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Benjamin Franklin – An Illuminated Autobiographer

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Abstract:

Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography, typical of an Enlightenment man, illustrates the common intellectual and existential climate of the age. To the vision of the New World, still nebulous in the minds of many European contemporaries, Franklin, the product and the maker of his age, responded with a perfectly articulated representation of what America was like and what it meant to be an American at the time. As the autobiography of one of the Founding Fathers of America, Franklin's memoir prefaces the history of an autonomous and self-determining subject, characterized by independence, authority, and reason, while picturing America's pre-Revolutionary era.

The unfinished autobiographical project appears as a testimony of a person of eighteenth-century America, who emerges as a progressive personality of the Enlightenment. This essay will analyze Franklin as a quintessential American who embodied virtues that became manifest symbols of the Republic.

NATIONHOOD AND EDUCATION

The model of education during the Enlightenment was self-education. In the face of educational inertia, Locke and Rousseau in particular articulated a body of educational theory, which completely avoided the classroom and the school. Robinson Crusoe is for Rousseau a treatise on education, a model of what a child must learn in the world.

Before the eighteenth century, America was more a realized fantasy than an imaginable habitation for the American mind. Until the 1760's, British America in particular was substantially unknown in the European continent. But America also stirred up imaginative confusion. For many, including the eighteenth-century naturalists like Buffon, America was a late and incomplete creation. Whether monstrous or natural, America was an anomaly destructive of past conceptions of man, society, and the physical universe. Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the anomaly had been dealt with either by forcing it into pre-existing patterns or by ignoring it. By the mid-eighteenth century, the existence of America could no longer be ignored.

It was at this time that colonists were becoming aware of their collective identity as inhabitants of this unforeseen continent. But to call oneself an American required a difficult imaginative leap. The white

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colonists arrived with the language and customs of European nations but the institutions they established were modified to suit new circumstances. An unconscious evolution had taken place by the middle of the eighteenth century in their governmental structures, and in their educational institutions. George Gusdorf (1980:34) in his essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" observes that the Enlightenment refused any knowledge that would spring from intuition or revelation. The prevailing opinion of the age was that knowledge did not precede experience but vice versa. The Enlightenment individual, as an instance of universal human nature, also was an instance of that putative universal discourse of reason. The individual was nothing if detached from the social dialogue that virtually constituted him as a person. While creating conditions for distinctness of the "I," the Enlightenment was working to reduce the differences between the "I" and "you," or the differences between the same and the other.

Benjamin Franklin was a catalyst for both processes of experience and recognition. He designed his autobiography as a pivot to the type of discourse with which he identified himself. When the events leading to Revolution began to attract European attention and required some understanding of American conditions, he was on hand to serve as a native guide. Fellow of the Royal Society and America's most distinguished citizen, Franklin was in England as an agent representing various colonies before Parliament and the British government. Franklin created an image of America for the European world during the decade before the Revolution. As an ambassador Franklin was helpless in the face of money and political influence which he could hardly match. As a pamphleteer and advocate, however, he was able to leave an image of America that hampered the British war effort and produced tremendous war influence in France. It was an image that featured particularly the kind of self that was possible only in America.

Franklin had lived in England, the only one of the Revolutionary leaders to do this before the Revolution. The experience of London life offered valuable lessons for the American. Franklin's impulse to define the meaning of his own experience can be viewed as a national characteristic. A European could hardly have understood his own life history or public history without recourse to powerful traditions of interpretations. But the thinkers of colonial America tended to be innocently sincere in their use of European intellectual traditions. The religious authorities considered that both individuals and nations shrivel into insignificance beneath the cosmic proscenium of universal history. Such a belief pervaded eighteenth-century America. The Puritans of the eighteenth century felt the momentum of the past traditions less, and so eighteenth-century America was inclined to accept the Enlightenment's constructs as truth. For Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin holding their particular truths as self-evident was both noble and intellectually naive. Yet, the creation of the population of British America was inevitable. A considerable act of imagination was necessary to see those people as one nation. No nation state of Europe embraced such a view. Mixed with and adjoining the white population, were numerous tribes of Indians. For Franklin the Native Americans were a group of neighboring nations, requiring a special language and ritual of diplomacy. Within the colonies themselves lived a large population of black slaves. Even within the white population there was considerable diversity. The non-English groups were not so ready to embrace the status of English provincials. The Dutch in New York preserved their language and religion through the eighteenth century. The Irish immigrants arrived with little loyalty to the Crown and in their frontier conclave resisted both royal and colonial authority. How a national character was to be formed out of these elements was a problem and the American patriots had to resolve this problem before they could ask for independence or even conceive of it.

A paradox underlies the Enlightenment's recognition of national character. Custom and tradition exercised a tyranny over the mind, which the Enlightenment self had to escape. Yet, vital civilizations show a group identity and purpose. The United States was to be a nation open to divergent groups and out of that confederation of separate entities a national identity would emerge, just as the nation constitutionally comprised free and independent states.

Franklin strongly believed that collective self-confidence was more important to the preservation of the nation than any constitutional arrangement. The Founding Fathers, in general, were deeply suspicious of human nature and sought to stymie potentially dangerous elements through a network of checks and balances. Franklin agreed with this judgment of human nature but he wished to see America as a special case. During the debates about the ratification of the Constitution, Franklin constructed an elaborate typological comparison between the Americans and the Jews after their departure from Egypt. In the comparison, the Constitution corresponds to the Ten Commandments, the Anti-Federalist faction to the dissident followers of Korah, and the Founding Fathers themselves to Moses and Aaron. This was a revival of the Puritan rhetoric and this argument illustrated an ideal, which Franklin wished for: the ideal of a virtuous nation.

Education became crucial in the depiction of a virtuous nation as well as the character of its individual. By the 1750's, education had assumed powers not attributed to it before, particularly in America.

The Puritans had been concerned about the perpetuation of the City on the Hill; the education of the "rising generations" was a matter of intense concern for New England as a whole. Education was expected to supply social and intellectual background, which had been left behind in England. Bernard Bailyn (1960:69) observes in his book *Education in the Forming of American Society* that "Education had been dislodged from its ancient position in the social order wrenched loose from the automatic, instinctive workings in society, and cast as a matter of deliberation into the forefront of consciousness." America, as a new nation, was not ready, did not have the essential components of a stable society. People were brought up to define their own place for themselves. Educational theory, therefore, became a major subject of interest in eighteenth-century America. The basic purpose of education, according to Franklin, was the preservation of a virtuous remnant within the population as a whole.

As a boy, Franklin himself underwent three different kinds of education. Because his father initially intended him for the ministry, he was enrolled for less than a year of traditional formal education at Boston Latin School. His father then thought better of it because of the expense and the vocation, and so sent his son to the writing and arithmetic school for another year. He was then apprenticed, first to his father as a tallow chandler and then to his brother as a printer. From the grammar school to apprenticeship, he had experienced, in quick succession, the kinds of education available to an American colonist. He had done well in the Latin School but at the end of his life when he reviewed the fate of the English School in Philadelphia Academy he drew an extensive comparison between the two and ridiculed the useless gentlemanly fashion there.

Franklin's "Plan for Self-Examination" illustrates precisely an attempt to internalize the moral law, to turn the practice of virtue into a habit. Only that, the application of the method in the first conception, focused entirely on a painful exertion, would have resulted not in an aesthetically constructed moral subject but rather in a quirky idea of the perfect character. The construction of such a subject takes into account the human community and our inevitable interdependence.

As Bailyn (*ibidem*:35) points out, Franklin's idea of education was utilitarian, "He wanted subjects and instruction that trained not for immediate goals, not for close bound, predetermined careers, but for the broadest possible range of enterprise."

The Enlightenment Autobiographer

David Levin (1969:61) in his essay "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin" observes the movement from the private to public standards of identity as the overriding structural feature of Franklin's Autobiography. Franklin begins his life-story with the putative question, "Who is Benjamin Franklin?" and then describes the process whereby the constituents of experience from which he fashions a highly particularized sense of personal identity. These became precisely those which justified his assumption of his final role in the narrative, that of "Representative American." Robert Sayre (1964) notes in his study of American autobiography that the convergence of individuality with some sense of representative cultural identity is a natural consequence of the autobiographical form.

Franklin's act of writing his autobiography coincides with the birth of America as a nation. When he died in 1790 he had brought the record of his life forward to 1757, a point where he was on the threshold of his political career. We see Franklin emerging as his country does, from the symbiosis of social circumstances and prevailing Enlightenment ideas. He wrote the Autobiography as a treatise on self-education and a model of national character. The independent self of the Enlightenment required particular education; it had to assume the identity of a citizen in society. Franklin's Autobiography represents a fulfillment of the Enlightenment ideas about the self. He was of the opinion that through a pragmatic approach an individual could achieve radical independence.

Franklin's definition of national character evolved in correspondence with the changes in his own image of himself; the image of America that surrounded the active projector of 1750, when he left for France, was not the same country that he returned in 1757. Franklin, also, was never simply an observer of national character. From the beginning, he was conscious in varying ways of being its creator.

Franklin's "Art of Virtue" reflects the problem that preoccupied the political and moral thinkers of the age. For a Republic to survive, the Americans of the Revolutionary period declared that all private interests must give way to public interests. Corporate virtues were deeply embedded in the millennial identity of America.

We, thus, find on the one hand, an autonomous subject as a source of value and as an agent of valuable experience, and on the other, a subject dependent on the conventions and impositions of abstract discourse. To put it differently, we find that a subject of the Enlightenment and a subject of discourse that is promoted were still being defined in terms of seventeenth-century rhetoric. Such paradoxical positions of the subject characterize not only Franklin's approach to autobiographical writing

but also nearly the entire age of the Enlightenment. Viewed in terms of language-analysis, the conflicts resulting from the contradiction posed by the emergence of a subject who defines himself as a concrete and particular whole, requires a language which allows him to define himself particularly, but still in a conventional sign in a universally acceptable manner.

The eighteenth century itself was contradictory in many respects. For many theorists, the Enlightenment reveals a Janus-faced worldview. It was a time of transition when both old and new emerging forces that turned people's attention from the universality of reason toward the individual's sensibility at the end of the century undermined the main postulates. Bakhtin speaks of the paradox of the age considered as chiefly abstract and historical in its thinking which at the same time reveals itself as sensitive to the temporal modification and practical difficulties taking place in individual existence. Terry Eagleton speaks of the philosophical and practical difficulties encountered by empiricism and rationalism, the fundamental directions of thinking that shaped the age.

The dilemma of the age claimed at one and the same time that the individual was everything and nothing from the social whole. The point was to discover among the laws and regularities of the individual and social behavior that governed the eighteenth century, a force capable of attracting both the individual and the society towards a putative common end. This is precisely the characteristic projected in Franklin's Autobiography. The Autobiography brings to light, through the image of the protagonist's own self-construction and energetic participation in his social environment, a typical Enlightenment man, who was a believer in the universality of reason and confident in the powers of mind, experimental and pragmatic.

To the thinkers of eighteenth-century millennial tradition, Carl Becker notes, salvation would be attained "not by some outside, miraculous, catastrophic agency but by the progressive improvement made by the efforts of successive generations" In Enlightenment America, it was Jonathan Edwards, who gave spiritual warrant to the "doctrine of progress." Faith in human capacity and hope in the future marked the "doctrine of progress," a faith Franklin devoutly espoused.

Franklin's Autobiography as an exemplary personal narrative depicted the rewards of personal autonomy and perceived ability of the self to transcend circumstances. Charles Sanford (1955:84) quotes Bernard Cohen who says: "As an expression of the American character, Franklin spoke with the personality of his own genius, but the particular qualities of the American character that he represented were also the result of the time and place in which he lived."

Franklin is typical in that the individual and society, the private and public spheres are in continuous interplay. He was the product of the philosophies of the eighteenth-century. He came out of an American background-in Boston and Philadelphia-thai significantly shaped his way of thinking and looking at life.

Franklin was the embodiment of capitalistic success. In the "combination of individual shrewdness and wide tolerance he was the quintessence of the eighteenth-century liberalism" (Sanford 1955:51). Franklin not only possessed the characteristics prevalent in that era of capitalistic development, but also was recognized as a symbol of the new era. Franklin has, therefore, presented himself as an emblem, an American type. By turning virtues into utility he became a representative of the culture and of the new republic. Beginning in poverty and "obscurity," he moved towards national "prominence"--thereby setting an example for his readers.

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