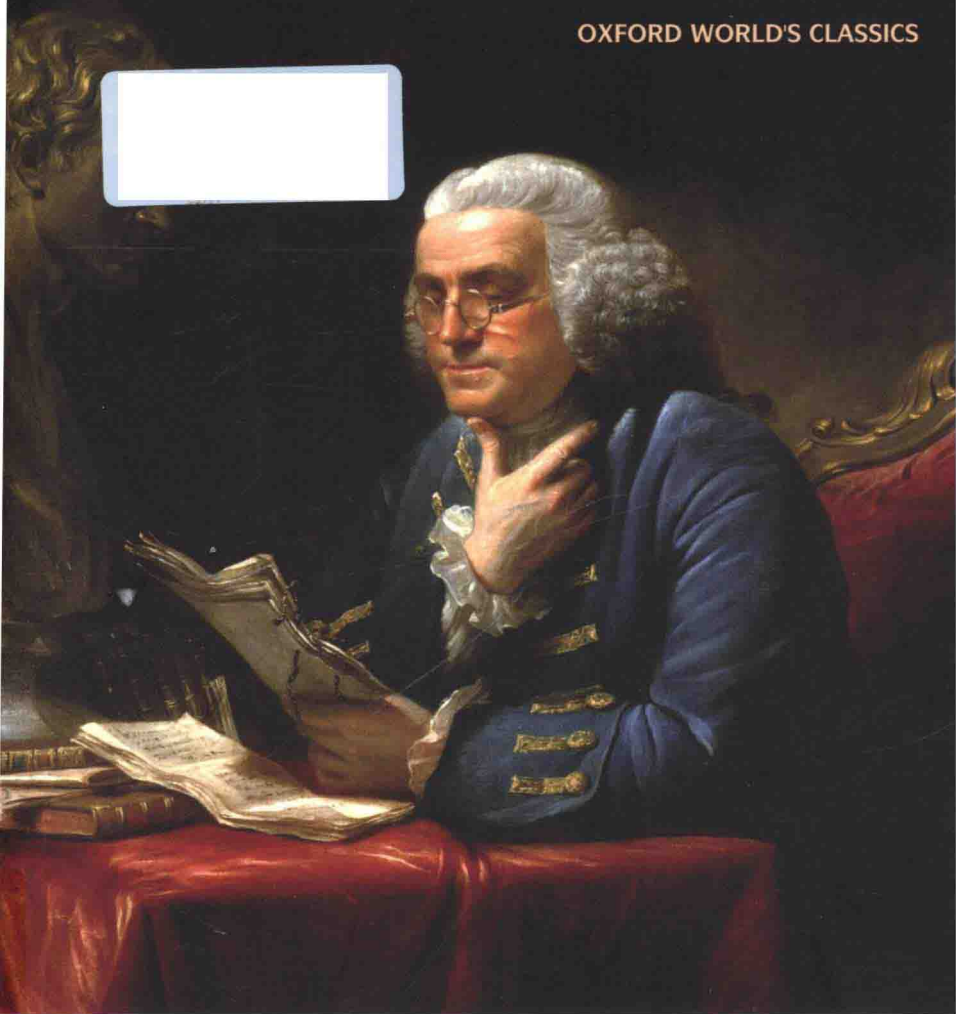


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## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND OTHER WRITINGS

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1706, the son of a tallow chandler. At the age of 12 he was apprenticed to his brother James, a printer, who published Franklin's earliest writings. At 17 he resettled as a journeyman printer in Philadelphia. He worked at print shops in Philadelphia and London until 1728 when he set up as a printer on his own. In 1730 he married Deborah Read. Over the next twenty-five years he masterminded a series of civic improvements in Philadelphia. In 1732 he began publication of *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Success in his business and investments allowed him to retire from active management before turning 42. He performed a series of experiments on electricity (1746-50), leading to his invention of the lightning rod. He became a party leader in the Pennsylvania Assembly, and from 1757 he served in London as colonial agent. He began his *Autobiography* in 1771. In 1775 after negotiations to avert a rupture between Great Britain and the colonies had failed, he returned to Philadelphia and was elected to the Continental Congress, where he served on the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence and was designated American ambassador to France. As ambassador (1776-85), he negotiated French assistance for the United States and finally a peace accord with Great Britain. He returned to Philadelphia and was selected as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787. He died in April 1790, leaving his *Autobiography* completed only as far as 1758.

ORMOND SEAVEY is Professor of English at The George Washington University and the author of *Becoming Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and the Life* (1988).

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The following pieces are reprinted with permission from *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*: the 'Epitaph'; the letter to Josiah and Abiah Franklin, dated 13 April 1738; 'Old Mistresses Apologue'; the letter to William Strahan, dated 5 July 1775. The text of the 'Internal State of America' is borrowed with grateful acknowledgement from *William and Mary Quarterly* (3rd ser. 15 (1958), 214-27). I am indebted to the helpful librarians of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress for their assistance in my preparation of the text of the 1726 journal. This edition reprints with permission *Benjamin Franklin's Memoirs: Parallel Text Edition*, edited by Max Farrand (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1949). I am grateful to the Graduate School of Arts and Science and the English Department of the George Washington University for support in the preparation of the text of the *Autobiography*. In particular I thank Etsuko Taketani for her editorial work in that project. Harriet Levy and Catherine Clarke of Oxford University Press World's Classics have been consistently helpful.

O.S.





## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN may not appear at first to be a literary figure in the same way that Emerson, Stowe, Faulkner, or Stevens do. Instead, Franklin seems like a historical figure, known for his discoveries about electricity and his political activities during the American Revolution and later. But first of all Franklin was a writer. The most important stage of his education, as he later describes it, made him 'a tolerable English Writer, of which I was extreamly ambitious'. Franklin was a writer by profession to an extent equalled by no other colonial American. His advancement in business, his career as a statesman, even his acclaim as a scientist depended upon his writing abilities. The culmination of his writing career is his *Autobiography*, which he worked on intermittently during the last eighteen years of his long life.

Benjamin Franklin began writing his *Autobiography* in the summer of 1771 when he was 65, but in a sense he had already been working on his own self-portrait for fifty years. Though his *Autobiography* overshadows all his other works, the other writings prepared him to write his life story and were themselves a substantial part of that story. No American writer of the colonial period was so intensely conscious of himself as Franklin. But self-revelation in Franklin's case always took the route of indirection.

The earliest surviving published work by Franklin was written under the disguise of Silence Dogood, a proper but observant Puritan clergyman's widow, born on the Atlantic as her parents were crossing to New England. Prim Mistress Dogood takes note of the same social and cultural features that preoccupied the 16-year-old Franklin. Some years earlier, young Franklin had been withdrawn by his father from an education that would have prepared him for Harvard College; instead Benjamin was apprenticed to his brother

James, a Boston printer. Mistress Dogood contemplates Harvard College and describes a place filled with young fools. Thus, even early in his life, Franklin was disposed to reverse his own apparent disadvantages. In *Silence Dogood* 7 she comments extensively on the dull, formulaic quality of much of Puritan poetry. Though at the time he had lived only in Boston, young Franklin recognized that there existed a standard of wit and critical intelligence higher than that commonly accepted in New England.

While writing the *Dogood* letters, Franklin took over the management of his brother's newspaper while James Franklin was imprisoned for recklessly affronting the Massachusetts authorities. The emblem the Franklin brothers used for their newspaper *The New-England Courant* was Janus, the two-faced god. Franklin began early to define himself by alternative identities. He describes how he developed his own style of argumentation in imitation of Socrates, 'dropt my abrupt Contradiction, and positive Argumentation, and put on the humble Enquirer & Doubter'. It was always natural for Franklin to be trying on a fresh identity, as if he were putting on new clothes.

In writing under an assumed identity Franklin was doing what European writers of the eighteenth century characteristically did. But there was something more problematic about the disguises the adolescent Franklin assumed in Boston and Philadelphia. The Puritan belief in which Franklin had been raised valued one's own authentic feelings and expressions. So the masquerades in Franklin's early writings were adopted in defiance of a pervasive collective ethos. Swift was not hiding out as Lemuel Gulliver in the same way that Franklin was as Silence Dogood. The adoption of disguise had the effect of intensifying Franklin's self-consciousness. He was both himself and someone else as well.

The earliest surviving pages in which Franklin was writing truly on his own, with no aim of self-advancement or thought of audience, a journal he kept in 1726 on his voyage back to Philadelphia from London, reveal a young man

intensely concerned with issues of society and solitude, right discipline, sincerity and reputation. He is very much a young man full of fun and pranks, getting into trouble and barely getting out. He is an excellent observer of the natural and social scene, noting the bird and fish species he has seen and performing a little experiment on the crabs which cling to gulf weed. And even at the age of 20 he is systematic and neat, making an entry for every day aboard the *Berkshire*. He even enters an explanatory footnote at one point. Another measure of Franklin's self-consciousness is that he preserved this journal into old age, even making reference to it in the *Autobiography*, suggesting that his reader will find the incidents of the voyage 'all minutely related'.

Purportedly the audience of the *Autobiography* is William Franklin, his 41-year-old illegitimate son, currently serving as royal governor of New Jersey. William Franklin had accompanied his father to England in 1757 and continued to serve as his father's ally and listening-post in America. By 1773, however, it was clear to the father that his son was leaning toward the British side in the conflicts which preceded the Revolution. William Franklin was never to read the manuscript of the autobiography addressed to him in 1771, and when Franklin finally began writing again, he addressed himself more explicitly to 'the Publick'.

The *Autobiography* provided Franklin with an opportunity in part to reveal achievements of his own which he had concealed earlier in his life out of a prudent concern for not showing his hand. As early as his first anonymous submission of a letter from Silence Dogood to his brother's newspaper, Franklin had hidden his own writings and activities, sometimes so that the credit might be shared more broadly, as in the case of his proposals for the first volunteer fire company or for the funding of the Pennsylvania Hospital. Franklin is candid about the vanity of retrieving credit for his past achievements, and in fact defends vanity in the first paragraph, 'being persuaded that it is often productive of Good to the Possessor & to others that are within his Sphere of Action'. Confident that his role would eventually

be revealed, Franklin's anonymity ironically became the ultimate manifestation of vanity.

In fact Franklin avoids bragging in his own story, even pointing out occasions where credit had been given him that others deserved. It is clear from his own description that Franklin's relationships with other people and groups after his early twenties had been guarded and somewhat distant. He describes his wife Deborah as a safe refuge from the danger of venereal disease and as a 'good & faithful Helpmate, [who] assisted me much by attending the Shop'. Franklin advances in the world not through close friends but through collaborators, and his very notions of friendship after his youth are framed in terms of manipulation. He describes how he befriended a prominent Philadelphian who had formerly opposed his election as clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly by asking to borrow a rare book and thanking the man for the loan.

Franklin exercises the same indirectness and wariness toward the reader of the *Autobiography* that he had exercised all his mature life in Philadelphia, London, and Paris. When he refers at the beginning to his vanity, he says, 'in many Cases it would not be quite absurd if a Man were to thank God for his Vanity among the other Comforts of Life'. Franklin knows that his contemporaries would still see vanity as a sin. But the very idea of sin is replaced by a term borrowed from the printing trade; sins are *errata*, typographical errors. More than forty years before beginning the *Autobiography*, in his fanciful 'Epitaph', he had first imagined himself as a text in need of authorial corrections. His 'bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection' is the most notable instance where Franklin combines playfulness and seriousness in relation to his reader. Franklin's reader knows that moral perfection is unattainable, and the young Franklin who undertakes the project reaches the same conclusion:

For 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.

Moral perfection is less important than keeping one's friends in countenance. The admission of faults in the *Autobiography* is therefore not confessional but strategic in his campaign to ingratiate himself with his readers.

Franklin describes his own departure from the religion of his parents and his readiness to argue over religious questions without making any definite commitment of his own to any side. Yet his *Autobiography* shows him to be very much in a Puritan tradition of self-examination. Franklin's father had emigrated from England in the late seventeenth century because he could not exercise his Puritan beliefs freely there. Puritans set a special importance on self-consciousness, as the biographies and autobiographies they left behind demonstrate (Bercovitch, 17-25; Shea, 87-91, 234-48). Ironically, Franklin, who saw no need for regular church attendance while still in his teens, is the true successor of this tradition of Puritan self-consciousness.

Franklin also exemplified a long-standing tendency among Puritans to evolve toward a belief in the moral value of one's own goodness. The earliest Puritans, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, had believed above all in the necessity of an undeserved spiritual regeneration accomplished by God. But lives spent in hopes of such miraculous regeneration, and in the endless soul-searching that was needed as well, produced anxieties that many Puritans wished to avoid. As a result, Puritans came more and more to hope that they could achieve righteousness through their own strenuous exertions. Max Weber and others have called this tendency the Puritan ethic, and Weber cites Franklin as a leading expositor of that ethic (Weber, 48-57). Though Franklin claimed to have found theological discussions unintelligible, he in fact exemplifies the beliefs of many of his more overtly religious contemporaries.

In fact, Franklin's defiance of religion is very qualified in all his descriptions of religious questions. He pauses at the beginning of the *Autobiography* to acknowledge the goodness of God to him, and when he introduces his Deistic creed in the third part of the *Autobiography*, he offers it as a statement shared by all believers everywhere. When he wrote in 1738 to his parents, who were concerned about his erroneous opinions, he was prepared to cite the Bible in defence of his beliefs. One of his last letters is a description of his religious convictions to the pious Ezra Stiles, a friend of long standing who had written to enquire about Franklin's beliefs about the divinity of Christ. In so far as he can, Franklin tries to placate Stiles, denying that his own position is really unorthodox. Franklin was determined to have both the freedom of action an unbeliever claims and the consensual security of the believer.

The Franklin who describes his youthful life in the *Autobiography* is a rather elderly man, who has undergone many important experiences after the ones he records. There is thus necessarily a distance between the old Franklin and the young one, creating several natural temptations for the writer. Old Franklin knows more than young Franklin did, so old Franklin might ignore the particular situations his younger version experienced. In an important sense, they are even different people: young Franklin is part of what old Franklin is, but young Franklin will not necessarily turn into the particular old Franklin who is his biographer. The temptation to judge the past or convert it into a series of purely instructive examples affects everyone of any age who has considered his or her past. 'I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors,' writes young Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*.

But old Franklin is actually quite generous and understanding toward his younger self. The faults of the young Franklin are only *errata*, and each is corrected as well as possible. Franklin is in turn careful not to give his young self too much credit. When his brother's friends discover

his anonymous contribution, the first Silence Dogood letter, they commend it highly, but the older Franklin wonders whether their judgement was as good as he had thought at the time. Franklin does not describe himself as a child prodigy, though he can recall instances when he had been a leader as a youth, building a sort of wharf with stolen masonry or inspiring some of the London compositors in the print shop where he worked to reduce their beer drinking. Old Franklin still vividly remembers the feelings of his young self, to the point that he can recall every stage of his first journey from Boston to Philadelphia, how cold or hungry he felt at various points on the way.

The danger of detachment between author and character has been a persistent issue in American writing for which Franklin offers one of the earliest solutions. American writers have written about themselves since the seventeenth century. For the Puritans, writing about oneself came close to being a religious obligation. When Mary Rowlandson returned from captivity among the Indians, she saw it as her duty to describe her imperilled state as a captive. Puritans addressed a complex audience when they wrote about themselves: other humans would read their testimony, but the most important reader was God, to whom they were confessing their sins, their beliefs, and their praise. Franklin makes occasional honorific references to Providence in his life story, but it is clear that he has avoided entangling religious alliances. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the American habit of self-description has taken on further complications. Emerson's essays depict the instants of insight of one potentially divine man. Detachment from one's true self becomes the root of all evil. Melville's Ishmael is so moody that he sets out on a suicidal whaling voyage. Whitman plants himself in the American soil and then grows out of it like leaves of grass. Henry Adams, after acknowledging Franklin as a predecessor in autobiography, describes a self-education which somehow avoids the crucial events of his adult life. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* conceals himself in a room lit with 1,369 lights. Electricity, the



power for those lights, was for Franklin an initially puzzling but finally familiar phenomenon: it was the source of lightning. Just as Franklin considered lightning as a problem to be solved rather than as a sign of the divine presence, he looked back at his younger self and saw not a divine or inspired being but a promising young fellow in need of good sense and a sound plan by which to organize his life. D. H. Lawrence, in a withering attack on Franklin in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, describes the result of Franklin's practical-minded avoidance of eternal considerations as 'a virtuous little automaton' (Lawrence, 16).

The *Autobiography* is incomplete, but probably even a longer version would not have satisfied Lawrence and others like him who find Franklin's life not emotionally adequate. In its concentration on the details of his early life, Franklin's life story significantly distorts his life as a whole. By itself, the *Autobiography* would not give the reader a clear sense of Franklin's political life or of the importance political questions had for him. Only toward the end, when he describes part of his role in the resistance to the Pennsylvania Proprietaries, does the political Franklin become more fully visible. The *Autobiography* even denies the importance of political issues in many cases, by stressing personal means around problems that could be perceived as public. His imagined solution to the problem of faction is a 'united Party for Virtue', but he sets aside the notion of organizing such a party and focuses on his own self-improvement. It is the same strategy urged in 'The Way to Wealth', Franklin's famous anthology of *Poor Richard* maxims on industry and frugality: there Father Abraham hears his neighbours grouching about taxes and replies with warnings that we impose the most serious taxation upon ourselves by idleness, pride, and folly.

Franklin's scientific interests get only passing attention in the *Autobiography*, not because they were unimportant to him but because he came to see his life story as a means to lead young people 'to equal the Industry & Temperance of thy early Youth', in the words of the letter from Abel James