THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE ABOUT A BOOK, NOT A MAN. ITS AUTHOR NEVER GAVE HIS WORK A TITLE, AND THOUGH HE WROTE IN ENGLISH, PART OF HIS MANUSCRIPT WAS FIRST PUBLISHED IN FRENCH TRANSLATION IN 1791, A YEAR AFTER HIS DEATH. THIS INITIAL APPEARANCE WAS QUICKLY FOLLOWED BY GERMAN, SWEDISH, AND ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE FRENCH FRAGMENT, ONE OF WHICH WAS SERIALIZED IN EIGHT INSTALLMENTS OF *THE LADY'S MAGAZINE; OR ENTERTAINING COMPANION OF THE FAIR SEX* IN LONDON BEGINNING IN JANUARY 1793. TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AND OVER ONE HUNDRED ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITIONS LATER, AN 1818 VERSION OF THE BOOK BASED ON WHAT WAS THOUGHT TO BE A COPY OF THE ENTIRE ENGLISH ORIGINAL FINALLY APPEARED, BUT EVEN THEN THE TEXT WAS INCOMPLETE, WITH CHANGES IN WORDING THAT MAY HAVE DRAWN, IN PART, ON A TRANSCRIPTION THAT HAS SINCE DISAPPEARED. THIS IRREGULAR JOURNEY INTO PRINT MIGHT WELL HAVE DELIGHTED THE AUTHOR, EDITOR, AND PUBLISHER WHOSE LIFE STORY WAS IN THE PROCESS OF MAKING A HAPHAZARD RETURN TO ITS NATIVE TONGUE.¹

SEVENTY-SEVEN YEARS AFTER THE BOOK’S INITIAL, FRAGMENTARY PUBLICATION, AN AMERICAN DIPLOMAT NAMED JOHN BIGELOW PRODUCED A VERSION DRAWN DIRECTLY FROM THE COMPLETE MANUSCRIPT THAT BENJAMIN FRANKLIN HAD LEFT BEHIND AT HIS DEATH. BIGELOW’S 1868 EDITION INCLUDED ALL THE MAJOR PARTS OF THE STORY THAT CON-
temporary readers associate with the title that Bigelow adopted, the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, but his efforts drew criticism from subsequent editors, and though the title that he used has prevailed, his text has not. After more than a century of scholarly labor, it is still an unfinished life, with important pieces lost or scattered, partly by accident and partly not, much as its author must have expected would occur, given the turbulent world from which the book emerged and where it first appeared, in a city and a language where Franklin himself was, at best, only partly at home. *Mémoires de la vie privée de Benjamin Franklin, écrits par lui-même, et adressés a son fils* is what the 1791 translator had called Franklin’s story, supplementing the narrative fragment with a “historical handbook” (*précis historique*) of Franklin’s political views, as well as several additional items relating to this “father of liberty.” Liberty had recently begun its violent reconstruction of French life as this early translation went to press. The publisher may have hoped that Franklin’s measured performance would help shape the growth of his unruly ideological child.

Its opening pages, however, were at least nominally directed to Franklin’s own unruly child, William, the royal governor of New Jersey at the time that Franklin sat down, during a brief holiday in 1771, to write him a letter explaining some aspects of his father’s early life, perhaps as a means of bridging the widening political gap between them. The epistolary form was a well-established publication convention in Franklin’s day, designed to evoke the thin illusion of private disclosure in a public medium. Franklin’s contemporaries clearly recognized his “letter” as a benign disguise. A young English friend, Benjamin Vaughan, wrote to Franklin ten years later urging him to continue work on the book, calling it simply “your Biography.” The first caretaker of the memoir whom scholars have been able to identify, a Philadelphia merchant named Abel James, termed it simply a “Work” and sent Franklin a brief description of the excitement he felt on examining a manuscript fragment that had come into his possession, late in 1782, in order to reawaken Franklin’s interest in it:

Some Time since there fell into my Hands to my great Joy about 23 Sheets in thy own hand-writing containing an Account of the Parentage and Life of thyself, directed to thy Son ending in the Year 1730 with which there were Notes likewise in thy writing, a Copy of which I inclose in Hopes it may be a means if thou continuedst it up to a later period, that the first and latter part may be put together, and if it is not yet continued, I hope thou wilt not delay it, Life is uncertain as the Preacher tells us, and what will the World say if kind, humane and
benevolent Ben Franklin should leave his Friends and the World deprived of so pleasing and profitable a Work, a Work which would be useful and entertaining not only to a few, but to millions. (A, 134)

Abel James had certainly read through Franklin’s twenty-three handwritten sheets. A wry undertone in this passage suggests that he knew his correspondent’s sense of humor quite well, and was even willing to mock his colloquial style, but wouldn’t risk sending this precious record from Philadelphia to Paris while England and the United States were still officially enemies, over an ocean patrolled by hostile warships, a prey to storms and shipwreck. The author would have to make do with some scribbled notes and a crowded memory to carry on with the protracted letter to his son and to posterity that he had begun over a decade earlier.

Eventually Franklin took the advice of his two friends, and over the last six years of his life added sections to the book as his circumstances and his declining health permitted, more than doubling its length but falling far short of covering the whole of his extraordinary career. The narrative ends in 1760, leaving the last three decades of Franklin’s life to the reconstructive energies of traditional biographers. But in setting out to continue his story, Franklin did something quite unexpected and surprising as well. Rather than simply put together the book’s “first and latter part,” as Abel James had hoped, Franklin provided for a highly conspicuous, even ragged, compositional seam. He indicated his wish to incorporate the letters from Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan directly into the body of his book, along with the pages of “Notes” that James had sent him to jog his recollection. These documents (Franklin indicated) would all appear sandwiched in between the portion of the story that Abel James had recovered near the end of the American Revolution and any new manuscript that Franklin might eventually live to add, carrying the narrative forward from 1730.2

Since 1818, when William Temple Franklin published the first version of his grandfather’s book that included some of this later material, every subsequent edition of the memoir has followed the author’s wishes and inserted the James and Vaughan letters where Franklin had wanted them to be. But no editor has printed the “Notes” alongside the letters. These loose manuscript sheets, rather oddly labeled Franklin’s “Outline” by modern publishers, wind up in an appendix. Notes and outlines, after all, are extraneous to any writer’s finished product, at least in the eyes of editors or executors. Surely so careful a stylist,
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and meticulous a printer, as Benjamin Franklin would have recognized this obvious fact and made a different decision about the placement of the notes before his book ever went to press. If he had been able to finish a complete draft that satisfied his intentions, the notes would have been superfluous and, perhaps, would have disappeared completely.

But the Autobiography never went to press in Franklin's lifetime, and though a large portion of the notes that Abel James sent to him in 1782 was eventually covered by the narrative that Franklin ultimately left behind, he never changed his mind about the role he wanted the notes themselves to play in his finished book. Many implications flow from this interesting gesture: Benjamin Franklin's apparent determination to confront his reader with the disruptions that plague the orderly writing of stories, or living of lives, and which the meticulously composed and carefully corrected nature of print inevitably conceals. “Join, or Die” is the motto Franklin famously gave to his drawing of a segmented snake in the 1754 editorial cartoon that he hoped might encourage some form of political union among the fractured British colonies of North America. The life story that he left behind at his death in April 1790 is yet another segmented snake, but one that he went to some trouble to avoid assembling from head to tail in an unbroken narrative stream. Moreover, the notes that Abel James copied and sent to him in 1782 display none of the architectural control of their subject that we customarily associate with the idea of an “outline.” They are arranged in a sequential but fragmented line of brief phrases, names, and topics that Franklin must have prepared to use as a reference shortly after he began the sheets that eventually came into Abel James's possession.³

Some of the items that Franklin lists in his notes are quite specific, almost to the point of approximating sentences in a draft. Some are quite broad and vague, touching on extensive categories of experience rather than particular incidents. The document as a whole is an episodic ramble, a portrait of the memory in action rather than a selective and carefully structured aid to composition:

My writing. Mrs Dogoods Letters Differences arise between my Brother and me (his temper and mine) their Cause in general. His News Paper. The Prosecution he suffered. My Examination. Vote of Assembly. His Manner of evading it. Whereby I became free. My Attempt to get employ with other Printers. He prevents me. Our frequent pleadings before our Father. The final Breach. My Inducements to quit Boston. Manner of coming to a Resolution. My leaving him
and going to New York. (return to eating Flesh.) thence to Pennsylvania. The Journey, and its Events on the Bay, at Amboy, the Road, meet with Dr. Brown. his Character. his great work. (A, 268)

The hints take up Franklin's life story some pages after the manuscript itself does, with his method of teaching himself how to write clear and graceful prose by segmenting and reassembling in various ways Joseph Addison's \textit{Spectator} essays. They leap to the Silence Dogood letters (which the memoir itself does not identify by name) before making any mention of James Franklin's newspaper, the \textit{New England Courant}, where those letters appeared, and ignore the early friendship with John Collins, as well as Franklin's boyish infatuation with Socratic argument. A bit later they refer to certain “Schemes” that Franklin entertained during the nineteen months he spent in London in 1725 and 1726: to the plays he attended, the books he read, and the preachers he heard. These intriguing details never appear in the pages he actually writes.

Franklin's notes allude somewhat cryptically to “Cornwallis's Letters” in connection with his 1724 London voyage. The reference is likely to puzzle readers who are unaware that “William Cornwallis” was a fraudulent identity assumed by William Riddlesden, the “complete rascal” whose correspondence Franklin inadvertently conveyed to a London recipient in 1724, hoping it might be some instructions from William Keith connected with the purchase of printing equipment. Riddlesden's actual name appears in the memoir, but his phony one remains in the notes. If Franklin meant to address the general problem of counterfeit identities in his narrative, he gives no indication of his plans, but he clearly recalls the special nature of Riddlesden's deceit. He was “a very knave,” the memoir rather stuffily observes, but its pages are oddly silent on the particular form of knavery that Riddlesden practiced.

At some point, Franklin meant to address the subject of “Children” in the early part of his story, a topic in which his surviving son William and daughter Sarah would have taken particular interest. But other than a poignant paragraph belatedly inserted into the margin of his manuscript discussing the 1736 death of Francis Folger Franklin, he decided not to do so. And even this brief reference omits the little boy's name or any account of the delightful personal qualities “Frankie” displayed that made his loss especially painful. After Abel James sent a copy of the notes to France, Franklin added to it some subjects that he had initially overlooked and then proceeded to overlook them again as he expanded his manuscript. Near the entry where he had reminded himself
to discuss a meeting with “Indians at Carlisle” he added “and at Easton.” The Carlisle episode plays an important, and controversial, role in the long third portion of the memoir, but Franklin never elaborates on the equally complex circumstances surrounding his role at the Easton negotiations with the Delaware a few years later. Apparently he planned to transcribe a copy of the 1754 Albany Plan of Union into his book and then make “Remarks upon it.” Would these have been more detailed than the brief discussion of this document that does survive in the book? We will never know.

Clearly the narrative took unexpected directions as Franklin both followed and departed from the track he laid out for himself. By including the notes that depict this sinuous track in the midst of his actual manuscript, along with the letters that accompany them, Franklin could expose the shifts, the interpolations, and the elaborations and omissions that characterize the unpredictable interplay between design and execution in any extensive piece of writing. The integration and disintegration of parts involved in the evolution of a complex story emerge as key features of the story itself: its theme as well as its textual background, the central psychological and moral lesson of an extraordinary life disguised as the patchwork preliminaries to a choppy draft. The verbal jigsaw puzzles that a teenage Franklin made out of Joseph Addison’s paragraphs and ideas, in order to teach himself “Method in the Arrangement of Thoughts,” almost inevitably invite comparison with the notes that Abel James sent to his seventy-six-year-old friend, urging him to take up yet another challenge in methodical arrangement. Just as inevitably, the extension of the notes well past the events of 1760 suggests Franklin’s implicit recognition that he would never live to finish an account of his crucial role in what his manuscript termed the affairs of the Revolution.

Max Farrand observes, in his parallel text edition of Benjamin Franklin’s Memoirs, that the handwriting as well as the ink of Franklin’s instructions concerning the James and Vaughan letters indicate that he added the following brief explanation to his book not in 1784, when he first began to expand his story, but four years later, in rapidly declining health and with less than two years to live:

Memo.

Thus far was written with the Intention express’d in the Beginning and therefore contains several little family Anecdotes of no Importance to others. What follows was written many Years after in compliance with the Advice contain’d in
these Letters, and accordingly intended for the Publick. The Affairs of the Revo-
lution occasion'd the Interruption.

Letter from Mr. Abel James with Notes of my Life, to be here inserted. Also
Letter from Mr. Vaughan to the same purpose. (A, 133)

It was August 1788, and Franklin was once again home in Philadelphia. The
new Constitution that he had helped to draft a year earlier had been officially
ratified by eleven states, two more than the nine-state minimum required to
make it binding. Virginia and New York, two particularly vital members of
the new union, had voted to adopt the Constitution in July. Franklin himself
had completed his will in the same month and could now turn his attention to
the unfinished account of his life that he had brought back from France. The
eighty-two-year-old author of this memorandum, in nearly constant pain from
kidney stones and gout, almost certainly recognized that another momentous
interruption would very soon prevent him from completing the story that he
had set out to tell. Because the notes that Abel James had sent him were likely
to be all that the reader could ever expect to see of significant portions of his
life, Franklin decided to include them here.

A second, brief book was to have served as an ethical and educational com-
panion to Franklin’s life story. In his own mind he had entitled it The Art of Vir-
tue and intended it as a commentary on his system of daily self-examination
and self-discipline, a routine that Franklin believed would be of more practical
use than “the mere Exhortation to be good” that he found all too common
in didactic literature. Benjamin Vaughan in particular hoped that this little
manual, along with the finished autobiography, would help secure his hero’s
legacy and impact. But only its title survives. “I did indeed, from time to time
put down short Hints of the Sentiments, Reasonings, &c. to be made use of in
it,” Franklin wrote, “some of which I have still by me” (A, 158). But he never
linked these hints together, and he was never able to carry out the “great and
extensive Project” to which The Art of Virtue was to have made an important
contribution. A succession of private and public business intervened, Franklin
explained, and these goals too remained unfinished.

In the weeks just before his death, Franklin was thinking about his unfin-
ished life, his unwritten book, and the ambitious plans that he had once pro-
jected for the Society of the Free and Easy, a loose international organization
of young men, schooled in virtue and public service, which he had postponed
forming until he was too old and infirm to do so. He alluded to some of these
truncated aspirations when Thomas Jefferson paid him a brief visit in March 1790, as Jefferson was traveling from Monticello to New York City to become George Washington's secretary of state. Franklin eagerly questioned Jefferson about his old acquaintances in Paris, which Jefferson had left six months earlier. How had they been coping with the instability and the danger of their own, great Revolution, Franklin wondered. The “rapidity and animation” with which he questioned his visitor, Jefferson remembered, were “almost too much for his strength.”

Like Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan before him, Jefferson then turned the conversation to the “history of his life” that he had heard Franklin was writing, possibly from some of their mutual friends in France:

I cannot say much of that, said he; but I will give you a sample of what I shall leave: and he directed his little grandson (William Bache) who was standing by the bedside, to hand him a paper from the table to which he pointed. He did so; and the Doctr. putting it into my hands, desired me to take it and read it at my leisure. It was about a quire of folio paper, written in a large and running hand very like his own. I looked into it slightly, then shut it and said I would accept his permission to read it and would carefully return it. He said, “no, keep it.” Not certain of his meaning, I again looked into it, folded it for my pocket, and said again, I would certainly return it. “No,” said he, “keep it.” I put it into my pocket, and shortly after took leave of him.

The pages that the dying man was so determined to give away, Jefferson discovered, contained an account of Franklin’s last-minute efforts to negotiate a compromise between the American colonies and the British Ministry, “when he was endeavoring to prevent the contest of arms which followed.” Perhaps he thought the nation’s first secretary of state could profit from this extended story of abortive overtures and frustrated hopes.

When Franklin died a few weeks later, Jefferson scrupulously returned the sheets to his grandson, William Temple Franklin, who never bothered to include them in the life of his grandfather that he belatedly published twenty-eight years later. Nor has any subsequent editor done so, despite an addition that Franklin made to the end of the notes that Abel James had sent him in 1782 indicating his intention to discuss his “Negociation to prevent the War” should his manuscript ever reach that point in his life. It never did, but the pages that Franklin attempted to give to Thomas Jefferson survive in Franklin’s papers in the form of a long letter, dated March 22, 1775, and addressed once again to
his son, written as Franklin was sailing home from England after a decade’s absence to take up a seat in the Continental Congress.7

The story the letter tells, interspersed with documents that Franklin intended to insert into the finished narrative, covers the events of a few months, between August 1774 and March 1775, when a variety of intermediaries tried to reengage Franklin in government discussions over British policy toward the colonies. Since his public humiliation before the Privy Council in January 1774, Franklin had broken with his political contacts in England. By late November, however, he was holding weekly meetings with private citizens and members of Parliament from both parties who were trying to grope their way toward an agreement that might mollify the Americans and preserve the dignity of the British Ministry. Franklin (they thought) had the best chance of bringing about this impossible result. The letter describing all this activity to William closely resembles the very brief fourth part of the memoir that touches on Franklin’s first mission to England in 1757 as Pennsylvania’s representative in its quarrel with the Penn family. Had he lived, it seems likely that the finished book would have contained equally detailed accounts of Franklin’s public and private activity during the years of the Revolution in Paris and in Philadelphia, as well as in London—very different political worlds that he was in a unique position to portray and to contrast with the successive experiments in self-government that the first parts of the Autobiography bring vividly to life.

Jefferson himself was uncertain of Franklin’s meaning when he handed this extraordinary manuscript to him and twice insisted, despite Jefferson’s scruples, “No, keep it.” Perhaps it is understandable, then, that the 1775 letter has never gained favor in the eyes of editors and publishers preparing modern versions of Franklin’s autobiography. By contrast, the labeling of the story’s main divisions in four “parts,” followed by “Franklin’s Outline” as an appendix, has become established publication practice, though Franklin never used these labels or endorsed this ordering of his book. Why would he have bothered to write a detailed letter to his son on this crucial episode of his life when he had every reason to anticipate seeing William Franklin in person when the 1775 voyage home had concluded? Why would he add the subject of these negotiations to his running “notes” if he had not intended to include the 1775 narrative in his life story? Why echo the opening format of the manuscript that he had begun only four years earlier if he did not see the 1771 and 1775 documents as closely related parts of a single literary enterprise?

These questions can never have definitive answers. But it is at least clear
that within a few weeks of his death, Benjamin Franklin was dispersing rather than consolidating his written legacy, giving parts away rather than joining the pieces together, and imposing on his heirs (in the broadest sense of that word) the task of deciding how, or perhaps even if, the sections should be reunited. The caption to his drawing of the segmented snake, in other words, applies only in part to Franklin’s book. Unlike the colonies whose union Franklin was among the first to urge, his life story must remain a series of provocative fragments in order to be complete, disassembled in order to be whole.

“In democratic countries,” Alexis de Tocqueville wrote half a century after Franklin’s death, “the science of association is the mother of all science,” the “mother of action.” Mutual assistance societies such as Franklin’s famous Junto had taught Americans how to magnify the influence of private feelings into “a power seen from afar.” “Among the laws that rule human societies,” Tocqueville concluded, “there is one which seems to be more precise and clear than all the others. If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased.” Though he does not cite Franklin directly, Tocqueville’s notes suggest that he drew on William Temple Franklin’s 1818 edition of the memoir in preparing the second volume of Democracy in America (1840). Benjamin Franklin’s book, in the form that he left it, is both a portrait of the associational arts that structured his life and a challenge to the associational instincts of his reader: an assortment of episodic fragments that dramatize and awaken the energies of combination.8

Both Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan envision Franklin’s story as a verbal monument, a source of pleasure and profit to millions, as well as a barrier against the uncertainties of a post-Revolutionary future. But Franklin himself is profoundly skeptical of monuments. More than any other member of the Revolutionary generation to which he belonged, he recognized the inherent vanity of such building. No Greek revival temple or grand obelisk on America’s national mall reminds tourists of Benjamin Franklin’s formative influence on the imagination of his contemporaries. That influence resides, instead, in the subtle textures of an unfinished story that this book sets out to disclose.

**THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS CORRESPOND, very loosely, to the five major sections of Franklin’s memoir that have survived: three fairly substantial narratives and two very brief ones, joining the 1775 voyage letter to the sections of**
the *Autobiography* with which most modern readers are familiar. But in every portion of the book I have not hesitated to draw together episodes or passages that Franklin may have written at intervals in his life many years and many thousands of miles apart from one another, if they seemed to invite a joint consideration. The chapter titles, however, are largely sequential, drawn from the sections of his memoir in chronological order of composition. “Great Works and Little Anecdotes,” the title of the first chapter, points to a repeated motif of the pages in which Franklin described his early life in Boston, London, and Philadelphia, a pattern that the chapter sets out to explore. “Imposing Forms” and “The Scramble of Life,” the titles of chapter 2 and chapter 3, both derive from the brief middle section of the book, in which Franklin literally imposes an ethical discipline on himself that Benjamin Vaughan hoped would deter the brutal scramble of appetites that the closing sentences of his letter envisioned.

“All Scripta Manet,” a Latin proverb on the durability of the written word, points toward a consideration of speech and writing that Franklin repeatedly explores in the third part of his memoir but which also engages him in the first and second parts as well. “Some Uses of Cunning,” the title of chapter 5, is drawn from Franklin’s own characterization of his civic tactics as the inventory of these accumulates through the densely detailed texture of his book’s longest section. But even this most public portion of Franklin’s memoir is a tissue of great works and little anecdotes, of formal design amid the desperate scramble of history. The figure of the segmented serpent recurs as the title of my conclusion, but as a mnemonic emblem it shapes every page of the book, as this process of assembly and of disassembly moves forward. The entire performance should be sufficiently brief to satisfy Franklin’s exacting standards of concision, and sufficiently long to do justice to one of the richest sources of instruction and happiness in American letters.

In writing each chapter, I have assumed a reasonable degree of familiarity with Franklin’s memoir on the part of the reader, though I recognize that many may not have read the story for years, and many others may recall only anthology selections. But such handicaps are less crucial than they might seem. The memoir is by design episodic, as Franklin repeatedly but gently warns his reader, stressing his own tendency to digress or to violate “the order of time” in his presentation of events. My own discussion often violates the order of time as well—reserving a detailed look at the epitaph Franklin wrote for his parents, for instance, until the very end of the first chapter, rather than treating
it very early in the book, as Franklin does; or concluding the second chapter with a lengthy discussion of a joke involving the eighteenth psalm that takes place during Franklin's first months in Philadelphia. If this approach proves occasionally confusing, my only excuse is that it exploits a structural feature to the memoir, highlighting the patchwork nature of writing and of memory on which the associational arts of reading ultimately depend.