whipple would later pursue this dichotomy for the purposes of more deeply exploring American character. Whipple admits that he thinks Eastman’s categorizations are oversimplified. It is too reductive, he thinks, to assert that everyone fits neatly into either of these categories. Americans do, however, he theorizes and concludes, tend to prioritize or be inclined toward one approach or the other.

Whipple characterizes these categories as “practical temper” and the “poetic temper.” Though Davis’s criticism wasn’t exactly an argument against a “poetic temper,” she is arguing for an engagement with the real, rather than with just ideas and ideals. Her assertions bear more precisely on the turn from Romanticism to Realism. But this change in literary tastes is in some sense a response to the same anxiety over the relationship of ideas to actuality. Should we be more attentive to practical matters, which center on personal achievement, or to experience? Her response is an endorsement of literary Realism, which took as its subject matter the “real world” and sought as its aesthetic the portrayal of the world “as it was.” Romanticism and Transcendentalism, according to Davis, were not engaged enough with reality.

In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler describes American Romanticism as a form that features not class struggle, but struggle between exceptional individuals and conventional society. Rather than struggling from within society, the main character escapes, taking a dispossessed companion with him, thus linking himself spiritually with the marginalized “other.” Hence, the writer of romance is focused on the alienation of the exceptional individual (the writer himself), for whom the most profound—to use Melville’s

phrase—“matters of the universe” pinball around his consciousness while the rest of the world celebrates the ever more alienating wave of progress.

Thus, the Romantic novel is an anti-bourgeois expression in which the main character, like the author, feels both part of—and estranged from—the middle class and rejects his socially prescribed role to embark on a quest for answers as to why the world is so alienating. For example, in *The Blithedale Romance* Hollingsworth is both seducer of the vulnerable woman and rejecter of domesticity, while Coverdale is wracked with guilt for his role as potential seducer; in *Moby-Dick* Ishmael is running away from domesticity altogether; in *Walden*, Thoreau runs from domesticity, too, not by boarding a ship but by holing up in the woods because the world is so screwed up; and in *Typee*, Tommo pulls off the rare double-escape, deserting his whaling ship for an island in the Marquesas and then, while seeing the obvious advantages to sailing the glass-smooth water of an island lagoon with the naked Fayaway, feels guilty about not feeling guilty, and thus decides to run away from the Typee, too.

Like these Romantic heroes, Ben Franklin, too, ran away. He left Boston behind and, with it, his family and all that was holding him back. As such, his autobiographical story is, like the Romantic escape novel, a quest narrative. Franklin is clearly running away from conditions he finds frustratingly oppressive. But he is not just running away to something ambiguous and indefinite. He is running toward something specific: success. Thus, his story lends itself easily to the would-be practical hero narrative by highlighting the difference between running away *to* something and running away *from* something. While it is true that he doesn't know his exact destiny, he is running away to a fairly specific set of opportunities. He has acquired a skill that he knows will translate to both material and personal success. And success, in this case, seems measurable by the attaining of ends. Thus, he comes to be seen as an icon of the practical

minded—the epitome of the new American, Puritan-derived emphasis on tangible personal achievement as the measure of success, valuing experience not for its own sake, but only for what it could possibly help him attain.

Emerson and Melville both see Franklin as a more complex figure, perhaps even a combination of the dialectical thesis and antithesis. Yet, both culturally and theoretically, this is an impossible line to straddle. One need only acknowledge all the dialectical formations of the mid-nineteenth century to recognize the difficulty of doing so. There's the “yea-sayer” and “nay-sayer”<sup>2</sup> intellectual and artistic response to social ills. Melville's “Benito Cereno” and *The Confidence Man* both employ a dialectical rhetorical structure between belief and disbelief with no resolved synthesis. Perhaps the Romantic movement even emerged as a way to provide a dialectical balance, if not a resolution to the limitations of this new practicality

Historically, not only did the war bring the difference between the physical and metaphysical into harsh relief, the industrial take-off and the onset of the Gilded Age divided the country philosophically into wealth-seekers and their critics who advocated a spiritually richer or more exploratory approach to life. Then, of course, there's the dialectical split I have been talking about between the practical and experiential. The mainstream victory of the practical-minded worldview precipitated the recruitment of Franklin into this camp. And assertions from the leader of Transcendentalism and arguably the chief practitioner of Romanticism would not be able to save Franklin from being labeled the face of American practicality, especially since both of their texts allow readers to see Franklin as such a one dimensional character. No one considered so disconnected from the “real world” could ever convince us that Franklin had concerns outside of—or, more precisely, *above*—it.

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<sup>2</sup> Derived from Thomas Carlyle's notion of the “everlasting yea and no” in *Sartor Resartus*.

If Romanticism represented a kind of “antithesis” to the practical “thesis” position in a dialectical relationship, and if Realism attempted to occupy the space of “synthesis,” we should also recognize autobiography as a kind of creative narrative writing that reflected this emphasis on the practical and that pre-dated the late-century shift in literary tastes from Romanticism to Realism.

Autobiography might be seen as a synthesis between experiential and acquisitive priorities. Autobiography relates experiences, reflects on the value of those experiences, and asserts how those experiences led the author to successful self-actualization or just plain material success. In America, however, it is a form that tracks, as Franklin put it in the opening lines of the *Autobiography*, the trek from “poverty and obscurity” to “affluence and some degree of reputation in the world.” In this case it takes on a decidedly practical aspect because it has a fixed endpoint of clearly defined success, which in America almost always boils down to financial prosperity more than epiphany.

That doesn’t mean, however, that pursuing the practical over the experiential signifies greed or even materialism. The choice is not always a shallow one. On the contrary, necessity and lofty ideals often require one to focus on the practical. In his autobiographies, Frederick Douglass adopts the narrative conventions invented by Franklin in his success autobiography to achieve practical means, melding Franklin’s practical philosophy with the real circumstances of his times. From *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) to *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) to *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, then supplemented and reissued in 1892),<sup>3</sup> Douglass’s representation of his life’s story becomes more and more

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<sup>3</sup> Citations from these texts are taken from the following editions: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Two, Volume One*. Ed. by John W. Blassingame. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. (Cited in text as *N.*) *My Bondage and My Freedom. The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Two Volume Two*. Ed. by John W. Blassingame. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. (Cited

Franklinian with each telling. Douglass's story is connected to both exchange and race, both of which are, in a way, market phenomena. Over each of his autobiographies, he presents un-ironic retellings of Franklin's rags-to-riches success story. In the process of doing so, his worldview evolves, and as it does he recruits Franklin into the camp of the practical, reducing his complexity and thereby participating in the process of his systemic character assassination.

#### b. Abolitionist Hero?

The practical application for Douglass's autobiographies is obviously that they shed light on the cruel inhumanity of slavery. While there were many ways to argue against slavery (including sentimental and religious appeals a la Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), the most effective way for abolitionists to do so was to employ the slave's own voice in order to represent the institution as fundamentally un-American. The rhetorical structure was staring everyone in the country right in the face: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The inclusiveness of "all men" could only be circumvented by faulty logic or illogic. Abolitionist leaders realized this, and thereby sought to humanize slaves by urging them to tell their stories from their own perspectives and by assisting them with the construction of slave narratives. For Douglass, this abolitionist mentor was William Lloyd Garrison, who Douglass met at an anti-slavery convention on Nantucket in 1841. Garrison heard Douglass speak and recognized the talent and potential before him.

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in-text as *MB*. *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1962. (Cited in-text as *LT*.)



In his autobiographies, Douglass represents himself as never having planned on becoming such an influential leader, and having done so largely by a “right place at the right time” accident. But the success hero never misses an opportunity. And as Douglass’s narrative suggests, opportunities are created. Douglass writes in *My Bondage* that, in the summer of 1841, while living in New Bedford, Massachusetts, he attended the Convention of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society on Nantucket Island. A fellow New Bedford resident, William C. Coffin spotted Douglass in the crowd. Having overheard Douglass in New Bedford speaking about his life to some other freed and escaped slaves, Coffin invited Douglass to address the crowd about his experiences as a slave and about his impressions of the convention. This would be Douglass’s first anti-slavery speech.

He was nervous and apprehensive, but emerged from the experience empowered. He recalls not remembering “a single sentence” (*My Bondage* 205<sup>4</sup>). His nerves nearly buckled his knees and, as he said, made it impossible for him to “articulate two words together without hesitation and stammering” (*MB* 206). Yet he got through the speech and it was a huge success. The crowd, he explains, “became as much excited as myself” (*MB* 206).

Spurred by the heightened emotion of the crowd, William Lloyd Garrison followed Douglass’s speech with one of his own that, according to Douglass, was regarded by those present and who knew and had seen Garrison speak before, to be exceptionally astonishing in its brilliance. Douglass’s description of the scene testifies to the personal transformation he experienced that day when he realized the potential of public speaking:

It was an effort of unequalled power, sweeping down, like a very tornado, every opposing barrier, whether of sentiment or opinion. For a moment, he possessed

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<sup>4</sup> Hereafter, if the citations from Douglass’s autobiographies are not clear, the *Narrative* will be distinguished as “*N*”, *My Bondage* as “*MB*,” and the *Life and Times* as “*LT*”.

that almost fabulous inspiration, often referred to but seldom attained, in which a public meeting is transformed, as it were, into a single individuality -- the orator wielding a thousand heads and hearts at once, and by the simple majesty of his all controlling thought, converting his hearers into the express image of his own soul.

That night there were at least one thousand Garrisonians in Nantucket! (*MB* 206)

The occasion of Douglass's first speech roused similar enthusiasm in Garrison, who called it a "most fortunate occurrence" for "the millions of his manacled brethren" who fight against slavery, and for the cause of freedom itself, which Garrison called "the great work of breaking the rod of the oppressor, and letting the oppressed go free!" (*N* 3). Douglass was asked by the society to join them and to become an abolitionist spokesperson. Only reluctantly did he consent, and for a period of three months, for he feared exposure and arrest, and had as well a lack of confidence in his oratorical abilities.

This three month commitment would turn into decades, as Douglass became the most prominent African American opponent of slavery and other social injustices of his time. Much of his success was based on his skill as an orator. Garrison asserted that "Patrick Henry . . . never made a speech more eloquent in the cause of liberty" and that "[a]s a public speaker, he excels in pathos, wit, comparison, imitation, strength of reasoning, and fluency of language" (*N* 4).

As Garrison's introduction to the *Narrative* makes it clear, however, some witnesses of Douglass's speeches doubted the authenticity of his recollections. In order to give credence to his public claims, Douglass wrote an autobiography, even naming names in order to back up his claims of authenticity. It was most important to the abolitionist cause that its chief spokesmen—and especially its eyewitnesses—be credible. Revelations that the earlier published slave narratives *The Memoirs of Archy Moore* and the *Narrative of James Williams* were fictional

accounts written by white northern abolitionists embarrassed and undermined the anti-slavery cause, for they allowed pro-slavery advocates to argue that abolitionists had to fabricate slave narratives in order to make them shocking. Conditions for slaves, they said, were not as bad as abolitionists claimed. In addition, Douglass's eloquence as a speaker sparked charges from doubters that he "was not a runaway slave, but some educated free negro, whom the abolitionists had sent forth to attract attention to what was called ... a faltering cause" (N xxx).

Douglass's *Narrative*, then, served primarily to support the truth of the claims he made about slavery in his speeches and to explain how he came to be an eloquent and moving speaker. Needing a model text, however, and an American one at that, Douglass adopts the conventions Franklin invented in his *Autobiography*. Douglass constructs a self who ascends from the humblest, even the most depraved, of origins, to freedom and the beginnings of success. He accomplishes this ascent in the same way Franklin does, by educating himself, running away, and being opportunistic, diligent, and industrious. In his subsequent autobiographies, Douglass constructs an increasingly Franklinian self, a hero of the American success myth.

The critical field reflects this emphasis on Douglass as a constructor of and as a constructed aesthetic self. William L. Andrews notes that Dickson J. Preston's 1980 biography *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years* sparked a shift in how critics viewed Douglass from a figure through which to gain historical insight to what Henry Louis Gates calls "a creature of language"—that is, an artist, a "language-using" creator of self to achieve a purpose. Houston Baker follows with a thoughtful inquiry into the painful ironies inherent with this new way of seeing Douglass as an artist. Baker points out that since there is no distinct black language with which to represent the slave's story that Douglass's story of self-making is limited. Noticing that the absence of another conventional structure with which to conceive of oneself, Baker writes,

“The voice of the unwritten self, once it is subjected to the linguistic codes, literary conventions, and audience expectations of a literate population, is perhaps never again the authentic voice of black American slavery” (43). The audience Baker refers to is, of course, white. Thus the very rhetoric the slave used to describe the inhumanity of slavery simultaneously limits his or her ability to process the cruelty in any other social context, and thus appropriates the teller for the perpetuation of its own grand design.

Eric J. Sundquist has examined the revisions Douglass makes between the 1845 *Narrative* and 1855’s *My Bondage*, arguing that the latter appropriates the rhetorical language and structures of both white and black American revolutionaries. In doing so, Sundquist claims, Douglass “clarifies his complex process of self-definition as an *American* who happens to have been a slave of African descent” (85). Thus, Douglass has embarked on a project of *revising* his “self” into a distinctly and characteristically American self rather than a victim of an American system. *My Bondage*, Sundquist claims, looked ahead to *The Life and Times*, in which Douglass would present his life as the model American success story, proving not only to African Americans, but all Americans who begin from a place of disadvantage, that self-made success is possible in America.

James Olney and others have argued that *The Life and Times* fails as a result of its lack of revolutionary power.<sup>5</sup> Edward Tang’s assessment of *The Life and Times* is more valuable. Tang argues that “[t]he subject matter of Douglass’s life in post-Civil War America followed this less-than-revolutionary path when he became compromised by his rise to power within official structures of federal governance” (20). Tang points to the government patronage from which Douglass benefitted as a source of his softening polemical voice, concluding that “Douglass’s

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<sup>5</sup> Olney, James. “The Founding Fathers: Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington,” in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

personal successes . . . distanced him from the difficult economic and social realities still facing many African Americans in the late nineteenth century” (21). For this reason, the *Life and Times* projects a much more Franklin character, one committed to the American mindset rather than the polemical critic a la the Douglass of the *Narrative*.

Alexis de Tocqueville’s observances about American democracy might provide a useful framework with which to conceptualize what happens to Douglass. Tocqueville argues that democracy “does not break will, but it softens them; it rarely forces one to act, but it constantly opposes itself to one’s acting; it does not destroy, it prevents things from being born.” The effect of American ideological apparatuses on Douglass can be evinced in the softening of his combative style and in his championing of the more traditional American avenues like optimism and work ethic as means to self-actualization and self-worth, rather than defiance and self-defense. In effect, Douglass becomes a character in an American story, rather than in his own. And in the process he influences others’ to perceive Franklin as more dryly didactic than richly ironic.

c. Not Quite Benjamin: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Douglass’s purpose in writing *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in 1845 is fairly straightforward. He intended for his self-produced story to aid in the cause of emancipation, a cause for which he had been lecturing and speaking from 1841 to 1845. As Douglass became more and more popular and influential, it was important to the cause for him to prove that the experiences he related during his public speaking engagements were authentic.

This is an extraordinary circumstance for a man to find himself in. Douglass had been born a slave and had lived as property for twenty years. Not so far removed, he began speaking

publicly against the institution that had attempted to deny him his humanity. It was an amazing turn of events. Yet still he encountered forces that would deny his legitimacy, only in this case they were attempting to deny not his freedom, but his path to freedom. Here he was, once again, fighting to be accepted as a self-actualized American man. It is only logical that in America, submerged in American culture, one would fit his story to the nation's mythology. It is a phenomenon akin to adopting any dominant ideology, such as religion. Since Franklin's was the most American of stories, Douglass employs its conventions.

Like Franklin, Douglass starts from nothing, responds to unjust or oppressive circumstances by developing his intellectual and practical capacities, runs away from his home amidst threats of violence, and with a combination of pluck, opportunism, and hard work, becomes both wealthy and famous. This is not to deny the reality of Douglass's suffering, only to say that Franklin's narrative design provides Douglass both with a way to process and express his own experiences in narrative form. Without the ingenuity of Franklin's autobiographical design, Douglass would've had to seek a different set of generic parameters from within which to create.

First, like Franklin, he emphasizes his—to use an understatement—humble beginnings. Franklin's starting point, "poverty and obscurity," while a disadvantage, at least presupposes his humanness. Douglass's beginning, meanwhile, is even more restrictive than Franklin's. He is not only devoid of the freedom to make himself, but also from the typical bases from which people formulate an identity. "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it" (12). Douglass continues,

My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father;

but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me.” (12)

Not only was Douglass deprived of such information as his birth date and the name of his father, he also asserts that “I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night” (13).

Franklin universalizes his story by intimating that anyone who employed the “conducting means” by which he achieves success can do the same by imitating him. Similarly, in the *Narrative* both Garrison’s remarks and Douglass’s narrative technique universalize Douglass’s experience as a slave. Garrison argues,

The experience of FREDERICK DOUGLASS, as a slave, was not a peculiar one; his lot was not especially a hard one; his case may be regarded as a very fair specimen of the treatment of slaves in Maryland, in which State it is conceded that they are better fed and less cruelly treated than in Georgia, Alabama, or Louisiana. Many have suffered incomparably more, while very few on the plantations have suffered less, than himself. (7)

Garrison even ventures to interpret the text for us, saying “how deplorable was his situation! what terrible chastisements were inflicted upon his person! what still more shocking outrages were perpetrated upon his mind!” (7).

Douglass accomplishes as much in the rhetorical design of his narrative voice, which shifts from personal accounts to more expository, journalistic, and emotionally neutral reporting. In one instance when he witnesses a particularly horrifyingly violent act, he reveals his innermost fears: “I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be

my turn next” (15). A few lines later, he describes what life is like not just for himself, but for all slaves:

There were no beds given the slaves, unless one coarse blanket be considered such, and none but the men and women had these. This, however, is not considered a very great privation. They find less difficulty from the want of beds, than from the want of time to sleep; for when their day's work in the field is done, the most of them having their washing, mending, and cooking to do, and having few or none of the ordinary facilities for doing either of these, very many of their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing for the field the coming day; and when this is done, old and young, male and female, married and single, drop down side by side, on one common bed,—the cold, damp floor,—each covering himself or herself with their miserable blankets; and here they sleep till they are summoned to the field by the driver's horn. (17)

Here Douglass relates his plight to that of all slaves. He is a “representative man, but not in the Emersonian, myth-of-success, mode—at least not yet. Rather, in the *Narrative* he is more literally representative in that his story resembles the story of countless other slaves.

By telling his story and, by implication, the story of all slaves, Douglass’s autobiography serves as a performative utterance<sup>6</sup> in the sense that it does not *describe* something—a life (or lives) in this case—as *do* something, which is to prove, in its very presence, the existence of a life of its creator and those who are referred to within it. To illustrate, we might extend Descartes maxim by adding an independent introductory clause in order to include the writing of autobiography not as simply a statement or description of living, but evidence of thinking, which is undeniably human: *I write*; therefore I think; therefore I am. Slave narratives nearly always

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<sup>6</sup> I’m taking the notion of “performative utterance” from J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*.



function this way, because the essential humanness of their authors has been cast into doubt by the slave system. In Douglass's case, his autobiography proves that he is who he says he is on the lecture circuit, while simultaneously proving that what happens to slaves is an injustice. And it does so in a way that a fictional story, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, cannot.<sup>7</sup>

Franklin consistently espouses the virtues of self improvement. He reads anything and everything he can get his hands on. He soaks up knowledge like a sponge about the printing trade while apprenticing under his brother. He sets up educational groups to expand his knowledge of all kinds of subjects. Most of all, he sees every day and every event in his life as a potential learning experience. Later in his life he commits to a self-improvement program that, while imbued with obvious and hilarious irony by calling it his "Project at achieving Moral Perfection," does reflect on his part a desire to be the best he can be.

In comparison, Douglass too sought education and points to it as a source of empowerment. First, he cites learning to read as one of the first things that made clear to him his status as a victim of injustice and oppression. It was Hugh Auld's scolding of his wife for teaching Douglass "the A, B, C" that first made Douglass aware of the power of education. Douglass recollects Auld's lecture to his wife:

if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy. (29)

This event was a major awakening for Douglass, one of the landmark moments in his intellectual development. Douglass recalls remembering how "[t]hese words sank deep into my

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<sup>7</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is effective because it appeals to sentiment. While slave narratives no doubt similarly appeal to sentiment, they also assert humanity in the way that I've just suggested.

heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought” (29). It was truly a moment of learning. Douglass explains: “I now understood . . . the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted. . . I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master” (29). Douglass takes from the experience a new resolve. “I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read” (29).

Denied teaching from Sophia Auld, Douglass seeks and finds instruction elsewhere, being, as he says “compelled to resort to various stratagems” (31). In doing so, he displays shrewdness that rivals Franklin’s, at one point even cleverly tricking neighborhood boys into spelling their names and thereby enabling him to associate phonetic sounds with their corresponding letters from the alphabet. Like Franklin, Douglass provides details about what he read, citing the “Columbian Orator” and specifically Sheridan’s speeches on behalf of Catholic emancipation as being important and influential to him. Indeed, reading empowered Douglass the way it did Franklin, though for Douglass empowerment was a means to self-possession, not just to possession. “The reading of these documents,” he proclaims, “enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery” (33). Auld’s fears about slaves learning to read was in fact borne out. Douglass writes, “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers” (33).

However, in the midst of his relative comfort as a domestic slave, a turn of unfortunate events lands Douglass back on a Maryland farm where he is again subjected to absolutely horrific violence. This time, however, the violence is inflicted on him personally. The perpetrator is the cruel overseer, Edward Covey. Besides the shocking cruelty of Covey, which far surpasses that of Ben Franklin’s brother James, the obvious outrage readers feel towards Covey as a result,

and the violent response it brings out in Douglass, these episodes function similarly to Franklin's narrative in that they are devices that move the plot forward. Franklin runs away, and Douglass's escape is inevitable once he begins to formulate runaway plots. Besides, we know from the *Narrative's* introduction that Douglass ran away before we actually read about it in the context of his story.

Lastly, like Franklin, a combination of pluck, opportunism, and hard work, leaves Douglass at the end of the *Narrative* on the precipice of worldwide fame and success.

Yet, even though the *Narrative* borrows the generic conventions from Franklin's *Autobiography*, it is the least Franklinian of Douglass's three autobiographies. Primarily this is a function of Douglass pathos appeals. Douglass's tone is angry and aggressively accusatory, more viciously critical than celebratory of America.

#### d. Getting Warmer: *My Bondage and My Freedom* Moving toward Myth

The *Narrative* is the version of Douglass's life featuring a hero that least fits the model of the American myth of success. But that's because it isn't supposed to; it's an anti-slavery document in which Douglass's main task was to come off as trustworthy, not a mythic one intended to make him an American hero. And next to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it was the most effective rendering of slavery in the antebellum era.

In contrast, *My Bondage* features a much more, though not entirely, Franklinian hero. Between 1845 and 1855, Douglass's newfound celebrity enabled him to experience much. He travelled through Europe speaking for the emancipation of American slaves. He wrote a fiction novella called *The Heroic Slave*, which was published in 1852. All this lecturing ignited an evolution in his own personal ideology and strategy, and sharpened his rhetorical skills. In *My*

*Bondage*, Douglass's writing is more rhetorically sound, crisp, and theoretical, while retaining the visceral force, if not the rawness, of the *Narrative*.

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, while it may borrow conventions from Franklin's *Autobiography*, is the least Franklinian of Douglass's three autobiographies. In the *Autobiography*, Franklin asserts an archetype, an impersonal, representative example rather than a unique individual. Douglass did as well in the *Narrative*. Douglass represents himself in the *Narrative*, which is guided by the heavy hand of Garrison, as the everyman slave. With *My Bondage*, however, his focus shifts.

The major turning point for Douglass is a changing view of the United States *Constitution*. Garrison believed the *Constitution* to be a document that protected slavery and that was thus unjust and even "evil," famously declaring that it represented "a pact with the devil." When Douglass wrote the *Narrative*, he agreed with Garrison. As late as 1849, Douglass wrote in his abolitionist newspaper *The North Star* that the *Constitution* was a fundamentally flawed document, manipulated by its writers to provide a loophole for slaveholders. It was, he argued, contradictory to its own message.

Liberty and Slavery—opposite as Heaven and Hell--are both in the Constitution; and the oath to support the latter, is an oath to perform that which God has made impossible. The man that swears support to it vows allegiance to two masters--so opposite, that fidelity to one is, necessarily treachery to the other. If we adopt the preamble with Liberty and Justice, we must repudiate the enacting clauses, with Kidnapping and Slaveholding. ("Oath to Support the Constitution" 118)

Influenced by Garrison, Douglass clearly believes at this point that for slavery to be abolished the *Constitution* has to go. However, Garrisonian abolition had become committed to

the universal denunciation of anything connected to slavery, even politics and religion.

Garrison's calls for anyone against slavery to refuse to vote and his anti-government policies went so far as to recommend that the northern states secede from the union. Douglass, however, became persuaded by fellow abolitionist Gerrit Smith that the *Constitution* was fundamentally anti-slavery. Thus, he came to view Garrison's policy of denunciation as impractical and, thus, ineffective.

Instead, he comes to believe that both the *Constitution* and the *Bill of Rights* held the key for emancipation and eventual racial justice in America. According to James Oakes, Douglass took up Smith's doctrine that "[t]he Constitution must be read in light of its Preamble, promising universal freedom, especially since there was no overt reference to slavery" (20). Douglass found an energizing power in his newfound ideas about the founding documents. Contradicting his earlier position, he wrote in the *North Star* in February of 1850 that, since the *Constitution* was an anti-slavery document, it was a tool that should "be wielded in behalf of emancipation." As a result, emancipation could become a political force. He declared that the "first duty of every American citizen . . . [was] to use his *political* as well as his *moral* power" to overthrow slavery (qtd in Oakes 20). Henceforward, Douglass distances himself—both strategically and ideologically—from Garrison, embraces fundamental American principles, and moves toward a mode of self-representation that more closely resembles the Franklinian hero.

He still professes in *My Bondage* that his purpose remains consistent with the narrative, writing, "It is not to illustrate any heroic achievements of a man, but to vindicate a just and beneficent principle, in its application to the whole human family, by letting in the light of truth upon a system, esteemed by some as a blessing, and by others as a curse and a crime" (4).

Thereby, with *My Bondage* Douglass seeks to illuminate the injustice of the American slave

system, given its clear contradictions with the stated principles of human equality in the *Constitution*. But it doesn't take long for Douglass to make it clear that he will be doing more in *My Bondage* than pointing out the paradox of American slavery.

In addition to criticizing America for its hypocrisy with regard to slavery, he will also present a story of the stuff national myths are made, as the "Preface" makes clear in its justification and standard appeal of the success autobiography—that the author has risen from poverty and obscurity to a position of eminence:

There was little necessity for doubt and hesitation on the part of Mr. Douglass, as to the propriety of his giving to the world a full account of himself. A man who was born and brought up in slavery, a living witness of its horrors; who often himself experienced its cruelties; and who, despite the depressing influences surrounding his birth, youth and manhood, has risen, from a dark and almost absolute obscurity, to the distinguished position which he now occupies, might very well assume the existence of a commendable curiosity, on the part of the public, to know the facts of his remarkable history. (6)

Douglass is not only telling a story in attempt to change people's way of thinking about slavery, he's telling an American story. In his introduction to *My Bondage*, James M'Cune Smith, selling Douglass as Benjamin Vaughn sold Franklin, emphasizes the place of Douglass's story in American myth:

When a man raises himself from the lowest condition in society to the highest, mankind pay him the tribute of their admiration; when he accomplishes this elevation by native energy, guided by prudence and wisdom, their admiration is increased; but when his course, onward and upward, excellent in itself,

furthermore proves possible, what had hitherto been regarded as an impossible, reform, then he becomes a burning and a shining light, on which the aged may look with gladness, the young with hope, and the down-trodden, as a representative of what they may themselves become. To such a man, dear reader, it is my privilege to introduce you. (7)

Perhaps it was the response of audiences at anti-slavery rallies in the North that convinced Douglass to change his approach. Douglass shaped his rhetorical strategies according to audience, as John W. Blassingame has shown.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps his change in viewpoint could simply be attributed to the psychic distance that had grown between him and slavery. One way or the other, in the intervening years, Douglass realized he could do more than speak out for the abolition of slavery; he could participate in the establishment of the American myth of the self-made man. Both the life he lived and his skill as a rhetorician would enable him to become this representative American. So he turned his back on the too radical platform of the Garrisonian abolitionists and embraced not just the principles of freedom championed by Franklin and other founding fathers, but the principles of American success, too, though he knew that his incredible slave-to-prominent-American-story had been far more dramatic in both its obstacles and its ascent than Franklin's rags-to-riches-story. So, while Douglass was still focused primarily on emancipation, he had come to believe that the notion that the sentiment expressed by "all men were created equal" was the key to the abolition of slavery and to making oneself in America, regardless of one's birth status. Thus, Douglass made his story an American story, like William Bradford's, like John Smith's, like Franklin's.

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<sup>8</sup> See Blassingame's "Introduction" in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Volume 1, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) xxii-lv.

Though Douglass stood up for his rights, he wasn't exactly a revolutionary, for he worked within the existing democratic system and believed ultimately in its promise. It may be argued, as it is with Booker T. Washington, that he did everything he could given what he had to work with. And I am not criticizing Douglass; to say that his courage, diligence, intellect, and skill make him exceptional would be an understatement. He risked his life for freedom and risked it again to help others gain freedom. He risked his life nearly every time he took the stage to lecture. His famous last minute refusal to join John Brown's revolutionary raid on Harper's Ferry shouldn't be a strike against him. History has both martyred Brown and found him to be insane, and the raid did not work. Douglass should not be faulted for not being there.

Whereas in the *Narrative* Douglass limits his representational capacity to that of all slaves, he, like Franklin, became very well aware over the ensuing ten years of his story's applicability for "the whole human family." Thereby he sought to make the sorts of connections between himself and America that Franklin had. While Franklin very clearly recognizes that he has risen to a state of affluence and fame, which is an understatement, Douglass goes further to cast himself as everyman, saying "I have but little reason to believe that I belong to that fortunate few." Douglass is, of course, referring to his skill as a writer here and is being admirably modest, but the implication is that he does not possess the sort of extraordinary talents that he does in fact possess. But his position implies that he is not more talented than us. Rather he is one of us. So, while he fits the Emersonian notion of the representative man: not the man who represents the common man, but who could be and thereby inspires the common man, who "engage[s] us to new aims and powers . . . [and] introduce[s] moral truths into the general mind . . . [and] exist[s] that there may be greater men," Douglass is encouraging us to identify with him.



Just as Able James and Benjamin Vaughan had done for Franklin, Smith asserts that Douglass should be absolved of all charges of writing *My Bondage and My Freedom* for self-promotion. He has written it, rather “to vindicate a just and beneficent principle” (6). This principle is, of course, the most celebrated of all American principles: that all men are created equal. Moreover, it is Douglass’s life which provides the example of why the principle should be applied to “the whole human family.” It is his success despite his limitations that makes Douglass most American, and thus his story ultimately, and contrarily to polemics such as the “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” speech, reinforces the American myth of freedom rather than indicts it for its fraudulence or exclusiveness. The slave’s plight is the plight of America. Smith argues that, along with Ward, Garnett, Wells Brown, and Pennington, Douglass has “illustrated and adorned our common country” (8). Douglass will become the most celebrated of his literary peers, not only illustrating and adorning America, but embodying its mythology. The myth is in place. Douglass’s autobiography, featuring the story of a truly representative man, is written, Smith is saying, to help us realize it. Smith points to Douglass’s Americanness: his drive, energy, industriousness, perseverance, and his work ethic. “In the history of his life in bondage, we find . . . that inherent and continuous energy of character which will ever render him distinguished” (9). Smith holds up Douglass’s life as an example of the best in all of us: “the indestructible equality of man to man is demonstrated by the ease with which black men, scarce one remove from barbarism—if slavery can be honored with such a distinction—vault into the high places of the most advanced and painfully acquired civilization” (7). Such a “vault into the high places of the most advanced and painfully acquired civilization” is possible for everyone in America. Douglass’s life, contained in *Bondage and Freedom*, is credible, tangible testimony.

Douglass's first chapter bears out the notion that difficult beginnings don't matter in a country where all men are—while perhaps not born—created equal. *My Bondage* is more stylized, even novelistic in its construction and voice. Unlike the *Narrative*, *My Bondage* establishes the setting first, then introduces the self into it. Instead of using the stock introduction "I was born . . .," the narrator begins, "In Talbot County . . ." Douglass pays much more attention to detail in setting the scene, emphasizing Tuckahoe as being "thinly populated," "worn out," dilapidated," "decayed," "ruined," etc...(21). Douglass also emphasizes the arbitrariness of birth by also placing the reader into the setting, emphasizing the arbitrariness and contingency associated with birthplace. Any of us could have been born in Tuckahoe.

It was in this dull, flat, and unthrifty district, or neighborhood, surrounded by a white population of the lowest order, indolent and drunken to a proverb, and among slaves, who seemed to ask, "*Oh! what's the use?*" every time they lifted a hoe, that I -- without any fault of mine was born, and spent the first years of my childhood. (21)

The poetry of this Melvillean sentence is enchanting. It draws us into the narrator's mind and makes us identify with him. And in a preview of what Washington will say about success, the suggestion here is that if Douglass could make it out of Tuckahoe, any of us can overcome just about anything in America. This is not the story of a slave from Talbot County, Maryland, this is the story of all of us.

If, in the myth of America, one starts from a disadvantaged position and successfully makes himself, Douglass's birth is perfect. One could not start from a worse position. Not only is Douglass a slave, but he doesn't even have models of behavior to guide him, the whites

notwithstanding. And he is born there “without any fault of [his own]” (21). He doesn’t deserve such bad luck, he’s saying. Yet, again, it’s the perfect beginning for the American success story.

Douglass apologizes for going on so long (he’s much more thorough in detailing the setting here than in the *Narrative*), keeping in mind that brevity is one of the necessary qualities of autobiography. But if his autobiography is to establish him as a model of American success in the vein of Franklin, establishing the starting point is important. So he justifies what could be perceived as long-windedness. “The reader will pardon so much about the place of my birth, on the score that it is always a fact of some importance to know where a man is born, if, indeed, it be important to know anything about him” (22).

The Lockean blank slate metaphor is so important to the idea of freedom in America. All men are created equal because all men are born a blank slate. For Douglass, that “blankness” is exemplified by the absence of traditional determinants of identity. Since his father is unknown to him, he has no inherited foundation to influence or guide him. He is literally a blank. This fatherless state, too, however, Douglass makes to fit the storyline. Perhaps he does not know the pleasure of having a father, but to be a self-made man, the parent is irrelevant. In fact the absence of father might even be considered preferable. For, as Franklin’s story establishes, we are a bildungsroman nation. One must run away from the parent in the spirit of “go West, young man,” in order to truly make oneself anyway.

Whether the parent oppressively attempts to determine the fate of the son (Franklin), or the parent is non-existent (Douglass), the American self-made man story is basically a replay of the breaking away of the colonies from England. Thomas Paine famously employed this trope in his attempt to incite to revolution those who wished to remain loyal to England because it was the “parent country.” Paine argued, “This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted

lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster” (84). When the parent does not grant the freedom that the child—that symbolic lover of liberty—wants, then the parent becomes the monster to be overthrown —or in Douglass’s case, the “master” to be overcome. This is not to say that the child is petulant, that his desires are irrational or unjustified, but to connect the myth of the self-made man, as opposed to the heredity-made man, to the project of America.

This project becomes even more universal in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. In his introduction, George Ruffin praises Douglass as the most extraordinary man America has ever produced. But he stands above us not just as an individual who achieved success, but as a man upon a hill. Though he stands above us, he should not be seen as separate from and superior to us, but as a model for us. In expanding the relevance of Douglass’s life beyond the mere abolition of slavery to the project of America, Ruffin implies as much. He attaches Douglass’s mission to that of America itself: “Frederick Douglass stands upon a pedestal; he has reached this lofty height through years of toil and strife, but it has been the strife of moral ideas; strife in the battle for human rights” (4). Furthermore, Ruffin argues that “Plantation life at Tuckahoe as related by him is not fiction, it is fact; it is not the historian's dissertation on slavery, it is slavery itself, the slave's life, acts, and thoughts, and the life, acts, and thoughts of those around him” (5). Here, Ruffin’s comments have interesting implications about the text. Slavery, the unfortunate fact of Douglass’s life, he stresses, is real. And the text itself, it follows, is not just a text, “it is slavery itself, the slave’s life, acts, and thoughts” (5). In this sense, Ruffin would argue that Whitman was right: he who touches a book, touches a man.

e. Frederick Benjamin: Douglass as Founding Father in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*

In the earlier chapter on Benjamin Franklin, I noted a particular scene in the *Autobiography* as the symbolic starting point of Franklin's myth-constructing journey from rags-to-riches. The scene describes a brief stop in New York on the trip that will eventually take Franklin to his adopted home of Philadelphia. Franklin writes, "I found myself in New York,<sup>9</sup> near 300 Miles from home, a Boy of but 17, without the least Recommendation to or Knowledge of any Person in the Place, and with very little Money in my Pocket" (17). His claim—that he arrived with neither money nor relations to assist him, having nothing to rely on but his own self—represents, in his *Autobiography*, the literal "rags" moment. It makes tangible the "poverty and obscurity" from which he begins his life and sets up his mythical rags-to-riches story that ends with "affluence" and "some degree of Reputation in the World." It is also a symbolic, quintessential moment. It is the moment in which the American individual realizes that, in America, anything is possible. Success, in this instance, depends solely on the actions of the individual. Conversely, so does failure.

Franklin, though, is being a bit coy, if not disingenuous here. He might have been short on cash and sources of patronage, but he was hardly starting from scratch. He was educated and skilled, he had opportunity, and he was an extraordinarily gifted individual, perhaps the most outstanding combination of ingenuity, curiosity, and business acumen in American history.

Though not college educated, Franklin had a couple of years of formal schooling under his belt, and though he had failed arithmetic, he excelled in reading and writing. He had acquired skills in several trades, having apprenticed in candle-making, cutlery, and printing, which he had mastered. And one aspect that is often overlooked by contemporary champions of the

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<sup>9</sup> Franklin had planned initially to find work as a printer and stay on in New York.

Franklinian approach to life, opportunity in the eighteenth century was abundant. His ability to read and write, as well as his practical knowledge of several trades and mastery of one gave him a distinct advantage over his peers, most of whom couldn't even approach Franklin's qualifications, which not only came from training but from natural ability. Franklin's life prepared him to succeed at any time in history, though there's no doubt that he was in the right place at the right time. I include this caveat to emphasize that it is important that we be clear about the meaning of Franklin's text, which represents not a model to emulate but a constructed record of an extraordinary man—one even superior to its referent—who possessed distinct advantages at a time and in a place that provided ample opportunity.

A similar symbolic moment in the last fully revised autobiography of Douglass serves to show Douglass fulfilling the criteria of the Franklin-established myth while, at the same time putting his own stamp on it. Douglass writes:

My life began on the third of September, 1838. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of that month, after an anxious and most perilous but safe journey, I found myself in the big city of New York, a *free* man . . . Though dazzled with the wonders which met me on every hand, my thoughts could not be much withdrawn from my strange situation. . . The bonds that had held me to “old master” were broken. No man now had a right to call me his slave or assert mastery over me. I was in the rough and tumble of an outdoor world, to take my chance with the rest of its busy number. (251)

Douglass's description resembles Franklin's in that it signals a symbolic beginning. In a literal sense, the geographic setting is the same, if for Douglass the setting in time is rooted in a date rather than an age. On a more metaphorical level Douglass, just like Franklin, is in a position to take his “chance”—the chance built into the American myth—to become successful

based on merit. And like Franklin, Douglass uses the loaded expression “I found myself” to describe his status upon arrival. The phrase could indicate that the subject has a moment of self-consciousness upon arriving in a place he has never been. But more likely, since both Douglass and Franklin are very conscientious and skilled writers, they are rhetorically emphasizing some sort of epiphany or self-awakening, as in “I found my *self*.” That is, I have found an ability to be my *self* either for the first time or after a period that could be described as having been “lost,” or in a state devoid of the ability to become self-actualized. In Douglass’s case, he has now found himself with the same potential that the American myth of success holds belongs to every other free American—the ability to independently formulate a self.

The mythic Americanness of this moment is that both heroes “find themselves” when they have dispensed with all ties to the past. Loaded with symbolism as it is, in this moment they both have the dual advantage of possessing nothing and being untethered to family, authority, or past. In other words, for the first time in each of their lives, they are free to make themselves, which is highest ideal in an evolved, enlightenment worldview. Being possessionless and unencumbered by authority is the necessary beginning state for the potential self-made man. One cannot be “made” by the help of a father, teacher, mentor, etc..., but must rise by one’s own grit, determination, discipline, and opportunism. The irony is that they have made themselves free from bounds and possessions, in a sense impoverished, so that they can then begin to acquire power and wealth on their own. The key is to acquire those possessions and power without help. The goal, then, is not to become famous or wealthy in the literal sense, but to participate in something precise and mythical.

The above scene is included in *My Bondage* as well, but the language in this version of his autobiography is less similar to Franklin’s. In *My Bondage*, Douglass recalls

The flight was a bold and perilous one; but here I am, in the great city of New York, safe and sound, without loss of blood or bone. In less than a week after leaving Baltimore, I was walking amid the hurrying throng, and gazing upon the dazzling wonders of Broadway. The dreams of my childhood and the purposes of my manhood were now fulfilled. A free state around me, and a free earth under my feet! . . . I have often been asked, by kind friends to whom I have told my story, how I felt when first I found myself beyond the limits of slavery . . . In a letter to a friend, written soon after reaching New York. I said I felt as one might be supposed to feel, on escaping from a den of hungry lions. (194)

Douglass provides the basic information here. He's safely in New York after a perilous journey. He's free and dazzled by what he sees and he is moved to indescribable emotion as a result. It does not, however, recall the passage from Franklin as explicitly as its counterpart in *The Life and Times*. In *My Bondage*, Douglass does not describe the moment as a beginning, does not emphasize the cutting of all ties to the past, does not assert the genesis of an actualized self, and does not speak of having a chance—like all other Americans—to realize his potential. In other words, he does not cast his autobiographical character as the American mythic hero as thoroughly as he does in the *Life and Times*.

Though this formative event took place in 1838, there is no telling of it at all in the *Narrative*. The omission can easily be explained by the time parameters of Douglass's first autobiography, which would be called a "memoir" according to current genre distinctions because it deals only with a historical window of time rather than a complete life, and in 1845, with Douglass active on the lecture circuit, it must've been apparent that he would go on to do



much more with his life. Yet the event had happened by the time Douglass started writing the *Narrative*.

For both Franklin and Douglass, the *telling* of the life story makes the life. If we might call what Franklin did in his *Autobiography* a “revisioning” because of its many comparisons of living to writing, we might think of Douglass’s autobiographical writings as a “revisioning” accompanied by two instances of “re-envisioning.” Whereas Franklin’s *Autobiography* can be seen as a revision of self, Douglass becomes an instance of active revising, a writer of multiple re-envisioned biographies not unlike Walt Whitman, who continually revised his autobiographical poem, *Song of Myself*. And like Whitman or anyone else who revises a life—especially more than once, Douglass would have become more self-aware of his power to shape his life in writing. Revising, after all, necessarily involves rereading. The process of rereading places the writer, or *self*, in the position of the reader, or *other*. Assuming the role of reader of oneself makes the writer even more conscious of how he or she wants to be seen. It follows then, that the *Life and Times*, being the last “revision” of Douglass’s life, the last construction of self that Douglass will engage in, must be the most self-consciously *shaped* narrative of the three. And in this last instance of self-constructing Douglass embodies the hero of the American success autobiography. This is not to say that the last version of his life produced by the autobiographer is the most accurate. Indeed, more likely the opposite is the case because of changes in one’s self-perception and the expanded opportunity for one’s memory to fail, play tricks, or become selective. The last version isn’t the most adherent to history, but more likely how the autobiographer of multiple, revised autobiographies wants to be read.

The first four chapters of the *Life and Times* present a pared down version of what we saw in *My Bondage*, which probably explains some of the criticism it receives. The cuts

Douglass makes do indeed reduce some of the narrative force that characterizes *My Bondage*. For instance, the six page opening chapter of *My Bondage* is cut to three pages in the *Life and Times*. Douglass retains the basic skeleton of information, but cuts out the elaborations that humanize, substantiate, and give intensity to what he has to say. The kind of brevity Douglass employs here foreshadows the narrative style of Booker T. Washington.<sup>10</sup>

Starting in chapter five of the *Life and Times*, Douglass introduces material that appears in neither the *Narrative* nor *My Bondage*. Here in the *Life and Times* he goes into detail about the social structure of the plantation (particularly emphasizing the absence of a school or source of outside information), artfully describes American landscapes, makes claims about the harmful effect of slavery on owners. Meanwhile, he revises and softens his descriptions of violence.

Of the plantation's social structure, Douglass writes, "Its whole public was made up of and divided into three classes, slaveholders, slaves, and overseers. Its blacksmiths, wheelwrights, shoemakers, weavers, and coopers were slaves. Not even commerce, selfish and indifferent to moral considerations as it usually is, was permitted within its secluded precincts." Douglass is explaining how things work on the plantation as if he expects his readers to know nothing of it. What he really seems to want readers to take from this is that the slave system is fundamentally at odds with American democratic and capitalistic principles. It more resembles a traditionally European style serfdom. Slaves provide all the labor. Merit is irrelevant.

About the school system, Douglass points out that there isn't one, for neither the slaves nor the children of the slaveholding class:

There was neither school-house nor town-house in its neighborhood. The school-house was unnecessary, for there were no children to go to school. The children

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of Washington's concise narrative style, see Carla Willard, "Timing Impossible Subjects: The Marketing Style of Booker T. Washington." *American Quarterly* (2001): 624-669.

and grandchildren of Col. Lloyd were taught in the house by a private tutor (a Mr. Page from Greenfield, Massachusetts, a tall, gaunt sapling of a man, remarkably dignified, thoughtful, and reticent, and who did not speak a dozen words to a slave in a whole year). The overseer's children went off somewhere in the State to school, and therefore could bring no foreign or dangerous influence from abroad to embarrass the natural operation of the slave system of the place.

The white children are educated privately or remotely, so as to ensure that the slaves had no access whatsoever. All in all, Douglass is noting and emphasizing the fact that a slave system systematically deprives slaves of any access to outside influence, whether it be in the form of education or sympathy or news. Booker T. Washington will later make the assertion that slaves, some of whom serve as couriers to the post office for their owners, sometimes manage to find greater and faster access to national news than the slaveholders. Douglass's descriptions are obviously meant to show the numerous disadvantages that slaves were subjected to. Since slavery has been abolished, he could be including this material for several reasons. He is not referring to himself specifically, but to all slaves in general. Thus, he's still trying to illuminate a system, either for the purposes of reform or insight. He might have wanted to set the record of the past before the American public so that people realize how oppressive the system was. People might be more inclined to sympathize with others if they become cognizant of the hardships they had to endure. As importantly, Douglass's representation of this starting point of his life, in light of his life's successes, makes his story particularly American.

Douglass's rise to American hero status is remarkable when compared to other great self-made men. He fits the criteria: he came from nothing, taught himself to read and later to speak persuasively, embarked on a journey that took him away from his native region, and by sheer

will, determination, perseverance, and ingenuity, overcame odds stacked heavily against him to achieve a level of success that no one could have predicted. Yet, Douglass was born a slave. It would have been conceivable for him to become a representative black man, but a representative American?—a god sitting upon the American Olympus embodying the American mythology? But if we think about it, the fact that Douglass did come to occupy such a place in the American imagination shouldn't surprise us. For mythology is a separate realm than reality.

In reality, Douglass was a black man in America in the nineteenth century; he was born a slave and lived through the horrors and triumphs of the Civil War and Reconstruction. His narrative is filled with acknowledgments of his real situation: that he is no Ben Franklin and that he never will be. The same avenues for success are not available to Douglass like they were to Franklin. He cannot simply run away from home and start anew. His path to success is not lined by humorous, anecdotal, feel-good episodes, but by strife and antagonism. When he outperforms his white co-workers on the docks of Baltimore Harbor, Douglass is beaten nearly to death—a far cry from Franklin's co-workers in printing houses, who grumble under their breath over their lunchtime beers that Franklin is making them look bad.

But it was precisely Douglass's disadvantageous beginnings as a slave born in Tuckahoe that made it possible for him to become who we now know as the signifier "Frederick Douglass." Simply put, a freed black man who did not write an autobiography in the nineteenth century couldn't have become Frederick Douglass. Booker T. Washington would later contribute to the idea that beginning in slavery was an advantage in his own autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, saying that "the Negro boy's birth and connection with an unpopular race is an advantage, so far as real life is concerned . . . [O]ut of the hard and unusual struggle through which he is compelled to pass, he gets a strength, a confidence, that one misses whose pathway is

comparatively smooth by reason of birth and race” (679). Contemporary reviewers noticed this, too. A reviewer in the *New York Daily Tribune* wrote

If success is any criterion of ability, Frederick Douglass has fairly won his claim to the title of an uncommonly able man. He has overcome obstacles which no one in his position has ever before been called to encounter. Doomed by his birth to bondage, ignorance, and degradation, he has literally broken the fetters of Slavery, secured his place as an equal in the ranks of freemen, attained distinction as a writer, public speaker, and member of an intellectual profession, and gained possession of an influence which he has nobly exerted in behalf of human rights. The life of such a person belongs to history. (399)

Indeed it belongs to history; mythology, too, I would add—American mythology. By this I do not mean to suggest that Douglass isn’t real or that his story isn’t true, but that it creates a perception, like all lives with claims to American mythology, that the kind of excellence achieved by Douglass could be accomplished by any of us and that, like Washington says, “success is not to be measured so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has had to overcome.”

In describing the landscape, Douglass sounds positively sublime about its artfulness and Emersonian about its transcendentalist tone: “The tops of the stately poplars were often covered with red-winged blackbirds, making all nature vocal with the joyous life and beauty of their wild, warbling notes. These all belonged to me as well as to Col. Edward Lloyd, and, whether they did or not, I greatly enjoyed them” (*MB* 40). Of course Douglass’s point is that everything cannot be owned. But this is the kind of anti-capitalist assertion that is acceptable—even romanticized—in America. Nature belongs to no one—or everyone, as the case may be.

One of the most provoking revisions involves Douglass's treatment of violence. In the *Narrative*, violence is front-loaded. In fact, one of the most chilling episodes, Captain Anthony's sado-sexual whipping of Aunt Hester, is recounted in the first chapter. In *My Bondage* and the *Life and Times*, Douglass seems much more focused on setting the stage for his own rise. In the *Life and Times*, as in its predecessor, descriptions of the first two violent episodes do not appear until chapters three and four, thirty-five and forty pages in, respectively. While there are prior references to the inhumane cruelty of the masters and overseers, these acts of violence are perpetrated not by masters, but by Douglass's fellow slaves, Aunt Katy and "Uncle" Isaac Copper.

The aforementioned whipping of Aunt Hester by Captain Anthony does not appear until chapter five of the *My Bondage* and *Life and Times* and, inexplicably, Douglass has changed Hester's name to Esther. In addition, he communicates with much less vivid intensity the horror of the same scene in the *Narrative*. In all three versions, Hester is described as exceptionally beautiful: "She was a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions, having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood" (N 16). Here, Hester is goddess-like, "of noble form, and of graceful proportions," with "few equals and fewer superiors, colored or white. In *My Bondage*, "Esther" possesses "personal beauty." Being "tall, well formed, and [of] fine appearance . . . [t]he daughters of Col. Lloyd could scarcely surpass her in personal charms" (85). In the *Life and Times*, Douglass retains much of his description from *My Bondage*, but omits her superiority to white women or Col. Lloyd's daughters.

In the *Narrative*, Douglass juxtaposes this scene with the description of another woman subjected to a gruesome beating perpetrated by Lloyd's overseer, Plummer. He has just

mentioned on the previous page the benefits of systematic rape for the masters: “by law established . . . the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires as profitable as well as pleasurable” (14). Neither of these scenes precedes the Esther episode in *My Bondage or the Life and Times*.

In all three autobiographies, the circumstances are the same, but the details are different. In the *Narrative*, Hester has been “out one night,—where or for what I do not know,—and happened to be absent when my master desired her presence” (16). She was found in the company of “Lloyd’s Ned,” a slave whom she had been forbidden to see. Suggestively, Douglass adds, “Why master was so careful of her, may be safely left to conjecture.” Douglass knows that conjecture here, no matter the innocence of the reader, will hardly be necessary. Douglass is exposing a libidinal economy here that underscores how slavery perverts the owner and overseer classes. As James Baldwin will do in the twentieth century, Douglass is attempting to penetrate the psyche of the white male racist. He “desires” Hester’s presence and, upon finding that she is in the company of another man, strips her naked and whips her out of jealousy for defiance. Anthony isn’t interested in protecting Hester’s sexual innocence, for he is not “of pure morals himself” (16). So he strips her, ties her to a hook in a beam placed there specifically for the purpose, and whips her brutally and unmercifully, calling her a “d-----d b----h” and sadistically feeding off her suffering as he does so. “[N]ot until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin.” Perhaps Anthony is not beating the object of desire as much as his desire. Also, the physical damage inflicted upon her will render her less attractive. In effect, he is attempting to beat his own twisted psyche.

The language Douglass employs in both *My Bondage* and the *Life and Times* is horrifying, but less so than it is in the *Narrative*. The scene in the *Narrative* is absolutely chilling. The beautiful, mostly naked slave woman hangs by her bound wrists from a hook in the ceiling, “[h]er arms stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes” upon the stool (16). It’s a veritable maelstrom of sexually charged lashing and screaming: “He commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid the heart-rending shrieks from her and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor” (16). “The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped” (15). The scene culminates in post-coital exhaustion.

In *My Bondage*, Esther and Ned are Romeo and Juliet-like. She is being “courted” by Ned, “as fine looking a man, as she was a woman.” Anthony is determined to “break up the growing intimacy between Esther and Edward” by ordering her to quit his company (85). But “a woman’s love is not to be annihilated by the peremptory command of any one,” so “[i]t was impossible to keep Edward and Esther apart” (86). Anthony’s motives here for beating Esther are described as “abhorrent,” “foolish,” and “contemptible,” his attentions to Esther “brutal” and “selfish.” Douglass admits to having seen “only few of the shocking preliminaries” of the beating after being awakened by Esther’s “shrieks and piteous cries” (87).

The scene is unquestionably still horrific and shocking. “Each blow, vigorously laid on, brought screams as well as blood” (88). But Douglass seems intent on sparing us some of its brutality. Rather than quoting Anthony’s epithets and exclamations, Douglass asserts that “His answers to [her piercing cries] are too coarse and blasphemous to be reproduced here” (88). And he settles for a claim that “when the motives of this brutal castigation are considered, -- language has no power to convey a just sense of its awful criminality” (88). Then he ends the episode by describing the effects of the brutality he has just witnessed on himself. Whereas he had describe



his own response in the Narrative as thinking that this was “the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass,” he describes himself in *My Bondage* as being “hushed, terrified, stunned” and thinking that the fate of Esther might be mine next” (5, 88).

The *Life and Times* relates a story even less shocking and even less focused on the tyrant-oppressed motif of *My Bondage*. The scene is even more abridged, and becomes even more about the determination of slaves to overcome unnatural obstacles. Omitted is much of the irresistible influence of love, and even some of the perversion of Anthony. It concludes with the triumph of determination and persistence: “Edward and Esther continued to meet, notwithstanding all efforts to prevent their meeting” (55). While not robbed entirely of its horror, the scene in the *Life and Times* is much less disturbing when compared to its counterpart in the *Narrative*.

In addition to the Hester/Esther scene, the beating of Nellie is glossed over. Again, there’s a good treatment of her resistance, but when it comes time for the beating Douglass writes:

What followed I need not here describe. The cries of the now helpless woman, while undergoing the terrible infliction, were mingled with the hoarse curses of the overseer and the wild cries of her distracted children. When the poor woman was untied her back was covered with blood. She was whipped, terribly whipped, but she was not subdued, and continued to denounce the overseer and to pour upon him every vile epithet of which she could think. (59)

Douglass continues the point that the masters are basically cowards: “Such floggings are seldom repeated on the same persons by overseers. They prefer to whip those who are the most easily whipped” (59).

Additionally, not much is said about Mr. Sevier. He’s described as a terrible man, but given nowhere near the attention he gets in *The Narrative*. And the whipping of Barney is related much more mildly, concluding with this softening admission: “I owe it to the truth, however, to say that this was the first and last time I ever saw a slave compelled to kneel to receive a whipping” (70).

Douglass seems to want to use violence in the *Life and Times* as a way to open up discussions about the spiritually destructive effects of slavery on owners. “The slaveholder as well as the slave,” he argues, “was the victim of the slave system. Under the whole heavens there could be no relation more unfavorable to the development of honorable character than that sustained by the slaveholder to the slave” (51). To illustrate, he uses the example of Captain Anthony. Captain Anthony may sometimes look happy and at peace: “Could the reader have seen Captain Anthony gently leading me by the hand, as he sometimes did, patting me on the head, speaking to me in soft, caressing tones, and calling me his little Indian boy, he would have deemed him a kind-hearted old man, and really almost fatherly to the slave boy” (51). But the pleasant moods of a slaveholder are transient and fitful. They neither come often nor remain long. Douglass recalls:

Even to my child's eye he wore a troubled and at times a haggard aspect. His strange movements excited my curiosity and awakened my compassion. He seldom walked alone without muttering to himself, and he occasionally stormed about as if defying an army of invisible foes. Most of his leisure was spent in

walking around, cursing and gesticulating as if possessed by a demon. He was evidently a wretched man, at war with his own soul and all the world around him.

(51)

While trying to tone down the shock value of his story, Douglass sings the praises of work and denounces indolence.

The poor slave, on his hard pine plank, scantily covered with his thin blanket, slept more soundly than the feverish voluptuary who reclined upon his downy pillow. Food to the indolent is poison, not sustenance. Lurking beneath the rich and tempting viands were invisible spirits of evil, which filled the self-deluded gormandizer with aches and pains, passions uncontrollable, fierce tempers, dyspepsia, rheumatism, lumbago, and gout, and of these the Lloyds had a full share. (66)

Like Franklin, Douglass applies himself in every moment to self-improvement by learning, working, and practicing discipline.

In *My Bondage*, Douglass attempt to answer, “why me?” Why has he, rather than other slaves, risen to the position he has attained. Gerald Mullin has made the argument that acculturation of slaves led to resistance and David Howard-Pitney has extended this line of reasoning to make the connection between acculturation and individual success<sup>11</sup>. Douglass admits that having the opportunity to be a domestic slave in Baltimore worked to his advantage: “I was not the only boy on the plantation that might have been sent to live in Baltimore. There was a wide margin from which to select” (80). If he had not been afforded this opportunity, he could not have become successful. “It is quite probable that, but for the mere circumstance of

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<sup>11</sup> See See Mullin, Gerald W., *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) and Howard-Pitney, David, *The African American Jeremiad* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

being thus removed before the rigors of slavery had fastened upon me; before my young spirit had been crushed under the iron control of the slave-driver, instead of being, today, a FREEMAN, I might have been wearing the galling chains of slavery (80). Americans do not succeed by mere chance, however. Douglass will do no different, writing, “I have sometimes felt, however, that there was something more intelligent than *chance*, and something more certain than *luck*, to be seen in the circumstance. Douglass has to deny the role of luck and chance in his success. Rather than doing so, he turns to divine intervention. “I may be deemed superstitious and egotistical, in regarding this event as a special interposition of Divine Providence in my favor; but the thought is a part of my history” (80). God didn’t just pick Douglass, though; he provided him with the “ineffaceable conviction, that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and this conviction, like a word of living faith, strengthened me through the darkest trials of my lot” (80). By divine grace, Douglass became possessed with the same kind of determination with which he hopes to inspire in others.

*The Life and Times* represents Douglass’s thought process differently:

Viewing it in the light of human likelihoods, it is quite probable that but for the mere circumstance of being thus removed, before the rigors of slavery had fully fastened upon me; before my young spirit had been crushed under the iron control of the slave-driver; I might have continued in slavery until emancipated by the war. (47)

Now, there are obvious reasons why these are different. First of all, emancipation has yet to take place when Douglass composes *My Bondage*. Therefore, he would say in *My Bondage* that “instead of being, today, a FREEMAN, I might have been wearing the galling chains of slavery” (80). But Douglass also leaves out of the *Life and Times* the part about divine

intervention, which, in effect, serves to credit entirely Douglass himself for developing his own sense of determination and the success that followed.

f. Conclusion: Douglass's Benjamin

Taken as a whole, Frederick Douglass's three autobiographies show how his purpose in writing evolved over the course of his life, how the force of American democracy operated on him, and how revision in autobiography works.

Douglass's autobiographies provide a great example of how self-building can become nation-building, each successively more so. In the *Narrative*, Douglass, like Franklin, urges readers to read and then do. His role, what Robert Stepto calls "master teller," is to form a storytelling community in which readers become secondary tellers (209). Stepto makes a good point, for Douglass is "master teller" of an African American narrative tradition. But Douglass is also a secondary teller in a community of purveyors of the American success myth in which Franklin is the "master teller."

What's particularly interesting for scholars of autobiography is that Douglass revises his constructed self into this role of American hero. The process of revising, especially if executed multiple times, necessitates that one become his or her own audience. The more one revises, the more one shapes what he wants people to see, rather than what he really is. Douglass became his own audience both for the purposes of helping him shape how he wanted to present himself and he became his own audience in that he read his own work, then was able to revise it to shape himself how he wanted to. And rather than attribute the rest of his life to accident (like he did his birth), he came to believe that "the chief agent in the success of the self-made man is well

directed, honest toil.” He came to believe in his own agency in a way that led him to discount chance and luck.

David Howard-Pitney characterizes Douglass’s rhetoric as reflecting no so much an evolved consciousness but a transitioning of emotional states based on historical context. Douglass in the Antebellum period is hopeful, sees the Civil War as a time of promise and of brief fulfillment of his Jeremiadic prophecies, then finds Reconstruction as a disappointment (33). But if this were the case, then Douglass would have appeared more angry and bitter late in his life, as he was in “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”. Conversely, the *Life and Times* gives us a Douglass that seems less angry and more inclined towards the “accommodationist” strategies we later see in Booker T. Washington.

Rather than Howard-Pitney’s evaluation, what we can see in Douglass is an initial rebelliousness, followed by a visceral, but strategic rhetoric that took into account the harsh realities of life for African Americans in America, followed by a kind of avowal that the promise contained within American foundational principles as shaped by Franklin was ultimately realizable. Thus, Douglass becomes, by his own design, like Franklin. He is an updated version of a “founding father” for African Americans, who could not embrace someone like Franklin as such because of the hypocrisies inherent in the existence of slavery within a democracy. If we consider the Emancipation Proclamation the “Declaration of Independence” for slaves, the Douglass is a founding father for the freed slaves, and an heir to Franklin. In casting himself thus, he suppresses the radically oppositional stance of the beginning of his career and of his early mentor Garrison in order to become a part of the American fabric.

Douglass’s role in the character assassination of Franklin is one of sustained and pronounced significance. While Franklin had been previously cast by Irving, Emerson, and

Melville as a representative of the practical, Douglass, by appropriating Franklin for a purpose entirely practical and hardly philosophical, solidifies that perception. It is a stamp that would not be erased. Perhaps this is a case of social forces operating on both Douglass and Franklin. We see over the course of Douglass's life an evolution from denouncer of America to promoter. A similar phenomenon was happening simultaneously to the legacy of Franklin. One part of him (the ironic humorist) was being suppressed while another (the representation of practicality and common sense) was being promoted.

## CHAPTER 5

### UP FROM THE SLAVE NARRATIVE: BOOKER T. WASHINGTON AND THE LAST AMERICAN HERO

#### a. Introduction

Over the course of his three autobiographies, Frederick Douglass revises himself into a hero in the Franklinian tradition. This hero of the American success myth holds a place of great importance in American racial politics. The pivotal figure is Frederick Douglass. Douglass unquestionably takes America to task for its hypocritical stance on race, but his criticism of the country fell short of a condemnation. Taking such an antagonistic stance would have been easy, in theory. The presence of a slave system, after all, in a country that prides itself on freedom, democracy, and the notion that “all men are created equal” cracks the very foundation of the country. On the most basic of levels, slavery makes a sham of America in the most obvious sense. In addition, Douglass shows in “What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?” that he had the rare gift of pathos, ethos, and logos that gave him the rhetorical power he would have needed.

In reality, though, there were forces prohibiting him from doing so. First of all, it was dangerous. There’s no underestimating the physical danger Douglass might have put himself in had he taken a viciously oppositional stance to America. Second, power was operating on Douglass and appropriating him for its own purposes. The state has a way of suppressing dissident voices, especially dangerous ones. While Douglass’s voice is indeed dangerous,



perhaps most subversively so, in the *Narrative*, the heat cools a bit with *My Bondage*, and a bit more with *The Life and Times*. And last but not least, sometime between 1845 and 1855, Douglass chose a different route. He cut ties with Garrison and determined to salvage the idea of American freedom and equality, casting himself as critic, but also as an incarnation of the Franklinian mythic hero. His mode of self-representation in the second and third versions of his autobiography, as Edward Tang has pointed out, cast him as both “provocateur and compromiser” (22).

Certainly there are differences between Franklin and Douglass. Douglass’s birthright was far more barren than Franklin’s, and his prospects bleaker. In short, he has more obstacles to navigate and less help doing so. But Douglass embraced the principles of America as the key to eventual racial justice, espousing the virtues of hard work, democracy, individual agency, and merit. He casts himself as a “Founding Father” redux. In his favor, it was the perfect time for him to become a Founding Father. For a large portion of the population had just—legally if not effectively—been freed from the bonds of tyranny. Douglass became a Founding Father for the freed slaves.

Booker T. Washington picks up where Douglass leaves off. The Booker T. Washington-W. E. B. DuBois conflict is commonly, and correctly, seen as a fight over the legacy of Douglass. But the terms of the conflict need nuancing. DuBois might have a legitimate claim to early Douglass, but Washington has a better one to later Douglass. The transition from *The Life and Times* to *Up from Slavery* is a seamless one. Washington becomes Douglass’s successor, again taking up the mantle of the Franklinian narrative in a racial context.

Some of the connections between Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass are obvious: both are influential Americans who fought to overcome slavery and for the betterment

of African-Americans; and, of course, both wrote autobiographies. Their respective philosophical positions about how to combat racism, however, are seen as less similar. Since being resoundingly criticized by W.E.B. DuBois for his “moderate” approach to reform and his acceptance of separate but equal, Washington has been seen as an “accommodationist,” a term that connotes emasculated weakness and a lack of dignity as much as it does strategy and locates Washington as an “arch-conservative” figure in contrast to the confrontational, “arch-radical” black leaders who follow in the footsteps of Frederick Douglass in asserting their humanity by fighting back. David Howard-Pitney explains,

Washington and Douglass represented fundamentally divergent modes of racial leadership and struggle. Douglass was preeminently a protest leader who made his greatest mark taking white America boldly to task for its shameful practice of racial slavery and caste. . . Washington’s racial leadership and strategy, on the other hand, aimed to curb protest against white prejudice and discrimination by accept[ing] without resistance white insistence on segregation and disenfranchisement. (72)

Given the perceived differences in Washington’s approach and others, it may be counter-intuitive, then, to associate Washington with Douglass beyond the obvious. Yet such an association between their approaches can and should be made. Washington and Douglass are more closely allied than we recognize for two reasons: First, late in his life Douglass was more like Washington than we are willing to admit. Second, Washington was a lot more like Douglass than his public persona indicated.

Washington doesn’t so much suppress slavery from his autobiography as distance himself from it. His book is called *Up from Slavery*, after all. And he understood the symbolic and

perhaps even subversive impact of building Tuskegee on the site of “an old and abandoned plantation” (99). Yet, his purpose was better served by emphasizing the distance between himself and the horrors of slavery. He chooses then, to present himself as an American “representative man.” In this respect, *Up from Slavery* resembles—or even continues—trends begun in Douglass’s second and third autobiographies. Both *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* reveal a Frederick Douglass whose purpose in writing his life had evolved, and had come to represent a life that more closely fits with the hero of the American myth of success than a victim of American hypocrisy and horror. In portraying himself thus, Douglass effectively supports America *in principle*. It is this implicit support of American democratic structure that links Douglass to Washington. Washington also believes that American democratic principles hold the key to the eventual rise of African Americans. In *Up from Slavery*, Washington’s methodology represents a testimony to his faith in America and his self-representation in *Up from Slavery* resembles what Douglass might have been had he been able to completely recast himself or even envision the appropriate black leader needed for the times.

In addition to the later models by Douglass, *Up from Slavery* retreats from the emerging type of autobiography exemplified by P. T. Barnum, which alters the autobiography somewhat in projecting an image of a more hypothetical, or less “substantial,” self. While Barnum and Washington are both selling something—the American myth of success—they approach their craft in the making of self and the making of autobiography, in different ways. Washington moves conservatively backward in the direction of Franklin’s more tangibly constructed hero archetype. Washington’s representation of self in *Up from Slavery* employs the self-improvement and character building techniques that Franklin formulates and recommends in his *Autobiography*. In addition, Washington, like Franklin, places unwavering faith in merit.

Besides its reproduction of the Franklinian success model and ideology, *Up from Slavery* also borrows from the dominant strains of intellectual thought at the turn of the twentieth century—namely, William James, Thorstein Veblen, and Max Weber. Combining these elements, Washington creates a text that simultaneously recalls purer, more meritocratic notions of the past, engages with contemporary intellectual thought, and employs the contemporary marketing and advertising strategies emerging in the transition from producer to consumer ethic taking place in the late nineteenth century. Washington, too, becomes an incarnation of Franklin.

Washington has traditionally been accused by critics following the lead W. E. B. DuBois and his contemporaries Ida B. Wells-Barnett and William Monroe Trotter of having catered to the prejudices of Southern whites, failing to fight for rights for African-Americans, and accepting sanctioned racism in the form of Jim Crow. Houston Baker accuses Washington of narrow-mindedness and outright financial and ambitious selfishness, saying “he closed the doors and barred the shutters on all that lay beyond the ultimate welfare and informing philosophy of his own autonomous, somewhat mechanical institution” (95). Like Baker, William C. Harlan sees Washington as hypocritical and acquiescent in segregation and asserts that the leadership of “the wizard of Tuskegee” amounted to a “setback of his race” and “the king of a captive people,” which is to say he was an extension of white rule (324).

Though Baker and Harlan criticize Washington for his chameleon-like qualities, more recent criticism of Washington has defended his role playing methods as effective strategies given the social conditions he had to deal with at the time. Chiefly among them, Robert J. Norrell argues that these criticisms take Washington out of context and fail to recognize that his approach is a strategy, not a philosophy. Norrell has attempted to force a “re-evaluation of Washington by presenting a more flattering portrayal of him as a man who understood his time

so acutely that he knew what rhetorical strategies he could employ to achieve optimal results for his cause. In addition, Carla Willard has suggested an illuminating method of inquiry into Washington's work and philosophy based on the rhetorical techniques employed by the emergent marketing and advertising industries at the time.

Norrell's thesis is correct in one sense, yet insufficient in another. He's right in saying that Washington knew the conditions of his time and recognized the most effective way of dealing with the extreme and dangerous conditions for African-Americans in the South. As a strategy that he felt would serve the cause of black uplift, he decided it would be better to work within, rather than fight, the system. What Norrell—and indeed others—have failed to see, is that Washington was not only adopting a strategy, he was adopting a model of success for himself and those he hoped to help that had been established by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography*<sup>1</sup>. In moving his narrative in the direction of Franklin's, Booker T. Washington accepted, adopted, and came to exemplify a very conservative model of success. In adopting the tropes of the American myth of success in his autobiography, Washington plays a major role in preserving the myth at a time when belief in it might have been lost or might have come to be viewed with cynicism.

Norrell and Willard provide stark contrasts to the volumes of scholarship critical of Washington. While their arguments are welcomed defenses of Washington, both have failed to see the connection between Washington and his autobiographical models in Douglass and Franklin. Without identifying these connections, Washington's role in recreating and perpetuating the American myth of success, which won him extensive popularity and influence, cannot be fully realized.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Up from History*, Norrell mentions Franklin's *Autobiography* only briefly to establish the numerous traditions within which Washington was working in *The Story of My Life and Work*.

## b. Historical Context

At the time of Douglass's greatest influence (just before, during, and just after the Civil War), significant progress had been made in the struggle for racial justice. Abolitionists had ramped up anti-slave rhetoric to the point that it became *the* national issue, and Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which, whether motivated by political/military strategy or genuine sentiment, was a milestone for African Americans. Perhaps all this might be chalked up to the inevitable march of human progress toward individual rights that had begun with the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, but in any case, that progress toward equality was evident. Moreover, the gains on behalf of African Americans had been made with white support. Things had changed by the time Washington rose to prominence.

The period after Reconstruction is sometimes called the "New South Era" to reflect the South's attempt to embrace the industrial models of the North. Yet, if the South was "new" it was only in the industrial sense; socially, most white Southerners yearned for the old antebellum racial hierarchies. The old guard that had fought to keep slavery and pushed for secession sought to wrest the southern political landscape back from blacks who had been given a political voice via federal mandates during Reconstruction. Whatever progress had been made via the War and Reconstruction toward racial equality suddenly reversed direction. In 1874, after almost a decade of Reconstruction efforts by Republicans, southern conservative Democrats, or "Bourbons," regained political power in the period that became known in southern circles as "Redemption." The turbulent time of federal efforts to establish an interracial democracy in the South was over. Instead, the resentment white southerners felt after the war and the measures taken during Reconstruction to enforce federal laws ensuring equal rights manifested itself in increased racial

tension and violence. As Bourbon Democrats re-imposed white supremacy and enshrined states' rights, limited government, and low property taxes in efforts to rekindle the flames of the old South, terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan massacred and lynched hundreds if not thousands of blacks in the South in a campaign of intimidation in order to re-establish white power. What was more deflating for African Americans in the South was that their white allies had largely turned a blind eye to them because, according to the law, their rights had been won. The successful terrorist tactics of white supremacists and the complacency of whites who had just a few decades earlier fought both in public discourse and on the battlefield for the freedom of African Americans led historians like Nicholas Lemann to conclude that the confederacy won "the last battle of the Civil War" (2). By 1901, the year Washington published *Up from Slavery*, fewer than 4,000 of the nearly one million blacks in Washington's adopted home state of Alabama voted. This is the historical climate in which Booker T. Washington was trying to facilitate the uplift of his race through the model of education he developed at Tuskegee.

### c. Who Wrote That?

A man as conscious and calculating in the construction of his image as Washington would have certainly realized the benefits of autobiography. What better way to cultivate a public image than writing an autobiography?

Besides, Washington could be fairly certain that people would be interested in his story. As Louis Harlan points out, Washington's popularity with white audiences who came to hear him speak stemmed from their admiration for his successful struggle "from slavery, poverty, and ignorance to a position of power and influence" (243). By writing an autobiography, he could, then, reach wider audiences, counter the degrading representations of African Americans seen in

minstrel shows and other forms of popular culture, increase his appeal with the public, and garner more support—both in sentiment and finances—with which to implement his philosophy.

Washington was first urged to produce an autobiography by Walter Hines Page of Houghton Mifflin in 1896, though, as popular a figure as Washington was, it is likely that other editors and publishers made the suggestion as well. Washington would be the subject of not one but two autobiographies over the next five years. In 1897, Washington sent a prospectus for an autobiography to a small publisher, J. L. Nichols and Company of Naperville, Illinois. W. Fitzhugh Brundage postulates that Washington might have wanted to avoid obstacles to reaching a white audience that presumably would hinder the book's success. But in any case, it is safe to say that Washington intended for this first version of his autobiography a primarily black audience.

While Washington had agreed with Nichols and Co. to produce an autobiography, his tireless fundraising efforts for Tuskegee left little time for writing. His schedule was so relentless that in 1899 a group of Tuskegee's biggest donors, concerned about the potential effects the demands of his work could have on his health, independently raised money just to send Washington to Europe on vacation. Upon his return from Europe, however, Washington took up just where he had left off: traveling, lecturing, fund-raising, and working on a separate book collection of his lectures and essays. With such a demanding schedule that left him little time to devote to writing an autobiography, Washington hired on Edgar Webber, a journalist and graduate of Howard University Law School with whom Washington had been impressed enough to bring to Tuskegee, as ghost writer. Uncharacteristically, Washington had little more than an advisory role in the composition of the text, instead allowing Webber to take the reins on a project that had enormous power in further shaping a public persona Washington had worked so



diligently to foster. Webber turned out to be much less suited to the project than Washington had believed. As Brundage writes, Webber produced a text that was nothing more than a “hastily written, poorly edited autobiography compiled from speeches, press announcements, and testimonials by and about Washington” (5). After Webber’s clumsy compilation job, the manuscript was sent to an editor who, as Harlan explains, “was too busy . . . to give [it] more than a cursory perusal before passing it on to the publishers (244). In addition, Nichols and Company “was notorious for shoddy copy-editing and book-making” (244). The result was a work that so embarrassed Washington that he would fire Webber.

Less than a year after *The Story of My Life and Work* was published, Washington would agree to serialize a version of his life story in the social reform magazine *The Outlook*, edited by Lyman Abbot. There are two possible motives for his doing so. First, he could have desperately wanted to produce a more accurate and credible version than *The Story of My Life and Work*. Another possible and quite likely purpose for a second autobiography was the potential for it to support his fund-raising efforts on behalf of Tuskegee. Washington wrote to John A. Hertel, the president of J. L. Nichols and Company, that a second autobiography would not violate any copyright or contract between the two parties, nor would it compete with the first one. “I am quite sure . . . the two publications will not in any way clash with each other since, in the first place, they are to be on different lines and to be sold in an almost wholly different section of the country and sold by trade instead of subscription” (*Papers* 642-43). Washington goes on to admit that he wanted to write his *Reminiscences* strictly as a way to raise funds for Tuskegee: “[T]he work . . . will have for its main advantage the bringing of [Tuskegee] before a class of people who have money and to whom I must look for endowment” (*Papers* 643). Lastly Washington tells Hertel that the second book will benefit his publishing house, too, since the success of

Tuskegee is crucial to the success of Booker T. Washington. So, while it is uncertain whether or not Washington was planning two versions of his story all along—one targeting a black audience and one a white, all signs seem to indicate that he was. In any case, he didn't waste much time getting started on his second one.

For his second autobiography, Washington would hire Max Bennett Thrasher, a white journalist from New England who had taken an interest in Tuskegee and had been active as a publicist for the school, as his ghost writer. Having learned his lesson from his previous experience with *The Story of My Life and Work*, Washington took a more active role in the construction and oversight of this second autobiographical project, *Up from Slavery*. Thrasher composed drafts from notes and dictation he took from Washington, then Washington would review and revise the drafts.<sup>2</sup> While acknowledging that he had help from Thrasher, who composed, and Abbott, who made editorial suggestions, Carla Willard feels confident that Washington shaped the rhetorical and narrative structure of *Up from Slavery*. “It is certain,” Willard says, “that Washington, vowing to do away with his former and rather disastrous absenteeism in writing, essayed from 1899 onward to establish himself in every sentence and in every image printed in his voluminous magazine and book publications” (625).

Indeed, it is hard to believe that someone as image-conscious as Washington would have allowed *The Story of My Life and Work* to go to printers without his stamp of approval. Subsequently, he would make sure that *Up from Slavery* represented the version of his life that he wanted to project.

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<sup>2</sup> See W. Fitzhugh Brundage's “An Exemplary Citizen,” the introduction to the Bedford Series in History and Culture's edition of *Up from Slavery* for a discussion of this process.

d. Recalling Franklin: Self-making the Updated American Way

The way in which Washington attempted to empower African Americans in the South was by the forfeiture of the push for social rights in favor of a focus on developing economic viability. He famously proclaimed during his “Atlanta Exposition Address” that “In all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (143). What Washington proposed to African Americans in the South was a program of industrial and agricultural education that would, he thought, lead first to self-sufficiency and ultimately the acquisition of respect from whites.

But *Up from Slavery* wasn’t written solely as an example for African Americans in the South to pattern themselves after. More likely, as Harlan suggests, Washington’s target audience was whites in both the North and the South. For practical purposes, he stressed that African Americans had something valuable to offer both as producers in the labor force and consumers. He wanted whites to hire blacks and to buy the bricks they were making at Tuskegee rather than hire northern laborers or immigrants. “Cast down your bucket where you are,” he exclaimed in one of his most famous metaphors, urging whites to capitalize on the labor resources right in front of them. African Americans in the South, he asserted, are “the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen” (143). So,

cast down your bucket . . . among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides, . . . who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South. (143)

Black labor, Washington is arguing, will be loyal, get the job done, and do so quietly and without causing trouble. Not only this, they'll prove to be good consumers, too. They're here, so let them work for you, not against you.

This is a brilliant and pragmatic approach by Washington that employs extraordinarily effective emotional and logical appeals. Yet, the true appeal of Washington's *Up from Slavery* is more subtle. Washington appeals to whites by casting himself as a new hero of the mythic American success narrative. Hence, like Franklin's character in his *Autobiography*, Washington isn't so much putting forth himself as a model, as embodying an American ethos. At a time when he (probably rightly) felt that the only chance he had to make Tuskegee a success or to facilitate black uplift was to appeal to whites for cooperation, Washington found a way to do all but force whites to like him: portraying himself as among the finest examples of what can happen when the principles underlying American democratic opportunity work like they're supposed to and, thus, reinforcing what Americans imagine America to be: a place of opportunity for those who actively seek it.

In *Up from Slavery*, Washington provides a classic example of American potential. He was born a Virginia slave. But he didn't let this considerable disadvantage dictate to him where he could go in the world. Rather, through fierce determination, dedication, hard work, and self-reliance, he would become the most influential American black man of his time and a man of extraordinary power, race aside.

In order to effectively appeal to whites, he adopts the model created by America's most famous white man, Benjamin Franklin. Washington's rags-to-riches success results from a practical and self-sufficient approach to life and rests upon the grounds that democracy invariably rewards merit. Of course, if things work out for you within a system, it's much easier

to believe in—or at least to profess to believe in—that system. And within that system Washington, like Franklin, is able to succeed. Thus he can represent his actions and his success as a simple cause and effect relationship. Belief in the system, Washington understood, is irrelevant. He understood the symbolic power of what he was doing and so he did it. He could win the admiration of white Americans by casting himself as mythic American hero. It was the ends that justified his testimony to the infallibility of the myth.

For Washington, the ends might have been wealth and fame, financial support for Tuskegee, or the alleviation of treacherous racial tension that could eventually lead to the social uplift of blacks. Or it might have been all three. In any case, the means became the valorization of hard work, the advocating of practicality, the achievement of self-reliance, and an unfailing faith in the connection between merit and success. And this mode of representation resonated with white people, as Washington's popularity shows.

Thus, Washington represents himself as a man who, like Franklin, started from nothing and, as a result of hard work, self-determination, self-discipline, and self-reliance, became immensely successful. Also like Franklin, he implements the trope of “building character” to show how he “made” himself. By emphasizing the building of character as a methodical, step by step process, he communicates that the “self” must be literally constructed. But if one followed the Franklinian model of self-improvement, then strong character—and, thereby, success—was sure to follow.

To be recognized as a man, he showed, required building oneself into manhood, which meant first and foremost to be self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency was sustainable. He derived his curriculum for Tuskegee on this model of hard work and sustainability and he made sure to promote that image as visibly as possible. The earliest promotional photos of Tuskegee featured

not Washington's likeness, but students farming, constructing buildings, and manufacturing bricks. While Tuskegee acquired some of its funding from donations from whom Washington called "friends" of the school procured by his skill as a fundraiser, Tuskegee survived its first few years by selling bricks made in its own facilities by its own students. These bricks, which would be of course stacked one on top of others to form solid structures, stand as a metaphor for the raw materials used to build formidable, if not unassailable, character. To illustrate his point, Washington had Tuskegee students erect campus buildings with the bricks they manufactured. Washington hoped that by having students both make the raw materials used in the building and construct the buildings themselves, that they would see the value of being a part of a start-to-finish process. As designed, Washington's program is as an end in itself. The end goal is to build up—and keep building—one's own individual character.

He updates the Franklinian model, however, in one very important way: by making the success attained by following it more subjective. Washington realized that there were limitations to the status African Americans could achieve within white America. He even was acutely aware of his own glass ceiling. Though DuBois declared Washington the "second most popular man in the South behind Jefferson Davis," Washington knew he could never match even a deposed Jeff Davis in political office. So, he did the next best thing: he persuaded President Grover Cleveland to visit Tuskegee and later had dinner with President Theodore Roosevelt in the White House, both of which sent powerful messages, though they represent the extent of Washington's symbolic power.

The response around the country to Washington's visit to the White House testifies to its significance.<sup>3</sup> The dinner between Roosevelt and Washington was front page news across the country. While many articles saw it as positive, others show the extent of public fury. An opinion

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<sup>3</sup> See Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* for a thorough discussion of the response to this event around the country.

piece in the *Memphis Scimitar* proclaimed it “[t]he most damnable outrage which has ever been perpetrated by any citizen of the United States was committed yesterday by the President, when he invited a nigger to dine with him at the White House.” Mississippi Senator James K. Vardaman responded to news of the dinner with similar indignation, reckoning that the White House was “so saturated with the odor of the nigger that the rats have taken refuge in the shelter.” The most outrageous comment, however, came from South Carolina Senator Ben “Pitchfork” Tillman, who said, “[t]he action of President Roosevelt entertaining that nigger in the White House will necessitate our killing a thousand niggers in the South before they will learn their place again” (Morris 52, 203, 53). Many of the comments stemmed from sentimental and etiquette concerns, citing the impropriety of a black man dining at the same table as white women, but most were offended by the deeper significations of a black man being entertained in the White House. There was nothing more fear-inducing for some American whites than the specter of a black man rising to the highest, most powerful office in the land, no matter how impractical it seemed at the time.

Thus, Washington replaced the endpoint of the Franklin success narrative (wealth and reputation, or fame) with a more symbolic definition of success. “Success,” Washington proffers, “is not to be measured so much by the position of status that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed” (58). Success, as Washington defines it, is more subjective and requires the perpetual, active building of character. Franklin’s autobiography runs out of steam when Franklin becomes rich and famous; Washington’s never runs out of steam, for he is forever building. Eight years after Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” declared that the American character was based on “steady movement away

from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines,” Washington applied these characteristics to individual character as a measurement of success.

e. Washington as Darwinist Mythic Hero

In adopting the tropes of the American myth of success for *Up from Slavery*, Washington plays a major role in preserving the myth at a time when belief in it might have been lost or might have come to be viewed with cynicism.

Eight years prior to the publication of *Up from Slavery*, William Dean Howells published *The World of Chance*, in which main character Percy Byshe Shelley Ray’s success depends not upon merit or hard work, but luck and, as the book’s title would suggest, chance. Howells’s work in this novel and others like it set off a veritable explosion of Realist and Naturalist stories in which success is either a matter of chance or not all it is cracked up to be. Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat” (1897), Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899), Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900), Jack London’s *Martin Eden* (1909), and Bret Harte’s “The Luck of Roaring Camp (1917) all feature similar themes. These writers are reacting against the popular late nineteenth century doctrine of Social Darwinism.

Believers in Social Darwinism apply the theories advanced by Darwin in *Of the Origin of Species* to human social dynamics. Basically, Social Darwinism explains the success of some and the failure of others as an evolutionary process in which the strong and deserving rise to the top of the social strata while the weak and immoral are phased out of existence. Herbert Spencer called this social process “survival of the fittest,” which gives the impression that life is a competition in which the fittest or, as Spencer writes, those “whose functions happen to be most nearly in equilibrium with the modified aggregate of external forces” win and the unfit, or



those “whose functions are most out of equilibrium with the modified aggregate of external forces,” lose (459). Sir Charles Lyell, who had influenced Darwin in his *Principles of Geology* (1833) and was in turn influenced by Darwin’s writings, particularly *On the Origin of Species* (1859), advanced a theory in *Antiquity of Man* (1863) of “unbroken evolution.” The theory of unbroken evolution connects “natural selection,” “natural evolution,” and “natural uniformity” to assert that the record of human history is one of continuous evolutionary progress toward a more and more perfect society.

Contrary to popular social and intellectual notions, Realist and Naturalist writers were working to undermine these cultural assumptions. In Crane’s “The Open Boat,” the physically strongest character after a shipwreck loses his life to the undercurrent within sight of the shore while the sea spares his three weaker companions. Additionally, even the characters who achieve some level of success don’t wind up enjoying the happiness or contentment that one might think. Norris’s *McTeague*, Dreiser’s *Carrie*, and London’s *Eden*, after coveting the class privileges and wealth of others, all find out that worldly success isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. What these writers are suggesting is that nature is utterly indifferent to our human notions of order and justice and, moreover, the mode of life we hold up as the measure of success (wealth and/or fame) is not success at all, but lie along the path leading toward spiritual doom.

One aspect of Social Darwinism that lent itself to the criticism of the American myth of success—that all Americans had the opportunity to lift themselves up by their bootstraps and overcome whatever obstacles life presented and become successful, self-made men—was the notion that an individual was created by his or her environment. Beginning with Jacob Riis’s photojournalistic exposé of life in New York City’s tenement slums in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), a notion arose in the minds of thinkers and artists that the rags-to-riches story was

just a myth. In reality, most people could not overcome or “rise above” an oppressive and bleak environment to achieve success. Literary examples advancing this position include Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, which features characters from the New York slums who are trapped in a neverending vortex of self-destructive alcoholism and violence and Howells’s *The Minister’s Charge*, in which the message for those who might consider moving from the vulgarity and poverty of rural areas to the city in order to chase the dream of American success is that what awaits them in the city is not opportunity, but destruction.

These novels contradict the tenets of Social Darwinism and the contemporary rags-to-novels of Horatio Alger, who spun tales of lower class boys who, through hard work, determination, and honesty, overcame poverty, a lack of access to education or positive role models, and sometimes even homelessness.

Ironically, Alger’s cultural status as America’s foremost purveyor of the rags-to-riches story is a bit of a misconception, Alger biographers Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales have pointed out (Scharnhorst). Alger’s heroes always start with rags, but frequently end up gaining only middle class respectability rather than “riches.” The type of success they reach is Washingtonian in the sense that it’s more about what they overcome than where they end up.

While his characters epitomize the myth of success as it is conceived of by Washington, the reality of Alger’s own life tells a different story. Alger wanted to be a poet or at the least a respected and admired writer of fiction. Yet, no amount of hard work or dedication would yield him access into the serious literary circles he sought. Instead, Alger was forced to make ends meet as a tutor before tapping into his own perverse psyche for the material that would lead to his production of over a hundred best-selling but formulaic second-rate novels. These novels may have earned Alger a modicum of fame, if not respect. As for riches, the money that came

in is rumored to have went right back out. Allegedly (and this is borne out by Alger's ignominious end), Alger gave much—if not all—of his money to boys the age of his heroic characters whom he found attractive to indulge his alleged pedophilic perversions. These rumors are borne out by the fact that he died broke, living in his sister's basement and by the well known evidence that he was dismissed from his position as a Unitarian minister for molesting young boys.

In the end, the mythology as supported by Alger's novels is undermined by the fact that he himself, despite drive and desire, couldn't be what he wanted to be, that he died virtually penniless, and that the very boys he imagined were doing more than pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.

Even outside the serious literary circles Alger only found the periphery of, merit and the American myth as it was constituted were taking knockout blows. T. J. Jackson Lears points out that near the end of the nineteenth century America began to shift from a producer culture to a consumer culture. This very important cultural change that contributed to the skepticism of many intellectuals near the turn of the century is accompanied by the rise of advertising as an industry. In *From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture 1880-1910*, Lears argues that in the late nineteenth century an "ethos that had enjoined perpetual work, compulsive saving, civic responsibility, and a rigid morality of self denial" gave way to a new set of values sanctioning periodic leisure, compulsive spending, apolitical passivity, and an apparently permissive (but subtly coercive) morality of individual fulfillment" (1). You're no longer what you make, but what you own. If advertising appropriates the terms of the American myth, it does so to sell a

product, not to make a nation or an individual. In doing so, it renders hard work, sacrifice, frugality, and merit empty shells—catchy and attractive, but without substance.

The new leisure and consumer ethic combined with and the rise of advertising that accompanies this cultural shift ought to have meant the death of the American myth that merit leads to success as exemplified in Alger's success stories. It is into such a cultural climate that Booker T. Washington enters as an important and influential figure with his "Atlanta Exposition Address" in 1895 and then with *Up from Slavery*.

Washington embodied the rags-to-riches tale in the vein of Horatio Alger's fiction. He makes the "rags" metaphor clear in describing the earliest sleeping arrangements he can remember: "Three children—John, my older brother, Amanda, my sister, and myself—had a pallet on the dirt floor, or to be more correct, we slept in and on a bundle of filthy rags laid upon the dirt floor" (41). Born a slave and sleeping on the "filthy rags" that serve to connect the literal to the metaphorical in life, autobiography, and myth, Washington portrays himself as a man who, faced with overwhelming odds, does not focus on the negative in his life and resort to self-pity or self-destructiveness, but relentlessly tries to better himself through a combination of hard work, education, and making the most of every opportunity. He does so, and constructs an autobiography that emphasizes the rags-to-riches track of his story.

While, as Carla Willard has argued, Washington employs the brevity of advertising in his rhetoric in order to appeal to the contemporary reader's aesthetic taste, Washington seems in the substance of his autobiography to be eschewing fluff for practicality. He advocates action on the part of African Americans that is less Veblenian "conspicuous consumption" or "emulation," and more Jamesian "pragmatism."

Washington's approach suggests that he anticipates a kind of racial ascension/declension cycle on the horizon. Nearly two decades before Spengler theorized in *The Decline of the West* that history shows a pattern of cyclical rise and fall of dominant cultures, Washington seems to be predicting a symmetrical rise of the black race and corresponding fall of whites. The *Education of Henry Adams*, written only a few years after *Up from Slavery* was published, and Theodore Roosevelt's 1905 speech "On American Motherhood," in which the President warns whites to procreate at a higher rate or risk "race suicide," indicates that notions of the decline of Anglo-Saxon culture was part of the zeitgeist. Washington, then, can be seen as appropriating a text that exemplifies the highest point of evolution of the white race and applying it to blacks instead in an effort to foreshadow the ascent of blacks in America.

Franklin's narrative shows the rise from poverty and obscurity to wealth, fame, and power as a process. Washington is merely adopting this process as his prescription for facilitating the rise of African Americans. In doing so, Washington follows the Jamesian turn away from "idealism" to what he calls "pragmatism." Rather than think in absolutes and seek essential truth, people, according to James, ought to focus on the useful. Rather than placing faith in "should," people ought consider what "is" and work within their existing social structure as opposed to an ideal one. This philosophy is what led Washington to urge both African Americans and whites in the South to "cast down your buckets where you are." This phrase that serves as the basis for his Tuskegee experiment is a veritable slogan for pragmatism. He sends the message that you have to work, in other words, with what you have, not what you should have. He talks in his "Atlanta Exposition Speech" about making people more "useful."

One of the main problems that Washington encountered when he first came to Alabama to found Tuskegee was the impractical use of the land and resources among the African American poor. Washington was struck by the inefficient and unhealthy—the impractical—lives led by the people he visited noting particularly their poor diets and their wasteful spending. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers commonly subsisted on diets of “fat pork and corn bread” (92). And they also made conspicuous purchases on things such as “showy clocks” and rarely used sewing machines or organs. Washington includes these passages to show his commitment to a pragmatic approach:

The people seemed to have no other idea than to live on this fat meat and corn bread,—the meat, and the meal of which the bread was made, having been bought at a high price at a store in town, notwithstanding the fact that the land all about the cabin homes could easily have been made to produce nearly every kind of garden vegetable that is raised anywhere in the country. Their one object seemed to be to plant nothing but cotton; and in many cases cotton was planted up to the very door of the cabin. (92)

Seeing that the people he traveled among seemed to want to acquire things beyond their means—that is, to become what they are not—while not working to increase their means, Washington advocates a pragmatic back to basics approach, rather than an idealistic or superficial one, in order to achieve empowerment. He instructs people to plant a vegetable garden for self-reliant and more healthy subsistence and to stop making purchases for things you don’t need. In other words, “cast down your bucket where you are.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Wayne Flint’s *Poor But Proud* for a discussion of the lack of vegetable gardens and the economic and health consequences of poor diet among sharecroppers/tenant farmers in Alabama, which sometimes had to do with the terms of their contracts with the landowners who would stipulate that only cotton could be grown on the rented land,

Washington describes his turn away from abstract to practical education as having resulted from the real conditions that he encountered, which were discouraging: “I confess that what I saw during my month of travel and investigation left me with a very heavy heart. The work to be done in order to lift these people up seemed almost beyond accomplishing” (94). What he’s doing is very carefully setting up his educational program as the only potentially successful method for empowering African Americans in the 1890s South:

Of one thing I felt more strongly convinced than ever, after spending this month in seeing the actual life of the coloured people, and that was that, in order to lift them up, something must be done more than merely to imitate New England education as it then existed. I saw more clearly than ever the wisdom of the system which General Armstrong had inaugurated at Hampton. To take the children of such people as I had been among for a month, and each day give them a few hours of mere book education, I felt would be almost a waste of time. (94)

When observing a schoolhouse and his prospective students, Washington feels similar disappointment with the curriculum and the interests of the students.

It was also interesting to note how many big books some of them had studied, and how many high-sounding subjects some of them claimed to have mastered. The bigger the book and the longer the name of the subject, the prouder they felt of their accomplishment. Some had studied Latin, and one or two Greek. This they thought entitled them to special distinction. In fact, one of the saddest things I saw during the month of travel which I have described was a young

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or liens at the supply store that made the purchase of seeds other than cotton impossible. (University of Alabama Press, 1989, pp. 173-177).

man, who had attended some high school, sitting down in a one-room cabin, with grease on his clothing, filth all around him, and weeds in the yard and garden, engaged in studying a French grammar. (96)

In all these examples Washington laments the tragic impracticality of the types of curricula being offered and the kinds of education being sought by the students. So he commits to a pragmatic curriculum of agricultural and industrial training that focuses on the “usefulness” of the instruction. In pushing for such a curriculum, Washington employs the principles of Social Darwinism and Jamesian Pragmatism. He’s also advocating a process-oriented path to empowerment that is fundamentally based on the American myth of success, featuring his own life as the model. The hero of the American success story isn’t pulled out of a field and appointed to political offices, doesn’t gain social acceptability by owning an organ, a clock that doesn’t work, or a store-bought hat, and certainly doesn’t gain wealth or status by mastering a foreign language. The hero of this story starts from nothing with all the odds stacked against him, sacrifices, struggles mightily to first learn self-sufficiency, and without any handouts from anybody, proves his worth to the world. Then (and only then) when he deserves recognition, does he gain it.

#### f. Conclusion: A Franklin Renaissance?

Washington’s appropriation of Franklin is an attempt to usher in a power surge for African Americans. Washington knew it would be a lengthy process that would need a strong foundation. He found both that process of self-improvement and that foundation of hard-work, self-sufficiency, virtuous and unassailable character, determination, and perseverance in Franklin’s *Autobiography*. In some ways, Washington’s adopted methodology worked.



He was able to recruit students to Tuskegee from the fields of Alabama and eventually all over the South. And he lured prominent African American scholars to join the faculty. Whites in the South bought what Booker T. was selling. Some praised him for his non-confrontational doctrine. The *Montgomery Advertiser* proclaimed, “there is nothing of the agitator about him.” Their endorsement clearly derives from what he doesn’t do, which is stir black fury, than what he does do.

Northern whites also came to the support of Washington, some practically comparing him to Jesus the savior or Moses the deliverer. Perhaps most notably, Andrew Carnegie called Washington “the combined Moses and Joshua of his people” (Thornbrough 162). In addition to Carnegie, Washington attracted many benefactors, such as philanthropic tycoons Henry Huttleston Rogers and Anna T. Jeanes, who donated \$1m to Tuskegee and became major benefactors. He sought and received funding for Tuskegee from the Rockefeller General Education Board, The Rosenwald Fund, and the Phelps-Stokes Fund. He became close acquaintances with William H. Baldwin, Jr, vice-president of the Southern Railway, and also with merchants John W. Wanamaker and Robert C. Ogden, Collis P. Huntington, the railroad magnate, and Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck and Company. He understood that good marketing couldn’t be relegated to just philanthropic foundations and tycoons, but that he had to win over the goodwill of all sectors of the public.

And while the fight for civil rights would be prolonged and characterized by much more violence, would be supported by a wide array of voices and methods, and is ongoing, race relations in America have improved. The Tuskegee “Normal School” that he helped found is thriving now as Tuskegee University. And though he couldn’t have been President of the United States, an African American has. While it’s debatable whether Washington advanced or

hindered this process, it is clear that he enhanced the successes that he did have by casting himself as another version of the hero of the American success story. His ability to do so benefitted not only himself, it helped to perpetuate the myth. Perhaps Howells's review of *Up from Slavery* is most telling: "Except for the race ignominy and social outlawry to which he was born," Howells writes, "the story of Booker T. Washington does not differ so very widely from that of many another eminent Americans" (qtd in *Washington Papers*, p. 192).

Howells's impression of Washington as he portrays himself in his autobiography is telling, for Washington's appropriation of the Franklin hero myth couldn't have helped Franklin's legacy. Washington's version of the myth contains no hint of irony or humor. It may be unfair to expect a black writer to have written humorously or ironically about race in 1901. No black writer would successfully do so until Ishmael Reed. But Washington's absolute humorlessness in his role as Franklin detracts from or causes us to discount the ironic humor of the original, and ultimately contributes to simplification of the Franklinian character. *Up from Slavery* is a straightforward account of ascension that presumes an ordered world where hard work and merit ensure success, no matter the difficulties. Franklin's *Autobiography* is a much more nuanced text than that. But as we see that old familiar story again, it has the effect of conflation. This is especially true when we're inclined to disbelieve the simplicity of a story in the first place, as the reaction to the theories about an ordered and just world from Naturalist writers and texts like *The Education of Henry Adams* indicates. Thus, *Up from Slavery* rendered Benjamin battered and bloodied, and in critical condition.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS AND THE ASSASSINATION OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN*

#### a. Introduction

What is Henry Adams doing in a dissertation about Benjamin Franklin? On the surface, the two men's autobiographies seem to cast them as polar opposites. Franklin was born in poverty and obscurity; Adams to American royalty. Franklin overcame disadvantages to make himself; Adams dwelt upon the disadvantages that came with his birthright. Franklin became a political mover and shaker, orchestrating one of the most important political revolutions in history; Adams bemoaned political inertia and ineffectiveness. Franklin responds optimistically to the uncertainty that language represents truth; Adams pessimistically. Franklin lived in the eighteenth century; Adams didn't, but claimed that he should have. Franklin's narrative details his accomplishments and appraises him as a success. Adams's laments his inability to accomplish anything and appraises him as a failure.

Yet, a closer look at both of these prominent Americans reveals a connection more substantial than one might think. They both try to define themselves and their nation through narrative, each using irony to express uncertainty about, or to palliate, his perceptions. And, within a certain context of the narrative of an American type authored by Franklin, Adams might be thought of as an incarnation—the last incarnation—of the Benjamins and as a representation

of the transition to a new anxious and reflective modern American type. *The Education of Henry Adams* can be seen as an engagement with Franklin's *Autobiography* in that it reverses Franklin's narrative arc, tracking an American life not from "poverty and obscurity" to "success" based on the arrival at "affluence and some degree of reputation in the world," but from privilege to "failure" based on Adams's perception that education results not in progressive self-improvement, but uncertainty. Whereas Franklin's narrative evolves to a point of order, Adams's devolves into chaos. The effect of such a profound memoir of devolution in American life as Adams's is to position its anti-hero alongside Hawthorne's Satan in "Young Goodman Brown," as an "undeceiver." But rather than exposing religious hypocrisy, Adams—though himself humorous—ushers in an age that, absent of humor, can only view the Franklinian success hero as a fraud.

#### b. Devolution in the Age of Darwin

Franklin and Adams both represent themselves as men who sought to improve themselves. Franklin's *Autobiography* is a narrative of ascent featuring a character who starts from nothing and progresses to a heightened state of existence. In Franklin's self- and nation-making project, the hero's ascent mirrors that of his nation, for it is the heightened state of the nation that makes it possible for the individual the opportunity to reach his full potential. America is thus defined as a nation of progress, the most evolved of all nations on earth and a place that, because of its enlightened democratic government, will be defined by perpetual evolution and ascent. Social Darwinism, then, made sense to Americans because it provided them with a theory to explain how America, by a process of natural selection, became the "more perfect union." Adams's *Education* is structured according to an entirely different principle of

how the world operates. To Adams, the history of humanity is not in a record of perpetually ascending progress.

In his youth, however, Adams initially believes in social Darwinism because, as he admits “it was easier than not” (225). Indeed, social Darwinism dominated philosophical thought at mid-century and beyond. Adams calls the 1860s a time when “Darwin was convulsing society” (224). Darwin’s theories were among those so widely accepted that they could not be questioned. Adams explains that “The atomic theory; the correlation and conservation of energy; the mechanical theory of the universe; the kinetic theory of gases, and Darwin's Law of Natural Selection, were examples of what a young man had to take on trust.” Little did it matter that “[n]either he nor any one else knew enough to verify them” (224).

Sir Charles Lyell’s work supported and helped advance the Darwinian doctrine. His 1863 *Antiquity of Man* and 1866 tenth edition of the *Principles of Geology* connected “Natural Selection” to “Natural Evolution” and “Natural Uniformity” to form what he calls “Unbroken Evolution,” which posits that the world and human society within it were on a track of continuous improvement. “This was a vast stride,” Adams wryly explains. “Unbroken Evolution under uniform conditions pleased every one—except curates and bishops” (225).

Being interested in how social theories evolve, Adams considers the motivation behind “unbroken evolution.” He argues that the devaluation of religion as a source of social unity left a catastrophic void that called for a substitute to fill it. Thus philosophy stepped in.

Unity and Uniformity were the whole motive of philosophy, and if Darwin, like a true Englishman, preferred to back into it—to reach god *a posteriori*—rather than start from it . . . the difference of method taught only the moral that the best way of reaching unity was to unite. Any road was good that arrived (226).

Thus, the Darwinist scientific inquiry and findings (along with its accompanying philosophy) is driven by humanity's desire to think of itself in the way that it wants to, which is as something highly evolved—something “good.” After all, Adams points out, “[l]ife depended on it, and [s]teady, uniform, unbroken evolution from lower to higher seemed easy” (226). It is easier, Adams argues, to believe in the superiority of one's world. This is why philosophies emerge to support that notion and also why a narrative arc like the one Franklin invents appeals so strongly to Americans. It works hand in hand with people's own imaginary fantasies to reinforce the view they already have of themselves.

In the opening lines of his “Preface,” however, Adams alludes not immediately to his American autobiographer forbearers, but to Jean Jacques Rousseau. The immediate allusion to Rousseau indicates that Adams's autobiography will break with the usual form of boasting about triumphs and accomplishments and will instead deliver something much more introspective. Rousseau, Adams argues, is “a very great educator.” Unfortunately, his pedagogical method—confessing his vileness and unworthiness—“has not,” according to Adams, “been universally admired” (xxiii). On the contrary, “Most educators of the nineteenth century have declined to show themselves before their scholars as objects more vile or contemptible than necessary, and even the humblest teacher hides, if possible, the faults with which nature has generously embellished us all, as it did Jean Jacques” (xxiii). Americans in particular, Adams argues, are less likely to reveal the unsavory aspects of their lives. This may be because they feel that God doesn't want us “thrusting under his eyes chiefly the least agreeable parts of his creation” (xxiii). Or it may be, as he has already suggested, that it is simply easier not to reckon with the unsavory, that Americans would rather think of themselves as the most highly evolved of all civilizations and thus want to ignore the parts “least agreeable” because they don't mesh with how they want

to view themselves. Either way he is making the point that American literature avoids such confessions or such disclosures. And he is right. Though there were authors such as Melville and Hawthorne who dared face the toughest existential questions, American popular authors and most readers seem to suppress darkness and ambiguity in favor of creating and reading texts that reinforce cultural values through redemptive morals and tidy resolutions.

As a result, Adams argues, the introspective American at the turn of the twentieth century “finds few recent guides to avoid, or to follow,” for “American literature offers scarcely one working model for high education” (xxiii). The one author Adams does mention who offers up anything resembling “self-teaching” is, not surprisingly, Benjamin Franklin. But Adams mention of Franklin can hardly be seen as indicative of admiration. Adams implicitly poses Franklin as one of those models to avoid. He is thus offered up as a representation of the problem, for in Adams estimation, “no one has discussed what part education has, in his personal experience, turned out to be useful, and what not” (xxiii). Thus not Franklin, not Douglass, not Washington, nor anyone else can serve as a model for education. Adams himself will be a first, for his task, like Franklin’s assertion about his own, will be instructive, or “to fit young men . . . to be men of the world” (xxiv).

It is clear, though, that this will not be an American story in the vein of Franklin’s success narrative, which, Adams would say, ignores rather than confronts. The arc of the success myth did not conform to Adams’s own life, nor did it fit with his view of the world. No matter how he tried, a man like Adams would not be able to cast himself as the American mythic success hero.

Adams was born not in poverty and obscurity, but just the opposite. The opening lines of chapter one of *The Education* recall the structure of Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My*

*Freedom* in that the author first describes the setting, then, at the end of the paragraph, sets his subject in it. Douglass writes,

In Talbot county, Eastern Shore, Maryland, near Easton, the county town of that county, there is a small district of country, thinly populated, and remarkable for nothing that I know of more than for the worn-out, sandy, desert-like appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever . . . in this dull, flat, and unthrifty district, or neighborhood, surrounded by a white population of the lowest order, indolent and drunken to a proverb, and among slaves, who seemed to ask, "*Oh! what's the use?*" every time they lifted a hoe, that I -- without any fault of mine was born, and spent the first years of my childhood.

In comparison, Adams begins,

Under the shadow of Boston State House, turning its back on the house of John Hancock, the little passage called Hancock Avenue runs, or ran, from Beacon Street, skirting the State House grounds, to Mount Vernon Street, on the summit of Beacon Hill; and there, in the third house below Mount Vernon Place, February 16, 1838, a child was born, and christened later by his uncle, the minister of the First Church after the tenets of Boston Unitarianism, as Henry Brooks Adams. (3)

Contrary to the "rags" beginning of Douglass or Franklin, *The Education* abounds with symbols of American royalty, such as the Boston State House, Beacon Hill, Beacon and Mount Vernon Streets, and Boston's First Unitarian Church. Since Adams is born both affluent and famous, or, as he calls it, "branded," there's nowhere to which he can ascend. His status at birth equals Franklin's at the end of his life. Starting from the top, paradoxically, dooms Adams from



the get go. He is, as he puts it, “heavily handicapped in the races of the coming century, in running for the stakes that the century has to offer” (3).

But what he is handicapped in is the ability to delude himself with the illusion of success at the expense of education. The success myth is just that—a myth, an illusion, or, to borrow a term from Marx, an “opiate” of the masses. It is an ideal that turns one away from education .

The second paragraph of Adams’s introduction presents more similarities to Douglass. Adams explains,

Had he been born in Jerusalem under the shadow of the Temple and circumcised in the Synagogue by his uncle the high priest, under the name of Israel Cohen, he would scarcely have been more distinctly branded, and not much more heavily handicapped in the races of the coming century, in running for such stakes as the century was to offer. (3)

This passage functions similarly to Douglass’s declaration that it was “without any fault of [his] own” that he was born when and where he was born. Like Franklin, who was born to a pretty good family but one that stifled him, both writers emphasize their own helplessness in the circumstances of their births. Though they are drastically different circumstances, each emphasizes the pure accident of one’s lot, the ironic contingency of life in a country presupposing that one is solely responsible for the making of one’s own self. Douglass, like Franklin includes such a detail in order to show what disadvantages he had to overcome in order to make himself into a success. Adams, on the other hand, wants to argue that what we are and who we become is less reliant on what we do than on forces beyond our control.

Adams’s use of third person point of view emphasizes his contention. Of all the autobiographies studied for this dissertation, only Douglass occasionally switches to third

person, and he does so for a universalizing effect (the reason a writer would choose to do so), but Adams maintains it throughout his narrative. Generally, to reference oneself in third person has the effect of distancing and, in a sense, this holds true with Adams. His use of third person in *The Education* also allows Adams to place judgment on himself as well as to encourage the same verdict from readers.

Given the socio-economic status he was born into and his self-evaluation, *The Education* has to break with the conventions of American autobiography. Adams starts from the top, refutes the position that America is a nation of ascent, then tears himself down to prove it. He could have simply explained that privilege prohibits him from participating in the American myth of success, but that would merely prove that that not everyone could follow the same path sketched by Franklin. Adams planned more. His purpose was not to discuss “what part education has . . . turned out to be useful, and what not” (xxiii). Nor is it “to fit young men . . . to be men of the world” (xxiv). Adams wanted to shock and disturb in order to undermine the foundations of American thought. In other words, he wanted not to reinforce a myth, but to educate. To understand his whole lesson, one must consider *The Education* in relation to its predecessor, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*.

### c. Unity: *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*

George Hochfield calls *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* “an obvious and necessary first step” in providing “the historical perspective that made the very idea of a book such as *The Education* possible” (115). *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* and *The Education of Henry Adams* form a diptych juxtaposing eras nine centuries apart in order to assert that the medieval period was characterized by unity, while the turn of the twentieth century, if examined honestly, is

characterized by relative disharmony, or what Adams calls in his preface to *The Education*, “multiplicity.” Adams’s basic project in presenting such a comparison of ages is to argue against social Darwinism. He seeks to educate by disproving the Darwin-inspired notion that America represents the most evolved society in the history of human civilization, and thereby to encourage introspection. His books, then, might be more appropriately called *The Education of Us*. Comparing the two books—and the two eras—makes it clear from Adams’s standpoint that western, white civilization is not on a course of evolutionary progress at all. Rather it has moved from unity to chaos, a de-volution.

Published in 1904, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* is, on the surface, an art history. It takes as its subjects medieval cathedrals and, in the guise of an architectural study, presents an evaluation of medieval culture and values. On a deeper level, the book is autobiographical in that it places its author/subject in the medieval period, where he feels grounded, a part of nature and culture at its absolutely most unified, as if he is home. From the vantage point of Mont Saint Michel cathedral Adams writes,

one can almost take oath that . . . one knew life once and has never so fully known it since . . . [W]e of the eleventh century, hard-headed, close-fisted, shrewd, as we were, and as Normans are still said to be, stood more fully in the centre of the world’s movement than our English descendants ever did. (3-4)

Adams’s takes himself imaginatively back to the medieval period, and this is his great accomplishment in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*. According to R. P. Blackmur, “Some kind of organic unity was [Adams’s] own ideal, and he had come on it by having grasped it imaginatively, in its last apparition, at the height of the Middle Ages” (127). That the nineteenth century mind might imagine a social unity in a time different than his own is commentary

enough that his own time is less than unified. One cannot imagine that a thirteenth century mind would have had similar anxieties.

Adams's tone is one of nostalgia and longing. The art and architecture of the time signals to Adams that the medieval period was a time less characterized by doubt and despair and much more unified in mind and purpose than the turn of the twentieth century. Imagining himself living in medieval society, he sees no fractures that result from hierarchic social categorizations or differing motivations: "Church and State, Soul and Body, God and Man, are all one at Mont-Saint-Michel, and the business of all is to fight, each in his own way, or to stand guard for each other" (8).

As Adams takes us from the Mont Saint Michel cathedral, which dates from the eleventh century, to the thirteenth century Chartres cathedral, this feeling of unity with society only intensifies. Adams explains that he is after "not technical knowledge; not accurate information; not correct views either on history, art, or religion; not anything that can possibly be useful or instructive; but only a sense of what those centuries had to say, and a sympathy with their ways of saying it" (60). It is Adams's aim to impart that feeling, allowing us, too, to feel it.

Adams guides us step-by-step through the process: "For a visit to Chartres, choose some pleasant morning when the lights are soft, for one wants to be welcome, and the cathedral has moods, at times severe" (61). As if we are approaching it, Adams begins his description with the most outstanding feature, the spire, which would come into our view first upon approach. The spire is important not only because its conspicuousness means it will require "the least study in order to be felt," but because it "tells the whole of its story at a glance, and its story is the best that architecture had to tell, for it typified the aspirations of man at the moment when man's aspirations were highest" (61). He is making the connection between object and sentiment clear,

for the main feature, the Virgin, we must recognize as more than an object or even a symbol to the people of the thirteenth century.

To those who lived then, the Virgin eclipses even her son in importance. When we come into view of the “Queen Mother,” Adams, encouraging us via his use of second person to put ourselves there and join with him in imagining, explains that she is “as majestic as you like” (88). The first detail he includes about her, that she is “absolute,” emphasizes the difference between her time and his, when there are no absolutes. Indeed, she is so all encompassing that she can be everything to everybody depending on what one might need from her at the time. “She was the greatest artist, as she was the greatest philosopher, and musician and theologian, that ever lived on earth” (88). Indeed, Chartres exists for her because “[s]he required space, beyond what was known in the Courts of kings, because she was liable at all times to have ten thousand people begging her for favours” (88). By the time of the Crusades, she comes to overshadow the Trinity itself.”

She is so tantamount to every other concern that nearly all of the wealth of France at the time was invested in building cathedrals for her. Such enormous expenditure “expressed an intensity of conviction never again reached by any passion, whether of religion, of loyalty, of patriotism, or of wealth” (92). People did expect a return on their investment. Adams explains that “as the French of the nineteenth century invested their surplus capital in a railway system in the belief that they would make money by it in this life, in the thirteenth they trusted their money to the Queen of Heaven because of their belief in her power to repay it with interest in the life to come” (93). As we can see, the focus in the thirteenth century on “the life to come” indicates a more unified, more intense common feeling than in the nineteenth, where the financial returns of

the nineteenth century mean different things to different people and also have a more self-serving aspect.

This is not simply a matter of the medieval period being more primitive or lacking the individual empowerment that comes with the knowledge of the nineteenth century. Those in the medieval period merely possess a different kind of knowledge. For instance, Adams explains that when the thirteenth century architect built onto the original eleventh century Chartres structure, he had to preserve the old structure when trying to put his own stamp on the new one. He could do so “only by the exercise of an amount of intelligence that we shall never learn enough to feel our incapacity to understand” (109). In other words, the thirteenth century architect possesses an intelligence based on feeling that we cannot even conceive of.

The difference between thirteenth and nineteenth century knowledge is based on Adams’s conception of “ignorance,” and what kind of ignorance each era employs. The thirteenth century has what Adams calls a “true ignorance,” which “approaches the infinite more nearly than any amount of knowledge can” (109). For the thirteenth century, it is an indifference to “anything except the incomprehensible” (109). Thus, for the thirteenth century, Adams asserts that ignorance is a kind of strength, something one possesses just like knowledge. Blackmur describes this thirteenth century ignorance as “a present sense of the ‘unknown’ other than in the consciousness that uses words and ideas . . . [or] the absence of articulable knowledge in the presence of another and positive skill of knowing” (133). Ignorance in this sense, then, is a type of knowledge. Conversely, the nineteenth century “refuses to be interested in what it cannot understand” (109). When the thirteenth century architect sought to “provide more space for her worshippers within the church, without destroying the old portal and fleche” he did so because

that “order came directly from the Virgin” (110). This made perfect sense to him, when to us it would not.

To think that one is acting on divine orders rather than selfishness might today be associated with fanatics, lunatics, or even terrorists, yet Adams argues that it is the result of a special kind of knowledge. And the proof is in the pudding, for the architect successfully completed his task, never once succumbing to selfishness or pride. To properly see this phenomenon the way Adams did, it might be useful to return to the Max Eastman and T. K. Whipple dialectic structure I introduced in chapter four between the poetic and practical tempers.

Eastman, to reiterate, argues that nineteenth century Americans can be divided between the “practical,” or those “chiefly occupied with attaining ends,” and the “poetic,” or those interested in “receiving experiences” (qtd. in Whipple, 4). Both groups, the practical and poetic are seeking their own contentment, which might be compared to a sense of unity in the world. The practical values acquisition while the poetic values experience for its own sake. To compare, the nineteenth century, maintains focus on the practical, attempting to understand the world but doing so through the lens of a frame ultimately trained on commerce, while the thirteenth shows more of a poetic collective mind, putting to use its concern with the unknown or unknowable to establish unity that is evidenced in its artistic expressions. Europe, Adams reminds us, is small, and travelled “as easily now as one could do it then . . . but one does not now carry freight of philosophy, poetry, or art. The world still struggles for unity, but by different methods, weapons, and thought” (140).

Not only the artist, but everyone in the thirteenth century felt this poetic sense. Adams supports this claim in a flourish of emotion, perhaps the most passionate in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*,

[E]ach in turn whether priest, or noble, or glassworker, would have certainly appealed to the Virgin and one can imagine the architect still beside us, in the growing dusk of evening, mentally praying, as he looked at the work of a finished day: 'Lady Virgin, show me what you like best! . . . Gracious Lady, what ought I to do? Forgive me my blunders, my stupidity, my wretched want of taste and feeling! I love and adore you! All that I am, I am for you! If I cannot please you, I care not for Heaven! but without your help, I am lost! (176).

Adams is translating the unified emotional energy that he imagines that every thirteenth century person must have felt. He asserts that

you or any other lost soul, could, if you cared to look and listen, feel a sense beyond the human ready to reveal a sense divine that would make that world once more intelligible . . . and any one willing to try could feel it like a child . . . but what is still more convincing, he could, at will, in an instant, shatter the whole art by calling into it a single motive of his own. (177)

The implication here is that we have the ability as human beings to experience such elation, but we would likely not be able to because of what it would require from us, which would be the total commitment to the divine and the relinquishing of individual concerns. Even Emerson, who seems to be suggesting a similar abdication of self when he calls for man to try to reconcile the "me" and the "not me" and banish all "mean egotism" does so in the same individualist spirit in which he proclaims "trust thyself." Emerson's self-abnegation is based on a certain belief in the sanctity of the individual. In Adams's mind, his contemporary society has lost the "poetic temper" of our twelfth and thirteenth century counterparts.



d. To Chaos: *The Education*

Much like *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, *The Education* is layered. On the surface, it is an autobiography, but on a deeper level it is the intellectual history of the late nineteenth century. In it, Adams tells the story of his own pursuit of unity and his ultimate inability to find it in the way that he imagines he would have in the medieval period and, by implication, he judges that humanity has not evolved.

Adams's narrative voice strikes one initially as bitter and petulant. He whines about his position of privilege and repeatedly decries his "failure," despite having cavorted around Europe in luxury and having had access to governmental and educational structures of power. Yet, Adams's *Education* must be understood, like Franklin's *Autobiography*, as shrouded thick in irony. From the outset, Adams is playing literary games. The "Editor's Preface" though signed by Henry Cabot Lodge, was written by Adams himself, an immediate signal that what follows will be less than straightforwardly sincere. He also claims that *The Education* is a companion piece to *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, giving him "two points of relation" from which "to project his lines forward and backward" (xxi). While he may have accurately characterized his project, he follows it up with a superficially modest caveat that his movement will be "subject to correction from anyone who should know better" (xxi). Adams is being coy here, knowing good and well that no one had a more thorough knowledge of the relationship between twelfth century Europe and the end of nineteenth century America than he did. When feeling anxious about his knowledge after being asked to join Harvard as a professor of medieval history, he admits that he could think of no one who knew more about the subject than he. He felt self-assured also that no one had issued a more accurate and piercing judgment of the late nineteenth century than to say that those who lived during the time were "between two worlds, one dead. The other powerless

to be born.” Irony is so pervasive in *The Education* that Martin Green and Barry Maine recognize it as the book’s most important feature and claim that the book cannot be understood without awareness of it.<sup>1</sup>

The circumstance of publication also raises doubts about the surface sincerity of Adams. In 1907, the manuscript of *The Education* complete, Adams began circulating privately 100 copies which he had printed at his own expense. He sent the copies to a selected list of readers, leaving wide margins as it soliciting commentary and revision. However, he knew that a book like *The Education*, while it could be disputed, could not be “corrected” because of its subjective point of view. Yet, even on this point he expressed disappointment, writing to his brother Brooks that “the world is now a big ocean into which we throw things, but there is no longer a splash.”<sup>2</sup> Adams wanted responses, not “corrections.”

His modesty brings up another crucial indicator of irony in *The Education*. Adams repeated references to himself as a “failure” should also be taken with a grain of salt. Adams represents himself as having desired to attain a position of importance and influence in the world, but always fails to do so because his “education” rendered him ill-prepared. This is a charge that he knew to be patently false. A man who had published ten books, who had been sought after by Harvard, authored a “theory of history,” and who, generally, was renowned and, at worst, infamous—quite an accomplishment in itself—was certainly no failure. It is hard to believe that a man who considered himself a failure would have commissioned such a monument as the Adams Memorial at his future grave site at the Rock Creek Cemetery. Therefore, readers cannot

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Green, *The Problem of Boston* (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 213. Barry Maine, “*The Education of Henry Adams: Music for Ourselves Alone.*” *The New England Quarterly*. Vol. 61, No. 3 (Sep., 1988), pp. 325-340

<sup>2</sup> Henry Adams to Brooks Adams, 3 February 1909, in *Henry Adams and His Friends: A Collection of His Unpublished Letters*, ed. Harold Dean Cater (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), pp. 644-45..

take him at face value. But he should also not be dismissed as a melodramatic poser. His representation of himself as such, then, is rhetorical, literary, or both.

In *The Education*, Adams is engaging in the same kind of wink wink nudge nudge irony that Franklin had in his *Autobiography*. Both Franklin and Adams employ irony because they recognize that what they had to say was not so simple. Franklin knows that becoming successful or building a nation can't be accomplished by merely imitating him. Adams sees a contradiction between social theories of unity and what he sees as a chaotic world. The difference between the two lies in Franklin's optimistic and Adams's pessimistic responses, which bring to mind Jacques Derrida's sensible assertion in "Structure, Sign, and Play" that one can respond to the event which he calls a "rupture," or the instance when unity of thought became open to "free play," or when absolute knowledge becomes relative, with "joyous affirmation" of its openness or despair at the impossibility of believing in anything. Neither Franklin's nor Adams's use of irony cancels out what they say, but with both we must contend with it or risk misinterpretation.

The effect of the irony Adams maintains throughout *The Education* is a voice that can only be taken, if read properly, as a voice of sarcastic, biting wit. People resort to sarcastic edginess when they are frustrated, angry and bitter that others don't see the world in the same way that they do. Generally, the practitioner of ironic wit is highly intellectual and insightful, and feels justifiably irritated by the rest of the world's lack of insight. This describes the Adams of *The Education*.

One cannot help, however to see that he is amused. The world may be a sick joke, but at least it's still funny. He writes about sophisticated, elitist Boston that "[t]he Garden of Eden was hardly more primitive." Then, in the next sentence, calls Boston's primitiveness a "virtue." "To balance this virtue, the Puritan city had always hidden a darker side" (40-41). Clearly crediting

Boston with such a “virtue” is a backhanded compliment, and one Adams enjoyed writing. Not impressed with the office of the presidency, having had, after all, two presidents in his immediate family, Adams comments, “Revolutionary patriots, or perhaps a Colonial Governor, might be worth talking about, but any one could be President, and some very shady characters were likely to be” (46-47). With equal ferocity he goes after Harvard, the place that employed him, claiming that “the school created a type but not a will.” Furthermore, “Four years of Harvard College, if successful, resulted in an autobiographical blank, a mind on which only a watermark had been stamped.” In all fairness, though, he writes “disappointment apart, Harvard College was probably less hurtful than any other university then in existence” (55). The criticisms are fairly clear. Harvard does not provide education or breed strong, independent, analytical thinkers. The concession, however, complete with the uncertainty of judging Harvard not as beneficial but “less hurtful,” along with the qualifier “probably” indicates a disbelief in the inability for others to recognize ridiculousness of Harvard, but also shows how Adams is able to amuse himself in his criticism of the school.

He is equally as unmerciful to the British. Consider this indictment of the their mentality: “The English mind was one-sided, eccentric, systematically unsystematic, and logically illogical. The less one knew of it, the better” (180). Or this put down: “[T]he best educated statesman England ever produced did not know what he was talking about” (155). Overall, he judges the Brits to be pretentious about art and literature, ignorant, and clueless, consisting of all style and no substance. Of the American government, he quips, “The government resembled Adams himself in the matter of education. All that had gone before was useless, and some of it was worse” (254).

Yet, Adams is doing more than just amusing himself by playing literary games with irony. As Lears has pointed out, Adams is not simply “an early example of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur*, an intellectual absorbed only in the ‘free play’ of ideas” (84). Adams’s ironic voice reveals a man undoubtedly troubled by the world. As with Franklin, we must avoid thinking that the irony cancels out the surface message. Adams doesn’t exactly mean the opposite of what he says, but his relationship with what he says is different than it seems. Through irony, Adams issues a critique of his world, made especially effective by the extent to which he is willing to shock. It worked. Even his close friend William James was put off by what he saw as Adams’s pessimism. James critiqued Adams based on his disagreement with Adams’s scientific theory of history, arguing that it was nothing more than “retrospection projected on the future.”<sup>3</sup>

So, what is Adams’s aim in *The Education*? Following up on his evaluation of the medieval period in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, Adams aims to contrast medieval conviction, richness, and absolute unity with modern restlessness, shallow selfishness, and multiplicity. Nothing produced in his own world fires his imagination comparably to the cathedrals of Normandy. In fact, just the opposite is true; everything he witnesses indicates to him that the turn of the twentieth century is afflicted with disharmony, or “multiplicity,” and accompanying restlessness, alienation, and discontent. The modern world, Adams believes—secular, capitalist, consumerist, industrial—has no centralizing beliefs or ethics, no common art or tradition, and thus no unity. We have moved from unity to chaos.

We may believe ourselves to be the most evolved civilization in human history, but the theories that support our beliefs are inventions, not a reflection of reality. Adams describes 1870

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<sup>3</sup> William James to Henry Adams, 9 February 1908, in *The Selected Letters of William James*, ed. Elizabeth Hardwick (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961), p. 242.

as a time when “[e]volution from lower to higher ranged like an epidemic. Darwin was the greatest of all prophets in the most evolutionary of worlds . . . Improvement, prosperity, power, were leaping and bounding over every country road” (284). Scientific hypotheses and theories are influenced by what humans desire to find as much as by what they do find. Seeking unity, scientists will advance theories to explain what unifies their society. After all, “true science was the development or economy of forces” (379). In this case, as a result of social forces, scientists assert that contemporary western culture and particularly American society represents the most advanced society in human history and that the explanation for this is that humanity is constantly evolving into a more and more advanced civilization.

Yet, Adams didn’t buy it. Neither did his own story nor his perception of the world gel with evolution. His observations, detailed in *The Education*, contrasted with those of Darwinists Sir Charles Lyell and Sir Isaac Newton. For instance, Lyell, who had influenced and in turn been influenced by Darwin, had posited that glaciers could explain the appearance of “erratic” geological matter.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, glaciers were a part of natural evolution. Adams disputes this claim, saying sarcastically that he “was ignorant enough to think that the glacial epoch looked like a chasm between him and a uniformitarian world” (227). “If the glacial period were uniformity,” Adams jokes, “what was catastrophe?” (227). In Adams’s estimation, “the two or three labored guesses that Sir Charles suggested or borrowed to explain glaciations were proof of nothing, and were quite unsolid as support for so immense a superstructure as geological uniformity” (227). Adams goes on to say that he thought Lyell’s views “weak as hypotheses and worthless as proofs,” and that ultimately, “he doubted” (227). Of all of Lyell’s scientific proofs, Adams could find nothing but “pure inference” (230).

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<sup>4</sup> Glacial erratic are rocks non-native to their place of rest.

Adams concludes that the whole of evolutionary theory amounts to nothing more than a belief in modern superiority: “To other Darwinians—except Darwin<sup>5</sup>—Natural Selection seemed a dogma to be put in the place of the Athanasian creed; it was a form of religious hope; a promise of ultimate perfection” (231). In light of events such as the Civil War, Adams asks, could we really believe in an evolution of morals toward anything resembling an ultimate perfection? In this way, Adams astutely anticipates Modernism, which responds to the horror of World War I with similar despair and doubts in the inevitability of human progress.

Incidentally, the Civil War, particularly one of its most heroic figures, presents the material for some of Adams’s most piercing denunciations of evolution. The victim: Ulysses S. Grant. He starts his indictment of Grant by citing the buffoonery of Grant’s cabinet posts, which upon hearing them “had the singular effect of making the hearer ashamed, not so much of Grant, as of himself” (262). Apparently Grant’s choices were so baffling as to signify to one that his own assumptions about life were completely misconceived.

Then Adams asserts that the General’s success was a mystery to even those closest to him. Grant is not a thinker, but “an intermittent energy” (264). Adam Badeau, who had been Grant’s secretary during the war and wrote a *Military History of Ulysses S. Grant*, admitted that “neither he nor the rest of the staff knew why Grant succeeded; they believed in him because of his success” (264). Often, Badeau explained, Grant seemed vegetative for long stretches of time while his staff talked strategy. Suddenly he would come to life and announce the plans his staff had discussed in his presence as his own, then issue an official order. And lo and behold, it would work. Badeau’s characterization of Grant led Adams to conclude that the General was a

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<sup>5</sup> Adams wants to make sure that his readers understand that part of the problem with Darwinians is they’ve distorted Darwin somewhat.

force of nature, not intellect. He was of a type, Adams writes, that was “pre-intellectual, archaic, and would have seemed so even with the cave-dwellers” (265).

Adams finds Grant’s ascension to the Presidency highly problematic to the idea of human evolution and also, obviously, highly irritating:

He had no right to exist. He should have been extinct for ages. The idea that, as society grew older, it grew one-sided, upset evolution, and made of education a fraud. That, two thousand years after Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, a man like Grant should be called -- and should actually and truly be -- the highest product of the most advanced evolution, made evolution ludicrous. (266)

Clearly, Adams is having fun with his scathing excoriation of Grant and of Darwinians, but he simply cannot see how, in the face of such overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that anyone could believe seriously in the theory of unbreakable evolution. Instead, “Darwinists ought to conclude that America was reverting to the stone age” (266).

Rather than evolution and natural selection, Adams advances a theory of his own. Harkening back to *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, he asserts that the world has moved from unity to multiplicity. In the Virgin of Chartres, medieval Europeans had a unifying symbol. R. P. Blackmur writes:

[T]he Norman-French state during parts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries seemed in its religion, art, love, and philosophy to strike a human balance between man and the universe, which was alone for fullness in the Christian world. The effort was as intense as it was various and showed the fullness of its unity most clearly in the Cathedral of the Virgin of Chartres. (127)



Nothing similar can be found in the modern world. Instead, what Adams finds in his own time is disillusioning. Adams could not have been born with anything more resembling already formulated character. Yet, it matters little. The devolution takes shape in the juxtaposition of the “dynamo” and the virgin.

Adams encounters the dynamo at the Paris Exposition of 1900. The exposition showed to Adams evidence of the chaos of his times. Nothing he sees inspires in him any sort of the unifying energy he felt at Chartres. Instead, he looks at the many spectacles on exhibit and wonders, “how much of it could have been grasped by the best-informed man in the world” (379). Guided by astronomer and physicist Samuel Pierpont Langley, Adams is astounded by the chaos symbolized by the dynamo.

In “the great hall of dynamos,” Adams is confronted with astonishing force. He is aware that Langley’s perception of them is different than his. The scientist sees “but an ingenious channel for conveying somewhere the heat latent in a few tons of poor coal hidden in a dirty engine-house carefully kept out of sight” (380). The constraining term “but” indicates the limitations of Langley’s vision. His ignorance, the result of a concern with only what he can explain, not with the unknowable, prohibits him from seeing the larger scope of what is before him. Yet for Adams, “the dynamo became a symbol of infinity” (380). In its presence, “he began to feel the forty foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross,” so much so that he imagines “[b]efore the end, one began to pray to it” (380). The machine is replacing religion.

What Langley and his ilk are presiding over is a “new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old” (381). But Langley seems also to know not on what he looks, for man “had entered a supersensual world, in which he could measure nothing except by chance

collisions of movements imperceptible to his senses, perhaps even imperceptible to his instruments, but perceptible to each other” (381-382). The measurement devices of man seem powerless to contend with the dynamo. While Langley “seemed prepared for anything, even for an indeterminable number of universes interfused,” he is ignoring the metaphysical implications:

Rigidly denying himself the amusement of philosophy, which consists chiefly in suggesting unintelligible answers to insoluble problems, he still knew the problems, and liked to wander past them in a courteous temper, even bowing to them distantly as though recognizing their existence, while doubting their respectability. (377)

Thus Langley is limited in his ability to understand the dynamo. Indeed, Adams concludes that what he is dealing with in the dynamo is a “sudden irruption of forces totally new” (382). And a new phenomenon of unbridled power is taking place. As quickly as Adams had determined that religion was being replaced by Darwinian theories, something else comes along. As Lears puts it, “[t]he false unity and order proposed by evolutionary optimism was giving way to the multiplicity and randomness acknowledged by 20th-century science” (88). Humanity has either created or become subject to a force beyond its control.

#### e. Conclusion: Killing Franklin

Franklin’s narrative acquires so much cultural capital in America because it fits with the American mythos of progress. It provides a heroic figure to embody that mythos. The game is up with the publication of *The Education of Henry Adams*. The damage to the Franklinian hero that began with Irving and continued through Emerson, Melville, Douglass, and Washington is completed by the arch assassin Adams, who cleverly delivers the final crushing blow by

portraying a world where human constructs of universal order such as evolution don't carry the same weight as they did for Franklin. This new world has no place for the linguistically constructed hero of the success myth. In Adams's reversal of the Franklinian narrative, he shows that he—and men in general—can no longer construct character in the way Franklin did. More precisely, we're just realizing that man never could.

After *The Education*, Franklin's story about self-making can only lead to a judgment that he is ignoring uncertainty, denying human beings complexity. Adams's autobiography accomplishes the feat by attacking something very dear to Franklin: the notion of character as tangible. To Benjamin Franklin, "character" was concrete. In the sense that William James understood it, Franklin believed that character was formed by an infinite series of small choices. Each right decision serve as bricks, and brick by brick individuals constructed a formidable, indestructible, though provisional, structure of character.

When someone in Franklin's life lacks character, there's little ambiguity about it. Collins, Ralph, Keimer, and Keith lack it, while Denham and Franklin himself have it or at least make genuine attempts to get it. Franklin is betrayed by Keith, but Keith's lack of character is revealed rather quickly and with little permanent damage done. Keith's failure to send "letters of credit," or offerings of his own "character" on behalf of Franklin results from the fact that Keith himself lacks sufficient character. In other words, he has, as Denham points out, "no credit to give." When Keith's lack of character fails to set him up in England, Franklin, bolstered by the sound advice of Denham, simply sets to building his own character, which he of course does brick by brick—the way all Americans are expected to do it—and the rest is history.

But this system of order reflected in the notion that building character follows an evolutionary process cannot stand up to the scientific developments at the dawn of the twentieth

century, which led even its own practitioners to admit that the universe was a chaos and that order existed only in the constructs of the human mind. It also cannot stand up to the social realization that character did not have to be built systematically, but could be faked by a newly emergent class of confidence men in order to facilitate their predatory capitalist practices. The false certainties of the nineteenth century like social Darwinism and the building of character had been obliterated by the embrace of chaos in both science and sociology, which led Adams to proclaim, “Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man” (451).

Adams himself exposes the theories that asserted order in nineteenth century as illusory, and his thought anticipates what men would come to know in the twentieth, that nothing in nature conformed to the desires of humanity and that humans designed order only to fend off maddening realizations of helplessness. His attack on education is an indictment of all unifying myths, theories, and systems. By pointing out through the explanation of his own life circumstances the problems with the myth that all Americans can go from rags-to-riches, Adams rendered scientific theories that humanity was evolving toward a more perfect society moot.

The story of Adams’s education boils down to his realization that the more he learned, the less he understood. Thus, his project is incredibly courageous because he goes where few of us want to go. Insofar as the title promises an education, it is wittily ironic, for such a promising notion leads to repeated assertions of “failure” and arrival at “The Abyss of Ignorance” toward the end of the book. It would be a mistake to conclude, as many of his contemporaries did, that he longed nostalgically for the past because of some petulant bitterness over not having success handed to him. But this isn’t Adams. Adams exposes all human constructions—particularly science—as unreliable. As Lears contends, “He concluded that his most honorable course was not to flee modern doubt by creating a sentimental facsimile of medieval belief or by embracing

the equally sentimental religion of progress. Nor did he retreat into cynicism. He kept asking ultimate questions” (92).

Franklin had formulated plans to perfect himself and his nation. Even though his ironic humor betrayed at least a modicum of uncertainty about the actual potential for reaching a state of individual or social perfection, his overall philosophical project was based on the pursuit. Adams argues that such a philosophy neglects real evidence that would contradict it. Thus it denies one real education, for a belief in such a philosophy actually works to deny humans the unity they seek because it deludes them into thinking they already possess it when, in fact, they possess nothing but illusions. In Adams’s mind, such illusions cannot, in light of catastrophic “wake-up call” events like the Civil War, endure. Thus, we would suffer far less trauma if we were educated than if we remain deluded. Adams explains that he, too, wished for unity: “he warmly sympathized in the object; but when he came to ask himself what he truly thought, he felt that he had no Faith” (231). The consequences for such traumatic disillusionment was, as Adams in his insight already felt, a feeling of debilitating helplessness and alienation, which troubles Adams and, because of the preposterousness of it all, amuses him.

Such a disillusionment had the effect of angering others, however. And these post-World War I modernists would more explicitly implicate Franklin for having constructed the illusion. And against such an onslaught ushered in by Henry Adams, the Franklinian hero became the scapegoat—the representative of a false principle of order that endowed the individual the illusion of a sovereign ability to construct himself.

## CONCLUSION

### AIN'T NOBODY'S HERO: FRANKLIN IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

To reflect on Benjamin Franklin is a task that takes one this way and that, branching off into variety of divergent estuaries, streams, inlets, and outlets before spilling out into a vast ocean containing multitudes. Perhaps the thing most striking about Franklin is precisely the flexibility—the seemingly limitless applicability—of his legacy. Like he was in his lifetime, he has been many things to many people since his death. Most prominently, however, he has been recognized as a mythic success hero, an inspiration for those who want to succeed in all sorts of ways: in business, in leadership, salesmanship, in gaining social confidence, in garnering influence and social status,<sup>1</sup> and in all facets of the self-improvement movement, from trying to live a happier life to battling alcoholism.

Yet the backlash against this social application of Franklin has been profound. The roots of this backlash are the treatments and appropriations of him over the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. I have been describing this fairly steady nineteenth century decline in the esteem afforded Franklin—this character assassination or villainization. In doing so, I have oversimplified matters a bit and been, at times, unfair. For instance, with the exception of his own time, Franklin was never more revered than by the über-capitalists of the late nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> Writer Dale Carnegie attributes his study of Franklin with helping develop his self-improvement and corporate training courses, as well as writing his best-sellers *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* (1944).

century, a time which I argue that his popularity is waning rapidly. But this apotheosis of Franklin by capitalists and self-righteous purveyors of self-help advice is precisely what has led to growing ire from social critics who have a propensity to not only reject the doctrines of those with whom they disagree, but also of symbols and icons representing those doctrines, whether that response is justified or not.

Thus, as the adopted symbol or icon of capitalists and the self-righteous, Franklin becomes misread, mischaracterized, and unfairly categorized alongside others whom we find objectionable. He becomes, that is, redefined, sans wit and irony. If the fundamental definition of irony in the classic sense is a difference in what something means on the surface and below the surface, reading Franklin comes down to who can see or who cares to see below the surface and who can't. Or more precisely, it comes down to who is in on the joke and who isn't. To ignore this tension in Franklin's writing is a grave mistake, for it cheats us out of the joys to be had from reading one of our great humorists as well as the insights to be gleaned from an American who understood the complexities of American character as it was forming.

Nowhere can the pulse of this cultural backlash against Franklin by those who disregard his irony be measured more effectively than in Van Wyck Brooks's *America's Coming of Age* (1915), D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), and William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain* (1925). The particular crime committed against Franklin by these early twentieth century literary and social critics is that they have pigeonholed him as a man possessing what Isaacson calls "a shallowness of soul and a spiritual complacency that seem to permeate a culture of materialism" (4). In characterizing Franklin this way, Brooks, Lawrence, and Williams espouse a viewpoint perhaps first articulated by Charles Angoff in his *Literary History of the American People*, published in 1831. Angoff argues that "Franklin represented the

least praiseworthy qualities of the inhabitants of the new world: miserliness, fanatical practicality, and lack of interest in what are known as spiritual things” (qtd. in Wright 3). Angoff goes on to say that Franklin “had a cheap and shabby soul,” and that America is still suffering from his “tremendous success.” Others like Thomas Carlyle, the editor Leigh Hunt, Henry David Thoreau, and Edgar Allan Poe all saw Franklin as a figure who influenced humanity to seek material wealth rather than spiritual fulfillment and, as a result, led American culture down a path of soulless greed and self-indulgence.<sup>2</sup>

Van Wyck Brooks is famous for having conceived of American character in the eighteenth century as having split according to philosophic and economic priorities or, as he puts it, “two irreconcilable planes, the plane of stark theory and the plane of stark business” (27). Brooks’s terms to describe these two planes, the “highbrow” and the “lowbrow,” remain in our vernacular. Both terms are “derogatory,” Brooks explains. “The ‘Highbrow’ is the superior person whose virtue is admitted but felt to be an inept unpalatable virtue; while the ‘Lowbrow’ is a good fellow one readily takes to, but with a certain scorn for him and all his works” (7-8). The two most appropriate representatives of each of these planes, Brooks argues are, respectively, Jonathon Edwards and Benjamin Franklin. Brooks writes:

Strange that at the very outset two men should have arisen so aptly side by side and fixed the poles of our national life! For no one has ever more fully and typically than Jonathon Edwards displayed the infinite inflexibility of the upper levels of the American mind, nor any one more typically than Franklin the infinite flexibility of its lower levels. (11)

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<sup>2</sup> See Walter Isaacson’s *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, Chapter Eighteen, “Conclusions” (476-492) for a thorough discussion of Franklin’s legacy. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).



Brooks asks at the end of his essay for a “real” which exists in between these two poles. Yet he does Franklin an injustice when he paints him as a “simple” man of “unmitigated practice” (13) who accepts “catchpenny realities” (7).

D. H. Lawrence issues an even more scathing assessment of Franklin than Brooks does. In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence follows up his claim that American freedom exists in name only with an absolute excoriation of the heroic symbol of that freedom, exclaiming “I just utter a long loud curse against Benjamin and the American corral” (14). Lawrence uses the term “corral” as a metaphor for Franklinian virtue, which he calls a “barbed wire moral enclosure” (14). Arguing against what he perceived as Franklin’s hypocrisy and self-repressive rigidity, Lawrence defiantly proclaimed, “I am a moral animal. And I am going to remain such. I’m not going to be turned into a virtuous little automaton, as Benjamin would have me” (15). Lawrence’s personal creed, which he positions “against Benjamin’s,” declares:

“That I am I.”

“That my soul is a dark forest.”

“That my known self will never be more than a little clearing in the forest.”

“That gods, strange gods, come forth from the forest into the clearing of my known self, and then go back.”

“That I must have the courage to let them come and go.”

“That I will never let mankind put anything over me, but that I will try always to recognize and submit to the gods in me and the gods in other men and women.”

(16)

Given Lawrence's self assertive declarations, he clearly sees Franklin as a would-be oppressor who seeks to deny human complexity and whose influence shaped America into a nation of self-repressed and self-deluded so-called "dummy Americans."

Lastly, William Carlos Williams gets into the act, profiling Franklin in his series of sketches on representative American personalities. Alan Holder has pointed out that Williams was drawn to the tragic, and thus features in his book stories of failure more than stories of success. Even when he could judge one's life a success—as in the case of Christopher Columbus—he deems it a failure, concluding that Columbus was America's "first victim" (10).

Williams's inclusion of Franklin as *the* representative of American success might then seem suspect. Williams sees Franklin in the way that most do, as a man who considers the world as ordered and meritocratic and whose story makes the claim that anyone ambitious, hard-working, and determined will inevitably find success. But Williams profiles Franklin in order to make the point that the success achieved by Franklin came at too high a cost. Franklin's strength, he asserts, "is the strength that denies itself" (155).

Like Lawrence, Williams treats Franklin with hostility. He begins by arguing that anyone who comes to America believing it will be the land where it is possible to go from rags-to-riches "will surely find themselves disappointed" (145). Williams's argument assumes a decidedly Tocquevillian angle in that it compares the relatively poor but happy people of Europe to wealthy but malcontent Americans. Franklin represents the anxiety riddled pursuit of wealth, and this, to Williams, is the aggravating thing, for the pursuit of wealth is the denial of spiritual or contemplative richness. Franklin's philosophy, he says, was based entirely on industry and thrift: "Work night and day, build up, penny by penny, a wall against that which is threatening, the terror of life, poverty. Make a fort to be secure in" (156). Williams's Franklin is not a bold

and courageous man, but a timid one, a man afraid of complexity and mystery, a man who seeks to force out all the potentially enriching ambiguity in his head by filling it with one distracting practical or material pursuit after another.

Brooks, Lawrence, and Williams target Franklin, but their real problem is with American culture in general. Brooks laments the tendency of American thought to gravitate toward one unreal and reactive philosophy or another; Lawrence wants to expose the paradox of American freedom; Williams hates the evasive motivations behind America's pursuit of wealth. Franklin is just the mask.

There are a couple of important issues at stake here: First, how does Franklin come to represent what Brooks, Lawrence, and Williams see as being so ugly? Second, what does it say about our culture that we have, by ignoring Franklin's ironic wit as we please, participated in elevating him to such a socially symbolic role?

Irving, Emerson, Melville, Douglass, Washington, Adams and countless others who invoke or evoke Franklin, influenced by the social values of their social context, act as a kind of filtering device on the legacy of Franklin. Irving, Emerson, and Douglass use Franklin to critique society in hopes of raising awareness or effecting change. Douglass and Washington use Franklin as a way to show that by participating in something so American as the success story, they show the world that since blacks just as capable as going from rags-to-riches as whites, that they are just as American.

The common thread in all their treatments of Franklin is a general minimization or outright neglect of his ironic wit. Granted, we can't expect Douglass and Washington to be funny or ironic about something as grim and serious as slavery or the Jim Crow South at the turn of the century. They do not owe it to Franklin to do so. But the result is the same. The rags-to-riches

story authored by Franklin begins to be thought of only at face value. Franklin's wit begins to have less bearing on interpretations of his text.<sup>3</sup>

Ignoring Franklin's ironic wit serves the purpose of discounting the ambiguity that it indicates. And this is where we get into the implications of what it says about America that we have turned Franklin into a humorless promoter of self-improvement by the accumulation of wealth and the denial of human nature. Why have we come to see Franklin this way? What social need does our redefinition of him fulfill?

Well, first of all, we have a lot invested in the belief that America is a morally advanced meritocracy. We at least have an interest in maintaining the appearance of the belief in that idea, and whether we believe it or not makes little difference, for either way the same social ends are achieved. Franklin himself knew that appearances were in some cases as important as, or even more than, reality. In truth, it might be even more crucial to profess a belief in moral superiority and meritocracy once they come into doubt. What professing such a belief allows us to do is avoid reckoning with the converse—that maybe America isn't the most morally advanced or meritocratic state ever built. Because if that's the case, what are we to do? Such a conclusion would necessitate a cultural overhaul of our whole worldview. We would have to humble ourselves by acknowledging that we weren't always right, nor have we always been the fairest or the best.

This is exactly what Adams is getting at, which is why ending this dissertation with Adams has, to me, always been inevitable. Adams's indictments us for constructing dubious myths and theories to avoid confronting things about life that frighten us. Taking Adams's lead, we can surmise that we have made out of Franklin a myth that supports our cultural needs. Without

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<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the real-life irony that Horatio Alger, author of the rags-to-riches fiction popular in the late nineteenth century, turned out to have been a pedophile and, despite writing over 100 popular novels, died poor fails to undermine the narratives he created.

having done so we would have to reckon with the notion that perhaps the universe does not conform to some kind of law of progress that America has made most central to its value and belief systems. We would have to consider when we turn our critical eye on history and comparatively upon ourselves whether or not that we really sit at the pinnacle of human advancement, superior to our ancestors. Instead, we would have to entertain the idea that perhaps the foundational beliefs of our Republic are all wrong, that, on the contrary, nothing makes sense. This is what Adams is pushing for, not only an acknowledgment of how much we don't know, but an investigation into why we don't know.

Our culture, by and large, has read in Franklin's *Autobiography* a schema to a logical fallacy, namely that the road from "poverty and obscurity" to "a state of affluence and reputation" is paved simply by hard work and perseverance. This logical fallacy has inspired some but aggravated others. We have identified him as an example of "lowbrow" America. Yet Franklin was an intellectual and writer who, from when he was sixteen years old and invented "Silence Dogood," audaciously experimented with identities. One need go no further than the first page in which Franklin declares his motivation to be in part didactic to see that. This is a man instinctively put off by didacticism, as his invention of the prudish Silence Dogood and his beat down of the unnamed Presbyterian minister prove. Therefore, when we take at face value his offer of telling his story so that it might be imitated, we've missed the boat. The *Autobiography* simply presents one of Franklin's many experiments with identity. In misreading the *Autobiography* as an attempt at revealing an authentic—and didactic!—self, Lawrence fails to follow his own warning to "never trust the artist. Trust the tale." And we have too, for if we were reading the tale as critically as we should, we would see that it is steeped in irony and know that we cannot simply take it at face value.

Besides, perhaps an evaluation of Franklin that acknowledges his pervasive use of irony could be more useful—not to mention entertaining, since we’d be in on the joke, too—for both those inspired and those aggravated. For if the Franklin character floating around on the surface of the story is another mask, then the only way we hope to find any traces of the real Franklin would be to look for the ironic voice—the voice behind the mask. If we peek behind his mask, we might find a Franklin whose program for continual progress, his narrative arc, his “project at achieving Moral Perfection,” amounted to little more than a self-conscious or meta-attempt to make order where order simply could not be made. And this attempt, Franklin perhaps sees, is absurdly funny. From behind the mask Franklin is winking at us. Being receptive to that wink allows us to see a fuller, more complex Franklin and, in turn, the same thing in ourselves. Likewise, Adams’s irony betrays a similar acknowledgment of hilarity, even if his laughter is darker. So perhaps what we can take from Franklin’s and Adams’s texts is that, even if the world will never ultimately conform to human attempts to order it, we ought to ascertain the comic or tragic irony created by our efforts.

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