

Review

Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*: A Discourse of Conversation

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This paper is an in-depth reading of the second section of the memoir, containing only thirteen pages in manuscript and written at Passy, outside Paris, in 1784. The endeavor is to ascertain that Franklin designed the memoir around discourse of conversation. The paper is divided into three sections: Section I is the introduction of the author, his work and the objective of this paper; Section II of this paper discusses the public image of Franklin during his diplomatic mission to France; Section III focuses on Franklin's effort to create his identity in his memoir through a discourse of conversation.

Key words: Benjamin Franklin, Autobiography, Enlightenment, Discourse of Conversation, Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Section I

The unfinished autobiographical project of Benjamin Franklin appears as a testimony of a person who lived through eighteenth-century America and emerged as a progressive personality of the Enlightenment. Written in three different intervals over a period of eighteen years, Franklin brought the record of his life only up to 1757, a year that coincides with the birth of America as a nation. To the vision of the New World still nebulous in the minds of many European contemporaries, the autobiography prefaces the history of an autonomous and

self-determining subject emerging from the symbiosis of social circumstances and prevailing Enlightenment ideas.

The term autobiography coined or translated by Robert Southey in 1809 became a familiar term only in the nineteenth century. Other terms available by then were confessions (associated with St Augustine's work) and memoirs. Franklin's preference for the latter indicates his intentions to speak of himself in relation to others and not in relation to God. Faced with God in Augustine's *Confessions*, the historical subject in the eighteenth century starts shifting to a confrontation with society and

with itself.

The *Autobiography* was written in four parts and for most parts his work was that of a public man in public life. Part one, which is an address to his son, recounts the protagonist's youth and apprenticeship and constitutes a pre-history made up of opposing experiences that preface the history of an autonomous and self-determining subject. Part two chalks down his arduous project of attaining perfection, was written when he was in Europe as an ambassador. Part three, the longest section, was written in Philadelphia in 1766 and, then, the very short fourth section was written in the winter of 1789-90 during his final illness. The dialogic nature of the *Autobiography* is emphasized by writing the first two sections in the epistolary form.ⁱ

This paper would discuss the second section of the memoir, containing only thirteen pages in manuscript and written at Passy, outside Paris, in 1784, and endeavors to establish that Franklin designed the memoir around discourses of conversation. Conversation is not a topic or theme, but the substance of his personal writing, is my contention and it is the medium of presentation which speaks of itself in the memoir.

Section II

In France, where Franklin lived as America's representative from 1776 to 1785, his place in the public mind was similar to that held by other Enlightenment heroes such as Voltaire and Rousseau. According to Bhaktin, "public man and public life are by their very essence *open, visible, and audible*"ⁱⁱ (*The Dialogic Imagination* 123). Franklin's personal narrative, through its autobiographical language within the contemporary cultural context, creates a public identity to be emulated by the posterity.ⁱⁱⁱ John Adams, his colleague of diplomatic mission, wrote years later that, "His name was familiar to government and people, to kings, courtiers, nobility, clergy, and philosophers, as well as plebeians, to such a degree that there was scarcely a peasant or a citizen, a *valet de*

chamber, coachman or footman, a lady's chambermaid or a scullion in a kitchen who was not familiar with it and who did not consider him as a friend to humankind" (1660). If not fully mindful of that adulation, Franklin was, at least well aware that his Company was "still sought for, and agreeable even to his younger Acquaintance." He begins his second section as a response to a letter from Benk Vaughan:

It is some time since I receiv'd the above letters, but I have been too busy till now to think of complying with the request they contain. . . . but my return being uncertain and having just now a little leisure, I will endeavour to recollect and write what I can; if I live to get home, it may there be corrected and improv'd. (*Autobiography* 72)

The second memoir, dealing with Franklin's "bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection," (*Autobiography* 76) is also the most attacked portion of the *Autobiography*. D.H Lawrence referred to it and to its list of thirteen virtues as "Benjamin's barbed wire fence." Leibowitz, following Lawrence's line of interpretation, says that, "The last three sections are written by a Franklin who is a curator of his own reputation, as a prodigy of virtue"(51). Taking a different stand, Robert F Sayre argues that the author of this piece was parading himself as a naif.'

The Passy installment (*Autobiography* 72-85), sketches a moral self-portrait of Franklin in his twenties produced by the seventy-nine year old American ambassador in France before its own revolutionary years, speaks of his 1730 moral crisis. This section totally suspends the chronological design upon which all other parts are structured. Franklin, as Sayre rightly maintains, "was continually reassessing his early life and past in terms and style of his present." What emerges is the transformation undergone by a moral being, who brought up as a Presbyterian, into a man of the world whose company is still sought for by the English people despite his old age, foreign origin, and different culture. The dogmatically

educated boy and the parochial tradesman turned into an object of general admiration and what may explain this immense shift, not in external but in internal terms, is the abandonment of everything that was in himself doctrinaire, extreme, excessive, and peculiar. Franklin emerges as an enjoyable company because he constructed himself in a way that pleased people everywhere during his stay in Passy. The onerous Project that Franklin claims to have undertaken may be regarded as an aide memoire of his Puritan education and as an example of early dogmatism emphasized by the very words that express it.

It was about this time I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong. (78)

Franklin, in an ironic tone, speaks about his grandiose objectives at the time. As he gradually realized, the project was not only extremely strenuous, but it would have led, if accomplished, to the appearance of an odd and freakish individual, contemptuously looked at by other people.

The second part focuses thus on the same figure articulated by the first section, and explains the transition from a biased and tendentious discourse to an enlightened conversation based on a shared set of cultural values and on homogeneous reasonableness. In essence, it is a move of de-particularization that follows a previous attempt to develop singular habits. Unlike that of his contemporaries, Jefferson and Washington, Franklin not only seems more accessible to posterity but also more affable. This accessibility and affability in part is a consequence of the conversational tone and humour of the text. Rather than appearing heroic, he appears as an embodiment of the aspirations and failings of the Americans. The account of his life, therefore, has been accepted as the tale of America's first Horatio Alger. *Poor Richards's Almanac Series*, like Part II of the *Autobiography*, has attracted criticism yet the focus on a segment of Franklin's long career serves to emphasize some of the essential features of Franklin's personality

that sustained him throughout the varied challenges of his life.

Section III

Conversation in the *Autobiography* designates both the recollection of multiple and various talks taking place at different moments and the manner in which Franklin makes those recollections known to us. It is through dialogue with others that Franklin constructs his identity and passes on to the posterity to emulate. My contention finds support in Emily Benveniste's work, which claims that discourse incites subjectivity because it has detached utterances

Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse. Because of this, *I* posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to 'me,' becomes my echo to whom I say *you* and who says *you* to me. This polarity of persons is the fundamental condition in language, of which the process of communication, in which we share, is only a mere pragmatic consequence. It is a polarity, moreover, very peculiar in itself, as it offers a type of opposition whose equivalent is encountered nowhere else outside of language. This polarity does not mean either equality or symmetry: 'ego' always has a position of transcendence with regard to *you*. Nevertheless, neither of the terms can be conceived of without the other; they are complementary, although according to an 'interior/exterior' opposition, and, at the same time, they are reversible. (qtd in Clarke 2; "Subjectivity in Language" 225)

To put Benveniste contention, in short, dialogue is constitutive of the subject. Language and subjectivity are identical because subject is always conceived as an

instance of discourse.

The eighteenth-century social order began to acknowledge itself as language, a universal language. And the individual also emerged as example of the putative universal discourse of language. The Enlightenment was working towards reducing the difference between *I* and *You*. The term "conversation" in Franklin's *Autobiography* serves exactly the same purpose. He makes his experiences known to us by recording and recounting frequently past conversations and attempts to transmit his cultivated virtue to his posterity in his memoir.

The Passy installment also reveals the transition from the concept of virtue appropriated in terms of what Terry Eagleton calls the "lived the habit of moral propriety" (24). The transition is from imposed rules to lived moral standards, or from what is excessive and absolute to what is generally sustainable. This is the principle of moderation that practically removes what is asperity in the bold and arduous project. And the conversational discourse brings in a protocol of civility and of agreeable company. It is a polished, aestheticized manner of speaking instituted among sensible fellow citizens for giving or receiving information or pleasure. Often autobiographers are at odds with the world in which they live. Rousseau, with his obsession of persecution, modeled the interlocutor he addresses in his *Confessions* as his alter-ego. Henry Adams, at the beginning of the twentieth century, believed that *Education* would be an appropriate lesson for the *fin-de-siècle* readers. But these examples show already a writer who is separated, in varied modes, from society. The writers' aloofness from the world and their loss of social integration speak of a phenomenon that occurred progressively after the Enlightenment. On the contrary, the optimistic eighteenth century Benjamin Franklin witnessed and sanctioned the writers' emergence as a representative function within society. According to Bakhtin, as Julia Kristeva writes, "Socratic dialogues are characterized by opposition to any official monologism claiming to possess a ready-made truth. Socratic truth (meaning) is the product of a dialogical relationship among speakers" (81). Franklin seems to have adopted the "Socratic method," a

method that operates through depersonalization, where the subject created is not an accountable subject but a subject of discourse.

In his humorous way, Franklin does not argue here for a middling moral behavior but for a different view of virtue and vice that echoes the liberal position. The benevolence or the tolerance professed by the eighteenth century derived first of all from the opinion that men are all weak and therefore liable of error. That was also a matter of intelligence, of having a right view of man in general. The Enlightenment, as Eagleton writes, both internalized and aestheticized the social norms, while rejecting moral strenuousness as an "ominous reminiscence of a disruptive Puritanism." The individual, born together with the Enlightenment appears to himself as the self-giver of the moral law. The external compulsions and the internal impulses are so interfused that the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter.

Freedom, virtue, and the body are all terms closely interconnected in the aesthetic discourse as formulated by the eighteenth century, because the moral laws operate first of all upon the body as the site of sensations, perceptions, desires, and appetites. It is for this reason that the path of virtue is no longer a question of external dogma but something prescribed by the nature of man itself as an impulse of man's inward being.

Franklin's Plan of Self Examination illustrates an attempt to internalize the moral law, to turn the practice of virtue into an unthinking habitude (77). Only that, the application of the method in its first conception, focused entirely on a painful exertion, would have resulted not in an aesthetically constructed moral subject but rather in a quirky piece of museum called the perfect character. Franklin presents himself not as a *naïf*, in other words, if we understand correctly Sayre's metaphor, not as a "savage American" playing the role of Voltaire's *I' Ingenu*, but as a man of the world whose aspects resemble the form of the aesthetic artifact. The construction of such subject takes into account the human community and our inevitable interdependence. As Franklin concludes, the habit of virtue creates a harmonious being, agreeable and

enjoyable to the sight of others as a work of art.

For the autobiographer Franklin - as for other Enlightenment thinkers - moral restraint is a source of freedom. It liberates the body from the servitude of vice and free the individual from economic enslavement. The aesthetic and economic argument helps to produce an individual whose recognized identity is also a passage from apprenticeship to authorship.

As a self-portrait, the section gives the reader some account of Franklin's private life in terms of his abilities and shortcomings, of daily schedules and occurrences of everyday life. The autobiographer, for example, boasts about his "exceeding good Memory" but finds himself, on the other hand, "incorrigible with respect to Order" (83). From this section and from other parts as well we may pick up a number of intimate details concerning the autobiographer's image as an ordinary man. We thus come to know that Franklin likes eating fish and that his breakfast was usually Bread and Milk and that, the young tradesman, ate his regular breakfast with a pewter spoon of two penny earthen porringer. Such details would naturally constitute the category of intimate disclosure.

It could be said that in autobiography and memoirs what seems intimate, confidential, and repetitious in life, serves the same purpose of portraying a coherent and consistent self mirrored in all anecdotes and particulars exposed by the story. The signs of confidential nature refer to and are mixed together with other signs that entail the synthetic character of self-representation. In other words, in autobiography not a single element - no matter how futile it may appear - is gratuitous. The confidential sign emerges not as a slip of pen but as a sign which looks like other signs interspersed throughout. Autobiography therefore operates through analogy recording only what is noticeable, recurrent, and worthy of general interest in one's life. The condition of autobiography indicates on the part of the autobiographer a certain system of taking notice himself. Franklin's reference to his breakfast appears thus not as a trivial detail to be taken in itself as a unique sign that bears witness to the ephemera of everyday life, but as a component of a network of messages to his readers

pointing out the characteristics of frugality in his self-portrait.

In the first section Franklin recounts his serious illness that occurred in February 1726/27 when he was just twenty-one years old. The precision of information that precedes the recollection proper would also make us expect a fully detailed account of an individualizing moment in Franklin's life. Perhaps this is the most desperate situation the book records and the lowest point is Franklin's disposition, otherwise high spirited and optimistic. Yet the recollection serves as an introduction to different facts. The event works for a larger system of signification put forward by the book. Here the autobiography as a genre subordinates the events to the demands of representation. The event takes on the dimensions of the self that uses it in order to illuminate, to confirm, or to assert its own coherent psychology.

My scheme of ORDER gave me the most trouble; and I found that, tho' it might be practicable where a man's business was such as to leave him the disposition of his time, that of a journeyman printer, for instance, it was not possible to be exactly observed by a master, who must mix with the world, and often receive people of business at their own hours. (82)

The above statement, if anything, is a dialogue, in truly Bhaktinian term. Conversation here as a language of agreement pervades not only the spheres of private and public life but also interrelate the general and the particular. The British Governors, generals, and civil servants fail to pass this trial of conversation. Governor Morris appears, for example, as a victim of a mistaken education which favored verbal fights:

He had some Reason for loving to dispute, being eloquent, an acute Sophistry, and therefore generally successful in argumentative Conversation. But I think the Practice was not wise, for in the Course of My Observation, these disputing, contradicting and confuting People are generally unfortunate in their affairs. They get Victory sometimes, but they never get Good Will, which would be of more use to them. (111)

Benevolence, as recognition of the other, is the condition of one's being on good terms with his fellows. General Braddock, who led a disastrous campaign from Britain, "gave us Americans the first Suspicion that our exalted Ideas of the Prowess of British Regulars had not been well founded," is also too self-confident and therefore deaf to the interlocutor's differing opinion. It would not be inaccurate to say that in the autobiographer's picture America's pre-revolutionary years opposed, on one hand, people with good conversation and on the other hand, representatives of the British government, who were unwilling to listen to them. To use the historical terminology, the picture is that of an enlightened people against the absolutist power and the weapon in the hands of the former was good conversation ability.

Michael Foucault has pointed out that discourse constitutes knowledge together with social practices and forms of subjectivity and power structure are intrinsic part of societal relationship (108). Franklin's *Autobiography* resonate Foucault's voice as it records and recounts the discourse of conversations within the social framework that establishes the subject within the power structure of the time. And what emerges is an individual with polished, aestheticized manner of speaking that binds intimate unity and gives rise to the "I" of polite, neutral, and enjoyable discourse in the *Autobiography*.

ⁱ Here I would like to mention that in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, the writer divides the autobiographical account in two halves, of completely different significance, namely, the subject's pre-history, on the one hand, and the subject's history, on the other. The first represents the subject's youth, the biographical and the unproductive time which may be narrated in traditional terms and imagery because it is given to the subject. The second section, the largest one by far, is meant to be the survey of the subject's self-creation by means of writing, in other words, the history of writing subject in which "bios" would be irrelevant.

ⁱⁱ Bakhtinian dialogism is the dialectical relationship between the self and the other where the "self occupies a relative center.

ⁱⁱⁱ In Bakhtinian term, this can be labeled as *appropriation*, which is an integral part of dialogue

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