

# Form and Moral Balance in Franklin's Autobiography

MORTON L. ROSS

RECENT efforts to assess and appreciate Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* as a work of art have resulted in disagreement about the shape and the coherence of its form. The issue can be drawn by a rough division of the critics into judges who are strict constructionists and those who are loose constructionists. The former group is represented by Robert Sayre in *The Examined Self* (1964). Sayre first summarizes the facts which, strictly speaking, establish the *Autobiography* as a narrative done to chronological plan, but in four segments written at four different times under widely varying circumstances, and transmitted by enough other hands to complicate enormously its textual history. Sayre then concludes that when Franklin "started and when he started again and recommenced, he had only a sense of order, no sense of form." If, however, the work has no structure more comprehensive than chronology, "each of the three major parts does have a form. The fragmentary fourth part is too short to consider, but the first three are outstanding in American literature as three separate explorations in self-discovery and self-advertisement."<sup>1</sup> Sayre's separate analyses of the first three parts does, however, nudge him toward the loose constructionists, for his discussion implies two principles of organization which are common to each part and thus would seem to lend coherence to the whole narrative. The first of these is Franklin's persistent intention to explore self, and the second is a consistent method for doing so, the creation of a series of subtly interlinked personae, but Sayre prudently stops short of any explicit claim that these prin-

ciples, once seen in operation, might reveal an architecture for the whole narrative. In 1967, A. Owen Aldridge put the strict constructionist view more strongly. He insists that "in form, Franklin's work is a virtual disaster." Particularly impressed by evidence that Franklin altered his conception of his reader when he resumed his interrupted memoir, Aldridge explains: "For this reason, I am unable to accept the theory that there is any kind of conscious art in Franklin's over-all structure as opposed to the separate parts . . . ."<sup>2</sup> Aldridge refers, as an example of such theory, to a formulation by David Levin, but there are several to choose from among the loose constructionists.

Another formulation is Richard E. Amacher's argument, in *Benjamin Franklin* (1962), for a recognition of "organic unity" in the work. "As a literary work the *Autobiography* has a certain degree of unity—more than meets the eye of the casual reader. This unity of the four parts, considered collectively and separately, consists in a rather carefully patterned long and short design."<sup>3</sup> Amacher's attempt to explain this patterning is too brief to be convincing, a brevity prompting J. A. Leo Lemay, a moderately strict constructionist, to dismiss the contention as "nothing more than a scheme of the *Autobiography's* structure." One might also take Lemay's remark as the scholar's delicate hint of the critic's over-ingenuity. Because Lemay tends to depend for illumination of the *Autobiography's* form upon comparisons with other literary genres practiced in the 17th and 18th centuries—the character, the promotion tract, the conduct book, etc.—he is understandably wary of any attempt to see the work *sui generis*, a procedure which necessarily stresses the critic's perception rather than the scholar's learning. It is perhaps for this reason that Lemay is moved to lament in print: "Alas, knowledgeable readers today are few."<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the loose constructionists tend to be impatient with conventional reading and readings—witness Ama-

cher's allusion to the bedimmed eye of the casual reader. This habit of coupling schemes for uncovering the *Autobiography's* structure with allegations of imperceptive reading is also illustrated in David Levin's 1962 essay. It begins with an extensive list in support of his charge that "too often . . . we forget a few simple truths about this great man and his greatest works." Further armed with his assertion that "Franklin's art is deceptive," Levin can then offer us his perception of the way in which the parts, which strict constructionists would keep separate, are related. "Clearly, however, its narrative order includes two major divisions: the first half of the book describes his education, as he strives for a secure position in the world and for a firm character; the second half concentrates on his career of *public* service . . . ." Unfortunately Levin rests his case for the existence of what he calls this "simple pattern" just here; because he immediately goes on to another matter, the contexts which support his view of Franklin "as a prototype of his age and his country,"<sup>5</sup> his contention turns out to be simply an invitation to check his perception of pattern in the *Autobiography* against our own. The argument which follows is intended to enter the debate at this point, for I agree with Levin that the book works by means of the related, but contrasting concerns of its two major divisions. Mindful of the strict constructionists' cautionary admonitions, I will describe something which is less a unifying or coherent structure than it is a significant change of, even a reversal of emphasis, a movement which yet has the effect of putting the two major divisions of the narrative into moral balance.

One sign that the debate characterized above has been progressive is that there now seems general agreement about the core of Franklin's art in the *Autobiography*. In the early stages of recent debate, Levin could charge that "above all, we forget that he was a writer, that he had a habit of creating characters," and that "he *actually*

*creates himself as a character.*"<sup>6</sup> But since 1962, the date of Levin's essay, and particularly since Sayre's careful demonstration of how such characterization works in the narrative, most critics have accepted Franklin's characterizing skills as central. Attention, however, to the *techniques* of characterization has obscured the important fact that one of the chief *subjects* treated by Franklin in the *Autobiography*, particularly in the first two parts, is quite literally the protagonist's task of creating a persona for himself in the form of a favorable public image. Sayre makes the point generally and in passing, describing the first three parts as "three separate explorations in self-discovery and self-advertisement."<sup>7</sup> I wish to refine Sayre's generalization by arguing that the first two parts—the first major division—of the *Autobiography* contain the record of an extensive exercise in self-advertisement. In the remaining parts of the work, this exercise is deliberately abandoned, and in an important sense inverted, so that what begins as self-advertisement concludes as self-effacement. This movement results in a change in the texture and in the focus of the work, a change necessary to Franklin's purpose in using his own career as the exemplum of a balanced ethical program.

The first major division of the *Autobiography* follows the arc of traditional comedy, charting the protagonist's rise in fortune "from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World." This ascending curve displays Franklin's early career as demonstrating the success of "the conducting Means I made use of."<sup>8</sup> Although the story lingers briefly over some physical hardships which had to be overcome, the major obstacles are human, what Sayre terms "various types of villains and friends." Sayre calls attention to Franklin's manipulation of these figures "in order to give the story suspense and continuity,"<sup>9</sup> but the same manipulation also functions graphically to limn the 18th century lottery of commer-

cial patronage which shaped, even dictated the means necessary for a young man of parts to survive and flourish within it. Gladys Meyer has listed the several means which interact to do this for Franklin's own ascending fortunes: "good repute, the strength of association, the threat of adverse publicity, the use of patronage, the accumulation of wealth, the interest in civic improvement."<sup>10</sup> One should only add that, in the first part, the first four of these are most often treated as means to ends named by the last two. These first four organize themselves under the necessity to contrive and maintain a favorable public image, and it is this principle which acts to select a surprisingly large number of the details by which Franklin charted the oscillations of his early career. The means programmatically recommended for attaining wealth in the *Autobiography* is the practice of the prudential virtues, industry and frugality. These are capital-creating efforts which work to make the young entrepreneur independent of others, but in an interesting way, they are also shown to be a means for attaining reputation; insofar as they are successfully advertised to others, they are seen to secure for Franklin public confidence, private loans, generous patronage, and increasing custom. This dual bearing of prudential economic practice is underscored by Franklin's often quoted remark, "In order to secure my Credit and Character as a Tradesman, I took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* of the Contrary" (p. 125). The first part of the narrative is especially rich with descriptions of Franklin's canny efforts to contrive economically favorable appearances and to avoid unfavorable ones. If the famous account of the entry into Philadelphia is the most vivid dramatic image in the book, this one is only a shade less so: "to show that I was not above my Business, I sometimes brought the Paper I purchas'd at the Stores, thro' the Streets on a Wheelbarrow. Thus being esteem'd an industrious thriv-

ing young Man, . . . I went on swimmingly" (p. 126). Franklin's image-management is further revealed here by his amused confession that even occasional discrepancies between action and desired image did not disturb the latter's effect: "a Book, indeed, sometimes debauch'd me from my Work; but that was seldom, snug, and gave no Scandal" (p. 126). He is equally candid in reporting occasions upon which his calculations failed. He here explains his competition with Andrew Bradford:

. . . as he kept the Post Office, it was imagined he had better Opportunities of obtaining News, his Paper was thought a better Distributer of Advertisements than mine, and therefore had many more, which was a profitable thing to him and a Disadvantage to me. For tho' I did indeed receive and send Papers by Post, yet the publick Opinion was otherwise; for what I did send was by Bribing the Riders who took them privately . . . (pp. 126-127).

Here even bribery is insufficient to avoid adverse and therefore unprofitable public opinion.

Franklin's penchant for effective economic image generates additional exempla by operating as a criterion for judging the behavior of friends and competitors alike. His partnership with Hugh Meredith discouraged two patrons who were willing to advance needed capital because Meredith "was often seen drunk in the Streets, and playing at low Games in Alehouses, much to our Discredit" (p. 122). Franklin is apprehensive about his rival David Harry "as his Friends were very able, and had a good deal of Interest," but Harry scandalously abused his public image: "He was very proud, dress'd like a Gentleman, liv'd expensively, took much Diversion and Pleasure abroad, ran in debt, and neglected his Business, upon which all Business left him . . ." (p. 126). Although the reason for Franklin's final break with Keimer is called "a trifle," it yet illustrates his careful husbandry of good repute. Keimer's reproachful words "nettled me the more for their Publicity, all the Neighbours who were looking out on the same Occasion being Witnesses how I was treated" (p. 111). The accumulation

of such details suggests the precarious nature of the protagonist's task; the image he wishes to project seems fragile enough to require constant vigilance.

It would be wrong to see Franklin's public mask as a false face. It seems crafted to call attention to his genuine virtues rather than to disguise his occasional lapses from them. He simply avoided appearances to the contrary of the desired ones. But it is also true that the most intriguing instance of image-making in the first part of the narrative is not a matter of self-advertisement, but of deliberate self-effacement. The mask here presented is designed to please the public, not by publicizing its wearer, but by concealing him. Franklin explains, in part one, his early choice of a style of discourse. He originally "put on the humble Enquirer and Doubter" because he found "this Method safest for my self and very embarassing [sic] to those against whom I used it, . . . ." But this questionable advantage of scoring debater's points eventually gave way to others: "I continu'd this Method some few Years, but gradually left it, retaining only the Habit of expressing my self in Terms of modest Diffidence . . ." (pp. 64-65). There follows an extensive comparison between this method and its opposite, "a Positive assuming Manner." In securing favorable reactions from one's audience, the advantages are all with the former because the latter "seldom fails to disgust, tends to create Opposition, and to defeat every one of those Purposes for which Speech was given us . . . ." Further, "by such a Manner you can seldom hope to recommend your self in *pleasing* your Hearers, or to persuade those whose Concurrence you desire" (p. 65).

Franklin returns to this topic again in the two concluding paragraphs of part two. He there explains at length that his continuing practice of the diffident style, his habit of forbearing "all direct Contradiction to the Sentiments of others, and all positive Assertion of my

own," was a direct result of his success in projecting "the *Appearance*" of humility, despite the fact that he could not "boast of much Success in acquiring the *Reality* of this Virtue" (p. 159). Robert Sayre has correctly described the second part as the account of a project; he devotes his discussion to characterizing the projector's mask there assumed by Franklin, "his French one of the *naïf* 'Philosophical Quaker'." Sayre argues that the *tone*, which the projector's mask does much to establish, should determine our understanding of the project itself.

To accept the program didactically as an exemplary exercise in self-improvement or to look upon it cynically as a bumbling tradesman's petty commandments is to miss Franklin's *naïveté*, his cultivated 'infantine simplicity.'<sup>11</sup>

Clearly Sayre uses his definition of tone to defend the second part against critical strictures from those who have accepted the program in either of the forms mentioned here, but it seems equally clear from his discussion that his defense depends upon finding that tone "disarming." Sayre sees the irony of the projector's tone as resulting from a pleasant interplay of "his philosopher's hubris" and "his 'Quaker' simplicity." He then argues that in part two's concluding paragraph,

The two tendencies are beautifully reconciled, the frankly *naïf* young Franklin commencing the project with his scheme to become perfect, the famous elder Franklin carrying the idea along as a worthy endeavor that all men should be interested in, and the sophisticated, consciously *naïf* 'Philosophical Quaker' finishing it in a discourse on pride and humility.<sup>12</sup>

Disarmed by this intricate interplay, Sayre is less than critical here, for what he alleges as a reconciliation of two voices is actually the ironic qualification of the initial voice of "innocent reasonableness" by the canny accents of a fully experienced worldly wisdom now willing to settle for less. Franklin describes this latter voice, one heard frequently in part one, near the end of the second part: "something that pretended to be Reason was every now and then suggesting to me, that such extream Nicety



as I exacted of my self might be a kind of Foppery in Morals, which if it were known would make me ridiculous; that a perfect Character might be attended with the Inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent Man should allow a few Faults in himself, to keep his Friends in Countenance" (p. 156). Here the image of moral perfection is scrutinized by the worldly criterion of public acceptability and found wanting. In the last two paragraphs, it is finally this motive which scales down the projector's originally ambitious project to procedures for projecting an ingratiating public image. Sayre believes that "Franklin the writer never breaks character in his story of this project or lifts his mask to expose the man beneath,"<sup>13</sup> but the concluding discourse on pride and humility, coming as it does after a detailed paragraph about the ways to *appear* humble, is in fact a very theatrical unmasking, a flourish to signal the end of a successful performance; there the projector pointedly removes the mask so that we may compare its crafted features with his true ones. If the gesture reassures us about his essential integrity, it is also a sly invitation to admire the means by which the illusion was sustained. Franklin *is* disarming here, but disarming in the curious manner of the Reverend Mr. Hooper who so conspicuously advertises the fact that he conceals his face in Hawthorne's story, "The Minister's Black Veil." Much of the reader's pleasure in the first two parts of the *Autobiography* is a sense of being taken into the projector's confidence, made privy to the back-stage secrets of his self-projecting craft, and thus invited to marvel at its workings, its occasional failures, and its frequent success. If the record of Franklin's early career has the design of an exemplum demonstrating the practical success of prudential virtues, it is also and simultaneously a fascinating manual for the shrewd management of one's public image.

In the last two parts—the final major division—of the

*Autobiography*, Franklin turns his attention to accounts of civic projects, recording practical acts of public benevolence. Whereas the story of early business success required details about the craft of self-promotion and advertisement, such details are abandoned in the last two parts because, by this stage in his career, the desirable public image achieved had accomplished its purpose, helping to secure for him sufficient wealth and leisure. His public enterprises are now conducted largely by the contrary means of self-effacement, the adoption of the mask designed for concealment rather than publicity. These techniques are simply the extension of those he reports in putting on the humble inquirer and the diffident manner. Here, for example, he reports the method used in soliciting for a library: "The Objections, and Reluctances I met with in Soliciting the Subscriptions, made me soon feel the Impropriety of presenting one's self as the Proposer of any useful Project that might be suppos'd to raise one's Reputation in the smallest degree above that of one's Neighbours, when one has need of their Assistance to accomplish that Project. I therefore put my self as much as I could out of sight . . . In this way my Affair went on more smoothly, and I ever after practis'd it on such Occasions; and from my frequent Successes, can heartily recommend it" (p. 143). Sayre puts it well: "He allowed others to save their face instead of worrying always about his own."<sup>14</sup>

Although the last two parts are still enlivened by Franklin's accounts of his shrewd manipulation of the public, the ends sought are now collective rather than personal so that Franklin's image is shrewdly withdrawn rather than projected, on occasion withdrawn to the point of anonymity, "avoiding as much as I could, according to my usual Rule, the presenting myself to the Publick as the Author of any Scheme for their Benefit" (p. 193). In recalling his participation in Dr. Thomas Bond's efforts to raise money for a hospital, Franklin outlines a par-

ticularly cunning and systematic sequence of appeals which would do credit to the most calculating contemporary promoter. And in detailing his assistance to the revivalist preacher Gilbert Tennent during a campaign to erect a new meeting house, he in fact behaves as the eighteenth century equivalent of the modern fund-raising consultant. But these displays of his considerable promotional talents are constrained by an often weary sense of obligation very unlike the zestful pursuit of self-interest in the first two parts. If the record of the first major division of the *Autobiography* shows Franklin successfully imposing a self-image on the public, it is fair to say that the second division reverses this pattern, for it exhibits the roles imposed by the public upon the somewhat reluctant author. "When I disengag'd myself as above mentioned from private Business, I flatter'd myself that by the sufficient tho' moderate Fortune I had acquir'd, I had secur'd Leisure during the rest of my Life, for Philosophical Studies and Amusements; . . . but the Publick now considering me as a Man of Leisure, laid hold of me for their Purposes; every part of our Civil Government, and almost at the same time, imposing some Duty upon me" (p. 196).

This inversion of the original need to publicize an attractive self-image causes a corresponding change in the texture of the narrative. Sayre has noted that the third part of the *Autobiography* "bursts with things: fire ladders, dirty streets, smoky lamps, stoves, bags and buckets, wagons, munitions, whiskey, schools, pigs and chickens, bonds and subscriptions, forts."<sup>15</sup> So abundant is the presence of such minutia that on one occasion Franklin is moved to justify their inclusion: "Some may think these trifling Matters not worth minding or relating. But when they consider, that tho' Dust blown into the Eyes of a single Person or into a single Shop on a windy Day, is but of small Importance, yet the great Number of the Instances in a populous City, and its frequent Repetitions give it Weight and Consequence;

perhaps they will not censure very severely those who bestow some of Attention to Affairs of this seemingly low Nature" (p. 207). Although apologetic, the voice here is impersonal, preoccupied not with showing the virtuous self to advantage, but rather with the refractory world of fact in all its variety. His concern for the public eye is now to keep it dust-free rather than directing it toward himself. As a consequence Franklin is often obscured by his material. Because this last division of the work tends to objective memoir rather than to revealing autobiography, many readers have found it less engrossing. Aldridge believes that "the outstanding sections in Part III are the warm, self-revealing ones, particularly those describing his relations with George Whitefield, with the Quakers, and with the Indians,"<sup>16</sup> but these instances actually stand out because they are infrequent exceptions to the general de-emphasis of self-revelatory detail. The narrative texture of the last two parts, then, seems shaped by Franklin's inclination to practice the techniques of self-effacement fully described in the first two. It is this movement from self-advertisement to self-effacement which works to balance the halves of Franklin's ethical program.

Because the movement I've been sketching qualifies as a loose constructionist reading, it requires the customary charge that one misreads or reads imperceptively by overlooking it. Brian M. Barbour's essay, "*The Great Gatsby* and the American Past," (1973) is such a misreading of the *Autobiography* which Barbour asserts "is the most influential book ever written by an American." Barbour contends that in *The Great Gatsby*, the Buchanans "represent a deep and permanent tendency in American life," i.e., "a moral complacency that finds material wealth both self-validating and its own end;" this tendency "finds its source in Benjamin Franklin."<sup>17</sup> Barbour directs his principal objections to "the basic structure of the book itself." "Franklin was a skilled

comic writer and his life gave him a fund of rich material, but because there is no deeper sense of life working through and organizing the material it becomes hopelessly repetitious and finally boring. One reads up to the famous plan and perhaps a little beyond, but the book is unreadable straight through and no one is likely to mind that it went unfinished."<sup>18</sup> Such insouciance is remarkable, not the least because it hints a reason for Barbour's misreading—perhaps he didn't or couldn't finish the book—but his judgment here can't be so easily dismissed, for he is responding to the movement I've been describing without understanding its effect and its point. One simply has to concede that the last two parts of the work are considerably less exciting than its first two; the record of mundane, dutiful manipulation of both stubborn human nature and stubborn fact is intrinsically less dramatic than a personal success story which engages the reader by a back-stage view of the self-promoting crafts through which its energetic arc is achieved. But Barbour has mistaken Franklin's deliberate self-effacement from the latter parts of his narrative for a lack of any "deeper sense of life working through and organizing the material," and thus he has failed to see how the resulting effect accords with the moral intentions of Franklin's story. The following statement can serve as a summary of Barbour's understanding of the *Autobiography*: "It is so exclusively concerned with *getting free* that it has no energy left for exploring the meaning of its freedom. The wealth that bestows freedom validates itself."<sup>19</sup> My argument has been intended to support the opposite view; the book not only does continue in order to explore in detail the use of freedom gained through the acquisition of wealth and leisure, it actively dramatizes a loss of that freedom in the exercise of public benevolence by inverting the functions of the public masks worn by its protagonist. In the first two parts, those functions are seen as publicizing and self-promoting;

in the latter parts, the masks function to constrain and conceal the narrator.

Barbour sees the recommendation of the prudential virtues as the sole purpose of the book; if this were true, his criticisms would be just. Industry and frugality are the squirrel virtues, self-regarding, self-serving, practiced because they promise tangible rewards in this life, and making themselves obsolete by achieving those rewards. The moral conduct they enjoin does, then, seem pinched and narrow, easily seen as leading to Fitzgerald's conception of the Buchanans. But Barbour might have waxed even more hotly indignant had he properly noticed that in the first two parts, self-aggrandizement is fully bodied forth by the craft of image-making. Had the record ended "a little beyond the famous plan," Franklin might well have left a legacy even more pernicious than the one Barbour imagines. As the first American public relations expert, offering the canny management of his image as a source of his successes, Franklin adumbrates that overweening concern for the appearance of respectability which reaches beyond the Buchanans to Jay Gatsby himself.

But the *Autobiography* continues, and does so well beyond the famous plan. Its last two parts modify and balance the impact of the self-serving projects and projections recommended for imitation in the first two parts. Having recorded the achievement of sufficient wealth and leisure through both the practice and the studied appearance of the prudential virtues, Franklin completes the pattern by offering a series of anecdotes from his career which illustrate the responsible use of wealth and leisure. The major appeal of his counsels to the public display of one's prudential virtues had been their rewards as measured by his own case; by contrast he has no such support for his recommendations for civic benevolence because its practice is shown to entail a substantial loss of those very rewards. In order to emphasize this loss

of freedom, the self originally projected to the narrative changes to one constrained to withdraw from the public eye by the new demands of roles imposed by the public. It is this change which dramatically enacts the spirit in which Franklin's final recommendations are offered—a spirit of self-effacement, even the sacrifice of self before the public good. In assessing the ills which disfigure contemporary American life, it is tempting, I suppose, to seek scapegoats from the nation's past, but to blame Franklin, as Barbour does, for the complacent carelessness of the Buchanans among us is to repeat their mistake in taking the first half of Franklin's advice while ignoring the second. To do so is an injustice, not only to an artful movement in the *Autobiography*, but to the moral balance which it sustains.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Sayre, (Princeton, 1964), pp. 15-16.
- <sup>2</sup>Aldridge, "Form and Substance in *Franklin's Autobiography*," in *Essays on American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbell*, ed. Clarence Gohdes (Durham, N.C., 1967), p. 48.
- <sup>3</sup>Amacher, (New York, 1962), pp. 48-49.
- <sup>4</sup>Lemay, "*Franklin and the Autobiography: An Essay on Recent Scholarship*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, I (Winter, 1967), 192, 203.
- <sup>5</sup>Levin, "The *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin: The Puritan Experimenter in Life and Art," *Yale Review*, LIII (1963), 258, 261.
- <sup>6</sup>Levin, pp. 258-259.
- <sup>7</sup>Sayre, p. 16.
- <sup>8</sup>*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, et. Leonard Labaree et al. (New Haven, 1964), p. 43. Reference to this edition hereafter cited in the text.
- <sup>9</sup>Sayre, p. 18.
- <sup>10</sup>Meyer, cited in Amacher, p. 40.
- <sup>11</sup>Sayre, pp. 27, 28.
- <sup>12</sup>Sayre, p. 31.
- <sup>13</sup>Sayre, p. 30.
- <sup>14</sup>Sayre, p. 32.
- <sup>15</sup>Sayre, p. 31.
- <sup>16</sup>Aldridge, pp. 52-53.
- <sup>17</sup>Barbour, *The Southern Review*, IX N.S. (Spring, 1973), 293, 291, 292.
- <sup>18</sup>Barbour, p. 293.
- <sup>19</sup>Barbour, p. 292.