The Unfinished Life of Benjamin Franklin
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Franklin’s memoir dramatizes a remarkable range of experiments in association, large and small, nearly all of which incorporate the shifting proportions of stability and instability reflected in the epitaph that he wrote for his parents. Social compacts of all sizes are repeatedly established, broken, modified, and remade in his pages, often for reasons that have little to do with matters of principle. The secret apprenticeship that Franklin exploits when he leaves his brother’s printing house is an instance of this volatility on a diminutive scale. The intellectual bonds he had formed with his childhood friend Collins ultimately disintegrate not over ideological differences but in a trivial temperamental outburst, exacerbated by drink, after the two of them reunite in Philadelphia in 1724:

Collins wish’d to be employ’d in some Counting House; but whether they discover’d his Dramming by his Breath, or by his Behaviour, tho’ he had some Recommendations, he met with no Success in any Application, and continu’d Lodging and Boarding at the same House with me and at my Expense. . . . His drinking continu’d about which we sometimes quarrel’d, for when a little intoxi-
cated he was very fractious. Once in a Boat on the Delaware with some other young Men, he refused to row in his Turn: I will be row’d home, says he. We will not row you, says I. You must or stay all Night on the Water, says he, just as you please. The others said, Let us row; what signifies it? But my Mind being soured with his other Conduct, I continu’d to refuse. So he swore he would make me row, or throw me overboard; and coming along stepping on the Thwarts towards me, when he came up and struck at me I clapt my Hand under his Crutch, and rising pitch’d him head-foremost into the River. (A, 85–86)

“We hardly exchanged a civil word afterwards,” Franklin remembered, once his struggling friend returned to the boat. The unstable mix of drunken arrogance, a sour mind, and mild exasperation that brings on this crisis underscores the system of physical imbalances that Franklin depicts as Collins advances along the unsteady pathway of the thwarts. “What signifies it?” the others ask as they prepare to indulge Collins’s demand: what difference does it make if we row while he refuses? But Franklin’s sense of an interesting story almost always involves its capacity to signify issues larger than itself.

Five decades later, as Franklin is returning to America after the failure of his efforts to mitigate Parliament’s harsh colonial policies, he describes for his son a very similar breakdown in social balances. The long letter that he addresses to William on March 22, 1775, from his cabin on the Pennsylvania Packet, skips ahead more than forty years from the point where the first part of the memoir had ended in order to capture in detail his recent diplomatic frustrations. The 1771 fragment of Franklin’s book concludes by describing his role in establishing the Library Company of Philadelphia, among the earliest and most successful of the many cooperative societies in which he would play a formative role, “the Mother of all the N American Subscription Libraries now so numerous” (A, 130). These institutions, Franklin believed, had prepared Americans for self-government and had fortified them in their recent “Stand” against the British Ministry. It makes perfect sense, then, that Franklin would take up the broken thread of his story fours year later by depicting this political stand in action: another act of exasperated resistance to an irrational demand.¹

Unlike the episode on the Delaware with John Collins, this account depicts a rupture of momentous significance. A series of “severe Acts” of Parliament directed against Massachusetts had finally alarmed the moderate opposition in England, Franklin wrote, “For they saw in the Violence of these American Measures, if persisted in, a Hazard of Dismembring, Weakning, and perhaps
Description of the rowboat incident with John Collins, Franklin's manuscript, p. 40. Reproduced from HM 9999 by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
Ruining, the British Empire.” Franklin shared this anxiety and did what he could, through private conversation, to encourage the moderate minority in the Houses of Parliament not to permit “so glorious a Fabric to be demolished by these Blunderers” (P, 21.545). Just as he had with the recalcitrant Collins fifty years earlier, Franklin once more finds himself nursing a sour mind as he begins the voyage letter narrative. He had temporarily withdrawn from diplomatic life in response to the grievances incurred when the king’s solicitor general had humiliated him in a public hearing before the Privy Council. The March 22 letter candidly depicts his brooding:

From the Time of the Affront given me at the Council Board in January 1774, I had never attended the Levee of any Minister. I made no Justification of my self from the Charges brought against me: I made no Return of the Injury by abusing my Adversaries; but held a cool sullen Silence, reserving my self to some future Opportunity. . . . Now and then I heard it said, that the reasonable Part of the Administration were asham’d of the Treatment they had given me. I suspected that some who told me this, did it to draw from me my Sentiments concerning it, and perhaps my Purposes: But I said little or nothing upon the Subject. In the mean time their Measures with regard to New England failing of the Success that had been confidently expected, and finding themselves more and more embarrass’d, they began, (as it seems) to think of making use of me, if they could, to assist in disengaging them. But it was too humiliating to think of applying to me openly and directly; and therefore it was contriv’d to obtain what they could of my Sentiments thro’ others. (P, 21.545–46)

Wounded pride and diplomatic guile combine to sustain this cool, sullen performance. As Franklin’s long letter unfolds, his last-ditch efforts are repeatedly thwarted less by political differences than by the temperamental ones that had played so prominent a role in the personal collisions of his earliest years in Boston and Philadelphia.

“Providence is an excellent artist,” Jonathan Shipley ultimately writes a deeply discouraged Franklin shortly before his departure from England, “and can perform very admirable Works with very wretched Tools” (P, 21.540). The words are intended to console an old friend, in the face of what Shipley hoped would be a temporary, if devastating, reverse. But they are also a beautiful similitude: a figurative emblem in the tradition of The Pilgrim’s Progress that points directly toward Benjamin Franklin’s lifelong struggle to harness the essential “tool” of his own nature in the service of constructive ends. That strug-
gle is on display, both for better and for worse, as Franklin describes his state of mind on the threshold of the Revolution. In his efforts to alleviate the differences dividing Americans from Englishmen, Franklin is not always successful in curbing his own resentments or abiding by the elaborate system of precepts and personal rituals that he had built for himself at the beginning of his business career in Philadelphia, long before he had any intention of entering public life. This system too represents a delicate act of accommodation to the unstable interplay between passion and principle in human behavior. The opening of the 1775 voyage letter, like the memoir as a whole, portrays that interplay as vividly as Franklin does the instabilities of a rowboat full of quarrelsome young men on the Delaware River.

When a printer imposes his forms, he wedges his lines of carefully set type firmly in place so that the press can pull a clean and near-perfect image from the inked surfaces of the letters: an admirable work, Jonathan Shipley might have observed, produced with wretched tools. But character is not so simple a medium to manage. Franklin’s craft had taught him to appreciate the intricate and often frustrating relations between the process and the product, a double nature that the printer’s finished page conceals.2

The sheets of unruled paper that make up the memoir’s manuscript are a conventional adaptation to the double nature of authors and of the books they make. Like many writers before and after him, in the centuries preceding electronic composition, Franklin divided his pages into equal halves with a single vertical fold, in effect creating an expanded margin to one side of the main column of his draft. The unimpeded flow of Franklin’s memories, directed in part by his stream of suggestive notes, filled half of each manuscript sheet. The other half remained available to accommodate large-scale corrections or changes that might occur as the narrative progressed, like the proliferating “sparks” of thought or dialogue that kept presenting themselves to John Bunyan as The Pilgrim’s Progress grew to presentable dimensions. The detailed discussion of Peter Folger’s “homespun Verse” in defense of religious liberty is one such interpolated detail, inserted beside the main body of the story. So is the brief entry, early in the third fragment of the book, in which Franklin describes the death of his four-year-old son during a smallpox outbreak in 1736. The scene in which Franklin throws John Collins into the Delaware River is another, a story that spills out into the broad margin of the sheet much like Collins spills out of the boat when Franklin unexpectedly seizes him by the “crutch” and throws him off balance.3
This simple provision for handling one’s manuscript was an effective means of providing for the mix of addition, elaboration, and revision that go into the writing process, particularly in an era of expensive paper. But it is also an effective emblem for the restless counterpoises of character and experience that never lost their fascination for Franklin. Mrs. Read, for instance, as Franklin portrays her in the first part of his story, is both astute and imprudent when she evaluates Franklin’s promise as a potential son-in-law and ultimately risks her daughter’s happiness on a bad match. Samuel Keimer is an equally complicated human composition, both inept and perceptive in his appreciation for Franklin’s argumentative and technical gifts. The account of Franklin’s marriage with which the 1771 fragment of the memoir closes is a love story like few others, blending as it does long-standing reserves of mutual affection and respect with the burdens of guilt and dejection stemming from the Read family’s precipitous interest in a worthless suitor, while a mercurial Benjamin Franklin steeped himself in the cultural resources of London. The complex legal obstacles to Deborah’s remarriage (not to mention the existence of Franklin’s illegitimate son William) combine to suggest the depth of the erotic quagmire into which Franklin and Deborah had tumbled and from which both were struggling to free themselves as they revived their relationship.

Ultimately they are able to form a bond that approximates the durability of Josiah and Abiah Franklin’s lifelong partnership, but the comparison is only approximate, marked by the array of contingencies and qualifications that complicate all emotional or moral accountings. Every dimension of Franklin’s story invites the reader to assess the individuals whom it introduces or the scenes that it describes on finely graduated scales of character or principle, not unlike those which Franklin applies to himself throughout the narrative, beginning with the bodily scale that presswork routinely imposed on a journeyman printer. Walking up and down a flight of stairs in Watts’s London printing house in 1725, Franklin had startled his fellow pressmen by his surprising ability to carry “a large Form of Types in each hand” to and from the composing room. The Water-American, as they called him, deriding Franklin’s abstemious drinking habits, was able to distribute across the fulcrum of his shoulders and back two sets of lead letter, locked into pages and ready for the press, weighing as much as seventy or eighty pounds apiece.

This memory too has a figurative double life in Franklin’s book. In effect, the anecdote depicts Franklin as a bodily scale under considerable strain, sustaining formidable amounts of weight on either hand, as he moves through the
divided world in which he finds himself: master and worker, pressman and compositor, writer and printer, English and American. The striking of precarious balances is an ongoing preoccupation of Franklin’s story, a delight and a challenge to the intellectual and physical vigor that he brings to his experience. Like much of the memoir, these scales and balances too have their origins in the tradition of moral discrimination that John Bunyan presents in The Pilgrim’s Progress. The engaging mixture of narration and dialogue had first attracted Franklin’s interest in the dramatic immediacy of Bunyan’s book, but incessant mixture itself proves to be the more influential feature of Bunyan’s example: a conceptual and imaginative bent that eventually sustains Franklin’s moral performance in an equivocal world.5

The village of Ecton in Northamptonshire that Franklin visited in July 1758 to collect information about his English ancestors is less than twenty miles northwest of Bedford, the town where John Bunyan’s nonconformist congregation met and where Bunyan spent over a decade in jail, in the years following the Restoration, for illegal preaching. Josiah Franklin was six years old and living with his family of staunch dissenters in Ecton when Bunyan was first imprisoned in 1661. Eleven years later, when Bunyan resumed his interrupted career, Josiah was seventeen—the same age as Benjamin Franklin when he first left Boston—and, like his own son, Josiah too was apprenticed to an older brother, John Franklin, a dyer in Banbury, a little over thirty miles west of Bedford. When The Pilgrim’s Progress first appeared in 1678, Josiah was twenty-three, two years into what he had called “a man’s estate” when he declined to support William Keith’s premature investment proposal for his youngest son’s future. By that time Josiah’s apprenticeship was over, though he probably remained a journeyman in his brother’s Banbury shop, close enough to experience the influence of Bunyan’s Bedford meeting.

The religious circles in which the Franklins of Ecton moved, during Josiah’s formative years, as well as their proximity to the town and the dissenting congregation made famous by such a celebrated figure make it quite likely that Josiah knew of John Bunyan as he grew up and may well have heard him preach during these troubled years. Bunyan’s fame derived in part from his own itinerant life, first as a tinker and then as a preacher who traveled an informal circuit, meeting with groups of nonconformist worshipers in the immediate vicinity of his home, as well as preaching from the pulpits of sympathizers in London. Certainly some of Bunyan’s sermons would have been included among the
shorthand stock that Franklin’s uncle hoped to bequeath his gifted nephew, when it seemed for a time that he too might become a preacher. Uncle Benjamin was a connoisseur “of the best preachers,” Franklin noted in the memoir, and John Bunyan was clearly in that class, even before *The Pilgrim’s Progress* gave evidence of quite different literary gifts.6

Bunyan’s personal example, however, is less important to the emerging design of Franklin’s memoir than are the methods and the fruits of self-examination that Hopeful touches on while he and Christian are warding off sleep as they walk through the Enchanted Ground, one of the figurative environments that tests their vigilance on the route to the Celestial City. Even saints are prone to drowsiness, and Hopeful proposes that the two pilgrims “lie down here and take one Nap” before proceeding on their journey (PP, 130). To resist this fateful urge and to pass the time, Christian asks his companion for a kind of spiritual memoir: “How came you to think at first of doing as you do now?” Hopeful had been a contented resident in the city of Vanity and a customer at its famous fair when Christian and Faithful originally arrived there. The spectacle of Faithful’s martyrdom and Christian’s fortitude gradually brought him to the same state of anxiety that marked Christian at the beginning of his pilgrimage, but at this point in the book Bunyan expands on the psychological process of awakening that takes hold in Hopeful’s mind: a contest between Principle and Inclination, in which Hopeful only gradually comes to recognize the intractable nature of the spiritual troubles that sometimes recede from his mind, as he takes steps to change his life, only to come “tumbling on me again, and that over the neck of all my Reformations” (PP, 133).

Even the fear of damnation is insufficient to prompt us to “mend” our lives once and for all. Old sins cannot be erased, Hopeful ultimately concludes, and new ones cannot be evaded, no matter how exacting one’s self-examination might be: “if I look narrowly into the best of what I do now, I still see sin, new sin, mixing itself with the best of what I do” (PP, 133). Franklin’s own discoveries about himself and others spring from the same method of narrow ethical inquiry, leading to much the same conclusion that Bunyan’s characters reach: a stubborn impurity is latent even in the best that human beings strive to do. This insight is particularly congenial to the exacting trade that Franklin finally adopts after he signs his indentures and goes to work for his brother in Boston. He stresses the link very early in his memoir when he calls many of his regrets and misdeeds “errata,” a printing term that seems at first to diminish the weight of the guilt that Franklin feels for his transgressions, signaling his escape from
the religious world that John Bunyan and his Ecton ancestors shared. Hopeful offers Christian a detailed account of how he came to accept the necessity for Christ’s imputed grace if he were ever to overcome the persistent sin in his nature. No such conversion experience influences the systematic process of “amendment” that Benjamin Franklin designs for himself.

At the same time, however, Franklin embraces the central perception that Hopeful describes. Our motives and our actions are never entirely free of the influence of self-interest, part of the trio of spiritual dangers that his uncle’s birthday acrostic had cautioned him to avoid: Satan, sin, and self. Vanity is a key motive for most human endeavor, Franklin admits in the opening sentences of the memoir, and is often “productive of good” despite its equivocal origins. Pride and humility may be ethical opposites, but in life (Franklin acknowledges) they are often inextricably entangled with one another. Mixtures of this kind are intrinsic to human nature. Even Josiah Franklin briefly thinks about his own financial necessities when he declines to support William Keith’s plan to set his son up in Philadelphia. Franklin deleted from the memoir Josiah’s admission to his son-in-law Robert Homes that “he had advanc’d too much already to my Brother James” to allow him to make a similar commitment to support his youngest son’s ambitions. His father “was clear in the Impropriety” of turning an expensive new business over to the untested judgment and skill of an eighteen-year-old, but a sense of impropriety is not the sole reason for Josiah Franklin’s decision. He is simply short of funds. In suppressing this detail, Franklin risks making his father appear unsympathetic in order to heighten the contrast between Josiah’s parental principles and William Keith’s shallow permissiveness—scales of character that are critical to the lessons that Franklin hopes his own son, William, will take to heart.

Like Bunyan’s Hopeful, Franklin too eventually embarks on an elaborate effort at personal reformation, instituting a systematic and narrow scrutiny of his daily actions only to find that his success is limited at best. But success, surprisingly enough, is of secondary importance to the ethical journey that parallels the more familiar tale of material progress that Franklin’s story often appears to embody. The anecdote of the speckled ax—another of the memoir’s many parables—illustrates this point with an economy and wit that John Bunyan might have admired. Hopeful’s discouragement at the persistent presence of new sin mixed with his “late amendments” invites comparison to the frustration Franklin claims to have felt at the incorrigible nature of his own “faulty Character.” With time and effort his various transgressions did indeed seem to
diminish, but they never entirely disappeared. When his attention lapsed, new faults would crop up in place of the old ones. Franklin was ready to content himself with imperfection:

Like the Man who in buying an Ax of a Smith my neighbour, desired to have the whole of its Surface as bright as the Edge; the Smith consented to grind it bright for him if he would turn the Wheel. He turn'd while the Smith press'd the broad Face of the Ax hard and heavily on the Stone, which made the Turning of it very fatiguing. The Man came every now and then from the Wheel to see how the Work went on; and at length would take his Ax as it was without farther Grinding. No, says the Smith, Turn on, turn on; we shall have it bright by and by; as yet 'tis only speckled. Yes, says the Man; but—I think I like a speckled Axe best. (A, 155–56)

A fatiguing stint at the grinding wheel makes short work of the love of dazzling appearances. Foppery in morals is ultimately ridiculous, Franklin concludes. And, at any rate, it is prudent to tolerate some flaws in one’s character in order to avoid arousing the envy of one’s neighbors.

But these are not the only lessons—or even the most interesting ones—that this little story tells. The Pilgrim’s Progress is full of similar spiritual exempla presented in the form of tableaux or exhibits for the instruction of Bunyan’s travelers. Some of these are little more than inspiring museum curiosities, like Moses’s rod or the sling and stone with which David slew Goliath, inspirational objects that Christian views on his visit to the House Beautiful. Others are proverbs or verbal emblems, like those that Prudence, one of the mistresses of the House Beautiful, introduces to Christiana’s children, in the second part of Bunyan’s book, when she invites her young visitors to pose “profitable” questions that she can turn into instructive similitudes of the spiritual life. “Why doth the Fire fasten upon the Candle-wick?” Christiana’s oldest son Matthew asks, taking up Prudence’s invitation: “To shew that unless Grace doth kindle upon the Heart, there will be no true Light of Life in us,” she replies (PP, 218).

More elaborate scenarios or instructive scenes call for a seasoned interpreter to unravel. Early in Christian’s journey, for instance, as he rests at the Interpreter’s House, he visits one of his host’s “Significant Rooms” to watch a man with a broom energetically sweeping a parlor and stirring up choking clouds of dust in the process, until a “Damsel” appears to sprinkle the room with water, allowing it to be thoroughly cleaned. What does the little tableau mean? Christian asks. His guide informs him that the parlor is an image of the
heart and the dust is sin, which can never be finally swept away until it has been sprinkled with the waters of Grace.

The original sweeper, the Interpreter continues, represents the futility of the moral Law without the assistance of the power of the Gospel to subdue the heart’s native corruption. Franklin may have had this little skit in mind, later in his memoir, when he describes the odd origin of his proposal for sweeping London’s perennially dusty streets. That “significant” scene too begins with an energetic street sweeper, a feeble old woman, whose efforts enjoy a miraculous success once Franklin arranges to pay her a fair wage for her work. In the second part of Bunyan’s allegory, Christiana is often very good at interpreting riddles on her own, but even she needs help with deciphering the emblem of a great spider hanging unnoticed upon the wall of the best room in the Interpreter’s array of meaningful exhibits. As he did for her husband, Christiana’s host explains its surprising significance—“that how full of the Venome of Sin soever you be,” he observes, “yet you may by the hand of Faith lay hold of and dwell in the best Room that belongs to the King’s house” (PP, 189).

The man shopping for a new ax in Franklin’s seemingly innocent story is not preoccupied by the venom of sin, but he does find himself in the presence of a surprisingly astute smith—a kind of successor to John Bunyan’s canny Interpreter—who is as good at teaching lessons as he is at metalwork. In the simplest, most circumstantial sense, it would be perfectly appropriate for this tradesman to point out to his customer, with some exasperation, that an ax is a working tool, not an ornament, made for hard use and not for show. It does not need to be uniformly bright to serve its ends. Or the smith might simply comply with his customer’s impractical desire in return for a higher price and ask an apprentice to turn the heavy wheel while the purchaser waits. But neither of these plausible outcomes occurs. By situating this story in a place that purports to be his own neighborhood, Franklin is inviting the reader to imagine more realistic exchanges between the two characters that, in turn, highlight its “significant” departures from the ordinary.

In reality, the story is an emblem of instruction as well as the vehicle of a lesson. How its participants behave, how the narrative is worded, and what it omits are as interesting as what the two men finally agree to accept about human imperfection. Even a speckled ax may have a keen edge. A brightly polished “face,” however broad or flawless, is not always a sign of inward perfections. Regardless of what we claim to “think” we like, our actual thoughts and reflections are almost certainly more complex than our words reveal.
These lessons too extend the scope of Franklin's simple story. “Something that pretended to be Reason,” he continues, was skeptical of the kind of “extreme Nicety” in morals that the speckled ax story purports to illustrate, but it actually illustrates a more provocative range of perceptions than this premature conclusion suggests. Neither the wily smith nor his chastened customer ever clearly explains his motives to the other or itemizes the different meanings to which their encounter lends itself, but the anecdote confers on each participant an ethical depth and narrative interest that the brevity and everyday nature of the story would appear to preclude.8

Franklin offers the scene as an encapsulation of the blend of success and failure that his experience taught him to expect from the struggle to shape his character to an ideal standard. The expression of modest diffidence with which the smith’s customer accepts his speckled ax—his affirmation of what he “thinks” he likes—signals the close identification of this make-believe neighbor with the restraints that Franklin had first applied to his own youthful love of argument and later adapted to the broad exercise in self-discipline that he began during his first years in Philadelphia: the celebrated pursuit of moral perfection, which he takes up in the second section of his memoir. This “bold and arduous Project” emerges from the accumulated frustrations that he had encountered in his relations with institutionalized religion, beginning with his Boston childhood and extending into his adult encounters with the clerical establishment of Philadelphia. Some of the dogmas of his parent’s church “appear’d to me unintelligible,” Franklin recalled in the memoir, others seemed merely doubtful, while still others he never ceased to accept throughout the course of his religious pilgrimage. He never doubted the existence of God, Franklin insisted, or the immortality of the soul, or the Providential government of creation and its enforcement of justice “either here or hereafter,” according to our behavior in life (A, 146).

In this carefully scaled response to inherited religious conviction, the unintelligible and the unquestionable counterbalance one another at either extreme, like the heavy forms of lead type on either hand that Franklin carried through Watts’s printing house, with “doubtful” doctrines poised between. A similar scale of responses extends to Franklin’s view of the other religious sects with which he found himself surrounded in the heterogeneous sectarian culture of Philadelphia. Nearly all of them endorsed the essentials of belief that Franklin too never ceased to affirm, but all of these confessional systems were likewise “more or less mix’d with other Articles which without any Tendency to
inspire, promote, or confirm Morality, serv’d principally to divide us and make us unfriendly to one another” (A, 146). Franklin does not calibrate his support for public worship in conformity with these fine discriminations of mixture or division, but neither does he commit himself to any single sect’s support beyond the “Mite” that he says he extends to any religious body that promises some degree of “good Effects” from the construction of a church. Each group that solicits his help gets an equal measure of endorsement—the accounts are balanced—but the aggregate effect of these many “mites” reflects Franklin’s ongoing reluctance to align himself with any particular sectarian persuasion.

This wary posture is quite easy to confuse with the kind of religious equivocation that John Bunyan scorns, very early in The Pilgrim’s Progress, when he has Evangelist administer a stern lecture to Christian about his apparent willingness to settle for a nice house in the village of Morality, rather than pursuing the hardships of pilgrimage. Worldly-Wiseman had given Christian this self-serving advice when he observed “his laborious going . . . his sighs and groans” as he struggled toward the Wicket Gate at the outset of his journey. A citizen of the great town of Carnal-Policy, “hard by” the City of Destruction, Worldly-Wiseman had heard of Christian’s quest for eternal life and had set out across the fields deliberately to intercept him and suggest a less arduous alternative.

“Pray Sir open this secret to me,” Christian eagerly asks:

Worldly-Wiseman: Why in yonder Village, (the Village is named Morality) there dwells a Gentleman, whose name is Legality, a very judicious man (and a man of a very good name) that has skill to help men off with such burdens as thine are, from their shoulders: yea, to my knowledge he hath done a great deal of good this way. . . . His house is not quite a mile from this place; and if he should not be at home himself, he hath a pretty young man to his Son, whose name is Civility, that can do it (to speak on) as well as the old Gentleman himself. There, I say, thou mayest be eased of thy burden, and if thou art not minded to go back to thy former habitation, as indeed I would not wish thee, thou mayest send for thy wife and Children to thee in this Village, where there are houses now stand empty, one of which thou mayest have at reasonable rates: Provision is there also cheap and good, and that which will make thy life the more happy, is, to be sure there thou shalt live by honest neighbors, in credit and good fashion. (PP, 19–20)

Bunyan’s village of Morality bears a striking resemblance to the Philadelphia that Franklin describes in the early pages of the memoir: reasonable rents and
cheap provisions (if the price of bread is a reliable index), honest neighbors like the young Quaker who steers Franklin to a reputable inn after he falls asleep in Sunday meeting, and an abundance of vacant real estate that alarms the gloomy Samuel Mickle when he informs Franklin in his newly opened print-shop that he has cast his economic lot in a “sinking Place.” This half-whimsical, half-troubling parallel is probably not lost on Franklin himself, as he is drawing it in 1771.

Eventually Franklin too will have “pretty young man to his Son,” one accomplished in the civil graces, who is ready to make a career in this compliant and comfortable world. A complacent Legality seems, at first glance, to be the very destination that Franklin aims at in his own religious aspirations. But he quickly signals the reader of the memoir that his personal understanding of moral life has very little in common with the kind of shallow, outward conformity to Law that Worldly-Wiseman recommends. Franklin in fact attacks mere Legality with nearly as much zeal as Bunyan’s Evangelist. In response to the frequent urging of Philadelphia’s sole Presbyterian minister, he occasionally attended Presbyterian services during his first years in the city, partly perhaps out of deference to his New England roots. Once (Franklin brags) he appeared at these weekly “Administrations” for “five Sundays successively,” a comment aimed at stressing the superficial nature of religious conformity. The sermons invariably disappointed him. The minister’s “Discourses were chiefly either polemic Arguments, or Explications of the peculiar Doctrines of our Sect, and were all to me very dry, uninteresting and unedifying” (A, 147). Sectarian discipline rather than “moral Principle” seemed to be their goal: a kind of legalism intended to shore up congregational solidarity for its own sake, “their Aim seeming to be rather to make us Presbyterians than good Citizens.”

This objection is not as secular as it first appears to be. Franklin did not attend church to brush up on the particulars of the catechism, but neither did he go for a Sunday civics lesson. Like many of his peers in the years immediately preceding the Great Awakening, he was interested in the state of the heart, in its capacity to lend an inward energy to the kind of “mere speculative conviction” that often left religious doctrine or moral principle a dead letter in most people’s lives, a matter of tabulating church attendance for its own sake, rather than attending to the substance of their religious lives. “Why doth the Fire fasten upon the Candle-wick?” Christiana’s son inquires when Prudence invites him to pose emblematic questions. Why do some spirits burn with fervor or
inner purpose, consuming “the Wick and Tallow and all,” the boy continues, while others flicker out? The questions intrigue Franklin as well, and when his minister announces that a forthcoming sermon will address Philippians 4:8, he is hopeful. The memoir quotes a close paraphrase of the verse, apparently from memory and not strictly by the book, so that Franklin’s reader can appreciate the grounds of his anticipation: “Finally, Brethren, Whatsoever Things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, or of good report, if there be any virtue, or any praise, think on these Things” (A, 147).

Very little in this verse would appear to invite a narrow sectarian reading, but neither is it directed strictly at the formation of good citizens. The pure, the lovely, and the true are central to its focus, along with the more public or civic attributes of justice, honesty, and “good report.” Half of the Philippians passage looks outward toward social values, and half turns inward toward more mysterious resources linked to spiritual perception and, in doing so, asks the listener (or the reader) to think, not to do. Reflection as well as action seems to be the goal of these words—a counterpoise between the outer and the inner life—as if some transformational experience or insight shares equal importance with behavior in the mind of its author. A complex interchange between physical and metaphysical, between secular and spiritual ends, is at issue in the verse. It does not refer openly to grace, as Prudence so candidly does in the House Beautiful, but it points toward the same mental and emotional terrain over which Bunyan’s pilgrims traveled. Like Bunyan’s similitudes, it is an effort to shape consciousness or to foster a special kind of awareness, rather than to prescribe behavior.

When Philippians 4:8 elicits only another doctrinaire sermon from Philadelphia’s Presbyterian minister, Franklin reports that he abandoned the church meetings in disgust—a surprisingly strong term for this master of modest diffidence—and returned to the exercise of a private liturgy that he had devised for himself shortly after his return from London in the autumn of 1726. A few fragments of this private worship system remain in the memoir, but Franklin’s chief interest in the brief section of his book that he wrote at Passy in 1784 was to explain the reasoning behind a list of virtues that he had made, and to describe a tablet of “accounts” that he kept, in an effort to restrict his habits within a specific array of moral boundaries. This attempt begins in the same tabulating spirit that Franklin derides when he recalls his successive Sundays of church attendance, but it quickly outgrows this shallow stage:
I wish’d to live without committing any Fault at any time; I would conquer all that either Natural Inclination, Custom, or Company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a Task of more Difficulty than I had imagined. While my Care was employ’d in guarding against one Fault, I was often surpris’d by another. Habit took the Advantage of Inattention. Inclination was sometimes too strong for Reason. I concluded at length, that the mere speculative Conviction that it was our Interest to be compleatly virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our Slipping, and that the contrary Habits must be broken and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any Dependence on a steady uniform Rectitude of Conduct. (A, 148)

The language in this passage is both unobtrusive and highly charged, from the perspective of the religious world in which Franklin was raised. The familiar antagonism between Inclination and Reason carries over directly from the 1771 fragment of the memoir, where Franklin discusses his dietary qualms over eating freshly caught cod, but Prudence’s examination of Christiana’s children in the second part of The Pilgrim’s Progress also includes the doctrinal reminder that Man was created, by design, a “Reasonable Creature” intended, above all, for “everlasting Happiness,” both terms central to the ethical enterprise that Franklin describes in the memoir. A respect for reason alone does not signal Franklin’s unmixed humanist or Enlightenment loyalties, particularly in view of his implicit recognition that reason often “sleeps” (as Hopeful had wanted to do in the Enchanted Ground) or loses its contest with the irrational forces of Natural Inclination. Other terms in the passage do appear deliberately intended to exclude a conventional religious analysis of the inner life. Faults, rather than sins, are the target of Franklin’s efforts at reformation; good habits, rather than Grace, are the necessary auxiliaries that reason requires if it hopes to “conquer” appetite and desire. Rectitude of conduct is Franklin’s nominal goal, a phrase that Worldly-Wiseman might applaud.

Once Franklin turns to his collection of virtues and precepts, however, he moves steadily if subtly closer to the psychological heart of John Bunyan’s world. To begin with, a kind of balancing act dictates the formation of Franklin’s list of ethical goals, one closely related to the interchange between narrow inquiry and outward performance that troubles Hopeful during his pilgrimage. Franklin’s research into the “Catalogue” of virtues derived from his reading produces a problem at the outset: ideas and names (or labels) appear to be inconsistently
arranged, with a “more or less numerous” roster of virtues linked to “more or fewer Ideas” of what any particular authority believed a particular ideal to include. The conceptual and the moral “books” that he examined were in disarray. Cataloging alone is clearly the wrong approach to managing the complex relationship between conscience and conduct. In framing his own list of ideal attributes, Franklin chooses to align fewer ideas with more names, for the sake of “Clearness” (he claims in the memoir), and prepares a list of twelve initial virtues, which grows eventually to thirteen when a Quaker friend points out a conspicuous deficiency.

The original twelve had formed an all-too-obvious Christological echo that the awkward addition of a thirteenth virtue at first disrupts, but Franklin is pointedly indifferent to symbolic numerology as well as to folk superstition. Twelve, after all, was also the number of original members in Franklin’s Junto, his young men’s club for moral improvement and mutual education, and dictated the familiar structure of his annual almanacs, as well as being an appealing even number that lent itself to a variety of symmetrical and asymmetrical groupings of the sort that might have delighted the fussy mathematician, Thomas Godfrey, a Junto member and for some years a tenant in Franklin’s printshop. “Clearness” alone is much too simple a criterion to account for the original design of Franklin’s ethical program, but neither is it immediately clear what instincts ultimately influence its shape.

To each virtue Franklin then “annex’d” a short “Precept” to illustrate its “Extent.” These three terms from the memoir appear carefully selected to avoid the implication that Franklin was aiming at the kind of prescriptive definition to which the cataloging mind inclines. Each ethical ideal on Franklin’s list has territorial scope. Moreover, the precepts themselves are worded so as to discourage the love of legalism, or the merely technical compliance with a public code, that makes the village of Morality such an appealing destination for human pilgrims. Each virtue requires that a thoughtful interaction take place between the subjective and the objective spheres of moral life. Temperance, for instance, stipulates that Franklin “Eat not to Dulness. Drink not to Elevation,” a double exhortation calling for careful attention to one’s interior condition long before a drinking or dining companion might be inclined to express some concern over one’s obvious excesses. Dullness and elevation are subtle, affective states as complicated in their own ways as the meaning of temperance itself. The precept for Silence addresses a similar division between behavior that others might readily observe and feelings or intentions that only the moral agent is
in a position to examine: “Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling Conversation.” As Franklin presents it, this virtue can only manifest itself through the way in which one manages its audible opposite. Mere silence can be a form of selfishness, as it is in the early sentences of the 1775 voyage letter, a kind of “trifling” with the responsibilities that the gift of language imposes.

Sincerity, the seventh virtue on Franklin’s list, is by definition rooted in intentions that are invisible to others and often hidden even from ourselves. It can be a notoriously difficult attribute to assess. For this reason, the precept that Franklin annexes to it establishes its claims in unusual terms, substituting accessible ideas for inherently elusive ones. “Use no hurtful Deceit,” the motto for Sincerity begins, immediately conceding that deceit itself is often an inescapable feature of social existence, even for the sincere, and may in fact be put to generous uses. “Think innocently and justly,” Franklin continues, “and, if you speak, speak accordingly” (A, 150). These words presuppose the presence of an inner monitor charged with overseeing the manner in which one thinks or speaks, not the essence of one’s thought: an interior performance which recognizes that an exhaustive command over our motives is unattainable.10

Justice and Moderation, the eighth and ninth virtues on Franklin’s list, have precepts that mix familiar public ideals with private criteria of judgment, redirecting their straightforward application from visible to invisible forums. The just must be wary of “omitting the Benefits that are your duty,” as well as careful to “Wrong none,” Franklin insists, envisioning a code of behavior that sets aside a conventional list of infractions or crimes in favor of discovering the benefits that we “owe” to one another. This standard has next to nothing in common with the appeal to mere legality that John Bunyan scorns. The moderate must “Avoid Extremes,” Franklin’s precept for his ninth virtue predictably (and moderately) declares, before making a surprising concession to the struggle with private resentments that lies behind all acts of moderation: “Forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.” Moderation strives to smother these resentful fires, as Franklin himself attempted to do after the bitter public chastisement of January 1774, but his precept concedes that one cannot reasonably expect to extinguish them.11

At several points in this portion of the memoir, Franklin refers to the list of virtues and precepts, along with the booklet that he made to track his daily behavior, as his “Scheme.” The term suggests to readers today an ingenious plan or devious plot, confirming a predisposition to view Franklin’s ethical interests
as purely manipulative. But he is using the word in an older sense to describe an elaborate and ambitious mnemonic device. John Bunyan uses it this way in the second part of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* when he has Piety present Christiana with a “Scheme” of all the objects and emblems that she and her children have seen at the House Beautiful “for when thou findest thyself forgetful” (PP, 221). Franklin’s bold and arduous project too is a compact tool for fending off forgetfulness. A virtue that hardens into a mere label risks losing its claim on our attention without a concise reminder of the interplay between thought and action, consciousness and conduct, that the practice of virtue entails. Franklin’s interest in forming virtuous “habits” suggests that he aims at an automatic or unreflective version of morality, but nothing in the precepts that he writes for his personal catalog of ethical goals lends itself to the merely habitual anymore than mere speculative conviction alone was adequate to govern the conduct of life.

The number and the sequence of the original twelve virtues, as well as Franklin’s daily, weekly, and yearly systems of ethical accounting, exert a variety of subtle claims on human attention. By beginning his list with Temperance and ending it with Chastity, for instance, Franklin shapes the sequence into a circle or a spiral of behavioral goals that imbeds a system of mutual reinforcement into the collective arrangement. Temperance, he explains, is a precondition for the “Coolness and Clearness of Head” that careful compliance with all the following virtues will demand, but it is also a close relative of the tempered sexual appetites that Chastity, the last of the original twelve, hopes to encourage. In a similar way, Silence and Tranquillity, the second and eleventh virtues on the list, are natural pairs, with the second of the two a direct, if higher, successor to the first. Order and Cleanliness, the third and the tenth virtues, are likewise cognate goals—ethical similitudes of one another applied to different aspects of existence. The first three virtues on Franklin’s list, in conjunction with their later partners, function much like a trio of concentric ethical circles inscribed around the six interior and socially oriented attributes of Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, and Moderation. Franklin’s arrangement, in other words, has an inside and an outside, as well as a beginning and an end, just as each precept seeks to mix interior and exterior life.

Once Franklin was persuaded to add Humility as his thirteenth virtue, this apparent asymmetry produced a convenient outcome: he could now use the little booklet that he had prepared for keeping track of his ethical lapses to organize four, thirteen-week “Courses” of moral reform in a year, concentrat-
ing each of the fifty-two weeks of the calendar on one of his virtues and its accompanying precept. The booklet included a verse motto from Joseph Addison’s *Cato* and a prayer of Franklin’s own to help remind him of the ontological context for his project. The first was very much an outer, and the second an inner, exhortation. “Here will I hold,” Addison’s Roman hero proclaims: “If there is a Pow’r above us, / (And that there is, all Nature cries aloud / Thro’ all her Works) he must delight in Virtue, / And that which he delights in must be happy.” Franklin’s prayer, by contrast, puts aside the defensive stoicism of Addison’s lines in favor of Franklin’s recognition that the motives and the self-understanding that shape our deeds call for metaphysical reinforcement:

*O Powerful Goodness! bountiful Father! merciful Guide! Increase in me that Wisdom which discovers my truest Interests; Strengthen my Resolutions to perform what that Wisdom dictates. Accept my kind Offices to thy other Children, as the only Return in my Power for thy continual Favours to me. (A, 153)*

These words appear to suggest an exchange of services, rather than a sincere expression of gratitude for blessings, a tradesman’s utilitarian piety aimed at enhancing worldly interests in return for kind offices. But just as with the memoir’s suggestively imperfect quotation from Philippians, this prayer requires a deliberative reading.12

Franklin is projecting a kind of unconventional trinity with these words as well as introducing his booklet of virtues, offering three versions of the Deity that mingle identities and attributes in provocative ways. Goodness is the locus of power in this prayer, not the mythic Father: an inner and to some degree an abstract entity from which bounty and mercy flow. But bounty and mercy are not the prayer’s objects. Wisdom is, and wisdom in turn is necessary to distinguish one’s “truest” interests from the many lesser ones that preoccupy or distract the human pilgrim. When Alexis de Tocqueville commented on the principle of mutually advantageous self-interest, as “the American moralists” understood and applied it, he quite clearly had Benjamin Franklin in mind:

In the United States hardly anybody talks of the beauty of virtue, but they maintain that virtue is useful and prove it every day. The American moralists do not profess that men ought to sacrifice themselves for their fellow creatures because it is noble to make such sacrifices, but they boldly aver that such sacrifices are as necessary to him who imposes them upon himself as to him for whose sake they are made. . . . They therefore do not deny that every man may follow his
own interest, but they endeavor to prove that it is the interest of every man to be virtuous. (2.2.8)

Tocqueville’s words (and the suggestive emphasis of Henry Reeve, the young Englishman whom Tocqueville selected as his first translator) indicate that he paid close attention to Franklin’s insistent sense of ethical causality in the first section of the memoir: that certain actions were “forbidden because they were bad for us,” or commanded because they were good, by the Providential intelligence that designed the world with human well-being in mind (A, 115). But Tocqueville goes on to wonder whether the outcome of this philosophic principle will be to purge the world of extraordinary virtues as well as extraordinary vices:

The principle of self-interest rightly understood produces no great acts of self-sacrifice, but it suggests daily small acts of self-denial. By itself it cannot suffice to make a man virtuous; but it disciplines a number of persons in habits of regularity, temperance, moderation, foresight, self-command; and if it does not lead men straight to virtue by the will, it gradually draws them in the direction by their habits. (2.2.8)

These words, once again, appear to be in close dialogue with parts of Franklin’s memoir, but the appeal to “Powerful Goodness” with which Franklin’s book of virtues begins makes extraordinary moral demands, as well as minor or pragmatic ones, operating on a vast rather than a diminished metaphysical stage. In some respects the prayer is framed as carefully as the ethical precepts accompanying each of the virtues that it introduces, aiming not simply at the accumulation of good or beneficial habits but at the wisdom to discern the truest from the merely expedient interests of existence.13

The prayer, in turn, links Franklin’s booklet of ethical accounts to the structure that he imposed on his daily schedule, presented in the memoir as a column of numbers enclosed in squares for every hour of the day, beginning at five o’clock. An extract from Pythagoras’s “Golden Verses” that he intended to transcribe in this section of the book suggests the necessity for some narrow daily examination to work in tandem with Franklin’s weekly and yearly plans: “Let not the stealing God of Sleep surprize,/ Nor creep in Slumbers on thy weary Eyes,/ Ere ev’ry Action of the former Day,/ Strictly thou dost, and righteously survey.” Accordingly to the left of Franklin’s schematic column of hours, he inserts morning and evening questions—“What Good shall I do this
Day?” “What Good have I done to day?”—and begins his workday routine with a recitation of the Powerful Goodness prayer, along with a handful of largely practical chores: rise, wash, “contrive the Day’s Business,” study, “and breakfast” (A, 154). Temperance, Cleanliness, two forms of Resolution, and a prayer expressive of Humility—all important entries on Franklin’s list of thirteen virtues—play a part in getting his day underway. Indeed, this group draws from the beginning, the middle, and the closing sections of the list of virtues, as if the morning hours have a more comprehensive scope than the evening ones do.

Franklin’s time line makes no provision for an evening prayer to balance the morning one, an intriguing decision since it seems to echo the conventional emblematic significance of wakefulness and sleep that John Bunyan’s allegory repeatedly stresses. Sleep is nearly always an outward sign of spiritual blindness in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Staying awake is the mark of an attentive and watchful soul. Bunyan’s characters often find themselves holding religious discussions or deciphering pious riddles all night during their journey. In part two of the story, no one in Christiana’s large party of pilgrims sleeps at all after they arrive in the Land of Beulah, immediately adjacent to the border of the Celestial City. When a travel-worn Christian and Hopeful originally rested there, “they talked more in their sleep . . . then ever they did in all their Journey,” a phenomenon that puzzles Bunyan until Beulah’s Gardener explains the reason: “It is the nature of the fruit of the Grapes of these Vineyards to go down so sweetly, as to cause the lips of them that are asleep to speak” (PP, 147).

The original twelve virtues, in fact, appear to parallel the hours of the waking day, as well as observing the order of progressive facility in which Franklin claims to have arranged them: a cumulative tactic whereby mastering the first virtue assists in addressing the second, which helps in turn with the third, and so on. This staircase model appears arbitrary at best the more closely one examines it, but the progression of the virtues across the private and public phases of the day is striking. The first four on Franklin’s list—Temperance, Silence, Order, and Resolution—all play important roles in the morning ritual that Franklin allot to the hours between five and eight o’clock, with the Powerful Goodness prayer serving as the beneficial speech prescribed by Silence, and breakfast offering the first opportunity to eat and drink in moderation. “Take the resolution of the day,” Franklin instructs himself, as he prepares for work, perhaps as a reminder to read over the precept for the virtue that is the object of the present week’s “strict Attention” as he leaves for the printshop or
Franklin's daily schedule, detail from the lower left corner of Franklin's manuscript, p. 99. The left margin reads, “The Morning Question, What Good shall I do this Day” and “Evening Question, What Good have I done to day?” Reproduced from HM 9999 by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
the Assembly, where the civic virtues of Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, and Moderation find a natural theater for their activity.

Cleanliness, Tranquillity, and Chastity, the last of the original twelve, are correspondingly tied to the evening hours: a reflective and traditionally intimate period of the day. “Rarely use Venery but for Health or Offspring,” Franklin admonishes himself in the precept for Chastity, “Never to Dulness, Weakness, or the Injury of your own or another’s Peace or Reputation,” words that carefully echo the precept for Temperance to which Chastity corresponds in the concentric behavioral circles that Franklin has arranged. But this sexual advice is not exclusively marital in its focus (as the bawdy pun on “piece” may be meant to suggest) and embraces the view that one’s sexuality is not strictly a provision for procreation. This hard-to-be-governed passion (as Franklin called it) has an important bearing on the complex form of emotional well-being associated with peace of mind and, as such, is more closely tied to Tranquillity than people customarily acknowledge. Cleanliness would appear to be out of place in this evening group, but “Uncleanness” referred to the full range of sexual transgressions in Franklin’s day, rather than simply to hygiene. Avoiding the erotic disorder that this word implied would have struck Franklin’s contemporaries as critical to the achievement of long-lasting happiness in such a vital sphere of existence.

Humility and its precept, “Imitate Jesus and Socrates,” conclude the list of virtues after one of Franklin’s acquaintances convinces him that he is frequently “overbearing and rather insolent” in discussions. The steps he took to try to modify his manners, if not his private opinion concerning the “Absurdity” of other people’s ideas, required Franklin’s attention across the entire range of his revolutionary working day and throughout his life. It is the only virtue of the thirteen that appeals to human models in its precept, and the two extraordinary beings whom Franklin names as its exemplars suggest the difficulty that he expected to encounter in trying to master it. But even in the face of such an impossible standard, Franklin concludes, his collective efforts at observing what he terms “the whole Mass of the Virtues” brought him happiness, wealth, reputation, and “Weight with my Fellow Citizens,” in spite of the political handicaps that plagued him: “For I was but a bad Speaker, never eloquent, subject to much Hesitation in my choice of Words, hardly correct in Language, and yet I generally carried my Points” (A, 160). To possess this kind of exemplary weight is a prerequisite to carrying the consent of others. The broad-shouldered young pressman in Watts’s printing house, over a long and
varied career, found ways to adapt his strength to the balancing of intangible burdens.\textsuperscript{14}

Franklin adhered to his system of narrow self-scrutiny and moral reform for a much longer period than he allotted to the public administrations of Philadelphia’s Presbyterian church. Five successive Sundays of disappointment was all it took to drive him out of a sectarian congregation and back to his private prayer, his daily questions, and a weekly charting of the ethical lapses that he committed. The paper records he kept repeatedly wore out, and he replaced them with an ivory-leaved booklet containing weekly tables for each of the thirteen virtues inscribed in durable red ink on its pages. The lead pencil marks of his faults could then be conveniently wiped away with a sponge and a new course of watchful accounting begun. Gradually his devotion to maintaining this record through four complete cycles of thirteen virtues a year also understandably waned: “After a while I went thro’ one Course only in a Year, and afterwards only one in several years; till at length I omitted them entirely, being employ’d in Voyages and Business abroad with a Multiplicity of Affairs, that interfered.” This effort too, like the memoir itself, falls victim to the incessant interruption that cuts through life.

But the apparent displacement of Franklin’s private ethical ambitions by his public responsibilities is partly a fulfillment rather than a rejection of the virtues and the precepts he had framed. The prayers, the goals, and the daily distribution of Franklin’s time always assumed the kind of active engagement in life that his conception of Providence required: “kind Offices” to other human beings, not ecstatic withdrawal into contemplative isolation. Christian and Faithful in \textit{The Pilgrim’s Progress} agree: “The Soul of Religion is the practick part.” Deeds, not verbal profession or the mastery of a catechism, are the spiritual essentials. At Judgment Day, Christian insists in a formulation that Franklin paraphrases many times in his life, fruits alone will matter: “It will not be said then, \textit{Did you believe}? but \textit{Were you Doers or Talkers} only? and accordingly shall they be judged” (PP, 78). When Franklin pockets his ivory memorandum book, then, and enters into the world of “Affairs,” he is striking a sound balance rather than compromising his principles. “I always carried my little Book with me,” he writes, even when it ceased to be the central focus of his day, as if its presence alone still represented a significant counterweight to the visible demands of business.

Indeed, though thirteen years separate the writing of the memoir’s first two
fragments, Franklin often seems to have his ivory memorandum book in mind, as well as in his pocket, as he reviews for his son the events of his months in London in 1725 and 1726 or tells the story of his gradual establishment in Philadelphia throughout the first section of his book. He carries his points among the compositors in Watts’s London printing house, for instance, very much as he does among the citizens of Philadelphia later on, through a combination of virtues that enhances the weight of his example: temperance, moderation, justice, industry. Once he got on a “fair footing” with his English co-workers by contributing to the Composing Room drinking fund, he was able to propose “some reasonable Alterations in their Chapel Laws” and win their adoption “against all Opposition,” both because the changes were sensible and because many members of the “Chapel” relied on weekly loans from Franklin to pay their alehouse bills (A, 101).

Originally something of an outcast amid this tightly knit fraternity of English workmen, Franklin rather quickly begins to influence their daily habits, establishing a breakfast cooperative, among other improvements, in order to replace the compositors’ traditional morning pint with a concoction of “hot Water-gruel, sprinkled with Pepper, crumb’d with Bread, and a Bit of Butter in it,” made to Franklin’s order. In addition to this savory gruel recipe, Franklin’s fellow workers soon acquire a taste for his abilities as a “jocular verbal satirist,” an interesting mix of comic and caustic gifts, part of which Franklin would ultimately try to restrain when he came to frame the precept for Silence in his moral program, in the hope of breaking the habit of “Prattling, Punning, and Joking” that he had fallen into.

But a “trifling” wit had its uses at Watts’s printing house. Franklin was able to draw on the goodwill it produced in order to change some bad laws for better ones in the whimsical, pseudo-sacred order that governed their workplace. Temperance, Silence, Frugality, Industry, and Moderation all play important roles in the design of this brief episode in Franklin’s early working life. Even the “little Pieces of private Mischief” that Franklin endured at the hands of the “Chapel Ghost” when he first moved from presswork to setting type—“mixing my Sorts, transposing my Pages, breaking my Matter”—did not so much provoke his anger as teach him “the Folly of being on ill Terms with those one is to live with continually.” The price of foppery in morals could be unpleasant and unproductive, just as the speckled ax story suggests; the advantages of sacrificing a bit of principle in return for good social relations could amplify rather than diminish one’s influence for good (A, 100).
A similar mix of ethical accountings extends to Franklin's other London household during this critical interval in his life. For most of his stay in the city, and for nearly all the time that he worked for John Watts, Franklin lodged with a Catholic landlady who lived “two pair of stairs backwards at an Italian Warehouse” with her daughter and a maid:

She was a Widow, an elderly Woman, had been bred a Protestant, being a Clergyman’s Daughter, but was converted to the Catholic Religion by her Husband, whose Memory she much revered, had lived much among People of Distinction, and knew a 1000 Anecdotes of them as far back as the Times of Charles the Second. She was lame in her Knees with the Gout, and therefore seldom stirr’d out of her Room, so sometimes wanted Company; and hers was so highly amusing to me; that I was sure to spend an Evening with her whenever she desired it. Our Supper was only half an Anchovy each, on a very little Strip of Bread and Butter, and half a Pint of Ale between us. But the Entertainment was in her Conversation. (A, 102)

Trapped by age, gout, and two flights of “backwards” stairs, Franklin’s companionable host has an agile and amusing mind—far more attractive a partner (it would appear) than the daughter or the maid, neither of whom receives much attention from a nineteen-year-old lodger who has just been slapped down by the lively young milliner, Mrs. T, with whom Franklin had attempted some unwelcome “Familiarities.”

By contrast, familiarity proves to be a source of great pleasure in these casual relations with his landlady. Like the “elderly” man who is now recalling her place in his life, she is an avid collector of anecdotes and something of a religious itinerant, having journeyed from one devotional extreme to another over the course of her experience, living up and down the scale of social distinction, since the early years of the Restoration, in a fashion that recalls the several flights of backwards stairs that lead to her present lodgings. She prizes good character, male protection, and intelligent conversation so highly that when Franklin finds cheaper rooms that might help him save more money, she cuts her rent to keep him. Together they feast on words, as much as bread, butter, ale, and anchovies, echoing the experience of Josiah Franklin’s Boston dinner table or the hot-water-gruel society in Watts’s composing room.

Among the anecdotes that Franklin’s landlady shares with him is a joke she tells about a maiden lady recluse now living in her garret, venerating Saint Veronica, and devoting her inherited income to charity. Hoping to be a nun but
unable to find a nunnery in a country that agreed with her, she had returned to England as a young woman to set up a personal cloister above the Italian warehouse:

Accordingly she had given all her estate to charitable Uses, reserving only Twelve Pounds a Year to live on, and out of this Sum she still gave a great deal in Charity, living her self on Water-gruel only, and using no Fire but to boil it. She had lived many Years in that Garret, being permitted to remain there gratis by successive Catholic Tenants of the House below, as they deemed it a Blessing to have her there. A Priest visited her, to confess her every Day. I have ask’d her, says my Landlady, how she, as she liv’d, could possibly find so much Employment for a Confessor? O, says she, it is impossible to avoid vain Thoughts. (A, 103)

The landlady’s mild joke points to another, comic instance of foppery in morals in the memoir, one similar to the anecdote of the chastened neighbor who wanted his ax to be as bright as a mirror until experience taught him to check his own idealism. Franklin and this reclusive lady share an appreciation for the pervasive presence of vanity in life, as well as a taste for hot water-gruel. Like Franklin, too, she is living out a bold and arduous project in the pursuit of moral perfection, embodying a number of the virtues that Franklin will later enumerate in the second fragment of the memoir: temperance, frugality, cleanliness, and humility, as well as chastity and tranquility, judging from the “cheerful and polite” demeanor with which she entertains an inquisitive young guest. They are, in some respects, mirrors of one another.

When Franklin pays her a visit, he surveys her austere surroundings as if he were taking the measure of one of the Interpreter’s “significant” exhibits in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*: “The Room was clean,” he recalls, “but had no other Furniture than a Matras, a Table with a Crucifix and Book, a Stool, which she gave me to sit on, and a Picture over the Chimney of St. Veronica, displaying her Handkerchief with the miraculous Figure of Christ’s bleeding face on it, which she explained to me with great Seriousness.” The import of this scene both echoes and inverts Uncle Benjamin’s ancestral anecdote of the Bible and the joint stool, grouping the book and the stool with other ordinary items of furniture, rather than presenting them as emblems of an intense inner life. Even in her retirement, Franklin’s devout hostess takes external display with an alarming degree of seriousness—a fact that the memoir quietly stresses by reducing to mere externals the significance of her pious example. “She look’d pale,” Franklin remarks as he concludes the account of his visit, “but was never
sick, and I give it as another Instance on how small an Income Life and Health may be supported.”

Franklin himself quickly proves to be much the greatest curiosity in this compact section of the memoir. The Water-American transmits his swimming skills, in only two miraculous lessons, to a fellow worker from Watts’s printing house named Wygate, with whom he shared a love of languages and reading. With some of the fervor of Saint Veronica’s devotee, the pupil soon urges his teacher to demonstrate his abilities to a company of “Gentleman” as they are all returning from a rowing excursion on the Thames:

I stript and leapt into the River, and swam from near Chelsea to Blackfryars, performing on the way many Feats of Activity both upon and under Water, that surpriz’d and pleas’d those to whom they were Novelties. I had from a Child been ever delighted with this Exercise, had studied and practis’d all Thevenot’s Motions and Positions, added some of my own, aiming at the graceful and easy, as well as the Useful. All these I took this Occasion of exhibiting to the Company, and was much flatter’d by their Admiration. And Wygate, who was desirous of becoming a Master, grew more and more attach’d to me, on that account, as well as from the Similarity of our Studies. He at length propos’d to me travelling all over Europe together, supporting ourselves everywhere by working at our Business. (A, 104)

“Our Business” was journeyman compositor, a skill with a long-standing tradition of itinerancy behind it, as talented pressmen wandered from city to city, across Europe, to meet the shifting demands of the printing industry. This triumph of external display in the Thames, however, briefly tempts Franklin to capitalize on his mastery of motions and positions by becoming a swimming instructor to the sons of English gentlemen, a shallow destiny that neatly captures the superficial nature of Franklin’s London attachments. His confidante and adviser, Thomas Denham, has little difficulty replacing Wygate’s prospective business proposal with another, enticing Franklin to abandon printing altogether and return to Philadelphia as his merchant clerk. Like Collins before him, Wygate represents another of the impermanent emotional bonds with which Franklin fills the first fragment of the memoir. But unlike Thomas Denham, Wygate’s commitment to this friendship seems implicitly self-centered rather than disinterested, a speculation conducted on his own “account” rather than an outgrowth of strong personal feeling.

Not all the emotional bonds in this section of Franklin’s story are equally
impermanent. Among the anecdotes from his early years that he shares with his son, one episode in particular captures his remarkable ability to impose dramatic form on the interplay between inner and outer life that characterizes his ethical experience: to link an outward propensity for display, with its attendant hunger for admiration, to more substantial inner attributes. This memory too involves the subtle exchange of identities that Franklin had begun to explore in the 1771 fragment of the memoir with his portraits of William Keith or Samuel Keimer and that continues with his amusing London landlady, her saintly lodger, and Wygate. Like those portraits, too, this passage invokes a broader biographical perspective, addressing the full scope of Franklin's life, as well as focusing on the obscure people and unimportant events from his youth that he appears to dismiss in 1784, as he prepares to take up later, more public portions of his story.

Shortly before the abortive voyage to England that interrupts his marriage plans with Deborah Read, Franklin develops a close friendship with three young Philadelphia clerks that anticipates the much larger, more formal, and more celebrated Junto that he will organize among his friends a few years later. Charles Osborne, Joseph Watson, and James Ralph, along with Franklin, are drawn together by their common love of reading and by the enjoyment of one another's company. But these four readers differ from, as well as resemble, each other. Each of their characters, too, is a compound of precarious balances, and the incident with which Franklin brings them to life illustrates the precariousness of life itself.

Osborne and Watson both clerk for the Philadelphia scrivener, Charles Brockden, and apparently hope to make careers in law or politics. Ralph clerks for a merchant, but as Franklin quickly makes clear, in the concise portrait that he offers of this group, they form an inherently unstable quartet, in spite of these superficially clear career paths:

Watson was a pious sensible young Man, of great Integrity. The others rather more lax in their Principles of Religion, particularly Ralph, who as well as Collins had been unsettled by me, for which they both made me suffer. Osborne was sensible, candid, frank, sincere, and affectionate to his Friends; but in litterary Matters too fond of Criticizing. Ralph, was ingenious, genteel in his Manners, and extreamly eloquent; I think I never knew a prettier Talker. Both of them great Admirers of Poetry, and began to try their Hands in little Pieces. Many
pleasant Walks we four had together on Sundays into the Woods near Skuykill, where we read to one another and conferr’d on what we read. (A, 90)

James Ralph’s conspicuous skill as a “Talker” is the first disquieting sign in Franklin’s pages that he possesses a more superficial nature than either Osborne or Watson; “Were you Doers or Talkers only?” is the dismissive question that awaits John Bunyan’s pilgrims at Judgment Day. The memoir’s quick descent from the eloquent to the pretty, in its characterization of Ralph’s gifts, anticipates the more crucial descents of Ralph’s subsequent experience. The anecdote that follows pays tribute to Ralph’s talents, at the same time that it separates these four companions along lines that roughly correspond to the inward and outward spheres of experience that Franklin will build into his system of virtues and precepts.

The two admirers and practitioners of poetry, Ralph and Osborne, are direct and envious competitors. Watson—by far the least verbal presence in this episode—brings the least contaminated character to the group. Franklin is an agent of ethical unsettlement, perhaps, but his expressive abilities, like Watson’s, appear to fall short of the standards that Osborne and Ralph apply to one another. These two ultimately spark a quarrel over the practicality of poetry as a profession, leading to an ingenious contest and a memorable joke:

Ralph was inclin’d to pursue the Study of Poetry, not doubting but he might become eminent in it and make his Fortune by it, alledging that the best Poets must when they first began to write, make as many faults as he did. Osborne dissuaded him, assur’d him he had no Genius for Poetry, and advis’d him to think of nothing beyond the Business he was bred to; that in the mercantile way tho’ he had no Stock, he might by his Diligence and Punctuality recommend himself to Employment as a Factor, and in time acquire wherewith to trade on his own Account. I approv’d the amusing one’s self with Poetry now and then, so far as to improve one’s Language but no farther. On this it was propos’d that we should each of us at our next Meeting produce a Piece of our own Composing, in order to improve by our mutual Observations, Criticisms and Corrections. (A, 90)

The list of virtues from the second part of the memoir is once more in evidence here, as if Franklin had his ivory memorandum book of ideals and precepts handy as a narrative guide. The voice of Moderation in this little scene belongs to Franklin himself, who is clearly echoing the dismissive views of his father, but without Josiah’s contemptuous conviction that “Verse-makers
were generally Beggars.” Watson is Silent, out of his reserves of good sense perhaps, while Osborne endorses Frugality and Industry, at the same time that he disparages Ralph’s dream for its implicit vanity as well as for its imprudence. Order and Resolution play modest roles in the group’s plan to come up with a way of testing various claims for and against the study of poetry and improving by one another’s criticisms.

Faults and corrections, beauties and defects, are the objects of this composition contest, but they are equally attributes of character in each of its participants. In his piety and integrity, Watson possesses the most potent virtues of the four, but one might argue that his personal reserve prevents him from exerting an influence for good on the others that might counteract the effects of Franklin’s corrosive skepticism. “Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself,” is Franklin’s motto for Silence; Watson seems deficient in beneficial speech. Osborne’s candor and sincerity are obvious counterweights to Watson’s reticence, but his critical spirit—like the insolent and overbearing behavior that leads Franklin to add Humility to his list of virtues—is the source of the mild atmosphere of antagonism that ignites the competition. While a middle ground of sorts, Franklin’s own lukewarm approval of poetry as a device for improving vocabulary has no effect whatever on either of his voluble companions. It is a forecast of his complete failure to produce a poem for the others to judge, the first of a series of broken promises on which this complex memory turns.

But the poem itself hovers over this story like the presence of the now-famous writer who is composing it. Though the memoir does not say as much, it may have been the pious and sensible Watson who suggested that each contestant produce a version of the eighteenth psalm as a display of his verbal powers. The choice of text is ambitious and significant, invoking another of the great works with which the 1771 fragment of the memoir repeatedly invites the reader to collate the autobiographical narrative in which it appears. Franklin rather blandly observes that these lines describe the “Descent of a Deity,” but any contemporary reader of his story would quickly recognize the inadequacy of that description. The eighteenth psalm is one of the few that appear twice in the Bible, once in the book of Psalms itself, detached from any specific narrative context, but once much earlier in the Old Testament as well, near the end of 2 Samuel, where its lines compose a verse memoir of David’s entire life, a summation of his outward trials and triumphs, as well as a retrospective assertion of the ethical and spiritual attributes that had sustained him.
The story of David’s reign is almost complete when the psalm begins. The rebellion of Absalom is over, and at long last the king has recovered and ceremonially reinterred the bones of Saul and Jonathan, imposing a degree of closure on his experience by honoring the remains of his oldest patron and enemy, as well as his most beloved friend. The memoir will serve some of the same purposes for Franklin, too, when he laments Watson’s premature death. The psalm takes stock of David’s achievements by describing the Lord’s fiery descent to deliver his servant from danger:

In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried to my God: and he did hear my voice out of his temple, and my cry did enter into his ears.  
Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of heaven moved and shook, because he was wroth.  
There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured: coals were kindled by it.  
He bowed the heavens also, and came down; and darkness was under his feet.  
And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly; and he was seen upon the wings of the wind.  
And he made darkness pavilions round about him, dark waters, and thick clouds of the skies.  
Through the brightness before him were coals of fire kindled.  
The Lord thundered from heaven, and the most High uttered his voice.  
And he sent out arrows, and scattered them; lightning, and discomfited them.  
And the channels of the sea appeared, the foundations of the world were discovered, at the rebuking of the Lord, at the blast of the breath of his nostrils.  

2 Samuel 22:7–16

Over fifty exultant verses allow the singer to dwell at some length on the abasement of David’s enemies, the humbling of the Philistine and Canaanite kings with whom he had fought all his life. To Franklin and his three young friends, the psalmist’s experience is equally foreign subject matter, making it all the more useful for the purposes of their poetic contest. But Franklin himself must have appreciated the uncanny pertinence of the lines to his complex circumstances in 1771, surrounded by real and potential enemies in the capital of a monarch who is hostile to the political aspirations that he represents.
This pertinence would clearly not be lost on a careful reader of the memoir who took the trouble to collate Franklin's public record with these snippets of private recollection. Lightning is Franklin's ally and protector, too, at this hazardous stage of his career, conferring on him a cultural authority derived from his scientific achievements that no colonial contemporary could equal in his negotiations with the British Ministry. As James Ralph's joke unfolds, this as-yet-to-be-realized affinity makes itself felt in the dramatic flair that Franklin brings to his role in Ralph's plan. In order to trick Osborne into revealing an unbiased opinion of Ralph's talents, Franklin agrees to present Ralph's version of the psalm as if it were his own. In the memoir Franklin retells the story with obvious pleasure, stressing the critical touch he contributed to Ralph's ruse by immediately transcribing the poem “that it might appear in my own hand.” By 1771, Franklin is the last surviving participant of the scene that follows:

Watson's Performance was read; there were some Beauties in it: but many Defects. Osborne's was read: It was much better. Ralph did it Justice, remark'd some Faults, but applauded the Beauties. He himself had nothing to produce. I was backward, seem'd desirous of being excus'd, had not had sufficient Time to correct; &c. but no Excuse could be admitted, produce I must. It was read and repeated; Watson and Osborne gave up the Contest; and join'd in applauding it immoderately. Ralph only made some Criticisms and propos'd some Amendments, but I defended my Text. Osborne was against Ralph, and told him he was no better a Critic than Poet; so he dropped the Argument. As they two went home together, Osborne express'd himself still more strongly in favour of what he thought my Production, having restrain'd himself before as he said, lest I should think it Flattery. But who would have imagin'd says he, that Franklin had been capable of such a Performance; such Painting, such Force! Such Fire! he has even improv'd the Original! In his common Conversation, he seems to have no Choice of Words; he hesitates and blunders; and yet, good God, how he writes! (A, 91)

Ralph's words are responsible for the quality of the writing that Osborne admires, but Franklin's “performance” brought the lines to life, beginning with his sham excuses and extending through a defense of “his” text against the changes suggested (sincerely or not) by the poem's actual author. Though a bumbling speaker on “common” occasions, Franklin implies that he is capable of remarkable expressive powers on uncommon ones, eclipsing the Bible itself in Osborne's overwrought opinion.
The episode concludes with a rapid disposition of the lives of its participants. Ralph is “cur’d” of his delusive poetic dreams by a disparaging couplet in Pope’s *Dunciad*—a kind of death that precedes his much more prosaic success as a London pamphleteer. But even this equivocal form of immortality is denied Franklin’s other two friends. Watson “died in my Arms a few Years after,” he writes, the only hint that the memoir offers of the depth of this particular friendship but all the more telling a disclosure for the unexpected glimpse of intimacy that it provides. He was “much lamented,” Franklin confesses, “being the best of our set” (A, 91). After establishing a successful legal career in the West Indies, Osborne too died young. He and Franklin, however, shared a final joke between them. They agreed before Osborne’s departure that the first to die was pledged to visit the survivor “and acquaint him how he found things in that Separate State,” but Osborne “never fulfilled his Promise.” Franklin’s inconspicuous pun captures the playful irreverence of this youthful friendship, along with a much older writer’s wistful recognition of life’s indifference both to individual promise and to our promises, an outgrowth of the half century of experience with his own limited powers of amendment that Franklin brings to the telling of this story.