

ANATOMY OF AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Michael Zuckerman, Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania

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Tonight's discussion will revolve around examining the *Autobiography* and the question of personal writing.

The first issue is the question of memoir as a way of analyzing, shaping, and communicating a coherent story from the materials of lived experience. I want to ask you whether the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is all that coherent of a story. Is it a coherent at all? If it is coherent, how? What is the story that you see it telling?

Rags to riches, you might say. Alright—except Franklin's not all that ragged to begin with. He's got a father who supports seventeen kids, finds apprenticeships—which are expensive—for all of them, or dowries for the females. Franklin never gets rich: in the *Autobiography* he says he's got a modest income that he can retire on. He doesn't want more, and he doesn't need more. He can never take the lead in any of his civic projects because he's not nearly rich enough. You've got to have a rich guy at the front of these types of projects, and he won't suffice. He's got other reasons for not wanting to be at the head of these projects that are much more devious, but the barefaced one is that he's just not a commanding enough figure economically. He's not in the top ten percent for income on the tax lists that we've got. So this story is not quite rags, and it sure isn't riches.

He begins, "Dear Son," and then once every blue moon he remembers that he's talking to his son—but it's really only a half-dozen momentary effusions. Even in the first part it's clear that he's not talking to his son, and that he's found a different audience. By the time he writes the second, third, and fourth parts, he's literally not talking to his son. They have broken over the Revolution, and the *Autobiography* is no longer a letter to his son, even in mock-epistolary form.

Are we prepared to say that Franklin's *Autobiography* is incoherent? It's been suggested that there's a coherence of authorial style in Franklin's intent to extract meaning out of all the different stories that comprise the *Autobiography*. But if we're talking about aesthetic, writerly coherence, what do you make of that cockamamie intrusion between parts one and two—the two letters from the two merchants, James and Vaughan? What are they doing in an artistically integrated memoir? What on earth is that about?

Of course, they serve as an excuse to resume writing—he's laid off for 13 years, between the first part and the second part. Those two letters just fall all over themselves to say, "You need to continue doing this, as an exemplar to youth, as a model of what they can be. And that model is an example of virtue, of goodness, of morality." But is the first part of the *Autobiography* really a model of virtue? It's just one con-trick after the other. The first part is the literary history of America's first juvenile delinquent. Nobody is doing good in that first part, and everybody's ripping everybody else off, everybody's looking to scramble to the top. Franklin's friends are betraying him, he's betraying them, they're stealing money from each other, they're stealing girlfriends from each other, and they're stealing identities from each other. Franklin's first story in the whole thing is stealing the stones from the wharf in Boston, and it's theft and scam, and scheme and duplicity non-stop from them on—some of it for good purpose and some of it for the sheer fun of it. When the Governor of Pennsylvania sends this innocent punk nineteen-year old kid on a wild goose chase to London, promising that Franklin's going to have letters of credit waiting for him, the Governor has not got the slightest intention in the world of having letters of credit waiting for him. It amuses him, sadistically, to strand this poor kid in London. He didn't know that he was taking him away from his betrothed, from Deborah—but it would have pleased him even more if he had known. Franklin has no prospect of getting

back – and no interest in getting back. He’s putting no money aside – he tells us he’s living hand to mouth the entire time, still ripping everybody off, still being ripped off by everybody.

So what on earth are James and Vaughan talking about when they say, “You’ve got to continue this wonderful example you’ve set for the kids,” when the first part—which is all they’ve read because it’s all he’s written, is nothing of the sort. They’re talking about Franklin the human being that they know, but not about those pages that now become part one of our four part *Autobiography*.

Franklin’s story starts with a purely democratic duplicity: looking out for number one; scheming; struggling to advance at other people’s expense; scrambling heedless of any moral concern. I would propose to you that there is a coherence to this *Autobiography*—that there is a story to this story—and it’s the story of Franklin discovering that this behavior doesn’t work. Or rather, Franklin discovers that it works, but that it doesn’t satisfy.

I think that what he’s doing in part one is that he’s giving you the groundwork. He’s giving you the foundation of American life. That is the common existence of Americans—that scramble, that heedless quest to pleasure yourself, to serve your own interests. He tells us this in a host of ways. For example, he tells us this with regard to religion, with the stuff that he writes about his early religion. Right at the beginning he talks about transmigration of souls, later on he tells us how his heterodoxy was making him very unacceptable in Boston and he could see that he had better get out of there because he certainly wasn’t going to have much of a career with people thinking that he was a smart-ass, and certainly not a believer in the things that they held sacred.

Then he describes his conversation, and that’s a story that runs through three phases in the *Autobiography* itself. In the first phase, he’s just the smartest kid on the block, and he takes on his elders, and he makes mincemeat of them in debates over political and religious issues because he’s smarter than they are. He rejoices in this kind of combat, he rejoices in defeating them, and it’s all about winning, losing, and vanquishing—and he wins much more than he loses. Then he discovers the Socratic Method. In the Socratic Method, you no longer just come at your opponent with fangs bared, instead you lure the opponent in with a series of apparently innocuous questions and you get them enmeshed in a morass of contradictions, and then you pull the string and you expose them, hopefully now in front of half a dozen people who have now gathered to watch the scene. He’s humiliated and you’re triumphant—it seems as though it’s not so combative or confrontational, but it’s really just a superior technology of combat—a more clever sort of sadism.

And then, when he comes to Philadelphia, he creates the Junto, and it begins to be in trouble—in fact, it’s in danger of going down the tubes. Franklin puts in a new set of rules for their weekly meetings, in which nobody is allowed to contradict anybody else, and nobody is allowed to be dogmatic and say, “This is so!” You’re only allowed to ask questions or say, “It seems to me that this might be so.” The Junto takes a turn for the better and begins to revive, and at the same time, in his own conversation, he says he takes that identical turn. A revelation dawns on him in Philadelphia—the revelation that conversation might not be for winning and losing. It might be for communicating, and sharing, and cooperating, and learning something. He realizes that he’s never going to get any of those benefits if he’s just beating everybody who’s not as smart as he is, and although they may not be as smart as he is, they do have some things that they know that he doesn’t know, and he does need their help.

That story just repeats itself in a series of metaphors and episodes, throughout the entire *Autobiography*. The *Autobiography*’s plot is a movement away from an unsatisfying scramble for personal interest and personal advancement, toward the realization that life is only going to work if you cooperate, if you have some regard for the common welfare as well as for your personal welfare, and an understanding that being the biggest fish in a small pond is not nearly as gratifying—not nearly as rewarding, literally—as being a middling-size fish in the ocean. So that, for example, if you can make Philadelphia far more prosperous than Boston or New York, then the fourth richest carpenter in Philadelphia will be richer than the richest carpenter in Boston, and everyone will benefit. There’s personal advantage in it, but there’s also a way of life. Its all about understanding that living endlessly with other

people exploiting you and you exploiting other people, and nobody caring about justice and nobody caring about cooperating just isn't a very satisfying way to live.

Franklin's *Autobiography* is a conversion narrative, and I think that he puts it that way—not in one grand, eye-opening moment, but in a series of bursts, so you've got to piece this story together.

We need to also consider the question of what he leaves out, because coherence is always achieved by what you exclude as well as what you include. Franklin writes about nothing beyond his middle age. He writes nothing about the Revolution, in which he plays an enormous part by galvanizing Pennsylvania (which was the decisive state for whether there would be a Revolution or not.) If somebody hadn't brought Pennsylvania around, the Revolution would have been a lost cause, there would have been no Declaration of Independence, and the British would just pluck off the south, pluck off the north, and that would be that. Franklin was the one to help Jefferson write the Declaration of Independence, he's the one that went off to France and secured absolutely indispensable loans, he's the one that drafted the peace treaty, and the one who then came back to Philadelphia and played a really important role in framing the Constitution—and he writes about none of that. Why not?

In 1771, when he writes the first part, of course he doesn't write about any of that—none of it had happened yet. But the second part was written in 1784, and American independence was already an accomplished fact. The last two parts were written after the framing and adoption of the Constitution, so the new nation and its new charter were already accomplished facts. One would think that this is the man, of all people possible, who could immortalize himself by telling this story, because nobody's going to tell it better. Franklin was the best writer on the continent, and he always had a great phrase for whatever was going on. At the time of the revolution, he's the one who says that we must all hang together, or assuredly we will all hang separately. After the Constitutional Convention is finished, he's the one who says, "You've got a republic, if you can keep it." He's the one who says that he's been looking at the sun on the back on Washington's chair throughout the whole summer, wondering if it's a rising or setting sun, and now he has the pleasure to know it's a rising sun. He's always got the right words. Had he written about the revolution, had he written about the Constitution, that would have been our canonical account, forever more. If he had wanted to be linked with world-shaking events, for the sake of advancing his own celebrity, his own fame and fortune, he certainly couldn't have done better than to write about the revolution, write about the struggle for independence, write about his life in the French court, write about the women, and write about whatever all of these things that people were panting to hear.

Instead, he never gets out of the 1750s in his *Autobiography*. What's that all about? Why wouldn't he write about those things? Why does he leave it to others? He's a very old man, he knows that John Adams hates his guts, he knows that John Adams is consumed with jealousy of Franklin. He has no reason to believe that John Adams won't write his own story of the revolution. He must know that if Adams writes the account unopposed by anything Franklin says, that Franklin's role will be reduced into something that's pretty despicable and contemptible. Why doesn't he want to write his own version of this story? Is it because in writing about the revolution, he would have to deal with the fact that he's now estranged from his son? Is it because he wasn't sure about the ultimate success of the American project? None of these are answerable questions.

My answer is that Franklin's is not about telling his side of the story. What I understand this autobiography to be is not Franklin's self-promotion, but Franklin's legacy—Franklin's last will and testament, if you will, his final gift to the American people. And that gift is to say, look, democracy is yours. Egalitarianism is yours, invincibly. That's the nature of American society. It was the nature of American society when we were colonists, it will be the nature of American society now that we're an independent nation—it's not at issue. The big story is not the revolution. The big story is not the Constitution. For Franklin, the crucial questions facing Americans as a people is whether they will indulge in the worst possibilities of that free-wheeling democracy? Will they indulge in nothing but self-seeking and self-aggrandizement and looking out for number one? Or will they take to heart the possibilities embodied in his schemes for civic improvement and embodied in his vision for a United Party for Virtue? The

question is not whether America will be a democratic society—Franklin believes that American society is so invincibly democratic that it doesn't really matter what exact form of government you use. I think that what seems to him urgent is the lesson of his early life, the lesson of moving from self-advancement and self-promotion, to civic endeavor, to mutual benefit, to doing things for the common good.

The only thing he talks about twice in the entire *Autobiography* is the lending library. He's writing the second part in 1784 and he doesn't have the first part with him. He's not sure whether he wrote about it or not, so he writes about it all over again—because it's important to him in 1771 and it's no less urgent to him in 1784 that the American people read about the lending library. It's more important by far than reading about the revolution or the constitution, because the lending library is the essence of the legacy he wants to leave, a legacy of civic endeavor and common commitment. I think that he puts the story about the lending library in the climactic place in the first part—his private life, his marriage to Deborah is the penultimate story, it's certainly important to him, but more important, to finish on, is the public project. The priority of public to private is constant through the *Autobiography*. It's the culminating lesson of the first part and then it's carried through in the second and beyond.

The second issue I want to tackle is the question of the uses of writing. Specifically, I want to look at why Franklin wanted to consult the materials of personal experience to compose a four-part memoir. Franklin is the worst sort of nerd, the worst sort of pointy-headed intellectual—what he does, all his life, is read and write. The rest of his life comes and goes, but reading and writing he does non-stop, at every point in his life. It's an instrument for his advancement throughout his life, it's the way he meets people, it's the way he gains patronage, and it's the way that he enlists allies for projects. Also, he just couldn't help himself. He should have been going to church but he found himself a snug little corner where nobody would notice him, and he read. He read voraciously.

Many of us also have a sense that one of the real uses of writing is to get inside oneself, to explore one's ideas, to come to some sort of self-knowledge. So if that's a real purpose of personal writing, one would think that Franklin's *Autobiography* would have a pretty clear connection to self-knowledge. He's written four parts, a couple of hundred pages: who is he? You can't write that many pages without revealing something of yourself, even if you hope not to, and of course most autobiographers intend to come clean—they intend to reveal themselves. What can you learn about Franklin in his two-hundred page memoir?

In fact, I would certainly argue that Franklin is writing much more to conceal than to reveal. Why write to conceal? Something is happening here: it may not be self-revelation, it may not be self-discovery, but something is impelling him to write something that is not a political tract, or arguments for a paper currency, or about other issues of public life. This is a detour, something in another vein altogether. He's chosen to write about himself, but say remarkably little about himself. He's clearly fearful of intimacy, there's no question about that. This is a man who's got a dozen aphorisms that all make clear that intimacy worries him a lot: "Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead" or "Fish and visitors stink after three days." He's not about to let us get all that close to him, or know his inmost thoughts. But then I come back to the question, why sit down and write this, especially when you're an old man, tormented by your gout?

Let me propose to you that what we have in the *Autobiography* is not somebody looking to get deeper into himself, not someone who was particularly interested in getting inside himself at all. In fact, his writing is an endless array of efforts to get outside himself. Not to conceal himself—that presumes that there is a self, that he recognizes, that he knows very well, and that he wants nobody else to know. That may have been true in Boston, when he knew that he was heterodox, when he knew that he was an unbeliever, but that's not what he's interested in anymore, it seems to me. What he wants to do is get outside himself and into others. It's no accident that he writes endlessly under pseudonyms. The first writing that he ever does is as "Silence Dogood" and he writes about it the *Autobiography*. Think of the audacity of this: you've got a sixteen-year-old male adolescent who's never spent a day of his life outside of Boston, writing in the voice of a middle aged rural woman. There's virtually nothing in the persona that he creates that he knows a thing about and yet he makes that voice work for an extended string of

essays with virtually nobody guessing. For the rest of his life, he writes under pseudonyms—some of his best stuff, “Polly Baker,” is again written as a woman. He’s constantly writing out of his age—older when he’s younger, younger when he’s older—he’s writing out of his gender, he’s writing out of his social class, and he’s writing out of his geographic place. The most famous thing he ever wrote is *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, under the name Richard Saunders, another fictive creation who couldn’t be more distant from him. Poor Richard is an astrologer: Franklin could not have had any more contempt for anything in the world than the bogus science that astrology represented. Poor Richard is a henpecked husband: the reason he’s doing the almanac is that his wife is badgering him that his astrology doesn’t bring in enough money, so he’s got to get into a second line of work so she can have some money to purchase fineries. Poor Richard is clearly impoverished: Franklin by the time he’s doing this is doing very nicely.

Franklin plays incessantly with other identities. Not just because he’s got a modern sensibility (though he does) but also because that is the nature of the civic life that he’s urging on people. He’s encouraging people to get into other people’s point of view, to understand other people’s perspective, to see the world in their terms. These endless pseudonyms are exercises in learning sympathy, exercises in seeing things from another standpoint. He sees this as absolutely essential to the good life in a democracy. Of course, you don’t have to do this if you want to just look out for number one and be obtuse and oblivious to where other people are coming from. But Franklin’s also discovered in Philadelphia that this the only way to live in a pluralistic multicultural society—if you maintain integrity, if you just maintain one fixed point of view and never appreciate where other people differ from your point of view then you’ll never be effective and you’ll never get your message across. If you talk in exactly the same way to Germans and to English and to Irish and to Scots and all the rest, you’re going to leave most of them cold. You’ve got to figure out what the Germans are like, what they value and what their taboos are, and what their aspirations and their fetishes are, because that’s different from what the Scotch Irish are going to be like, and that’s different again from what the African Americans are going to be like. Everybody’s got their own way of seeing things, their own way of coming at the world.

In Boston, where there’s orthodoxy, you’ve got two choices, you can either be orthodox or you can be heterodox. If you’re heterodox, they’re going to make mincemeat of you. They hung people on the square, they stoned them to death, and they pressed them to death. But in Philadelphia, there is an entirely different situation, and it’s about style, it’s not about integrity. Franklin learns that style is absolutely crucial. What he learned is the quality all the quintessential American occupations require: the same respect for other people’s point of view, the same reluctance to intrude your point of view a whole lot on theirs. It’s what characterizes advertisers, it’s what characterizes salespeople, it’s what characterizes bartenders, and it’s what characterizes good poker players. All the things that are really iconic and central to American life require the same skills of getting outside yourself, of not privileging your own perspective but privileging the other person’s perspective.

Part of what this means is that Franklin doesn’t use his writing to teach. He’s convinced, and he says this point-blank in several places, that didacticism will never work and preaching will never work. People will hear it, they may agree, but they won’t do it. It won’t touch their lives. The only way you’re going to reach them, the only way you’re going to move them, is by indirection, by setting it up so they can learn for themselves, so that they can sort out the meanings for themselves. When Franklin gets to the end of the “Way to Wealth,” he says that the audience gathered around Father Abraham delivering this speech full of Poor Richards’ aphorisms treated it like a common sermon—that is to say, they approved the doctrine and went out and did exactly the opposite. Franklin sees this as the fate that befalls all didactic teaching.

Now, in part two of the *Autobiography*, the largest part of it, is the project for moral perfection. Certainly, a lot of writers have thought that part two was the most arresting part of the whole thing and they have been endlessly infuriated and aroused and riled by it. Mark Twain and William Carlos Williams and D. H. Lawrence and a whole slew of people have taken off after Franklin, essentially based on their reaction to the project for moral perfection. Max Faber took it as the single most central document in the entire history of the Protestant ethic. Faber was a German scholar in the heartland of European scholarship at a time when American scholarship and American cul-

ture was a distant little pimple on the left pinkie of the European mind, and yet Franklin's project for moral perfection was important enough to Faber that he didn't merely say it mattered, he said that it mattered more than anything Calvin ever wrote—it mattered more than anything any European ever wrote. I think all of these people have taken it straight, and I think that's just loopy. Franklin tells us in a thousand ways that it's not to be taken at face value. Just look at the thirteenth virtue that he sets out to cultivate. He shows his twelve virtues to a Quaker friend and the friend tells him, "You know, Ben, there are people who think that you could do with a little more humility, and maybe you ought to work on that too. You're widely thought to be a very vain and proud person." So Franklin adds humility to his original twelve virtues. You may remember that for each of the virtues he's got a little sentence or two, a tagline that defines that virtue and what he means by it. Does anybody remember the tagline for humility? "Imitate Jesus and Socrates." These are merely the two most famous people in Western culture, and he's going to be humble by trying to be like them? We're clearly talking about a joke, a gag, a spoof.

It isn't just that one, so it's not a slip—it's systematic and it runs through many of these. Silence: "Speak not, but what may benefit others or yourself." I defy you to think of what you could say that wouldn't benefit either others or yourself. This is an unlimited license to say whatever you feel like saying. Frugality: "Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself." What can't you spend on, if the test is whether it will benefit others or yourself? "Sincerity: Use no hurtful deceit." Is that what any of you mean by sincerity? Deceit is all right so long as it's a little white lie, and not a big heavy one that's going to harm someone or make them feel rotten? This one I love: "Chastity: Rarely use venery, but for health or offspring." That's not, "Just say no." It seems to me that it is going to be pretty rare that you're going to use it for something other than pleasure or purpose! And so it goes on.

When he writes this thing, Philadelphia is a small place—there are fewer people in the entire city of Philadelphia than there are at the University of Pennsylvania today and they're cooped up in a space no bigger than the University of Pennsylvania occupies today. People know Franklin. Temperance is his first virtue—this is a man who's got one of the most splendid champagne collections and one of the best wine cellars in all America, and suffers from gout. You don't get gout from temperance. Silence—this is a man who's been writing and stirring up trouble all his life. Order is the third virtue, and three pages later he tells us that order is all right for an apprentice but once you become a man of business, order is impossible—the scale of your operations, the magnitude of your affairs guarantees that things will get out of control. Industry—this is a man who quit work when he was forty-two years old and never worked again a day the rest of his life. The whole thing is such a bizarre accounting of himself, but even beyond that, think about the virtues themselves: Temperance, Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Moderation, Cleanliness, Chastity ... Are these the measure of moral perfection? Would any of you define moral perfection in those terms? Maybe instead of frugality you might honor generosity? Maybe you'd think about faith, or hope, or charity? Maybe you'd think about a whole array of things that the world has always thought constituted moral perfection or saintliness, but surely not these penny-pinching chintzy things like frugality, and temperance and chastity and all the rest. In the rest of the *Autobiography* it becomes very clear that generosity and sympathy and charity and all the rest are essential virtues to him and they don't remotely appear in this description of the project for moral perfection.

I think he's also telling us something in some of his apparently aimless stories. Does anybody remember the two stories that immediately precede the launching into the project for moral perfection? One of them is a story about him giving up on the Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterian Church is the closest thing that he's got to a church that is his own. He contributes money to lots of churches, he sits in lots of churches once in a blue moon, but to the extent that he's a member of a church with voting rights and the like, it's the Presbyterian Church. He's fed up because they've had a succession of ministers who've all been concerned with doctrinal purity rather than with civic promotion and helping people. But this particular Sunday, the Presbyterian minister that he doesn't like has announced the text for that day and the text appears to Franklin to be so inescapably public that he's finally going to get to hear the guy talk on something other than Presbyterian doctrine. And so he attends and somehow the preacher manages to convert even that text into something about pure theology and wrong theology and right theology, and Franklin walks out in such disgust that he vows never to go back as long as this guy is priest. He'd had

an earlier fight that he's described, where the church is deciding between two preachers, one of whom is doctrinally adequate but has no stomach for doing any public good and using the church to public ends, and the other guy's who's patently wrong on a series of important Presbyterian theological points but he's got a charismatic personality and a capability for galvanizing civic action. Franklin agitates mightily to get the doctrinally inadequate guy, loses and it's part of his disenchantment with the church.

The second story that he tells is of the morning that he comes down to breakfast and discovers that after decades of eating off cheap crockery with pewter utensils, his wife has put in front of him a piece of fine porcelain and utensils of silver. He says, "What's this about?" and you know what's coming: this is the standard diatribe of the eighteenth-century male against the eighteenth-century female for her wastefulness, frivolity, spendthriftness, and running the male into ruin. Do you remember what she answers? "You're worth it! All these other people on the block have stuff like this and why should you, who are as good as they are, be eating off the cheap stuff. You should have the good stuff too!" And instead of launching into a tirade against her wasteful ways, he says, "You're right. I'm worth it!" And he says, "And then I went out and bought three hundred pounds-worth of porcelain and silver." Not Deborah—Ben. Following on immediately from that, he starts in on the project for moral perfection, with its injunctions to frugality and the rest. He deliberately gives the lie to some of the explicit principles of moral perfection—but mostly he's talking about resignation to imperfection.

The story that comes immediately after the project for moral perfection is the story of the speckled ax. Some country bumpkin comes into town and he wants to buy an ax from the blacksmith, and he admires the shiny edge of the ax head. He says, "Wouldn't it be beautiful if the entire head of the ax could be as shiny as the blade?" The blacksmith immediately knows he's got a live one and so he starts in, "Of course we can get the whole head shined up, we just do this for starters with the blade. It'll be nothing to get the whole ax head as shiny as the blade—I will hold the ax head to the grindstone and you'll just turn the grindstone for a while, and we'll shine it up in nothing flat. Half an hour later, sweat is pouring from the country bumpkin's brow, he's drenched in it and he stops and he says, "I think I can't go on any longer." And the blacksmith, who isn't about to give this game up lightly, says, "No, you're coming along great. Look at this!" And he shows him the ax head and it's got lots of places where it's shined up some. Then he says, "You keep going a little while longer, and we'll have the whole thing. Right now it's just speckled." And the rube finally realizes he's been had, and he says, "You know, I think I prefer a speckled ax." Again, it's a story of resignation to imperfection. So you've got this project for moral perfection totally framed by stories that say that any kind of perfection is not only impossible but foolish and wrong-headed. But in case you didn't get any of the irony, any of the misinformation, or any of the flat-out lying, Franklin lays it out explicitly when he's all done and he says point blank, "That such extreme nicety as I exacted of myself might be a kind of foppery of 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." So he never intended the thing to work, he never wanted to be morally perfect. This thing is itself a joke, a satire against exactly that kind of cold, ungenerous perfecting of the self. Franklin precisely wants to go out, to have friends, to keep them in countenance—and that means imperfection, that means immorality, and that means the whole array of faults and errata that the *Autobiography* sporadically dwells in.

The final question I'd like to address is about reflection and revision in the writing process. Franklin describes early on in the first part how he taught himself to write. It's a fascinating process in which as a young kid he comes across these issues of *The Spectator*, the Addison and Steele collaboration, and he thinks this the best writing he's ever encountered. He wants to be able to write like that, so he figures out strategies to try to learn from Addison and Steele, and he runs a lot of variations on these, one as interesting as the next. The most basic one is that he abstracts these essays, he takes out key threads, key thoughts, key transitions, and distils them into some straightforward rather arid prose that just catches the kernel of the ideas and their succession. Then he goes away for a few days, comes back and looks at the abstract, and tries to rewrite the essay. Having rewritten it in a more elaborated, refined, polished form, he then compares what he's done with what Addison or Steele did, and learns from his shortfall. He's simply not as elegant as they are, he's not as controlled as they are, he's not as polished as they are, but

he's learning to refine his prose and picking up tricks from how they handle the ideas—that the ideas are not just the inmost kernel of the idea, reduced to an abstraction, but that it is the way in which the idea is couched, the style in which it is presented, the transitions, that make those essays effective. Then he does a whole lot of other nifty things—he transposes them to poetry and then back to prose to expand his vocabulary, and again to break from the original in order to come back to see how well they really did. He tells us that he learned a ton and once in a while he had the gratification of thinking that actually, in this turn of phrase or that, he might have even exceeded Addison or Steele.

What's going on in that rewriting of the *Spectator* essays? What does this tell us about what Franklin thinks about writing, and about reflection and revision? He's certainly treating writing as an art, and he's learning as a trainee artist would, by copying the masters. Learning to write from the *Spectator* presumes that there is some optimal form of writing, that Addison and Steele are at the pinnacle and nobody will surpass them, so the only thing you can do is approximate as nearly as possible to that wondrous climax that they represent of English prose. What Franklin is striving for is to resemble Addison and Steele—their ease, their grace, and their consummate command of a pose of gentility and assurance. There is no ideal in any of that endeavour that Franklin engages in of originality, of uniqueness, or of expressiveness. He's not aiming to reveal his inmost soul—there's nothing of the romantic in any of any of this and there's no sense of a personal style. The Addison and Steele ideal is of an impersonal style, of something that cannot be identified as distinctively and specially yours, and I think that's very much Franklin's aspiration until the end of his writing days. And so the question on which I would leave you is the question of whether his world is our world, and whether any of us should be thinking of writing like he did—not just because our world is a world of television and images and his world is a world of books and words, in which books and words were magical, but also because Franklin had different ideals about what prose and what print were to accomplish.