From the moment that Franklin begins writing his memoir, he conceives of it as a record of excuses. The book as a whole, he insists, is an indulgence of an old man’s natural inclination to reminisce about his past. Franklin apologizes for doing so, in the memoir’s opening sentences, but vanity entices him to continue, consoled by the thought that readers (unlike listeners) need not pretend to be a polite audience. This convenient by-product of writing is also the writer’s most comprehensive excuse. Tabulating personal “errata” as Franklin does in the first section of his story is one way of apologizing for them, at the same time that it offers him a chance to explain and sometimes to excuse his behavior. He took unfair advantage of his brother’s conflict with the Massachusetts Assembly to evade the terms of his secret apprenticeship, Franklin admits, but his brother’s hot temper and tyrannical behavior were too much to bear. James “was otherwise not an ill-natur’d Man,” Franklin concedes, before taking some of the blame for their quarrels upon himself: “Perhaps I was too saucy and provoking” (A, 70).

After his Boston companion, John Collins, decides to join Franklin in Philadelphia, Collins’s drinking debts tempt Franklin to commit “one of the first
great Errata of my Life”: loaning Collins money that he was supposed to be holding in trust. This lapse, Franklin notes, confirms his father’s judgment that, at eighteen, he was “too young to manage Business of Importance” (A, 86). But an inability to say no to a desperate friend is at least some excuse, particularly at Franklin’s age. More substantial excuses account for the broken structure of the memoir itself. “The Affairs of the Revolution,” Franklin explained, were responsible for the first and longest interruption in his draft, the thirteen years that separate the book’s first and second sections. And his great distance from home, as he wrote at Passy in 1784, would force him to rely on an imperfect memory as he continued his narrative.

Four years later, Franklin once again called attention to the handicaps he faced, explaining that the war had resulted in the loss of many of the records that he had hoped to use, now that he was home, to help organize the extensive section of the memoir he began writing in August 1788. Only a single “little Paper” survives as a starting point, the 1731 memorandum of “Observations on my Reading History” that in itself is both a call to action and an excuse for not acting. The “great Occasion” that the “Observations” identify for mitigating the partisan cycles of the past prompts Franklin’s encouragement for whoever decides to take up the cause, but Franklin himself is careful to withhold a wholehearted personal commitment to the attempt, at least in so many words. Ultimately, circumstances interfere with his plans—the demands of the printing business, “my multifarious Occupations public and private”—time goes by, and the opportunity to please God by forming a United Party for Virtue is gone.

As Franklin begins to itemize what he actually did accomplish during the years when he was postponing his great and extensive project for worldwide reform, he often finds it necessary to continue making excuses for tactics that he suspects some readers might deem questionable. The establishment of Philadelphia’s hospital is a case in point. Franklin’s “particular” friend Thomas Bond had initiated the project in 1751 but ran into difficulty acquiring subscriptions to support it:

At length he came to me, with the Compliment that he found there was no such thing as carrying a public Spirited Project through, without my being concern’d in it; “for, says he, I am often ask’d by those to whom I propose Subscribing, Have you consulted Franklin upon this Business? and what does he think of it? And when I tell them that I have not, (supposing it rather out of your Line)
they do not subscribe, but say they will consider of it.” I enquir’d into the Nature, and probable Utility of his Scheme, and receiving from him a very satisfactory Explanation, I not only subscrib’d to it myself, but engag’d heartily in the Design of Procuring Subscriptions from others. (A, 199–200)

This friendship was apparently particular in more senses than one. Once Franklin removes himself from consideration as a potential excuse for prospective donors—and once Bond makes his own excuses for failing to consult Franklin in the first place—the rate of subscriptions increases. But when the fund raising bogs down again, Franklin takes the idea to the Pennsylvania Assembly in the form of a bill designed to obviate objections from “Country Members” who believe the hospital will benefit Philadelphia more than the outlying districts of the province. A “conditional” clause in Franklin’s proposal engages to tap public funds only after private subscribers have raised a significant amount of capital on their own, allowing reluctant members of the Assembly to justify an act of legislative charity that they believe will never cost them anything.

But Franklin’s clause “work’d both ways,” the memoir explains, securing enough votes for the bill to pass and giving a boost to private contributions at the same time, once people understood that “every Man’s donation would be doubled” by the Assembly appropriation as soon as the private subscription figure had been met. “A convenient and handsome Building was soon erected,” Franklin reports, “the Institution has by constant Experience been found useful, and flourishes to this Day. And I do not remember any of my political Manoeuvres, the Success of which gave me at the time more Pleasure. Or that in after-thinking of it, I more easily excus’d my-self for having made some Use of Cunning” (A, 201). Like the legislative tactic that it describes, this last excuse too works both ways: it is an apology for an infraction that, in this instance at least, Franklin has not really committed. Nothing in the bill that he proposes to support the hospital subscription is intended to fool the members who consider it. If anyone in this episode exercises cunning, in its least palatable form, it is the handful of assemblymen who vote to endorse an appropriation that they never expect to be asked to supply, trusting that private generosity would fall short of its goal.

But a misplaced excuse, in its turn, can be meaningful. In offering it, Franklin invites his readers to exercise their own cunning as they move through the dense, anecdotal fabric of this section of his narrative, marveling at the ex-
traordinary diversity of the vocational “line” that he inscribes across the public affairs of his province. Like the passages portraying Franklin’s relationship with George Whitefield, these pages too are full of incidents in which Franklin and others repeatedly make shift to address the mixed purposes of existence, devising tactics that invariably work both ways to accommodate, even if only in passing, the incompatible interests of a diverse and often fractured community. “Join, or Die,” the caption of Franklin’s serpent cartoon, implies a dramatic finality to the choice it depicts that experience does not always confirm. Collective interest and individual well-being repeatedly negotiate the terms of their coexistence in the longest, sustained section of Franklin’s book.1

AT MANY POINTS IN HIS MEMOIR, Franklin clearly enjoys describing the clash of wits or interests that often elicits from him and from his various collaborators some decisive exercise of cunning. The verbal “Evasions” that Pennsylvania’s Quaker assemblymen employ when they vote to appropriate money for military campaigns without openly violating their pacifist principles are too transparent to deceive anyone, but that transparency is in many respects their chief virtue. Granting funds “for the King’s Use” without restricting those uses in any way is a means of signaling compliance with royal demands without taking direct responsibility for the consequences. An authorization directing the governor to buy “Bread, Flour, Wheat, or other Grain” for the public benefit prompts some of the governor’s council to advise embarrassing the Quaker Assembly members who framed it by pretending not to recognize their calculated euphemism: “But he reply’d, ‘I shall take the Money, for I understand very well their Meaning; Other Grain, is Gunpowder’; which he accordingly bought; and they never objected to it” (A, 189). Franklin briefly thinks of adopting similar tactics to accommodate the scruples of the Quaker majority in the Union Fire Company by first gaining its approval to spend money on a “fire engine” and then buying a “Great Gun” for the city battery with the proceeds. “I see,” a friend remarks when Franklin explains this plan, “you have improv’d by being so long in the Assembly” (A, 190).

Cunning in this sense calls for an audience that is appreciative, and in some instances complicit, in order to register its success. The practical joke that Franklin and James Ralph pull off when Franklin presents Ralph’s version of the eighteenth psalm as his own is not fully realized until the two confess their trick and expose Osborne’s critical prejudices to the mild ridicule of a circle of young men who value their friendship more than their wit. Josiah Franklin puts
cunning to a benign use when he takes his son on walks around Boston specifically to study the boy’s inclinations toward various trades in the hope of using them to keep him close to home—a tactic that Franklin ultimately admires. By contrast, Franklin’s first courtship, managed by his Philadelphia tenants the Godfreys, is an exercise in cunning gone awry when Franklin begins to suspect that the motives of his prospective in-laws are crudely manipulative.

Mrs. Godfrey had singled out the “very deserving” daughter of a relative as a good match for Franklin and “a serious Courtship on my Part ensu’d”:

The old Folks encourag’d me by continual Invitations to Supper, and by leaving us together, till at length it was time to explain. Mrs. Godfrey manag’d our little Treaty. I let her know that I expected as much Money with their Daughter as would pay off my Remaining Debt for the Printinghouse, which I believe was not then above a Hundred Pounds. She brought me Word they had no such Sum to spare. I said they might mortgage their House in the Loan Office. The Answer to this after some Days was, that they did not approve the Match; that on Enquiry of Bradford they had been inform’d the Printing Business was not a profitable one, the Types would soon be worn out and more wanted, that S. Keimer and D. Harry had fail’d one after the other, and I should probably soon follow them; and therefore I was forbidden the House, and the Daughter shut up. Whether this was a real Change of Sentiment, or only Artifice, on a Supposition of our being too far engag’d in Affection to retract, and therefore that we should steal a Marriage, which would leave them at Liberty to give or withhold what they pleas’d, I know not: But I suspected the latter, resented it, and went no more. Mrs. Godfrey brought me afterwards some more favourable Accounts of their Disposition, and would have drawn me on again: but I declared absolutely my Resolution to have nothing more to do with that Family. (A, 127–28)

These incidents depict a collision between passions and interests that a very young Franklin is not yet equipped to manage with the kind of skill that he brings to Thomas Bond’s hospital project. The old folks misjudge the depth of Franklin’s feelings, as well as the speed with which he was capable of moving from serious courtship to stubborn resentment. He in turn misreads an implicit offer to negotiate from one settlement “sum” to another—not an unusual step in contemporary marriage arrangements.

After some days of reflection and a visit with the wily Andrew Bradford—who may have sensed an opportunity to hamper the progress of a dangerous young competitor—the parents decide to try to undermine Franklin’s confidence in
his future as a means of chastening him. But Franklin responds by dismissing the whole family out of hand. The Godfreys in turn resent Franklin’s behavior and move out of his house. “I resolv’d to take no more Inmates,” Franklin writes, but the brief satisfactions of this good-riddance gesture quickly lead to a series of risky sexual “Intrigues” that make Mrs. Godfrey’s solicitations seem trivial. The passions of youth are “hard-to-be-govern’d,” Franklin famously concedes, but not all forms of self-government are equal. The instances of cunning that he most relishes, throughout his book, are those that, unlike “Artifice,” enable the little treaties that are necessary among people without forcing the parties to swallow their pride, their principles, or their dignity.2

Cunning as a tool of accommodation—as a means of exerting influence by appearing to relinquish it—is a central feature of Franklin’s public life, but its origins ultimately lie in the habits of private speech that he describes at some length twice in his book and dramatizes repeatedly as the 1788 fragment of the memoir unfolds. Early in the book’s first section, Franklin explains how he gradually abandoned the “very artful and expert” tactics of argument that he had polished on John Collins or Samuel Keimer and learned to avoid using words “that give the Air of Positiveness to an Opinion” (A, 65). An opinionated manner, Franklin concludes, “seldom fails to disgust, tends to create Opposition, and to defeat every one of those Purposes for which Speech was given us”:

For if you would inform, a positive dogmatical Manner in advancing your Sentiments, may provoke Contradiction and prevent a candid Attention. If you wish Information and Improvement from the Knowledge of others and yet at the same time express your self as firmly fix’d in your present Opinions, modest sensible Men, who do not love Disputation, will probably leave you undisturb’d in the Possession of your Error; and by such a Manner you can seldom hope to recommend your self in pleasing your Hearers, or to persuade those whose Concurrence you desire. (A, 65)

Lovers of argument, Franklin suggests, tend to listen only for opportunities to argue, withholding the sort of “candid Attention” to the opinions of others that is necessary if people are to find grounds for agreement. Sensible listeners, by contrast, resist as best they can the allure of fixed opinions and withhold knowledge rather than plunge into disputes. Pleasure and persuasion are the natural casualties in contentious exchanges, much as they prove to be natural allies (in the memoir’s pages) when modest, sensible habits prevail.
Throughout the third section of his book, Franklin sketches the personalities and policies of Pennsylvania’s colonial governors with this account of the requirements of fruitful conversation in mind. The first of these officials with whom Franklin has public dealings, George Thomas, is the astute listener who accepts the flimsy euphemism of the Quaker assemblymen when he needs to purchase “other Grain” or gunpowder for the province’s defense. After the Assembly balks at crafting a militia law, out of the same sectarian scruples, Governor Thomas shows his gratitude for Franklin’s initiative in forming a private militia association by inviting him to meetings of his council and seizing on Franklin’s suggestion that the governor proclaim a public fast “to promote Reform, and implore the Blessing of Heaven on our Undertaking” (A, 184).

Deferring to Franklin’s New England “Education,” the province secretary leaves the wording of the proclamation to him: “I drew it in the accustomed Stile,” Franklin wrote, and saw it properly “divulg’d” throughout the province: “This gave the Clergy of the different Sects an Opportunity of Influencing their Congregations to join the Association” (A, 185). Both Franklin and Governor Thomas clearly recognize that they are acting as much out of political opportunism as piety in taking this step, but the memoir implies that the province’s clergymen too are searching for an excuse that the proclamation conveniently provides for exhorting their flocks to take up arms in their own defense. Franklin knows how to phrase this public appeal in such a way that all of Pennsylvania’s contentious sects (except the Quakers) combine to support the militia association. “If the Peace had not soon interven’d,” Franklin notes with mock regret, the militia would have been a near universal success.3

Governor Thomas was an equally enthusiastic proponent of Franklin’s stove, offering him a patent on the design that Franklin declines out of the same principle of conversational generosity that influences his conception of the uses of speech. The memoir cites the complete title of Franklin’s stove pamphlet as an instructive instance of modest self-assertion: An Account of the New-Invented PENNSYLVANIA FIRE PLACES: Wherein their Construction and manner of Operation is particularly explained; their Advantages above every other Method of warming Rooms demonstrated; and all Objections that have been raised against the Use of them answered and obviated. &c (A, 191). Franklin’s Junto friend Robert Grace is able to profit from casting the plates for these stoves, and a London ironmonger plagiarizes the design and makes a fortune, but Franklin insists that “invention” is not a commodity and declares himself averse to patent or property disputes.
As the pamphlet’s elaborate title implies, Franklin explains, demonstrates, answers, and obviates, all with a considerable degree of patience and restraint in what is clearly a quarrelsome, as well as a cold, climate, and all without naming the inventor of this newly invented device. The memoir introduces the stove episode just at the point where the Quaker dilemmas over purchasing gunpowder and financing fire engines become moot when peace is declared. But this final Pennsylvania “fire engine,” too, seems as capable of heating the passions as of warming rooms. Franklin employs the events to underscore his stress on useful rather than explosive forms of energy, a cunning adaptation of the Promethean iconography that Turgot and many others had long attached to Franklin’s image. By 1788 the master of lightning was ready to signal his interest not in harnessing or deflecting celestial power but in coaxing fire, along with water through the social offices of the Union Fire Company, to serve practical human needs.  

James Hamilton eventually succeeds George Thomas as Pennsylvania’s governor and puts Franklin’s talents to some of the same confidential uses as his predecessor did. It is Hamilton who names Franklin to two sensitive diplomatic commissions charged to negotiate with groups of native peoples during the first stages of the Seven Years’ War. The second of these gives Franklin a chance to suggest a plan of political union to the colonial representatives gathered at Albany in 1754 to discuss mutual defense interests with the Iroquois. But Hamilton is nearly alone among Pennsylvania’s governing officials in supporting Franklin’s ambitious proposal. Worn out by this and other arguments with the Assembly arising from the Penn family’s insistence that their personal estates be exempt from provincial taxation, Hamilton finally resigns his post (A, 212). Robert Hunter Morris takes Hamilton’s place and quickly offers Franklin a chance to dramatize both the uses and abuses of speech in human affairs. This section of the story is cunning in ways that would have seemed particularly obvious to Franklin’s contemporaries, who recognized the family tie between the Robert Hunter Morris of Franklin’s book and his nephew, Gouverneur Morris, one of Pennsylvania’s wealthiest and most outspoken delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, which had completed its work in Philadelphia less than a year before Franklin resumed writing his book. 

Franklin had known the elder Morris for some years before he succeeded Hamilton as Pennsylvania’s governor. When the two first meet in their new relation as natural opponents in the proprietary government—Franklin as spokesman for the Assembly and Morris as the executive appointee of the
Penns—Morris makes clear that he is looking forward to the same intractable political clashes that had driven Hamilton to resign: “My dear Friend, says he, pleasantly,” when he and Franklin meet in New York as Morris is traveling to his new post, “how can you advise my avoiding Disputes. You know I love disputing; it is one of my greatest Pleasures” (A, 212):

He had some Reason for loving to dispute, being eloquent, an acute Sophister, and therefore generally successful in argumentative Conversation. He had been brought up to it from a Boy, his Father (as I have heard) accustoming his Children to dispute with one another for his Diversion while sitting at Table after Dinner. But I think the Practice was not wise, for in the Course of my Observation, these disputing, contradicting and confuting People are generally unfortunate in their Affairs. They get Victory sometimes, but they never get Good Will, which would be of more use to them. We parted, he going to Philadelphia, and I to Boston. In returning, I met at New York with the Votes of the Assembly, by which it appear’d that notwithstanding his Promise to me, he and the House were already in high Contention, and it was a continual Battle between them, as long as he retain’d the Government. (A, 212–13)

Franklin was a party to these battles, drafting Assembly responses to the governor and his English patrons in exchanges that, over time, grew “indecently abusive.” The two men nevertheless remained on cordial terms. For Morris, dispute was largely a game that left his private friendships unaffected. But Franklin proves equally deft at exploiting the same boundary between public adversary and private companion, putting individual good nature to political use in another instance of the propensity to work both ways in this portion of Franklin’s story. The memoir includes a deliberately provocative account of a social occasion involving Franklin and Morris that turns what had seemed to be a brief private respite from the province’s growing level of political animosity into a complicated means of focusing and intensifying it, for Franklin’s readers as well as for the participants in the anecdote.

On an impulse at another accidental meeting, this time in the streets of Philadelphia, Morris invited Franklin home for supper to join a group of the governor’s friends. During the wine and “gay Conversation” that followed the meal, Morris joked about the advantages that Sancho Panza saw in having responsibility for “a Government of Blacks,” since he could sell his people whenever they became uncooperative—a none-too-cunning introduction of Don Quixote into the after-dinner discussion that quickly leads to a breach in
social decorum. Why don’t you sell your troublesome Quaker colleagues in the Assembly? one of Morris’s guests abruptly asks Franklin; “the Proprietor would give you a good Price.” Franklin answers in a way that demonstrates how quickly these political quarrels could verge on indecency: “The governor, says I, has not yet black’d them enough” (A, 214). Indeed, the memoir continues, the members of the Assembly “wip’d off his Colouring as fast as he laid it on, and plac’d it in return thick upon his own Face; so that finding he was likely to be negrify’d himself, he as well as Mr. Hamilton, grew tir’d of the Contest, and quitted the Government.”

At no other point in Franklin’s book is today’s reader more likely to cringe than at this example of crude racial humor. But in prompting such a visceral response, Franklin’s language also dramatizes, with stunning immediacy, the destructive impact of speech that sacrifices good will in favor of victory. His portrait of this exchange enacts, as well as describes, the social and moral failures of Pennsylvania politics at the time. Indeed, the cunning in the passage runs deeper still, for Franklin’s contemporaries in 1788 had just endured a bruising public debate on the relations of “blackness” to government as they tried to frame a federal system that would satisfy the demands of slaveholders without driving the increasingly adamant opponents of slavery out of the union. The notorious three-fifths clause in Article 1 of the Constitution that resulted from these efforts is an exercise in proportional “blackness” that has a suggestive affinity with Franklin’s reply to the guest who invites him to sell out the rights of the Assembly to the interests of the Penns.

Franklin had been president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery for over a year when he reconstructed this long-ago supper party, resurrected its long-dead participants, and invited his reader to compare its casual racism to the views of Morris’s nephew and of Franklin himself, as both men slowly outgrew the commonplace bigotry of their time. During a heated exchange on the floor of the Federal Convention, in the summer of 1787, Gouverneur Morris had attacked the three-fifths compromise with memorable force. James Madison took careful note of his words:

The admission of slaves into the representation [Morris insisted] when fairly explained comes to this: that the inhabitant of Georgia and S.C. who goes to the Coast of Africa, and in defiance of the most sacred laws of humanity tears away his fellow creatures from their dearest connections & damns them to the most cruel bondage, shall have more votes in a Govt. instituted for protection of the
rights of mankind, than the Citizen of Pa or N. Jersey who views with a laudable horror, so nefarious a practice."

Rather than “saddle posterity with such a Constitution,” Morris continued, he would prefer to see the nation tax itself heavily enough to buy and emancipate all the slaves in the United States once and for all. Eventually Morris brought himself to accept the new Constitution, including the three-fifths clause, but the issue was only postponed, not resolved, a predicament that the Philadelphia Convention explicitly recognized by providing for an opportunity to outlaw American participation in the international slave trade—though not American slavery itself—twenty years after the Constitution’s ratification. The memoir incorporates a cunning allusion directed at this intractable “contest,” too, by depicting Robert Morris’s weary withdrawal from the provincial government, immediately after describing his dinner party, a kind of secession that belies Morris’s lifelong love of disputes.

No narrative necessity explains Franklin’s decision to describe Morris’s supper party in his memoir more than thirty years after it took place and more than a quarter century after Morris’s death, but its presence indirectly crystallizes deep anxieties among Franklin’s contemporaries in 1788, as well as among the parties to the United States Constitution over two centuries later. Long after the proprietary rights of the Penn family had ceased to be an issue, the racial mockery with which Robert Hunter Morris and Benjamin Franklin chose to illuminate their thoughts during a dinner party in 1755 evoked profound divisions over a far more explosive “proprietary” claim, one entailing bitter debates over how many congressional seats would be sufficient to satisfy slaveholders that their black population counted in the legislative scale. Was the Constitution’s three-fifths provision adequate to acknowledge a slave’s presence among the “people” without conceding rights to slaves? The memoir’s wording applies a cunning twist to this painful question.

The replies that Franklin had drafted, on the Assembly’s behalf, to Morris’s combative messages reached the point where “one might have imagined that when we met we could hardly avoid cutting Throats” (A, 213). The cutting of throats over explosive differences remained a very real possibility among America’s contending ideological camps in 1788, much as Benjamin Vaughan had feared a few years earlier when he urged Franklin to finish his book and as Franklin himself had discerned in 1731 when he took note of the hopeless confusion of history. This episode is the first of several in the longest section
Some Uses of Cunning

of Franklin’s book that responds, with considerable subtlety, to the violent passions of his times. In doing so, it finds another means of working both ways by quietly inviting the reader to situate the events that the memoir describes in two contexts at once, looking back and looking forward, for hints at how best to address an uncertain future.6

The most extended of Franklin’s many excuses in the 1788 section of his book is the apology that he offers for taxing the reader’s patience with the description of such “trifling Matters” as paving, lighting, and sweeping city streets. This apology too is double-edged. Like the account of Robert Morris’s supper party, it directs attention toward a number of different subjects and settings at once: the past and the present, London and Philadelphia, the privileged and the destitute, the blind and the farsighted. Beneath these comparatively innocuous passages, too, extraordinary forces are at work: an interplay of destructive and constructive energies that Franklin ultimately hopes his heirs will learn to manage.

Improvements in the quality of urban life were seldom far from Franklin’s mind, an echo of his boyhood interest in the utility of stone wharves. The contrast between the “beautiful Regularity” of Philadelphia’s street grid and “the Disgrace of suffering those Streets to remain long unpav’d” eventually prompted him to help pave a small area near the Jersey market to reduce the mud and dust that plagued pedestrians as well as the owners of the nearby shops and houses. The convenience of this arrangement, coupled with the labor of “a poor industrious Man” whom Franklin hired to sweep the paved area twice a week, convinced the citizens to accept a tax for paving the entire city. When the bill that Franklin drafted for this purpose came before the Assembly, the members added a provision for introducing street lights “with the Idea of enlightning all the City” at the same time, initially with “Globe Lamps” from London that quickly grew smoky, were prone to breaking, and hard to replace. Franklin improved the lamp design, using four flat panes of glass ventilated by a funnel to allow the smoke to escape:

By this means they were kept clean, and did not grow dark in a few Hours as the London Lamps do, but continu’d bright till Morning; and an accidental Stroke would generally break but a single Pane, easily repair’d. I have sometimes wonder’d that the Londoners did not, from the Effect Holes in the Bottom of the Globe Lamps us’d at Vauxhall, have in keeping them clean, learn to have such Holes in their Street lamps. But those Holes being made for another purpose,
viz. to communicate Flame more suddenly to the Wick, by a little Flax hanging
down thro’ them, the other Use of letting in Air seems not to have been thought
of. And therefore, after the Lamps have been lit a few Hours, the Streets of London
are very poorly illuminated. (A, 204)

These trifling matters require only a few verbal adjustments on Franklin’s
part in order to form a little parable of the difference between Philadelphia’s
“enlightning” energies and London’s perverse adherence to its murky “Globe.”
One city is systematically emerging from its urban “Quagmire,” as Franklin
calls it, tapping the labor of its poorest citizens as well as the taxable property
of its most prosperous ones, whereas the other, for all its wealth and imperial
reach, is inexplicably committed to darkness.

The memoir repeats the parable almost immediately, with intriguing modi-
fications, by describing a proposal that Franklin once made to John Fothergill,
“a great Promoter of useful Projects,” for cleaning London’s streets. This time
the plan begins not with a clash between beautiful regularity and disgraceful
filth but in an accidental encounter that Franklin describes with one of Lon-
don’s desperately poor scavengers. During his long periods of residence in the
city between 1757 and 1775 as the agent for various colonial assemblies, an inef-
ficient system for keeping its streets passable did exist, relying on “poor People
with Brooms” to maintain temporary pathways through the muck until it was
periodically shoveled into carts and hauled away. An intimate glimpse of this
system in action awakens the latent civil engineer that Franklin often seems to
resemble in this section of his book:

I found at my Door in Craven Street one Morning a poor Woman sweeping my
Pavement with a birch Broom. She appeared very pale and feeble as just come
out of a Fit of Sickness. I ask’d who employ’d her to sweep there. She said, “No-
body; but I am very poor and in Distress, and I sweeps before Gentlefolkeses
Doors, and hopes they will give me something.” I bid her sweep the whole Street
clean and I would give her a Shilling. This was at 9 a Clock. At 12 she came for
the Shilling. From the slowness I saw at first in her Working, I could scarce be-
lieve that the Work was done so soon, and sent my Servant to examine it, who
reported that the whole Street was swept perfectly clean, and all the Dust plac’d
in the Gutter which was in the Middle. And the next Rain wash’d it quite away,
so that the Pavement and even the Kennel were perfectly clean. I then judg’d that
if that feeble Woman could sweep such a Street in 3 Hours, a strong active Man
might have done it in half the time. (A, 205)
These sentences go out of their way to depict a collaborative exercise in urban cunning: a feeble scavenger who proves surprisingly skilled and energetic once the economic prospects are favorable, and an opportunistic colonial agent (equally dependent on the whims of “Gentlesolkeses”) who is only too eager to demonstrate “how much Sweeping might be done in a little Time,” as Franklin puts it, fully aware of the figurative history that John Bunyan too exploited when the Interpreter in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* made “sweeping” a simple emblem for far-reaching spiritual purges.7

The plan that Franklin soon sends to Fothergill, based on the lessons of this experience, provides “for the more effectual cleaning and keeping clean the streets of London and Westminster,” the commercial and the political “city,” using watchmen to contract with scavengers and supply them with “Brooms and other proper Instruments” for the job. Equally effective diplomatic or political instruments for keeping Westminster’s parliamentary chambers clean prove more elusive, as Franklin’s bitter experiences with the British Ministry will ultimately show, though London’s long summer days offer ample opportunity to accomplish the task: “For in Walking thro’ the Strand and Fleetstreet one Morning at 7 a Clock I observ’d there was not one shop open tho’ it had been Day-light and the Sun up above three Hours. The Inhabitants of London chusing voluntarily to live much by Candle Light, and sleep by Sunshine; and yet often complain a little absurdly, of the Duty on Candles and the high Price of Tallow” (A, 207). The tallow chandler’s son from Boston must have enjoyed this opportunity to profit, even if only symbolically, over a people whose political system (as Franklin had experienced it) squandered natural light.

At this point, Franklin interrupts the narrative ostensibly to apologize for its trivial nature, but in doing so he adds to these first two political fables a third variation that carries a more ominous undercurrent:

Some may think these trifling Matters not worth minding or relating. But when they consider, that tho’ Dust blown into the Eyes of a single Person or into a single Shop on a windy Day, is but of small Importance, yet the great Number of the Instances in a populous City, and its frequent Repetitions give it Weight and Consequence; perhaps they will not censure very severely those who bestow some of Attention to Affairs of this seemingly low Nature. Human Felicity is produc’d not so much by great Pieces of good Fortune that seldom happen, as by little Advantages that occur every Day. Thus if you teach a poor young Man to shave himself and keep his Razor in order, you may contribute more to the Hap-
piness of his Life than in giving him a 1000 Guineas. . . . With these Sentiments I have hazarded the few preceding Pages, hoping they may afford Hints which some time or other may be useful to a City I love, having lived many Years in it very happily; and perhaps to some of our Towns in America. (A, 207–8)

Blindness in individuals is perhaps of negligible importance, Franklin admits, but blindness in entire cities or nations has potentially tragic consequences, as England’s had at the beginning of the Revolution and as France’s recent experience was beginning to illustrate for Franklin’s contemporaries in 1789, the year during which he was writing these words. After Philadelphia’s poor but industrious street sweeper and London’s feeble scavenger, the third version of the neglected underclass that these successive paragraphs present is a young man with a razor, kept in good order, and more valuable to him in the long run than a thousand guineas. In significant respects, these details do indeed add up to hazardous sentiments, as Franklin implies, without abandoning his rhetorical guise as the giver of “hints,” a variety of cunning that informs every instance of useful speech that his book depicts.8

ROBERT HUNTER MORRIS SOUGHT TO ENTANGLE Franklin in Pennsylvania’s military affairs at least twice: first when he sent him to represent the province’s interests to Edward Braddock, the British general who was festering in Maryland over the failure of the colonial governments to provide supply wagons for his campaign against the French, and once again after Braddock’s stunning defeat in the wilderness near Fort Duquesne. Morris offered Franklin a general’s commission to continue the abortive effort to drive the French out of the Ohio Valley, an opportunity Franklin prudently declined, though he did agree to help build some forts in the Pennsylvania backcountry to defend the civilian population against raids. During this brief stint as a militia officer, Franklin has occasion to solve a minor disciplinary problem with rum. In doing so, he draws together the crude and the sophisticated incentives to goodwill represented, throughout his book, by liquor and by cunning:

We had for our Chaplain a zealous Presbyterian Minister, Mr. Beatty, who complain’d to me that the Men did not generally attend his Prayers and Exhortations. When they enlisted, they were promis’d, besides Pay and Provisions, a Gill of Rum a Day, which was punctually serv’d out to them half in the Morning and the other half in the Evening, and I observ’d they were as punctual in attending to receive it. Upon which I said to Mr. Beatty, “It is perhaps below the Dignity
of your Profession to act as Steward of the Rum. But if you were to deal it out, and only just after Prayers, you would have them all about you.” He lik’d the Thought, undertook the Office, and with the help of a few hands to measure out the Liquor executed it to Satisfaction; and never were Prayers more generally and more punctually attended. So that I thought this Method preferable to the Punishments inflicted by some military Laws for Non-Attendance on Divine Service. (A, 235)

As with the Quaker euphemisms during Governor Thomas’s administration, or the carefully crafted hospital legislation that Franklin had sponsored, this tactic too works both ways to accomplish its transparent goals. The conflation of “offices” that Franklin proposes meets the expectations of both the men and the minister, and achieves something more besides. The barrier between the chaplain and his congregation diminishes, once it becomes clear that Mr. Beatty’s zeal is not above exploiting human nature as well as chastising it. He values an audience for his prayers above his clerical dignity. At the same time, Franklin is able to dramatize the superiority of ingenious tactics over the punitive practice of “military Laws,” and the new system of daily liquor rations and prayers gives general “Satisfaction”—a term as evasive as any of the Quaker assemblymen’s euphemisms in their appropriation bills, since it carefully skirts the question of whether the prayers, the exhortations, or the rum had the most impact on the inner lives of Franklin’s men.

Assessing the inner thoughts of others is every bit as difficult as influencing them. Franklin understood the human propensity to resent instruction and resist change, instincts that are partly responsible for the silence of modest, sensible people when confronted by an argumentative dogmatist. Franklin, Mr. Beatty, and the militia are satisfied with the terms of an outward compliance that accepts the limitations of coercion, an extension of some “judicious” advice that Franklin had already quoted in his book. “Men should be taught as if you taught them not,” Pope wrote in the *Essay on Criticism*, “And things unknown propos’d as things forgot.” The memoir’s first account of Franklin’s efforts to cultivate habits of modest diffidence cites these lines to underscore his belief that argument is futile as a means of changing the convictions or securing the cooperation of others. When he returns to this subject near the end of the memoir’s 1784 fragment, he stresses the limited success that an outward compliance with reasonable rules has on his own combative nature. In this second account of the restraints that he imposes on his speech, the behav-
ioral transformation he describes is more abrupt and involves much more of a struggle on Franklin's part—details that may reflect the considerable strains of the eight years that he had just spent in France, coping with the clash of personalities and goals involved in orchestrating French support for the American Revolution.

Unlike the gradual and graceful process of verbal change, mediated by Pope's elegant couplets, that Franklin had portrayed in 1771, the second part of the memoir describes his concerted attack on a serious personal weakness. A Quaker friend, he remembered, “kindly informed me that I was generally thought proud,” so much so that he often struck others as “overbearing and rather insolent” in conversation, vices that Franklin sets out to “cure” initially by adding “Humility” to his list of twelve virtues and “giving an extensive Meaning to the Word”: “Imitate Jesus and Socrates” (A, 159). This precept is at best curious medicine for the sickness of pride, but it has a certain cunning in its design. To imitate is to concede important limitations in one's nature that preclude a close adherence to exalted models. Moreover, neither Jesus nor Socrates could finally offer much encouragement to a person hoping to please his hearers or prompt a measure of political concurrence among a group of savvy merchants, wily assemblymen, or seasoned European diplomats. For much of his public life, Franklin sought to make himself useful with the kind of audiences that preferred to martyr prophets and sages rather than honor them.9

Recognizing that his standards for achieving humility were out of reach, and probably poorly chosen as exemplars of modest diffidence, he took sterner measures by imposing rules and laws on his aggressive nature:

I made it a Rule to forbear all direct Contradiction to the Sentiments of others, and all positive Assertion of my own. I even forbid myself agreeable to the old Laws of our Junto, the Use of every Word or Expression in the Language that imported a fix'd Opinion; such as certainly, undoubtedly, &c. and I adopted instead of them I conceive, I apprehend, or I imagine a thing to be so or so, or it so appears to me at present. When another asserted something, that I thought an Error, I deny'd my self the Pleasure of contradicting him abruptly, and of showing immediately some Absurdity in his Proposition. . . . I soon found the Advantage of this Change in my Manners. The Conversations I engag'd in went on more pleasantly. The modest way in which I propos'd my Opinions, procur'd them a readier Reception and less Contradiction; I had less Mortification when I was found to be in the wrong, and I more easily prevail'd with others to give
up their Mistakes and join with me when I happen'd to be in the right. And this Mode, which I at first put on, with some violence to natural Inclination, became at length so easy and so habitual to me, that perhaps for these Fifty Years past no one has ever heard a dogmatical Expression escape me. (A, 159)

These words immediately precede Franklin’s concession that pride is the most stubborn “of our natural Passions,” finding ways to conceal and sustain itself even in the course of our efforts to achieve humility. But in declaring victory over dogmatical inclinations, Franklin slyly dramatizes their stubborn persistence: proclaiming an immodest absurdity virtually in the same breath that he asserts a half century of success at restraining his love of assertion. These words, too, are as carefully chosen as the verbal formulas that Franklin initially adopts to help change his confrontational habits. He is successful not at eliminating his aggressive instincts but at denying himself the pleasure of expressing them. The instincts themselves never cease their search for avenues of escape, just as pride strives to do, no matter how vigilantly an individual sets out to “struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases” (A, 160).

Franklin’s passing reference in this passage to the Junto’s “old Laws” is yet another cunning reminder of struggles within human nature that may not be susceptible to any tactics of containment. His original account of the Junto describes it as a school of philosophy, morals, and politics governed by “Rules” and “small pecuniary Penalties” if any member grew too impassioned during debate. At the time that he was adding humility to his list of virtues and suppressing his love of contradiction, these Junto practices were hardly old, nor did the members appear to view them in precisely the same light as “laws.” But evoking the ethical clash between a punitive Old Law and its forgiving successor allows Franklin to signal his awareness that the traditional conception of “sin” (to which pride belongs) and the Enlightenment nomenclature of “natural Passions” have a stubborn and bitter kinship that John Bunyan and George Whitefield would have been quick to recognize. In making this latest excuse for the influence of pride in his personal “History,” Franklin sets the stage for a study of the pervasive struggle with deep-seated prejudices that the third section of the memoir explores.

On a geopolitical level, this struggle takes the form of Franklin’s involvement with Edward Braddock’s military campaign. It is Braddock’s “violent Prejudices” that Franklin is initially sent to soothe, when the general cannot
collect enough wagons in the Maryland and Virginia countryside to carry his supplies. Braddock's presence in America, in turn, is an outgrowth of “Suspicions and Jealousies” in the British government aroused by the plan of colonial union that Franklin had proposed at Albany the year before Braddock's arrival—a plan that failed in part because of the mutual suspicions and jealousies of the colonies themselves. “History is full of the Errors of States and Princes,” Franklin sententiously observes, as he reflects on the series of shortsighted acts that eventually led to the American Revolution (A, 211). But states and princes alone are not the only agents given to thwarting the general good on petty or personal grounds.

The third section of the memoir makes clear that Franklin's own experience with managing suspicions and jealousies begins on a much less ambitious scale, with the careful partnership contracts that he prepared when he established his former journeymen in their own printing businesses, first in South Carolina as early as 1733, when Franklin himself had been an independent printer for barely five years:

Most of them did well, being enabled at the End of our Term, Six Years, to purchase the Types of me; and go on working for themselves, by which means several Families were raised. Partnerships often finish in Quarrels, but I was happy in this, that mine were all carry'd on and ended amicably; owing I think a good deal to the Precaution of having very explicitly settled in our Articles every thing to be done by or expected from each Partner, so that there was nothing to dispute, which Precaution I would therefore recommend to all who enter into Partnerships, for whatever Esteem Partners may have for and Confidence in each other at the time of the Contract, little Jealousies and Disgusts may arise, with Ideas of Inequality in the Care and Burthen of the Business, &c. which are attended often with Breach of Friendship and of the Connection, perhaps with Lawsuits and other Disagreeable Consequences. (A, 181)

Unlike the disastrous courtship negotiation with the Godfreys, Franklin manages these little treaties with considerable success, but like that negotiation, these contracts too anticipate on a miniature scale the great breach between England and its colonies for which much of Franklin's early life is a rehearsal. His partnership experience makes him equally effective at mediating an agreement between two groups of trustees each of which hopes to control the use of the large meetinghouse that George Whitefield's followers had constructed
but which they could not afford to maintain on their own. With Franklin’s help, the parties agree to share the building, making it available “for occasional Preachers according to the original Intention” but allowing it to be modified to accommodate “a Free School for the Instruction of poor Children,” which eventually develops into what Franklin knows as the University of Philadelphia (A, 195).

As the narrative continues to unfold, more formidable treaties prove much harder to manage and require more problematic excuses, as Franklin’s public responsibilities grow. He abandons the role of justice of the peace when he finds that “attending a few Courts, and sitting on the Bench to hear Causes” requires more legal knowledge than he possesses. “I gradually withdrew from it,” Franklin confesses, “excusing myself by my being oblig’d to attend the higher Dutys of a Legislator in the Assembly” (A, 197). The English Board of Trade and the various colonial assemblies can’t agree on whether the plan of union Franklin proposed at the Albany conference contained too much royal prerogative or too much colonial democracy, and the idea falls by the wayside, in Pennsylvania at least because a cunning member of the Assembly arranges to have the plan rejected in Franklin’s absence. Like the mediating role that Franklin had played in the founding of the Philadelphia Academy, his first participation in a negotiation with native peoples also revolves around a unique building in which the memoir stages a much darker blend of cunning and excuses.

In 1753, two years before Braddock’s arrival in America, Franklin traveled at the Assembly’s request to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, with Richard Peters and Isaac Norris to meet a delegation of Indians from several tribes who had requested reassurances of English support against the incursions of the French and their native allies from the North. The memoir glosses over these preliminary details, omitting the year, the political circumstances, and even the arduous, four-day journey that Franklin and his colleagues had to make on horseback to attend the Carlisle meeting. The account focuses instead on a vivid picture of violent passions that Franklin intends to set in the frame provided by the living quarters of the Indian delegates and their families. The scene itself recasts a number of instances throughout the book where ugly aspects of human nature find release through drinking. Robert Hunter Morris’s supper rapidly deteriorates into racist banter as the guests linger over their wine. Hugh Meredith’s drinking and John Collins’s drunken outbursts played formative roles in the early stages of Franklin’s Philadelphia career. The compositors and pressmen whom
he met in London observed “a detestable Custom” of drinking throughout the workday and paying a substantial portion of their weekly wages to support their reliance on “muddling Liquor” (A, 100).

Governor Clinton grows progressively more generous with his cannon, under the influence of several “Bumpers” of Madeira wine, when Franklin and his Pennsylvania colleagues visit New York in the hope of borrowing some guns for the Philadelphia battery. Franklin himself keeps a wary distance from this picture of gentlemanly excess, though he is not above profiting from it, in the interests of his city’s defense. William Denny, the last provincial governor of Pennsylvania to try to court Franklin’s support, grows increasingly profuse with his “Solicitations and Promises” the more heavily he drinks, bribes to which the memoir responds with such an extensive list of sober and civil answers on Franklin’s part that Denny abandons his drunken efforts (A, 247).

Temperance heads Franklin’s list of virtues, in part, because alcohol pervades his world, requiring considerable cunning in those who hope to avoid becoming its victims.

In order to keep the Carlisle treaty discussions as orderly as possible, the Pennsylvania delegates forbid the English traders who had come to the negotiations to sell any rum until the public business was done. Once the treaty was “concluded to mutual Satisfaction,” Franklin wrote, the Indian delegates “claim’d and receiv’d the Rum” that they had been promised at the outset of the meeting:

This was in the Afternoon. They were near 100 Men, Women and Children, and were lodg’d in temporary Cabins built in the Form of a Square just without the Town. In the Evening, hearing a great Noise among them, the Commissioners walk’d out to see what was the Matter. We found they had made a great Bonfire in the Middle of the Square. They were all drunk Men and Women, quarrelling and fighting. Their dark-colour’d Bodies, half naked, seen only by the gloomy Light of the Bonfire, running after and beating one another with Firebrands, accompanied by their horrid Yellings, form’d a Scene the most resembling our Ideas of Hell that could well be imagin’d. There was no appeasing the Tumult, and we retired to our Lodging. At Midnight a Number of them came thundering at our Door, demanding more Rum; of which we took no Notice. The next Day, sensible they had misbehav’d in giving us that Disturbance, they sent three of their old Counsellors to make their Apology. The Orator acknowledg’d the Fault, but laid it upon the Rum; and then endeavour’d to excuse the Rum, by
saying, “The great Spirit who made all things made every thing for some Use, and whatever Use he design’d any thing for, that Use it should always be put to; Now, when he made Rum, he said, let this be for Indians to get drunk with. And it must be so.” (A, 198–99)

Like many of the excuses with which Franklin fills his narrative, this one too has a cunning capacity to work both ways. In making their apology, the three “old Counsellors” invoke the same criterion of “use” that Franklin repeatedly applies to various personal or social challenges in the course of his memoir, beginning with his struggle to restrict the use of assertive words and favor the use of modest ones in order to contain (or at least to disguise) his aggressive instincts. The appearance of the word in this painful setting suggests that the Indians too have invisible uses for behavior that outside observers can easily misconstrue. The many other instances of drunkenness in Franklin’s book seem trivial by comparison with this melancholy acknowledgment of cultural destruction, but the native orator’s words are coupled with an implicit assertion that rum has “uses” as well as frightening effects.

Oblivion is certainly one use: a temporary escape from despair or a release for feelings of impotent rage at the devastating changes that the presence of Europeans had imposed on their world. But Franklin’s comments pointedly include the implicit “use” of rum as a tool of English policy in the observation with which he follows the orator’s speech: “And indeed if it be the Design of Providence to extirpate these Savages in order to make room for Cultivators of the Earth,” he writes, “it seems not improbable that Rum may be the appointed Means. It has already annihilated all the Tribes who formerly inhabited the Seacoast” (A, 199). Up to this point in the memoir’s account, Franklin stresses the presence of families among the Indian delegation at Carlisle: men, women, and children gathered in a “Square” that invites comparison to the town squares of New England, the Court House square in Philadelphia where Whitefield preached his doctrine of natural depravity, or the city squares of London and Paris, some of which would shortly become revolutionary gathering places as Franklin wrote this portion of his story. His startling shift in scale, however, from domestic nightmare to the invidious clash between “Savages” and “Cultivators of the Earth” immediately underscores the adroit parody of providential design with which the old counselors had initially excused the rum. Franklin’s closing words make it only too plain that it is people, not Providence, who deploy the appointed means of annihilation.
In echoing the apology of the native orator, Franklin magnifies rather than diminishes the sense of mutual culpability that pervades their exchange. Both are careful to observe the memoir’s criteria for choosing words that minimize confrontational certitude, making use of religious formulas that mimic the instrumental potency of rum. But each is equally careful to hint at a sense of suffering for which no excuse can be made. Franklin himself is the author of both statements, voicing in turn the complex confession of the Indian delegates and dramatizing the arrogant rigidity of European prejudice. Few instances of cunning in his book are more subtle and far-reaching than the picture of perverse concurrence that this episode entails: its insistence that human communities are ultimately responsible for determining what must be so.10

Like the cultural collision depicted in the Carlisle negotiation, Franklin’s relations with Edward Braddock, and the efforts that he makes to address the British general’s needs while protecting the interests of colonial farmers and colonial assemblies, form a preamble in miniature to his long diplomatic engagement with centers of European power. These events provide Franklin’s first direct encounter with English imperial policy, as well as with the attitudes and assumptions of its ministerial agents. In some respects they anticipate the role he would play in France as a procurer of supplies for the Continental army and a representative of American “simplicity” in the sophisticated political circles of London and Paris. The memoir enlarges on this portion of Franklin’s story both because of its intrinsic historical and biographical importance and because it embraces many contexts and many subjects at once, through the verbal media that Franklin had made his lifelong study.

When the Pennsylvania Assembly first sent Franklin to Braddock’s Frederic Town camp, he was acting “under the guise” of his role as postmaster general of the colonies, hoping to streamline the movement of military dispatches, but the Assembly also intended his visit to serve as a surreptitious gesture of goodwill. Over the course of several days and several dinners at the camp, Franklin was able to manage this double role effectively, but as he was on the point of returning to Philadelphia, a second opportunity arose to “work both ways” in a much more tangible fashion. In the course of scouring the Maryland and Virginia countryside, Braddock’s officers had managed to collect only 25 of the roughly 150 wagons that the expedition would need to carry its supplies deep into the Ohio Valley to attack the French at Fort Duquesne. Franklin expressed
sympathy with the general’s dilemma and hinted at a solution that Braddock quickly seized:

I happen’d to say, I thought it was pity they had not been landed rather in Pennsylvania, as in that Country almost every Farmer had his Waggon. The General eagerly laid hold of my Words, and said, “Then you, Sir, who are a Man of Interest there, can probably procure them for us; and I beg you will undertake it.” I ask’d what Terms were to be offer’d the Owners of the Wagons; and I was desir’d to put on Paper the Terms that appear’d to me necessary. This I did, and they were agreed to, and a Commission and Instructions accordingly prepar’d immediately. What those Terms were will appear in the Advertisement I publish’d as soon as I arriv’d at Lancaster; which being, from the great and sudden Effect it produc’d, a Piece of some Curiosity, I shall insert at length, as follows. (A, 217)

The memoir as a whole refers to various examples of Franklin’s writing that have great and sudden effects: the paper currency pamphlet that strengthens popular feeling and stifles its wealthy opponents, the “sudden and surprizing” impact of Plain Truth in forming a militia association, the astute incentives of the Assembly’s hospital bill, and Father Abraham’s proverbial “Harangue” that compressed twenty-five years of almanac advice into a single speech, widely reprinted on both sides of the Atlantic and translated twice into French.

But despite the willingness that Franklin displays in the 1775 voyage letter to fill out his narrative with illustrative documents, these contractual terms for supplying wagons to the British, along with their companion address to Pennsylvania’s farmers, are the only instances of Franklin’s previously published work that the surviving manuscript of the memoir includes—a fact sufficiently curious in itself. His presence in Braddock’s camp at just this historical juncture is every bit as strategic as the appearance of a London scavenger at his Craven Street door. This and subsequent visits that Franklin made as Braddock prepared to march almost certainly resulted in Franklin’s first acquaintance with George Washington, who commanded the Virginia militia attached to Braddock’s force and who would distinguish himself during the fighting that covered the British retreat. The memoir, however, never mentions Washington’s presence, a second curious feature of this episode, made all the more conspicuous by Washington’s recent prominence as presiding officer at the Federal Convention that Franklin had attended less than a year before beginning the third portion of his book.
Braddock’s eagerness to make use of Franklin’s reputation (as the supporters of the Constitution sought to make use of Washington’s) is more than matched by Franklin’s own surprising readiness to draft, virtually on the spot, a complicated contract allowing for several farmers to spread the risk of this venture among themselves and share the profits of supporting the campaign. In attributing to Braddock the odd phrase “Man of Interest,” rather than the more familiar label “Man of Influence,” the memoir points to the balancing act that Franklin engages to perform among competing interests as he converts potential antagonists into allies. The contract terms that the memoir includes, in their entirety, encourage several farmers to collaborate on meeting the expedition’s needs by combining teams, wagons, drivers, packhorses, packsaddles, and feed from different owners into the units that will form Braddock’s baggage train.

Every piece of equipment and every animal, Franklin stipulated, would be “valu’d by indifferent Persons” at the time the arrangements were made, with the valuation to be paid to the suppliers in case of loss. The drivers were explicitly excused from doing “the Duty of Soldiers” (A, 218–19). Franklin and his son William, who had significant military experience, would replace Braddock’s officers as agents authorized to negotiate on the army’s behalf, and they divided the Pennsylvania counties between them when they set out to meet with interested parties who responded to Franklin’s elaborate “Advertisement,” a document of some cunning as well as curiosity. This address “To the Inhabitants of the Counties of Lancaster, York, and Cumberland” implies that Pennsylvania’s internal “Dissensions,” not the feeble response from Virginia and Maryland, had so exasperated Braddock and his staff that they were contemplating taking drastic measures to supply their expedition:

It was proposed to send an armed Force immediately into these Counties, to seize as many of the best Carriages and Horses as should be wanted, and compel as many Persons into the Service as would be necessary to drive and take care of them.

I apprehended that the Progress of a Body of Soldiers thro’ these Counties on such an Occasion, especially considering the Temper they are in, and their Resentment against us, would be attended with many and great Inconveniencies to the Inhabitants; and therefore more willingly undertook the Trouble of trying first what might be done by fair and equitable Means. (A, 219–20)
This preamble, aimed at arousing the anxieties of Franklin’s “Friends and Countrymen,” rewrites the circumstances that precede its appearance in the narrative. The memoir in fact reports that Braddock had “declar’d the Expedition was then at an End” when his first efforts to collect wagons in Virginia and Maryland produced such a meager result. Moreover, by Franklin’s original account, the general’s frustrations were directed not at the colonists but at his superiors, the ministers in London who had sent his soldiers to fight in a country too poor to provide the support they needed. Understating the “great Inconveniences” of military predation and exaggerating or distorting Braddock’s intentions appear to play equally transparent roles in preparing for Franklin’s presentation of the mutual interests at play in these circumstances.

The army’s mission, Franklin suggests, will give the backcountry farmers a chance to profit from the war by dividing among themselves “upwards of Thirty thousand Pounds . . . in Silver and Gold of the King’s Money” that their wagons and teams will earn from the campaign. The people of Lancaster, York, and Cumberland “have lately complained to the Assembly that a sufficient Currency was wanting,” Franklin noted. Here was an opportunity to address that deficiency. The army, in turn, has an interest in protecting its supplies that will prompt the soldiers to keep the baggage train secure. And Pennsylvania as a whole, Franklin continues, has an interest in dramatizing its loyalty to the crown, while at the same time preventing an angry British general from seizing by force what he cannot procure with money. The only impartial party to these arrangements (the advertisement claims) is Franklin himself, who recognizes that “the King’s Business must be done” under reasonable terms, if at all possible, but through “violent Measures” if necessary:

I have no particular Interest in this Affair; as (except the Satisfaction of endeavouring to do Good and prevent Mischief) I shall have only my Labour for my Pains. If this Method of obtaining the Waggons and Horses is not like to succeed, I am oblig’d to send Word to the General in fourteen Days; and I suppose Sir John St. Clair the Hussar, with a Body of Soldiers, will immediately enter the Province, for the Purpose aforesaid, of which I shall be sorry to hear, because I am, very sincerely and truly your Friend and Well-wisher, B. Franklin (A, 221)

This blended posture of indifferent bystander and concerned neighbor was unlikely to have deceived anyone who read Franklin’s flyer. His menacing sup-
position about the impending seizure of wagons and conscription of drivers, while not entirely implausible, is an equally transparent device.

In the end, the owners of the wagons and teams that Franklin assembled were less interested in his good wishes or in the advertisement’s threats than in the personal bonds that Franklin provided as additional security for the army’s official promise to pay for any animals and equipment lost or destroyed during the campaign. Ominous warnings about John St. Clair’s Hussars did not keep these farmers from exercising a degree of cunning on their own behalf, which, in the event, came close to ruining Franklin when the British government proved slow in paying the claims that arose from Braddock’s defeat. The aggrieved owners’ demands “gave me a great deal of Trouble,” Franklin confessed, and many of them sued to have him fulfill his bonds. Only the timely intervention of William Shirley, the governor of Massachusetts whose son had died with Braddock, rescued Franklin from financial ruin.11

Financial difficulties also threaten a number of Braddock’s junior officers when they find they cannot afford to buy supplies for the upcoming expedition. With his son’s help, and with Assembly funds, Franklin supplies twenty of these men with packhorses carrying parcels of food and drink for their private use during the march. In a final, curious gesture, the memoir carefully lists the contents of each parcel, nearly all of which wound up feeding the victorious French and their Indian allies or being destroyed after Braddock’s death, when his second-in-command was frantically trying to speed up his retreat to Philadelphia (A, 226). Franklin itemizes these gifts, apparently from memory, as carefully as he preserves the contents of the 1731 library memorandum or the legal particulars of the wagon advertisement on which the security of his personal fortune depended.

Each officer received twelve pounds of sugar, half in white loaf and half unrefined brown “Muscovado”; one pound each of two varieties of tea; six pounds each of ground coffee, chocolate, rice, and raisins; fifty pounds “best white Biscuit”; two cured hams; half a dozen dried tongues; a twenty pound keg of butter; a “Gloucester” cheese; two dozen bottles of “old Madeira wine”; and two gallons of rum. These gifts “were very thankfully receiv’d,” Franklin wrote, but he surely meant the memoir’s earliest readers to view this profuse array of goods with some astonishment. Franklin and his son packed an imperial grocery list into each officer’s parcel: tea from India or China, quite possibly imported on the same ships that Boston’s mob would attack twenty years later at the outset of the Revolution; two varieties of sugar from the Caribbean; cof-
fee and chocolate from Central America, Africa, or the East Indies; English cheese; rice from the Carolinas; butter from Pennsylvania or New Jersey; wine and rum in quantities calculated to warm the heart of Governor Clinton or William Denny. This is what the cultivators of the earth can produce for its merchants to transport around the globe, the memoir seems to suggest, when they are not engaged in annihilating one another. In place of George Washington on his cavalry mount, displaying America’s martial prowess in the midst of a wilderness catastrophe, the memoir depicts a train of pack animals laden with the mix of luxuries and necessities that were the mark of a prosperous trading people.12

The carnage of Edward Braddock’s defeat was all too real. Franklin tabulates the cost in the memoir’s pages: 63 of 86 officers killed or wounded, 714 of 1,100 soldiers dead, “picked Men, from the whole Army,” pushing ahead on the first leg of an ambitious campaign to capture all of western Canada, only to be cut off in ambush when they had scarcely begun (A, 225). As Franklin surely knew, any captives the Indians took during the chaotic retreat would have been tortured before being killed. The expedition that Governor Morris asked him to lead a few months later to reinter the victims of an Indian massacre at the Moravian settlement of Gnadenhütten and build a series of frontier forts gave him a firsthand look at the brutality of wilderness warfare. What is man at present, Benjamin Vaughan had asked in urging Franklin to finish his book: a reasonable and amendable creature or a vicious animal? The answer, he believed, would offer hope for the future.

The answer implied by Braddock’s example is that we are both: reasonable and vicious, stubborn and amendable, the eater and the eaten, as Franklin had recognized in the memoir’s first pages when he invoked an old truism to justify a sharp appetite for fresh cod. Like the young Franklin on his first ocean voyage, Braddock too enjoyed the convenience of reason as a reservoir of explanations and excuses. His overweening confidence in what Franklin oddly terms “the Validity of Regular Troops,” coupled with his contempt for American militia and its Indian allies, combined to destroy him. The Indians in particular, Franklin notes, “might have been of great Use to his Army as Guides, Scouts, &c. if he had treated them kindly; but he slighted and neglected them, and they gradually left him” (A, 223). Franklin himself had considerable experience with the slights and neglect that English officials often inflicted on Americans, instead of the kindness that would have proved a far more useful means of securing their mutual interests. A gradual process of alienation be-
gins with these events, one that works both ways (as so much of this portion of the memoir does) to depict an inward change that Franklin shares with the Indian scouts.\textsuperscript{13}

Braddock originally envisioned dislodging the French from three of their wilderness strongholds before winter brought a halt to his operations, but Franklin “had conceiv’d some Doubts and some Fears for the Event of the Campaign,” based in part on the knowledge of wilderness travel that he had acquired on excursions like the one to Carlisle, as well as on his reading, and on his respect for Indian tactics. But when he expresses these worries, Braddock’s dismissive response puts an end to the discussion, a perfect illustration of the price that a dogmatist pays for his air of positive assertion: “He smil’d at my Ignorance,” Franklin recalled, “and reply’d, ‘These Savages may indeed be a formidable Enemy to your raw American Militia; but upon the King’s regular and disciplin’d Troops, Sir, it is impossible they should make any Impression.’ I was conscious of an Impropriety in my Disputing with a military Man in Matters of his Profession, and said no more” (A, 224). Modest, sensible men who do not love disputes leave opinionated people in possession of their errors. Braddock’s realization that he was in the wrong comes too late to save the lives of his men, but the memoir includes an account of his death that portrays the process by which new “impressions” make their way past old prejudices:

Capt. Orme, who was one of the General’s Aid de Camps, and being grievously wounded was brought off with him, and continu’d with him to his Death, which happen’d in a few Days, told me, that he was totally silent, all the first Day, and at Night only said, \textit{Who’d have thought it?} that he was silent again the following Days, only saying at last, \textit{We shall better know how to deal with them another time}; and dy’d a few Minutes after. (A, 226)

Franklin makes no pretense of knowing what the dying man’s long periods of silence might mean, or what changes he might have been experiencing, but his last words are almost completely free of the vanity that had kept him from attending to Franklin’s worries or recognizing the value of Indian guides in this unfamiliar world.\textsuperscript{14}

The memoir portrays Franklin’s brief militia experience as a precise contrast to Braddock’s fate. Unlike the professionally schooled military man, Franklin is an officer who scarcely ever issues an order, preferring to send various detachments of men to parts of the undefended frontier “with Instructions” to build forts for the security of the settlers. The men under his direct authority
appear to need no instruction whatever, having long ago mastered the use of axes, shovels, and wagon axles as tools for cutting, moving, and planting heavy logs into a palisade adequate to deter Indians “who have no Cannon” (A, 224). Franklin’s delight in observing this work echoes the pleasure that he took, as a boy, rolling construction stones into a fishing wharf:

The next Morning our Fort was plann’d and mark’d out, the Circumference measuring 455 feet, which would require as many Palisades to be made of Trees one with another of a Foot Diameter each. Our Axes, of which we had 70 were immediately set to work, to cut down Trees; and our Men being dextrous in the Use of them, great Dispatch was made. Seeing the Trees fall so fast, I had the Curiosity to look at my Watch when two Men began to cut at a Pine. In 6 Minutes they had it upon the Ground; and I found it of 14 inches Diameter. Each Pine made three Palisades of 18 Feet long, pointed at one End. While these were preparing, our other Men, dug a Trench all round of three feet deep in which the Palisades were to be planted, and our Waggons, the Body being taken off, and the fore and hind Wheels separated by taking out the Pin which united the two Parts of the Perch, we had 10 Carriages with two Horses each, to bring the Palisades from the Woods to the Spot. When they were set up, our Carpenters built a Stage of Boards all round within, about 6 Feet high, for the Men to stand on when to fire thro’ the Loopholes. We had one swivel Gun which we mounted on one of the Angles; and fired it as soon as fix’d to let the Indians know, if any were within hearing, that we had such Pieces; and thus our Fort, (if such a magnificent Name may be given to so miserable a Stockade) was finished in a Week, tho’ it rain’d so hard every other Day that the Men could not work. (A, 233–4)

This passage deftly mirrors the separation of parts that Franklin recommends to the backcountry farmers when he is trying to arrange for Braddock’s transportation needs, a segmented serpent that celebrates the handiwork of Franklin’s men rather than his own leadership. Mr. Beatty’s willingness to serve as steward of the rum is a further departure from the kind of traditional military practice that had given Braddock such confidence in the spurious validity of his Regulars.

The Moravian population that Franklin’s men had come to protect discovered, during the early stages of the Seven Years’ War, the fragility of some of its own assumptions. The massacre at Gnadenhütten had prompted the Moravians to make preparations to defend their primary settlement at Bethlehem even before the militia had arrived. They built a stockade, purchased weapons
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from New York, prepared piles of paving stones for their women to hurl on attackers from the windows “of their high Stone Houses,” and organized their men into a garrison to stand watch. “I had suppos’d they were conscienciously scrupulous of bearing Arms,” Franklin observed in the memoir, “But Common Sense aided by present Danger, will sometimes be too strong for whimsicall Opinions” (A, 232). August Spangenberg, the Moravian leader, told Franklin that his people were similarly surprised that their pacifism had collapsed so quickly in the face of threats. Braddock’s poignant bewilderment—“Who’d have thought it?”—recurs among the settlers at Bethlehem, as they discover their own violent propensities, though a degree of cunning may have been involved in this misjudgment: “It seems they were either deceiv’d in themselves, or deceiv’d the Parliament,” Franklin wrote, referring to the sect’s exemption from military service.

During the visit that Franklin pays to Bethlehem on his way home from completing the fort at Gnadenhütten, his own whimsical opinions about the importance of a romantic bond in forming a happy marriage are tested by Moravian practices. When a young Moravian man feels inclined to get married, Franklin learns, he first approaches “the Elders of his Class,” who then consult the “Elder Ladies” to establish the best fit between “the Tempers and Dispositions of their respective Pupils.” Sometimes lots come into play in matching couples when several young women seem equally well suited for a given partner. Franklin is not satisfied with this approach to matrimonial treaties. Surely the “mutual Choice of the Parties” should decide the issue, he objects, otherwise some of these arranged marriages “may chance to be very unhappy.” The reply of his Moravian host surprises and silences him: “And so they may, answer’d my Informer, if you let the Parties chuse for themselves.—Which indeed I could not deny” (A, 237).

This exchange, like Franklin’s brief conversation with Braddock over military tactics, is a simple instance of choosing goodwill over victory. The wagon advertisement adopts the same approach to easing the potential antagonism between Pennsylvania’s cautious farmers and their militant British visitors. For Franklin, the Seven Years’ War offers opportunities for avoiding violence rather than deploying it, as he does when he convinces Mr. Beatty to combine his chaplain’s duties with the liquor ration to sidestep a disciplinary issue, or when he and his men fire their small artillery swivel as soon as it is mounted on the palisade at Gnadenhütten to advertise their cannon’s presence rather than to use it. The Indians were indeed within hearing when Franklin’s men
made this demonstration “to let the Indians know . . . that we had such Pieces” (A, 234). In patrolling the nearby countryside after the fort was finished, they found the signs that their audience had left behind:

We met with no Indians, but we found the Places on the neighbouring Hills where they had lain to watch our Proceedings. There was an Art in their Contrivance of these Places that seems worth mention. It being Winter, a Fire was necessary for them. But a common Fire on the Surface of the Ground would by its Light have discover’d their Position at a Distance. They had therefore dug Holes in the Ground about three feet Diameter, and some what deeper. We saw where they had with their Hatchets cut off the Charcoal from the Sides of burnt Logs lying in the Woods. With these Coals they had made small Fires in the Bottom of the Holes, and we observ’d among the Weeds and Grass the Prints of their Bodies made by their laying all round with the Legs hanging down in the Holes to keep their Feet warm which with them is an essential Point. This kind of Fire, so manag’d, could not discover them either by its Light, Flame, Sparks or even Smoke. It appear’d that their Number was not great, and it seems they saw we were too many to be attack’d by them with Prospect of Advantage. (A, 234–5)

The memoir quietly stresses the extent to which the “proceedings” of the English and those of their observant enemies mimic one another, much as Franklin had mimicked the words of the Indian counselor at Carlisle. Each party practices a defensive “art” linked to the necessities of a hard life; each is skilled in the use of the ax or the hatchet to meet its needs; each manages fire with uncommon care in order to enhance its safety rather than its power of doing harm. Both the stockade and the fire pits awaken Franklin’s love of measurement, his admiration for the little machines with which ingenuity and cunning address the threats to happiness or the incitements to curiosity that fill human experience.