Benjamin Franklin’s memoir begins, inauspiciously, as the recollections of an amateur genealogist, tracing his origins in the English Midlands, sharing the experience with his son, and adding his own contributions to the family lore. The initial result, he suggests in retrospect, is a compilation of “little family Anecdotes of no Importance to others,” a note of false modesty on the part of a writer who was already famous on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean when he began to tell his life story during a late summer holiday in 1771. Despite this apparent apology for the limited interest of his pages, Franklin clearly recognizes that his narrative amounts to momentous personal testimony: a public examination conducted before a tribunal far more extensive in its scope than the private judgments of his immediate descendants.

The book’s first words strike a deliberately casual note. “I have ever had a Pleasure in obtaining any little Anecdotes of my Ancestors,” Franklin writes his son: “You may remember the Enquiries I made among the Remains of my Relations when you were with me in England; and the Journey I took for that purpose. Now imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the Circumstances of my Life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with; and
expecting a Week’s uninterrupted Leisure in my present Country Retirement, I sit down to write them for you” (A, 43). The tone of these few sentences, however, is oddly guarded. Before any reference to the nature of the circumstances he hopes to describe or to the motives that lie behind such a belated disclosure to a child who is entering middle age, Franklin alludes to a time when he and his son were companions rather than distant correspondents whose increasing alienation from one another marks this opening reference to “my” ancestors, and “my relations,” rather than yours or ours. Mutually agreeable feelings must first be imagined before they can be revived. What “remains” and what one remembers—categories that Franklin’s initial words evoke—suggest a bitter contrast between desiccated bonds and living ones.

Even in the troubled year of 1771, William Franklin would have had little difficulty recalling the journey that he and his father took together thirteen years earlier in search of the family’s English roots, but the memoir briefly revisits the excursion as if it were Franklin’s alone, a lost opportunity rather than a fond memory.¹ Now that the stakes of mutual ignorance between father and son have increased, Franklin cannot be certain whether even this intimate a reader—or indeed any reader—is really equipped to understand the story of his early life, another variety of “journey” that may prove to be meaningful only to the one who takes it. The most important details will take only a week to record, Franklin disingenuously suggests, minimizing the complexity of a narrative that he must have suspected from the beginning would demand much more time to complete. He professes to anticipate no interruption or impediment to the telling of the tale, but uninterrupted leisure is clearly a rare commodity in his busy existence, an opportunity to seize while one can, knowing full well that experience almost always thwarts such sanguine expectations, as Franklin’s book itself will ultimately demonstrate. Interruption is the nature of life and the essence of death, an existential truth that every child of New England’s religious culture would immediately detect in the latent anxieties of Franklin’s opening paragraphs. It is because he expects to be interrupted that he starts to write.²

A younger and more secular generation, however, would require a patient introduction to the special demands that Franklin’s language will make as his story unfolds: to the subtle emotional inflections that a simple shift in modifiers can convey, or to the blend of documentary particulars and emblematic scope that often lends a surprising measure of suggestive power to inconse-
quential narrative details. Little anecdotes can unexpectedly acquire an expansive potential in Franklin's pages. Such evocative reserves call for a carefully schooled audience to register their impact. John Bunyan, one of Franklin's favorite writers, acknowledged a similar need very early in *The Pilgrim's Progress* by introducing his hero to the figurative tableaux of the Interpreter's House. Christian prepares for the ordeal ahead by reading a book and learning to “perceive” prophetic images by its meaning. Many of the memories that Franklin records in the first part of his own story are just such reading lessons, including the chance encounter with Bunyan's book that signals the beginning of his own pilgrimage. Franklin's little anecdotes draw his reader gradually, almost imperceptibly, back into the atmosphere of a tumultuous past, from the threshold of a tumultuous future.3

THE MEMOIR’S OPENING SALUTATION—“Dear Son”—is the first of several reminders, early in the narrative, that letters implicitly address an expanding circle of readers rather than a single recipient. Franklin anticipates that an unpredictably diverse and curious audience will be examining his son's mail, resulting in a “Sphere of Action” for his words that quickly comes to embrace all of his literal and figurative posterity, the indulgent (or indoctrinated) young of future generations, and a benevolent God. The epitaph Franklin writes for his parents' gravestone directs an equally sweeping appeal to the attention of every passing reader with the story and the moral that it offers. The “separate little Volumes” he buys as a boy pass through his hands into those of other readers so that he can afford to buy other books, the expression of an insatiable thirst that singles Franklin out for special attention but also links him to a social world that shapes every detail of his story. Through the first part of the memoir, the mobile culture of letters plays the role of Providence in Franklin's life, determining what he calls “the Complexion of my future Fortune” through agents who recognize the signs of a shared passion.

Among the episodes in his father's life that William Franklin had yet to hear about may have been one involving an early brush with authority. Dr. John Browne, a cosmopolitan innkeeper on the Burlington road, probably suspected that seventeen-year-old Benjamin Franklin was a runaway servant when he first began to chat with his guest on an October evening in 1723. Franklin was making his way from New York to Philadelphia, traveling light and much the worse for wear, with spare shirts and stockings stuffed in his pockets, when
Browne approached him to strike up a conversation and, perhaps, entrap him into disclosing his plight. But if that was Browne's original intention, he quickly changed his mind.4

“Finding I had read a little,” Franklin remembers, his host “became very sociable and friendly.” The young man's intelligence and conviviality quickly persuaded Browne to overlook his dubious appearance and embark on a lifelong friendship that eventually included sharing with Franklin a scurrilous poem he had written. “He had some Letters, & was ingenious,” Franklin recalled, “but much of an Unbeliever, & wickedly undertook some years after to travesty the Bible in doggerel Verse as Cotton had done Virgil. By this means he set many of the Facts in a very ridiculous Light, & might have hurt weak minds if his Work had been published, but it never was” (A, 74). This wicked doggerel is the “great work” that Franklin alludes to when he mentions Browne in the notes that he made for himself as he wrote the first part of his memoir nearly fifty years later. The encounter must have been a pleasant surprise to them both, an unexpected reminder that inquisitive readers and ambitious writers could surface in unlikely places. A common appreciation for books forms a bond that even a subsequent difference of opinion on the merits of Browne's biblical travesty could not entirely undo.

The narrative quickly moves on toward a far more celebrated scene in Franklin's story describing his first arrival in Philadelphia—a family legend that William must have heard his father or his stepmother rehearse many times before—but the sociable innkeeper near Burlington left a lasting impression that Franklin goes out of his way to share, despite his disapproval of Browne's gregarious unbelief. “He had been, I imagine, an itinerant Doctor,” Franklin concludes, “for there was no Town in England, or Country in Europe, of which he could not give a very particular Account.” Nor is this the only encounter between intellectual and physical itinerants that the memoir's initial episodes record. Franklin's own Uncle Benjamin was a kind of pilgrim as well, though of a different ideological makeup from Dr. Browne's. Before emigrating to New England in 1715, at the age of sixty-five, to join his younger brother in Boston, he had assembled two formidable archives that reflected his zest for the explosive verbal output of the English Revolution and its cultural aftermath: a manuscript stock of shorthand sermons and more than thirty volumes of polemical pamphlets covering “Publick Affairs from 1641 to 1717.” This encyclopedic textual repository must have impressed even its compiler as finally unreadable, for he left it behind in London when he sailed to America.5
Peter Folger, Franklin's maternal grandfather, had come to New England in 1635, six years before the appearance of the earliest of Uncle Benjamin's pamphlets, settling eventually in Nantucket, where he wrote a verse defense of “Liberty of Conscience” in 1675, supporting the various religious sects “that had been under Persecution” in Massachusetts. The “Decent Plainness and manly Freedom” of Folger's performance, in contrast to Browne's irresponsible mockery, prompted Franklin to memorize some of his lines. These brief portraits from the memoir's early pages suggest that Franklin's personal story of social and political mobility takes place side by side with many alternate versions of himself experiencing similar transformations. Peter Folger's commitment to liberty of conscience is the ancestor of Franklin's own lifelong suspicion of sectarian power. Uncle Benjamin's pamphlet archive suggests a fascination with the energy of the press with which his nephew's career would become virtually synonymous. Dr. Browne's scandalous poem anticipates the youthful Franklin's own scandalous pamphlet on Liberty and Necessity that succeeds in damaging at least a few weak minds before its chastened author manages (almost completely) to suppress it. All three men, like Franklin himself, were drawn to the power of print as a means of amplifying the individual voice in an age of democratic revolution.

Franklin and his genial host on the Burlington road belonged to the fraternity of strong-minded readers, able to withstand exposure to subversive ideas or caustic wit without moral or spiritual damage. But not every bookish mind was equally well equipped to profit from or to resist the extraordinary variety of paper currency that engulfed Franklin's world, much of which he surveys in the opening pages of his memoir: polemical divinity and crimp's bills, scurrilous satire and sober exhortations on the moral life in prose and verse, controversial pamphlets and sectarian histories, sermons and allegories, ballads and news digests, ancient works in translation and dietary advice, discourses, dialogues, grammars, self-help manuals. Novels would enter the mix in Franklin's youth—the memoir mentions Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders as especially engaging books—and Franklin himself would publish Samuel Richardson's Pamela in Philadelphia, four years before he retired from printing to conduct his electrical experiments and report on their progress in letters to learned correspondents in London, another literary genre of the day.

His childhood friend John Collins had entrusted his “pretty Collection of natural Philosophy and Mathematicks” books to Franklin when he set off from Boston to join his friend in Philadelphia. It may have been Collins's collection,
in fact, that caught the eye of the governor of New York when he asked to meet the young custodian of such an impressive library who was making his way back to Philadelphia via New York City in 1724, after reconciling with his parents. Like Dr. Browne on Franklin’s original excursion a year earlier, Governor Burnet took an interest in the fluid community of readers that came his way. The 1771 fragment of Franklin’s narrative will conclude with a brief description of his plan for establishing a “Subscription Library” in Philadelphia, shortly after his marriage, but many of the episodes that fill this portion of the story already present Franklin’s experience in the context of a mutually inquisitive and mutually supportive club of “subscribers” to the emerging circulating library of the eighteenth century.6

The bewildering variety of reading matter that Franklin consumes and produces in these early pages suggests that reading itself was a heterogeneous skill, unevenly distributed and unevenly practiced by a varied and busy population of readers who could not always be trusted to embrace an author’s intentions. Even a modern sage was subject to the whims of a youthful audience, as Franklin half-wistfully recognized when he noted that his own memoir “may be read or not as anyone pleases” (A, 44). A pious clergyman setting out to combat heresy might create a heretic in the process, as the anti-Deist sermons that Franklin read in his father’s “little Library” had made him, briefly, a Deist. Though style and substance were a single entity that Franklin learned to admire when he tutored himself in the delightful “manner” of the Spectator papers, amending his “faults” and inflaming his ambition in the process, even these resources could not prevent one’s work from being misread by an unsympathetic audience. The transmission of experience or the teaching of life’s lessons was not so straightforward an exercise as it might seem.

Many journeys preoccupy Franklin in the opening pages of his memoir, only one of which is the tale of personal and material success enshrined in popular myth. A more urgent story lies behind this familiar legend, one that requires Franklin to invoke a literary model early enough in the narrative to help shape its reception. Like the hero of John Bunyan’s famous account of the soul’s journey, Franklin too finds himself repeatedly confronted by interpretive challenges in his lifelong progress across the physical and metaphysical landscapes of the eighteenth century. He signals his interest in the parallel through an accidental discovery that his dissenting ancestors would not have hesitated to term providential. Thereafter, much of the structure that he imposes on the
1771 fragment of his manuscript springs directly or indirectly from the figu-
rate insticts that this happenstance encounter awakens.

Shortly before sharing some cordial conversation with Dr. John Browne at
his Bordentown inn, Franklin had endured a much less serene stage of his 1723
trip from Boston to Philadelphia. Unable to find work (as he had originally
hoped) in a New York printing house, Franklin set out by boat for Amboy, New
Jersey, only to be trapped all night on New York Bay by dangerously heavy surf
and “a Squall that tore our rotten Sails to pieces.” In the midst of the storm, a
fellow passenger tumbled overboard, and when Franklin fished him out, he
found a copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in the drunkard’s pocket—a Dutch trans-
lation “on good paper with copper cuts,” much more beautifully produced than
the cheap editions of Bunyan’s story that Franklin had read and enjoyed during
his Boston boyhood. “I have since found that it has been translated into most
of the Languages of Europe,” Franklin wrote his son, half a century after rescu-
ing the book’s owner by his “shock Pate” and dragging him to safety. Largely
as a result of its unique dramatic immediacy, Franklin suspects, *The Pilgrim’s
Progress* “has been more generally read than any other Book except perhaps
the Bible” (A, 72).

This little anecdote is characteristic of many that lend the opening portion
of Franklin’s story its own dramatic appeal. It is characteristic too in the subtle
ways that Franklin adapts Bunyan’s work to a new narrative setting. The title
page of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* cites Hosea 12:10 to forewarn the reader of the
book’s allegorical method: “I have used Similitudes,” the prophet explains, just
as Bunyan will use them to portray the spiritual journey that he proposes to
describe “from This World to That which is to come.” Facing the biblical epi-
graph in every edition published after 1679 is the famous “sleeping” portrait of
John Bunyan, reclining on top of the entrance to a dungeon where a crouching
lion lurks, a “similitude” or figurative depiction of the concealed sins that every
pilgrim must expect to confront. The City of Destruction lies in the distance,
etched and labeled just behind Bunyan’s shoulder, while a pilgrim has set out
on his wanderings in the background, with a burden on his back and a book in
his hand, all similitudes into which the dreamer’s identity has briefly passed.
The handsome copper cuts of the edition that Franklin undertook to dry for its
hapless owner almost certainly included this image. In the memoir, Franklin
fondly recalls how “Honest John,” along with Defoe and Richardson, first gave
him an appreciation for the mixture of narrative and dialogue in print.
But more potent mixtures than this one are clearly at issue in the memoir itself. As Bunyan’s sleeping portrait implies, readers, travelers, and dreamers have a great deal in common, particularly when the legacy of the past is heavy and pits or predators mark the way. Christian enters John Bunyan’s dream as “a man clothed with rags” and stricken with anxiety, “standing in a certain place, with his face from his own home, and a great burden on his back.” Like Christian, Franklin too is a disheveled traveler who has turned his face from home at this early point in his life, and though Boston in 1723 was hardly the City of Destruction that Bunyan’s pilgrim flees, it was still (in Franklin’s experience) all too “certain” a place: full of religious certitudes that he had come to doubt, sustained by an array of familial and civic authorities that seemed bent on thwarting his growth. The only figurative burden he carried, for the time being, was his own ambition, though in leaving Boston secretly he aroused a shipmaster’s conspiratorial sympathy by pretending that he had “got a naughty Girl with Child,” an echo of Christian’s abandonment of wife and children as he flees the wrath to come.

A few months later when Franklin repeated this trip, after reconciling with his family, his guileless nature would invite a dubious sexual overture from two female passengers on a coastal packet sloop. “Young Man, I am concern’d for thee,” remarks the Quaker matron who alerts Franklin to his danger, “as thou has no Friend with thee, and seems not to know much of the World” (A, 84). Franklin will soon confirm her judgment as he attempts to get a start in his trade: first as an unwitting party to James Ralph’s desertion of his wife and child when he joins Franklin on a London voyage to purchase printing equipment, and later as the initiator of his own unwelcome sexual overtures to the “sensible and lively” young milliner who had become Ralph’s lover. Franklin in turn had been enticed into this trip by the glib promises of William Keith, the governor of Pennsylvania and a good candidate for the roles of Mr. Facing-bothways or Mr. Two-tongues from the town of Fair-speech in Bunyan’s fable. It was Keith who made the improbable offer of financing Franklin’s start in business with an elaborate networking expedition to the heart of the British Empire.

Keith embodies the mix of benevolence and selfishness that will recur in many of the memoir’s initial characters and anecdotes, as well as in their author. “Having little to give,” Franklin notes, Keith “gave Expectations. He was otherwise an ingenious sensible Man, a pretty good Writer, and a good Governor for the People, tho’ not for his Constituents the Proprietaries, whose Instructions he sometimes disregarded” (A, 95). Franklin too would make a
career of thwarting the wishes and interests of the Penn family during his years in the Pennsylvania Assembly. The perplexing blend of good principles and ungovernable inclinations that make up Keith's Bunyanesque nature forms a mirror image, an ethical similitude, of the gullible young man whom he deceives.7

Once one begins to tug on the thread provided by the opportune appearance of The Pilgrim's Progress in Franklin's little anecdote, it quickly offers a number of unexpected hints on how to read the details and episodes that surround it: “Still as I pulled it came,” John Bunyan recalled, describing the improbable growth of his famous book in words that Franklin will echo in the sly account he provides of retrieving Bunyan's popular allegory from a drunken Dutchman's pocket. Additional echoes follow that signal important formal parallels. In the verse “Apology” with which Bunyan prefaces his extraordinary dream, he offers a series of reflections on the untoward interaction of chance and design that frames Christian's story, and which Franklin in turn incorporates into the structure of his memoir:

When at the first I took my Pen in hand,
Thus for to write, I did not understand
That I at all should make a little Book
In such a mode; Nay, I had undertook
To make another, which when almost done,
Before I was aware, I this begun. (PP, 3)

The creative process from which The Pilgrim's Progress emerges is thematically central to Christian's unpredictable journey: neither Bunyan nor his hero entirely appreciates the scope of what he has begun. Indeed, even before Christian reaches the narrow Wicket Gate where his pilgrimage is to start, he slips into the first of the moral quagmires that bedevil him, a Slough of Despond that cannot be filled despite the “Twenty thousand Cart Loads” of good advice that have been dumped into the mire “for above this sixteen hundred years.” The “Art of Virtue” that Franklin once proposed to draft aimed to avoid the fate of these cartloads by substituting practical behavioral tactics for exhortations, but this book too is swallowed even before it could be written. The “Slow” of Despond is a consumer of libraries, as well as souls, a destiny that both Franklin and Bunyan hope to thwart by more carefully attuning their words to the reader's strengths and weaknesses (PP, 17).
The memoir depicts its own share of quagmires, great and small, throughout the course of a story that, much like Christian's, proves to be a series of inadvertent interruptions and narrow escapes: from drowning, from sickness or imprisonment, as well as from an array of alternative futures as a swimming instructor, a wandering compositor, or a Barbados merchant. Moreover, Franklin and Bunyan present the process of writing as a similar collaboration between accident and intention. While working on one task, Bunyan unwittingly stumbles across “twenty things” that take on a compositional life of their own, the first signs of a long, unforeseen digression that will eventually grow into the tale of Christian's pilgrimage. Rather than simply ignore these prolific “sparks,” Bunyan sets them off by themselves and adds to them during “vacant seasons” only, strictly for diversion or pleasure:

. . . but yet I did not think  
To shew to all the World my Pen and Ink  
In such a mode; I only thought to make  
I knew not what: nor did I undertake  
Thereby to please my Neighbour; no not I,  
I did it mine own self to gratifie.  

For Franklin too, digression is design. Like Bunyan, he collects the incidents and details that begin to multiply as he writes, storing them in the notes that Abel James would later find with the first twenty-three sheets of his narrative, pages that Franklin wrote during his own vacant season of “Country Retirement” at Twyford. Like Bunyan once again, he writes at least in part to gratify his own vanity as much as the curiosity of his reader.

Bit by bit The Pilgrim's Progress grew, as Bunyan put what he termed its various “ends” together, until it attained an impressive degree of “bigness” that led him to ask some friends whether the result should be printed, a question that Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan answer at some length for Franklin. The story is “dark,” some of Bunyan's preliminary readers complain, and its incidents are “feigned.” Similitudes can deter weak minds, one friend insists: “Metaphors make us blind.” Bunyan's verse “Apology” argues strenuously for the advantages of his method. A literary vehicle and its spiritual content may be quite different from one another, he suggests. In fact the difference is critical if an author hopes to catch the attention and win the assent of a wide variety of readers: some birds can be snared only with pipe and whistle, Bunyan explains;
some fish must be tickled before they can be caught. Listless men learn more from homely figures of speech than from sober sermons: “Be not too forward therefore to conclude, / That I want solidness, that I am rude,” Bunyan cautions, “All things solid in shew, not solid be; / All things in parables despise not we” (PP, 6).

Franklin’s famous contrast between the stubborn imperfections of character and the progressively more correct editions of a printed book is a deft emblem of resignation and hope, mixing simplicity and subtlety much as Bunyan’s similitudes often do in The Pilgrim’s Progress. It would be a great advantage, Franklin confesses in his heavily edited memoir, to be able to edit the “sinister Accidents and Events” of the past—to repeat the human pilgrimage in modified form, as Bunyan does when he has Christiana retrace Christian’s steps in the second part of his allegory. But even without the possibility of issuing a corrected “edition,” Franklin confesses, he would have no objection to reliving his life, sinister accidents and all. “Faults” and “errata” are the most frequent terms that he applies to these unhappy memories, but Franklin also stresses the deeper layers of regret that shape this language. He has played a role in sinister things, he admits, in a letter to the illegitimate son whose obscure origins clearly remain a significant mental burden. “Sir,” Christian replies to Evangelist, when this all-important guide first detects his inner distress, “I perceive, by the Book in my hand, that I am Condemned to die, and after that to come to Judgment; and I find that I am not willing to do the first, nor able to do the second” (PP, 11). Franklin’s opening paragraphs delicately restage this encounter, as he finds himself poised between impossible emotional and political alternatives, facing condemnation on either hand, once the bonds between Britain and America, as well as those within his own family, begin to fray. Like Christian, he is reviewing his existential accounts, though he quickly recognizes that no one is obliged “to give me a Hearing.”

This last term too is a miniature similitude. The bitterest hearing of Franklin’s life had yet to take place when he began the memoir. In 1771 Alexander Wedderburn’s withering examination of his conduct before a gloating Privy Council was still several years in the future. On that subsequent occasion Franklin would maintain a stoic silence, as Wedderburn repeatedly attacked his character for the role he had played in conveying Thomas Hutchinson’s private correspondence into the Boston press. But during the Stamp Act crisis, five years earlier, Parliament had indeed given Franklin a careful hearing as he explained the passionate resistance with which the colonies had greeted
England’s revenue policies, reminding the members of the House of Commons that deep affections once treated with scorn could quickly change into equally deep resentments. “What was the temper of America towards Great-Britain before the year 1763?” the members of the House wished to know, when they met with Franklin as a committee of the whole in February 1766:

A. The best in the world. They submitted willingly to the government of the Crown, and paid, in all their courts, obedience to acts of parliament. Numerous as the people are in the several old provinces, they cost you nothing in forts, citadels, garrisons or armies, to keep them in subjection. They were governed by this country at the expense only of a little pen, ink and paper. They were led by a thread. They had not only a respect, but an affection, for Great-Britain, for its laws, its customs and manners, and even a fondness for its fashions, that greatly increased the commerce. Natives of Britain were always treated with particular regard; to be an Old England-man was, of itself, a character of some respect, and gave a kind of rank among us.

Q. And what is their temper now?
A. O, very much altered. (P, 13.135)

An English government that had once struck Americans as “the great bulwark and security of their liberties and privileges,” Franklin continued, was on the verge of squandering this goodwill. The thread was about to break.9

“See that ye refuse not him that speaketh,” Evangelist warns Christian, dismissing the shallow views of Worldly-Wise Man and directing Christian’s attention once more to his indispensable book: do not “draw back thy foot from the way of peace” (PP, 23). By 1771 the English Ministry and its American supporters (William Franklin among them) had embarked on just such a fatal misreading of their true interests, in Franklin’s eyes. The Boston Massacre in the spring of 1770, a little over a year before he began writing the first portion of the memoir, offered a glimpse of the future if the contentious parties proved unable to change course. The opening sentences of Franklin’s book address this complex texture of associations with considerable figurative economy, borrowed in part from the example of John Bunyan’s suggestive tale. The similitudes Franklin employs here have an exacting literary cast that draws on the extraordinary popularity of one pilgrimage to illuminate the circumstances of another.

Like Bunyan too, along with many contemporary moralists, Franklin rec-
ognized both the social uses and the ethical threat of vanity, but the memoir expresses this commonplace conviction in suggestively militant terms, echoing and modifying the traditional trope of the armor of virtue in its lifelong battle with vice. “Most People dislike Vanity in others,” Franklin writes as he begins his famous book, “whatever Share they have of it themselves, but I give it fair Quarter wherever I meet with it, being persuaded that it is often productive of Good to the Possessor and to others that are within his Sphere of Action” (A, 44). This reference to “fair Quarter,” like the pun on “hearings,” is both casual and telling—a similitude, or a miniature fable, that offers a wide-ranging context for the gentle didactic strategy of Franklin’s Uncle Benjamin in the two poems addressed to his four-year-old namesake aimed, in part, at discouraging the boy’s interest in being a soldier. Franklin slipped both poems into the manuscript of the memoir late in his life, long after the Revolution had born out his uncle’s warnings. The first set of cautionary verses has a simple grandeur that would not be out of place in John Bunyan’s dream:

Beleeve me Ben. It is a Dangerous Trade—
The Sword has Many Marr’d as well as Made.
By it doe many fall, Not Many Rise;
Makes Many poor, few Rich and fewer Wise;
Fills Towns with Ruine, fields with blood beside;
’Tis Sloth’s Maintainer, And the Shield of pride;
Fair Citties Rich to Day, in plenty flow,
War fills with want, Tomorrow, and with woe.
Ruin’d Estates, The Nurse of Vice, broke limbs and scarts
Are the Effects of Desolating Warrs.                  (A, 48)

A birthday acrostic from the same year (1710) administers a litany of his uncle’s orthodox advice that may have puzzled the boy at the time, counseling him to keep his “Dealings” free of fraud and falsehood, and to resist sloth, lust, and pride—a battery of precocious sins more suited to John Bunyan’s savage vision of Vanity Fair than to the repertoire of a four-year-old. “Above all Ills be sure Avoide the shelfe,” Franklin’s uncle enigmatically concludes: “Man’s Danger lyes in Satan, sin and selfe.” Clumsy though they may be, these lines distill the lessons of a complex political and religious inheritance. They are both a legacy and a reading lesson.

Uncle Benjamin was “much of a Politician,” Franklin recalls in the opening
pages of his book: “too much perhaps for his Station.” This apparently casual observation strikes very close to home. By 1771 Franklin’s own transgressions against the privileges of “station” were becoming increasingly pronounced to members of the English Ministry. By contrast, Uncle Benjamin wrote amateurish poetry and kept scrapbooks. His involvement in politics took the form of the fervor with which he assembled a vast pamphlet collection documenting the fierce ideological battles of the seventeenth century, a polemical library that reflected his insatiable appetite for controversy. “A Dealer in old Books met with them,” Franklin reports of these thirty-two bound volumes, “and knowing me by my sometimes buying of him, he brought them to me. It seems my Uncle must have left them here when he went to America, which was above 50 years since. There are many of his Notes in the Margins” (A, 50).

This exhaustive archive ultimately seems expendable to everyone who handles it: its original compiler, an opportunistic bookseller, and Franklin himself, to whom the collection seems little more than a curiosity. The pamphlets and their marginalia are the residue of old quarrels, the fruitless animosities against which Uncle Benjamin’s simple poems had sought to warn his four-year-old American nephew. Like his uncle, Franklin too chooses to jettison these verbal remains in favor of some snippets of birthday verse on the desolation that results from the “trade” of war. Truth “in Swadling clouts,” John Bunyan insisted, was better suited to appease our troubles than “lies in Silver Shrines.”

As two “Bookish” and highly competitive boys in Boston, Franklin and his friend John Collins reconstructed their own version of the pamphlet wars that Franklin’s uncle had observed in England, with Collins usually proving to be the victor in their debates. He “bore me down more by his Fluency than by the Strength of his Reasons,” Franklin recalls, an experience that eventually leads him to adopt the role of “humble Inquirer and Doubter” as a substitute for the unproductive results of contradiction and conflict. Disputatious habits, Franklin observes, are a vice of the educated—“Lawyers, University Men, and Men of all Sorts that have been bred at Edinborough”—and to underscore the point he sets a simple trap for the educated reader as he concludes this set of anecdotes in the memoir. To consolidate the hard-won lesson that a combative manner is self-defeating, Franklin mangles two couplets, from two different poets, into a single adage that mimics the boyish struggles where he had learned the dangers of passionate fluency: “Immodest words admit but this Defence,” Franklin declares, “That Want of Modesty is Want of Sense” (A, 66). Keen-witted students of poetry (he realizes) will probably sort out the misattribution in his
rhyme, as he too had once been fond of pouncing upon an opponent’s errors in argument. But the resulting surge of editorial triumph will simultaneously expose the habitual intellectual immodesty that the couplet strives to correct. In the ethical universe that Bunyan and Franklin share, foolish things often prove to be wise ones in disguise. This anecdote is both a memory and a similitude for the lesson in gentle tactics that it strives to teach.10

The most provocative emblem that Franklin offers for the recurrent mixture of great works with little anecdotes in his book is his family legend about the Bible and the joint stool:

This obscure Family of ours was early in the Reformation, and continu’d Protestants thro’ the Reign of Queen Mary, when they were sometimes in Danger of Trouble on Account of their Zeal against Popery. They had got an English Bible, and to conceal and secure it, it was fastned open with Tapes under and within the Frame of a Joint Stool. When my Great Great Grandfather read in it to his Family, he turn’d up the Joint Stool upon his Knees, turning over the Leaves then under the Tapes. One of the Children stood at the Door to give Notice if he saw the Apparitor coming, who was an Officer of the Spiritual Court. In that Case the Stool was turn’d down again upon its feet, when the Bible remain’d conceal’d under it as before. This Anecdote I had from my Uncle Benjamin. The Family continu’d all of the Church of England till about the End of Charles the 2ds Reign, when some of the Ministers that had been outed for Nonconformity, holding Conventicles in Northhamptonshire, Benjamin and Josiah adher’d to them, and so continu’d all their Lives. The rest of the Family remain’d with the Episcopal Church. (A, 50)

This passage combines both a reading device and a reading lesson. The Bible in its simple sling of tapes beneath a stool—“under and within the Frame”—calls to mind the process of carefully wedging pages of type into wooden forms before sliding them under and within the frame of a press. It is easy to picture the scene, and just as easy to elaborate on the figurative implications that John Bunyan would have appreciated: an elaborate similitude depicting the great work cleverly disguised and protected by a piece of ordinary household furniture, always near at hand though readily concealed, always open even when it is completely hidden.

When the Bible rests on the reader’s lap, it is still carefully secured within its wooden enclosure. Franklin’s ancestor is sitting, not deferentially kneeling, as he reads, and the safety of the entire family depends on the vigilance of one of
the children, who must watch and listen with equal care if they are all to avoid imprisonment. The mutual reliance of experience upon innocence and vice versa plays a key role in the anecdote’s suggestive scope. Turning the pages beneath the tapes would clearly not be casually or quickly managed, encouraging just the kind of deliberative reading that the Apparitor was charged to prevent. At any point the consideration of a chapter or a book might be interrupted and the Bible left literally suspended in its hiding place while the household went about its ordinary chores, superficially indifferent to the stool in the corner, but inwardly attentive to its presence, as well as to the inward-working experience that it conceals.

Twice in the passage Franklin stresses that his family maintained the practices that his uncle’s anecdote depicts across formidable generational divisions and in the face of considerable danger. His ancestors “continued all” in the Protestant faith until larger fractures in the Stuart succession radiate outward toward their Northhampstonshire home. The clever contrivance of the Bible and the joint stool presides over the first part of the story, bridging a considerable span of time between the middle of the sixteenth century and the closing decades of the seventeenth before the protective framework breaks down, “outing” some dissenting ministers to whom the brothers Benjamin and Josiah Franklin “adhere” when they join the more radical conventicles that refuse to conform to the strictures of episcopal government. These stubborn adherents in turn “continued all their lives” in a new course, and ultimately in a new home, while their relatives remained where Franklin and his son would discover them or their descendants on the genealogical tour to which the memoir’s opening sentence alludes.

Nonconformity and continuity collaborate in the compact picture of transmission and decline that this episode depicts. The resolute behavior of Benjamin and Josiah captures their determination to distinguish between the essential and the superficial features of their religious inheritance. Despite more than a century of experience as zealous Protestant readers, the balance of their family gradually settles by stages into the liturgical conventions of the Episcopal Church. But this pair of younger siblings, though they are “outed,” remained securely fastened within the homely framework of conscientious dissent for which the joint stool becomes a convenient emblem. This memory too invites William Franklin to “read” himself in the lessons of his great uncle’s anecdote, but as an emblem of strenuous reading its range is wider than the obscure family whose fate it describes. What imaginative purpose do riddles
or parables really serve, John Bunyan once complained at the beginning of *The Pilgrim's Progress*: “happy is he / That finds the light, and grace that in them be” (PP, 6). The light and grace that Franklin captures in Uncle Benjamin's story links intergenerational bonds and personal growth to a pattern of reflective reading captured in a simple dramatic prop, a template for the subtle formal relationship between homely means and extraordinary ends that the language of Franklin's memoir and of Bunyan's fable exemplify.

A more famous example of Franklin's figurative tactics at work, in the opening pages of his book, is his deliberate misapplication of an ancient proverb to solve a dietary dilemma that he faces during his first voyage to New York. Like his calculated mismanagement of Pope's didactic couplet earlier in the memoir, this lapse too is a similitude of much more profound human failings. The expression “big fish eat little fish” is as old as Hesiod, a blunt summary of the relations that prevail between kings and subjects, nobles and commoners, Spiritual Courts and humble Christians bent on exercising their own religious judgment. Wycliffe, Lydgate, and Shakespeare all employ the saying. Roger Williams alludes to it in *The Bloudy Tenant of Persecution*. Pieter Breughel the Elder illustrated the proverb in a 1556 drawing that, in its engraved version, circulated widely throughout Europe long before Franklin decided it would be a useful excuse for breaking his vegetarian habits and eating some savory fried cod that his fellow passengers had caught. His description of this decision introduces a pair of psychological antagonists that lie behind many of the disruptions that shape the first portion of the memoir.

As Franklin presents the story, he disguises the proverb just enough to allow it to fit unobtrusively into the narrative, but it is hard to imagine any of Poor Richard's contemporaries failing to detect its presence:

I believe I have omitted mentioning that in my first Voyage from Boston, being becalmd off Block Island, our People set about catching Cod and hawld up a great many. Hitherto I had stuck to my Resolution of not eating animal Food; and on this Occasion, I consider'd with my Master Tryon, the taking every Fish as a kind of unprovok'd Murder, since none of them had or ever could do us any Injury that might justify the Slaughter. All this seem'd very reasonable. But I had formerly been a great Lover of Fish, and when this came hot out of the Frying Pan, it smelt admirably well. I balanc'd some time between Principle and Inclination: till I recollected, that when the Fish were opened, I saw smaller Fish
“Big Fish Eat Little Fish” (1556) by Pieter Breughel the Elder after a lost original by Hieronymous Bosch. Engraving by Pieter van der Hayden published by Hieronymous Cock, Antwerp, 1557.
taken out of their Stomachs: Then thought I, if you eat one another, I don’t see why we mayn’t eat you. So I dind upon Cod very heartily and continu’d to eat with other People, returning only now and then occasionally to a vegetable Diet. So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable Creature, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for every thing one has a mind to do. (A, 88)

The generous margin of Franklin’s manuscript would have allowed him to introduce this incident at the point in his narrative where it actually occurred, during the original three-day voyage to New York that followed his surreptitious departure from Boston. But the memoir only reports that “a fair Wind” hurried Franklin along on his momentous escape, depositing him abruptly “near 300 Miles from home, a Boy of but 17, without the least Recommendation to or Knowledge of any Person in the Place, and with very little Money in my Pocket” (A, 71). These words stress the bewilderment of the little fish at a particularly telling juncture in Franklin’s life. When he elaborates on this experience many pages later, he imposes a reflective “calm” on the events that stresses a different lesson, one depicting the subtle counterpoise of principle and inclination into which memory and reason may be drawn.13

There is nothing inherently reasonable in Franklin’s self-serving change of diet. If anything his blithe suggestion, in this passage, that wholesale slaughter might, under certain circumstances, seem justifiable casts a monstrous shadow over the anecdote’s superficially innocent goals, one that springs directly from the gruesome nightmare of Breughel’s famous image. Situated where the episode is in the memoir, however, it provides an interpretive key—a reader’s guide—to the incidents immediately surrounding it, as well as to the fragile balance that marks this section of Franklin’s story. He has just described the first phase of his acquaintance with William Keith, the worldly patron who first enticed Franklin to draw up “an Inventory of a little Printing House” that Keith would import from England at his own expense to set Franklin up in business. No sooner had Franklin done so than Keith followed his grand gesture with the still more remarkable offer to send Franklin to London himself to select his equipment “on the Spot” and establish business connections. Little fish that he was, Franklin rejoiced in his spurious good fortune: “I believed him one of the best Men in the World.” The result would turn out to be not the dramatic commercial boost that Franklin expected but a costly interruption in his Philadelphia career.

Another little fish, Franklin’s boyhood friend John Collins, had just departed
for Barbados under similar fortuitous circumstances to become “a Tutor for the Sons of a Gentleman.” A ship captain commissioned to find a suitable teacher, “happening to meet with him, agreed to carry him thither.” Collins accepted the offer, partly as a desperate effort to recover his bearings after failing to find work in Philadelphia and partly as a result of a bitter break in his friendship with Franklin. Despite “a wonderful Genius for Mathematical Learning” and the encouragement of some prominent figures in Boston, Collins had begun to drink and to behave “very oddly,” Franklin recalled, “for when a little intoxicated he was very fractious.” A quarrel in a rowboat on the Delaware resulted in Franklin pitching Collins overboard and then helping to lift him back in the boat, when it became clear that Collins would rather drown than take a turn at the oars (A, 86). Talents alone can’t keep Collins afloat—another common similitude in these early sections of the memoir—and he disappears from the story without a trace.

These details involving Collins and Keith immediately precede Franklin’s apparently casual insertion of the cod anecdote into his narrative, as if to prepare the reader to consider a number of variations on the roles of the eater and the eaten in Franklin’s life: on the tendency of inclination to overwhelm principle whenever passion or desire momentarily displaces judgment, as they do when Collins and Franklin fight or when Keith’s empty promises lure Franklin to London with no letters of credit to redeem for printing equipment. All of these relationships are circumstantial enactments of the cannibalistic fish that Franklin had observed off Block Island. His comic account of duping Samuel Keimer into adopting a vegetarian diet immediately follows his description of how he convinced himself to abandon his meatless principles when the odor of fried cod sharpened his hunger. This episode too is a parable of consumption, a mockery of Keimer’s gluttony that recoils on Franklin himself as it probes more deeply into the ethical paradoxes entailed in being a “reasonable Creature.”

The collaboration between the two men had been unstable from their first meeting, when Franklin stood quietly by while crafty old William Bradford, the New York printer, enticed Keimer into revealing his plans for driving Bradford’s son out of the Philadelphia printing business, another instance of the human propensity to devour one another. Keimer was clearly “a mere Novice” at this game, Franklin immediately concluded, “who was greatly surprised when I told him who the old Man was.” The novice was savvy enough, however, to test Franklin’s skills before agreeing to employ him by putting “a Composing Stick in my Hand to see how I worked.” And he was deft enough to compose
an elegy “out of his Head” on the death of Aquila Rose, the promising young printer whom Franklin hoped to replace. Keimer set his elegy directly into type without even bothering to write it out beforehand. “He had been one of the French Prophets,” Franklin recalled, “and could act their enthusiastic Agitations. At this time he did not profess any particular Religion, but something of all on occasion; was very ignorant of the World, and had, as I afterwards found, a good deal of the Knavo in his Composition” (A, 79).

Keimer’s ability to “act” religious enthusiasms that he may not really experience closely resembles the willingness that Franklin himself will soon show to participate, however facetiously, in framing and defending doctrines that he does not believe. In their joint lack of a particular religious affiliation, but their interest in “all on occasion,” Franklin and Keimer mirror one another almost perfectly, as they do in their comparative ignorance of the world and in the mixed “Composition” of their characters. Little wonder, then, that Franklin is able to report that he and Keimer “liv’d on a pretty good familiar Footing and agreed tolerably well” at the outset of their working relationship. But this cordial teamwork, too, is based upon a measure of knavery on Franklin’s part. At this point in his story, he has already agreed with William Keith to equip a new printing house that will threaten Keimer’s livelihood, but for the time being he is keeping his plans to himself. Keimer “suspected nothing of my Setting up” (A, 88).

On this uneasy foundation, the memoir reports, these two nonsectarian spirits agree to establish a new religious sect. Both men loved “Argumentation” (as Franklin puts it), but Keimer had acquired a hard-earned appreciation for Franklin’s ability to “trapan” his intellectual adversaries, and Keimer’s equivocal background with the French prophets had equipped him with a number of “old Enthusiasms” to which he still remained firmly attached. This blend of talents and convictions made for a perfect counterpoise:

He was to preach the Doctrines, and I was to confound all Opponents. When he came to explain with me upon the Doctrines, I found several Conundrums which I objected to unless I might have my Way a little too, and introduce some of mine. Keimer wore his Beard at full Length, because somewhere in the Mosaic Law it is said, _thou shalt not mar the Corners of thy Beard_. He likewise kept the seventh day Sabbath; and these two Points were Essentials with him. I dislik’d both, but agreed to admit them upon Condition of his adopting the Doctrine of using no animal Food. I doubt, says he, my Constitution will not bear that. I
assur’d him it would, and that he would be the better for it. He was usually a great Glutton, and I promis’d my self some Diversion in half-starving him. (A, 88)

Distinguishing the diversion from the devotion in these words is a conundrum in itself. Franklin has set out to ensnare (or trepan) his sectarian partner at the same time that he proposes to collaborate with him, but neither is entirely cynical about their exchange. Despite the superficial nature of Keimer’s religious loyalties, he is not merely frivolous in his beliefs, and Franklin is at least partly sincere in his conviction that a vegetarian diet has important moral, physical, and economic benefits to confer.

But principle is hopelessly (and deliberately) entangled with inclination in this passage—a trap far more cunning in nature than Franklin’s silly negotiation with Keimer over their religious doctrines. The memoir makes it far from clear whether either party to the plan takes it seriously and, in doing so, briefly confers a playful quality on their relationship, mixed with the deep-seated antagonisms that will ultimately doom it, another human conundrum in which Franklin and his son might easily recognize themselves. Before very long, self-denial once more gives way to the allure of a savory odor. The partnership that Keimer and Franklin had established apparently had a social as well as a religious side, but when a roast pig that Keimer had ordered to entertain Franklin and “two Women Friends” arrives prematurely on the table, he devours it all himself with the same gusto that Franklin had dined on his fresh cod. In recording this episode, Franklin contrasts Keimer’s gluttony with his own lifelong ability to keep even the strictest Lent without the “least Inconvenience,” but this double-edged observation is itself a kind of diversion—even a kind of trap—because Lent is intended to impose, not to mitigate, the fleshly “inconveniences” that Franklin claims he is able to avoid.

The little fish outwits his employer in this anecdote, but the memoir’s wording casts considerable doubt on the purity of Franklin’s principles. “I us’d to work him so with my Socratic method, Franklin gloats of Keimer’s gullibility, “that at last he grew ridiculously cautious, and would hardly answer me the most common Question, without asking first, What do you intend to infer from that?” The same uncertainty confronts the memoir’s reader in evaluating the proverb of the cod, the puzzle of William Keith’s character, or the odd blend of strengths and weaknesses in Collins, Keimer, and Franklin himself. What does this sequence of episodes and portraits encourage us to infer from the repeated triumph of appetite over reason that they depict?
A final contest between principle and inclination concludes this carefully interwoven portion of Franklin's narrative. Like its companion episodes, this one too is linked to the challenge of distinguishing between sincerity and insincerity on the tantalizing basis of inference alone. In the months immediately following Franklin's arrival in Philadelphia, his courtship of Deborah Read had progressed to the point where marriage was the logical next step: “I had a great Respect and Affection for her,” Franklin wrote of this tentative romantic understanding, “and had some Reason to believe she had the same for me.” The wording is both a gentlemanly euphemism and a tacit acknowledgment of the difficulty of assessing human motives. Love too would appear to pose inferential difficulties that “Reason” alone is not adequate to resolve. Deborah's mother intercedes between Franklin and her daughter “to prevent our going too far at present,” perhaps as much for selfish as for practical reasons. Governor Keith's overtures of support had encouraged Franklin to plan a voyage to London that might require him to spend some time abroad purchasing printing equipment for his new business. Unlike Samuel Keimer, the Reads were clearly privy to at least some of Franklin's plan for setting up and may have harbored doubts about its success. Moreover, the prospective husband and wife were still only eighteen years old. A marriage would be more “prudent,” Mrs. Read believed, after Franklin's return and his successful establishment as a printer. “Perhaps too,” Franklin infers, “she thought my Expectations not so wellfounded as I imagined them to be” (A, 89).

It is, at the very least, unusual for the times that Mrs. Read alone, rather than her husband or both parents together, would exercise this decisive influence over her daughter's plans. John Read, Deborah's father, died in 1724, the year that Franklin sailed to London on the expedition that seems to have aroused Mrs. Read's skepticism. The chronology of the memoir is too imprecise to make clear whether Mrs. Read was a widow when she imposed this delay on the couple's marriage, and Franklin himself takes no notice of Mr. Read's death at any point in his story, though that event almost certainly played a key role in the hasty marriage that Deborah eventually made, perhaps in part for economic reasons, while Franklin was abroad. The memoir shows little interest in explaining the background to this latest of the many interruptions that mark Franklin's narrative. Perhaps Mrs. Read had a better grasp of Governor Keith's improvident nature than Franklin was willing to admit; or she may have had a richer experience of the vulnerability of the imagination to bitter disappointments: so convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature and
found elaborate hopes on empty promises. Behind this little episode, too, lies a rich tapestry of inference—an index of the interpretive challenges with which Franklin strives to entice his reader at every point in his story.\textsuperscript{14}

As the events of Franklin’s first years in Philadelphia unfold, Deborah Read’s mother proves to be a composite figure in her own right, partly the principled governor of her children’s impetuous desires and partly impetuous herself. When the Read family learns that Franklin is not likely to make a prompt and triumphant return from London, her mother persuades Deborah to accept the overtures of another suitor, a potter named Rogers, “a worthless Fellow, tho’ an excellent Workman” (Franklin remembers) and quite possibly a bigamist whom Deborah ultimately leaves, refusing “to bear his name.” The memoir does not stress the emotional trauma of this period in Franklin’s life or call attention to the speed with which the Read family gave up on Benjamin Franklin as a future son-in-law, but the picture is clear enough. Franklin arrived in London in late December 1724, planning to purchase a press and types, establish some professional contacts, and return to open his own business in Philadelphia in a matter of a few months. All these plans were rudely disrupted by the deceit of William Keith. Franklin was forced to live by his wits for over a year and a half in England, earning his own passage home if possible, while Deborah Read was quickly pressured into an unhappy marriage.

In the long run, these blows to the future prospects of two young lives prove to be temporary rather than decisive, but this early experience of the fragility of human happiness partly explains the unusual prayer that Franklin inserts into the opening paragraphs of his book, as both an expression of grateful dependence and an acknowledgment that life is as much a record of reverses as a celebration of triumphs. Though the first sentences of the memoir had already offered a formulaic acknowledgment of the “Blessing of God” that lay behind Franklin’s extraordinary success story, he quickly returns to the theme of the unpredictable collaboration between individual fortunes and divine favor in a digression that dramatizes the instability to which it points:

And now I speak of thanking God, I desire with all Humility to acknowledge, that I owe the mention’d Happiness of my past Life to his kind Providence, which led me to the Means I us’d and gave them Success. My Belief of this, induces me to hope, tho’ I must not presume, that the same Goodness will still be exercis’d towards me in continuing that Happiness, or in enabling me to bear a fatal Re-
verse, which I may experience as others have done, the Complexion of my future Fortune being known to him only: and in whose Power it is to bless to us even our Afflictions. (A, 45)

Though Franklin presents this passage as an afterthought, it neatly disrupts the stream of his narrative much as an unexpected reversal of fortune can disrupt any human design. The combination of circumstances that thwarts his initial romantic interest in Deborah Read is not the first such reverse that he records in his memoir, but it is clearly among the most meaningful ones, entangled as it is with William Franklin’s illegitimate birth and with the complex relationship that eventually developed between Deborah Franklin and her stepson. The consequences do not prove to be fatal, but they entailed a mix of blessings and afflictions that the memoir takes pains to expose.

The collapse of her first marriage left Deborah “generally dejected, seldom cheerfull,” and socially isolated, Franklin recalled: “I consider’d my Giddiness and Inconstancy when in London as in a great degree the Cause of her Unhappiness.” Mrs. Read ultimately accepted a greater share of the blame for her daughter’s depression, but the legal repercussions of the first marriage were potentially very serious and combined with its psychological consequences to make Deborah, at first, an object of pity in Franklin’s eyes after his return (A, 129). He is able to reestablish his friendship with the family, in part by filling some of the advisory vacuum that John Read’s death had clearly created, and to revive his relationship with Deborah, correcting “that great Erratum as well as I could.” This observation falls within two paragraphs of the conclusion of the memoir’s first part and is carefully phrased to acknowledge a legacy of pain that could never be completely eradicated. Deborah was still alive in 1771, as Franklin began his book. Her implicit presence, as a reader, shapes these closing pages, just as William’s explicit presence shapes the opening ones. Together their influence establishes the emotional framework for the first portion of Franklin’s story.

The chastened expression of thanks that Franklin offers at the beginning of his autobiographical “letter” gives voice to the complex lessons of his domestic experience, a study in the interrelationship between accident and design that all the members of the Franklin household were in a unique position to appreciate. These are not feelings that lend themselves to a conventional enumeration of blessings and transgressions, or to the personal calculus of happiness and affliction, failure or success, with which Benjamin Franklin is so often as-
associated. Character is to be judged not by what one has or achieves but by what one is able to bear with humility and patience. We can hope, Franklin stresses, but we can never presume, that “Goodness” will continue to be good to us. We can plan, but we can never rely on the efficacy of our “Means.”

Separation and dispersal are the governing energies of these opening portions of the memoir: dictating the fragmented state of Franklin’s manuscript, marking the legacy of his Northamptonshire relatives, and shaping the wayward journey from “religious Impressions” to “written Resolutions” that characterized the first years of his life. Despite the best efforts of his parents, Franklin was “scarce 15” (the memoir reports) when he began to stray from the “Dissenting Way” in which he had been raised. Some of the Boyle tracts attacking Deism that he found in his father’s library had the paradoxical effect of drawing Franklin to the Deists, whose arguments eventually prompted him to produce his own “great work” in the freethinking tradition, *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, which Franklin wrote and printed in London in 1725. The smug certitudes that this pamphlet sought to endorse—“that nothing could possibly be wrong in the World, and that Vice and Virtue were empty Distinctions”—prove as unsatisfactory to Franklin himself as the orthodox convictions of his parents or the polished arguments of the Boyle lectures.

Ultimately he falls back on a set of convictions suggestively similar to the doggerel advice that his uncle had offered when he was four years old—“that *Truth, Sincerity and Integrity* in Dealings between Man and Man, were of the utmost Importance to the Felicity of Life.” Franklin returns, in brief, to the lessons depicted in the similitude of the Bible beneath the joint stool: a practical, domestic respect for the wisdom of an old book, shorn of the superstitious attributes imposed on it by all sorts of spiritual courts or priestly authority:

Revelation had indeed no weight with me as such; but I entertain’d an Opinion, that tho’ certain Actions might not be bad *because* they were forbidden by it, or good *because* it commanded them; yet probably those Actions might be forbidden *because* they were bad for us, or commanded *because* they were beneficial to us, in their own Natures, all the Circumstances of things considered. And this Persuasion, with the kind hand of Providence, or some guardian Angel, or accidental favourable Circumstances and Situations, or all together, preserved me (thro’ this dangerous Time of Youth and the hazardous Situations I was sometimes in among Strangers, remote from the Eye and Advice of my Father) with-
out any wilful gross Immorality or Injustice that might have been expected from my Want of Religion. (A, 115)

The opinionated young man this passage describes has cut himself loose from the “weight” of traditional piety but not from an interest in what revelation might permit us to infer. Providence is a kind persuader, Franklin concludes, not a dictator. The equivocal agents of good luck and a guardian Angel combine with the parental benevolence of a distant but not indifferent Creator in order to preserve some individuals, at least, from inflicting or suffering lasting harm.15

John Dryden’s lines celebrating “the equal Beam” of the scales of Providence had attracted Franklin in his Deist phase, when he was arguing for the moral equivalence of virtue and vice, until it became clear that the cosmic poise was neither as equal nor as consoling as it had first seemed, when measured against the circumstantial fluctuations of existence. The dispassionate Chain and Beam of omniscient Design depict a judgmental apparatus that is largely unconcerned with the limitations of “purblind Man” and unresponsive to the needs of individuals caught in the crossfire between principle and inclination that permeated life. By contrast, Franklin’s spiritual journey ultimately teaches him to value a very different kind of moral interchange, one receptive to precisely the sort of guidance and kindness that Franklin captures in the elaborate portrait of his father that he presents in the memoir’s opening pages.16

Josiah Franklin gives circumstantial form to the complete human pilgrimage that Franklin’s book sets out to describe. In a handful of pages, the memoir charts the course of Josiah’s entire life, from his 1682 emigration to New England to his death in 1745, beginning with Franklin’s childhood memory of a family reunion in which thirteen of Josiah’s seventeen children were “sitting at one time at his Table,” an assembly in which Franklin himself was the “youngest Son and the youngest Child but two” (A, 51). In the anecdotes that follow, Josiah becomes a great work in his own right, a dramatic similitude for the conjunction of virtues to which his son will later aspire. As Franklin first introduces him, however, Josiah seems to be both an authoritarian and an indecisive parent—a compound of opposite attributes much like the compound characters of Dr. Browne, Samuel Keimer, or Mrs. Read. “My early Readiness in learning to read,” Franklin recalls, originally prompted his father to prepare the boy to be a minister. But in less than a year, Josiah changed his mind, interrupting Franklin’s extraordinary run of success at the Boston Grammar School to place
him in less prestigious, though perhaps kinder, hands at George Brownell’s School for Writing and Arithmetic.

The explanation that Josiah gave his friends (in Franklin’s “hearing”) for altering his “first Intention” is clearly intended for both public consumption and the private instruction of his son: college is expensive, Josiah complains, and in the end the ministry is a “mean Living.” But neither of these discouraging observations had any influence with him a few months earlier, when he first decided to designate his youngest son “for the Service of the Church.” Despite Franklin’s clear aptitude for the Grammar School curriculum, Brownell’s “mild encouraging Methods” prompt a sudden and decisive change in his father’s plans. The memoir highlights this quick and tactful decision to choose mildness over family vanity or future status.

The episode of stealing building stones to make a wharf on the Boston Mill Pond immediately follows this first illustration of Josiah’s parental tactics and principles. Franklin is the ringleader who organizes his “Playfellows” to relocate the stones from the site of a new house one evening after the workmen had gone home, filling in the “mere Quagmire” the boys had made as they fished from the Mill Pond’s bank. When the workmen return to find their construction supplies missing, Franklin and his friends are called to account by their fathers. “I pleaded the Usefulness of the Work,” Franklin recalls, but his own father “convinc’d me that nothing was useful which was not honest” (A, 54). Josiah Franklin was fifty-one years old when his youngest son was born, certainly around sixty when he corrected him for stealing building stones, and sixty-three when he set out to prevent Franklin from running away to sea by enticing the restless twelve-year-old to become an apprentice in his brother’s printshop. The blend of grandfatherly restraint with paternal authority in the portrait of Josiah that these early passages offer may reflect the generational complexity posed by their respective ages, but it is partly too an outgrowth of the generational complexity surrounding the memoir itself. In 1771 Franklin is writing to a child of his own who is long past the age of discipline but not beyond the reach of a persuasive parental voice.

“I think you may like to know Something of his Person and Character,” Franklin suggests, as he prepares to describe the only living grandfather whom his son William had ever known. Josiah did not die until January 1745 (1744 by the Old Style calendar), when his grandson was around fifteen years old. The two had never met, but surely stories featuring Josiah had played a role in William’s boyhood. On the genealogical expedition to which the memoir’s
opening sentences allude, Franklin and “Billy” (along with Franklin’s black servant Peter) canvassed every one of the family’s English relatives they could find in several counties and towns, taking an occasional gravestone rubbing and collecting anecdotes from many a “good natured chatty old lady,” as Franklin put it in a 1758 letter to Deborah describing the trip. “Mrs. Salt is a jolly, lively dame,” he wrote of one of these informants, “both Billy and myself agree that she was extremely like you . . . exactly the same little blue Birmingham eyes” (P, 8.144). “Billy” clearly shared his father’s pleasure in ancestral lore, as well as being an observant student of family traits.

When the memoir sets out to describe Josiah to his grandson, however, Franklin writes as if he were introducing his son to a total stranger:

He had an excellent Constitution of Body, was of middle Stature, but well set and very strong. He was ingenious, could draw prettily, was skilful a little in Music and had a clear pleasing Voice, so that when he play’d Psalm Tunes on his Violin and sung withal as he sometimes did in an Evening after the Business of the Day was over, it was extremally agreeable to hear. He had a mechanical Genius too, and on occasion was very handy in the Use of other Tradesmen’s Tools. But his great Excellence lay in a sound Understanding, and solid Judgment in prudential Matters, both in private and publick Affairs. In the latter indeed he was never employed, the numerous Family he had to educate and the straitness of his Circumstances, keeping him close to his Trade, but I remember well his being frequently visited by leading People, who consulted him for his Opinion in Affairs of the Town or of the Church he belong’d to and show’d a good deal of Respect for his Judgment and Advice. (A, 54–55)

This passage stresses the mix of unusual interests and strengths in Josiah’s nature: the excellent, the sound, and the solid elements of his character providing a stable matrix for the personal warmth with which Franklin recalls the deftness of his father’s drawing and the soothing nature of his voice. As Franklin himself would later prove to be, Josiah too is handy in the use of other tradesmen’s tools. His well-set constitution and memorable strength echo the physical determination of Franklin and his playfellows, pitted “like so many Emmets, sometimes two or three to a Stone” as they build their wharf, filling in the “Quagmire” they had made on the edge of the salt marsh.

The memoir’s account of Josiah’s musical talents invites the reader to link the overmatched boys and their construction stones to the psalmist’s mythic life, to the figurative “rock” of his faith, and to the judgmental firmness that
makes both Josiah Franklin and his son into reservoirs of advice for their peers. Franklin had clearly listened with great care and intense pleasure to his father’s singing and noted with interest and with pride the way in which Boston’s “leading people” had treated this gifted tradesman. Though he presents these details without fanfare, they too join the list of partial self-portraits with which the 1771 fragment of the memoir is filled, aimed at forming a mirror in which Franklin and his son might gauge the present state of their own feelings for one another.

When Franklin describes his father’s dinner table customs, he recasts his uncle’s story about the Bible and the joint stool in a secular setting that welcomes the presence of outsiders to the domestic circle. Instead of focusing on a biblical lesson, however, Josiah raises “some ingenious or useful Topic for Discourse” when the family sits down to eat, as often as possible inviting “some sensible Friend or Neighbour” to join them:

By this means he turn’d our Attention to what was good, just, and prudent in the Conduct of Life; and little or no Notice was ever taken of what related to the Victuals on the Table, whether it was well or ill drest, in or out of season, of good or bad flavour, preferable or inferior to this or that other thing of the kind; so that I was bro’t up in such a perfect Inattention to those Matters as to be quite Indifferent what kind of Food was set before me; and so unobservant of it, that to this Day, if I am ask’d I can scarce tell, a few Hours after Dinner, what I din’d upon. (A, 55)

Religious orthodoxy is not entirely absent from this passage, but its influence, like Josiah’s own, is subtle and indirect. The conduct of life and the food on the table appear to echo the opposition between flesh and spirit that preoccupied Franklin’s pious ancestors in their long struggle to take control of sacramental life. In similar fashion, Josiah’s simple ritual converts the meal into the eating of symbols rather than of “victuals”—a point that Franklin scarcely needs to stress to contemporary readers. Moreover, the scene inverts the story that Franklin tells later in the memoir about enjoying fried cod off Block Island. It is, he observes then, a “convenient Thing” to be a reasonable creature, as he contrives a flimsy excuse for a trivial transgression. The lesson that his father teaches produces a different order of convenience through a higher use of reason. The episode is part of a series of similitudes that undergird the memoir’s opening pages: a great work hidden in a homely memory.

Significant disappointments (if not quite fatal reverses) have lasting effects
on Josiah Franklin's life that test his spiritual and personal resources. He had to give up his trade as a cloth dyer when he emigrated to New England and support his family as a “Tallow Chandler and Sope-Boiler,” steady but dirty work that all but alienated his youngest son. The Franklins were by no means poor, but if Josiah ever had any ambitions to play a more prominent role in civic or church affairs in Boston, his son makes it clear that he had to give up those as well. “To his great Vexation,” Franklin remembers, a son and namesake from his first marriage ran away to sea and ultimately disappeared. Josiah and his nephew Samuel had a falling out over a fee that Samuel hoped to receive for training Franklin in “the Cutler's Trade,” a rupture that may have played some role in Uncle Benjamin’s eventual decision to leave Josiah’s house, despite the “particular Affection” that Franklin remembers the brothers once had for one another.

The epitaph that Franklin wrote for his parents and carefully transcribes into the memoir hints at other painful experiences in their lives:

Josiah Franklin
And Abiah his Wife
Lie here interred.
They lived lovingly together in Wedlock
Fifty-five Years.
Without an Estate or any gainful Employment,
By constant labour and Industry,
With God's Blessing,
They maintained a large Family
Comfortably;
And brought up thirteen Children,
And seven Grand Children
Reputably.
From this instance, Reader,
Be encouraged to Diligence in thy Calling,
And distrust not Providence.
He was a pious & prudent Man,
She a discreet and virtuous Woman.
Their youngest Son,
In filial Regard to their Memory,
Places this Stone.
More than one of the Franklin children must have disappeared, or become incapable of managing a family, for these seven grandchildren to have come under Josiah and Abiah’s care. Only their youngest son remains to memorialize his parents, instructing an anonymous “Reader” to pay careful attention to the memory that this stone records, while underscoring the hidden attrition among Franklin’s siblings. The epitaph points to a surprisingly modest moral: “Be encouraged,” Franklin writes, and “distrust not Providence.” But Josiah’s prudence and Abiah’s discretion also remind us that distrust is an inevitable feature of life and may have played an important complementary role in sustaining this loving partnership for fifty-five years. In its own way the epitaph too is both a discreet and a pious work.

Like Franklin himself, Josiah had an innate appreciation for the challenges of managing the young, for curtailing their natural impatience not so much by blunt opposition but by careful handling. The approach that he takes when he removes Franklin from the Boston Grammar School is an instance of this trait. When he finds Franklin and John Collins engaged in their private pamphlet wars, he attends to his son’s method and manner of writing, as well as to his lapses in “elegance of Expression,” to encourage the same sort of literary ambitions that he had appeared, rather curtly, to discourage when he ridiculed Franklin’s early poetic performances. Fearing he might lose another son to the sea, and having some experience with the untoward effects of coercion, Josiah took Franklin on walks around Boston to watch other tradesmen at work, hoping to find a skill that attracted the boy more than soap boiling and candle making. Pleasure in skill itself is one lasting result of these walks, Franklin reports, as well as a knack for using tools that would eventually enable him to manage “little Jobs” around the house or “to construct little Machines for my Experiments while the Intention of making the Experiment was fresh and warm in my Mind” (A, 57). Josiah too is managing a kind of experiment in this episode, trying as best he can to “fix” his youngest son’s interests and intentions on a trade that will tie him to the land.

When James Franklin’s return to Boston in 1717 made printing a possible channel for Benjamin’s energy, Josiah grew impatient to complete the apprenticeship arrangements, Franklin remembers, but not so impatient as to neglect the importance of Inclination in the long-term success of his plan. Franklin was only eleven when James brought his press and equipment home from England, but even so the boy’s consent mattered to his father: “I stood out some time,” Franklin remembers of this critical period, “but at last was persuaded
and signed the Indentures, when I was yet but 12 Years old.” At this important juncture in his son’s life, Josiah seems to have appreciated the necessity that the boy agree to commit himself almost completely to his brother’s control until he was twenty-one, an eternity in the eyes of a twelve-year-old. For good reason, the term “Indenture” in the early eighteenth century applied equally to the documents that controlled the life and labor of a “bought Servant” as well as to apprentices who expected to be trained in a skill in return for the fee paid to the master craftsman. But the power to enter into this legal agreement belonged to Josiah and to James, not to the boy whose future they were deciding. That Franklin “stood out” from endorsing this plan until he was “persuaded” to do so is some measure of the determination and the patience that both the father and the child brought to their extraordinary relationship.

The “flat Denial” that Josiah gives to William Keith’s proposal that he set his eighteen-year-old son up in business stands in stark contrast to this background of mutual consideration and concern. But his father’s response was not as peremptory as Franklin seems to imply. Josiah took Keith’s suggestion under consideration and inquired discreetly into his character before making a decision that he promptly followed with a “civil” letter of thanks to Franklin’s Pennsylvania patron, as well as a private expression of pleasure that his son had been able to make such a favorable impression in his new home. Avoid “lampooning and libelling,” he advised Franklin, “telling me, that by steady Industry and a prudent Parsimony, I might save enough by the time I was One and Twenty to set me up, and that if I came near the Matter he would help me out with the rest” (A, 83). Along with the love, approbation, and blessing of his parents, Franklin writes, “this was all I could obtain” before leaving Boston for a second time to pursue his prospects in Philadelphia. But this “all” is both less and more than Franklin had a right to expect, an exercise of goodness that both retards and advances his future fortunes. The words are a harbinger of the epitaph that Franklin would compose for his parents more than thirty years later, celebrating the blend of love, prudence, faith, and discretion that constituted their invaluable legacy.