The Liquid Life: Money and the Circulation of Success after Franklin

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Recommended Citation
THE LIQUID LIFE
Money and the circulation of success after Franklin

Matthew Garrett

What happens when the money form becomes a model for selfhood and social success? Benjamin Franklin's autobiography posits a reciprocal relationship between the circulation of money and self. Self is expressed in Franklin's memoirs in the form of money, through a formal configuration of narrative episodes modelled on Franklin's own conception of the circulation of money. Through this representation, Franklin produces a historically novel way of formally accommodating the antagonisms of social inequality through narrative, of reconstituting conflict as controlled and industrious experiential diversity. Through a consideration of Franklin's writings on credit and money, and an analysis of the narrative form of his autobiography, this article assesses the origins and persistence of the money-self nexus in modern times.

KEYWORDS: Benjamin Franklin; John Fitch; money; value; autobiography; narrative

From Political to Narrative Economy

Benjamin Franklin wrote much on the subject of political economy, and he devoted special consideration to the money form: to the value and economic function of paper money, and to credit and debt. Recent scholarship has focused our attention on the salutary aspirations of these writings as they inform Franklin's endorsement of what he called 'Happy Mediocrity' (that is, a social formation that would cheerfully avoid class polarization), his celebration of creditworthiness as exemplary of American entrepreneurialism, and his commitment to civic-improvement projects. In its engagement with Franklin as a historical person, this work has illuminated the ways in which a nineteenth- and twentieth-century retrospective reading of Franklin as the emblem of disciplined and exploitative capitalism ignores both the breadth of his capacious intellectual and practical activity and the Enlightenment ethos that motivated and shaped that activity (Baker 2005, Mott & Zinke 1987, Houston 2008, Smith 2005, Terrell 2003, Weinberger 2005).

Yet such renewed enthusiasm for Franklin — and for a late-eighteenth-century capitalism that can only appear kinder and gentler than the one that adopted him as its ethical hero — has tended to deal rather lightly with the formal character of the text through which Franklin always has been most widely represented: the Autobiography. In seeking to provide a historically nuanced account of Franklin himself, recent scholarship has therefore not given a historical account of the representation of Franklin, and of social success as such, in the Autobiography. But in order to understand rather than merely dismiss the way Franklin has both reflected and shaped our conception of social success,
we must attend to the cultural work of that representational form. For what is truly significant to cultural history is the socio-narrative tradition that crystallizes in Franklin’s narrative. Lives do not generate their own plots, their own formal patterns. And if formal patterns are ‘what literature uses in order to master historical reality, and to reshape its materials in the chosen ideological key’, then an analysis of those formal patterns should be the prerequisite to understanding the shadow of Franklinian achievement on our fantasies of well-plotted success (Moretti 2000, p. xiii).

Beginning, then, with the issue of narrative representation, this essay aims to make two points about money and a modern, or what we may call post-Franklinian, understanding of social success. The first is that Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography posits a reciprocal relationship between money and self. The concept of ‘self’ is here a matter of what we would now call ‘career’: the kind of successfully patterned life-trajectory that can be formalized through narrative shaping. Self is expressed in Franklin’s memoirs in the form of money: its liquidity, its circulation, and its alleged capacity (as we shall see) to accumulate through spontaneous self-reproduction.

The second point I will make is that Franklin’s model for money/self persists so robustly because it serves to resolve in imaginary fashion the basic problem of social antagonism in modern times. In a socioeconomic world in which my success typically emerges out of your failure and my wealth comes out of your hide, but in which it remains true that I both feel bad about these circumstances and, perhaps more to the point, recognize the threat posed by your coming into awareness of the sources of my success and my wealth – in this situation, a narrative-representational system that obscures the origins of both money and success serves the crucial function of salving the wounds of social antagonism. Specifically, Franklin produces a historically novel way of formally accommodating social antagonism through narrative, of reconstituting conflict as controlled and industrious experiential diversity. And Franklin’s narrative accommodation of conflict succeeds so well because it harnesses our attention to the moment of monetary and characterological circulation. Money, like self, has no source other than itself in Franklin’s autobiography; it accumulates – as so often in the extended theoretical tradition that underwrites what Karl Polanyi would call fictitious commodification – in the process of circulation itself. In Franklin’s narrativization of himself, the weight rests on the money form rather than, for example, on the dynamics of production and the desire for equitable distribution of social resources. The weight rests on the money form because the problem of the Autobiography is distinct: How can one situate individual success within a field of social competition and inequitable social distribution? This question of accommodation is not one Franklin set out to answer in the Autobiography; but the social antagonism of competition and exploitation is nevertheless the central dilemma that is both recognized and solved through the organization of the narrative.

There is an apparent paradox here. Nothing in Franklin’s political-economic writings intimates such a thin and tendentious understanding of value or social relationships. But the Autobiography, like all of Franklin’s didactic writing, diverges dramatically from the sophistication of that work. In the Autobiography, things are simpler, starker. But what the Autobiography sacrifices in the realm of socioeconomic theory, it gains back in terms of both aesthetics and ideology. The cultural achievement of the narrative has little to do with the personal achievements of Benjamin Franklin, pace the commitments of Franklinophiles far and wide; instead, we may locate its achievement precisely where
Credit, Debt, and Episodic Poetics

In 1748, Franklin wrote his ‘Advice to a Young Tradesman, Written by an Old One’, which was published in a book (which he printed in Philadelphia) entitled The American Instructor: or Young Man’s Best Companion. Here Franklin organizes his advice around the concept of credit. Time is money, he begins. But:

Remember that CREDIT is Money. If a Man lets his Money lie in my Hands after it is due, he gives me the Interest, or so much as I can make of it during that Time. This amounts to a considerable Sum where a Man has good and large Credit, and makes good Use of it. [...] Remember that Money is of a prolific generating Nature. Money can beget Money, and its Offspring can beget more, and so on. (Franklin 1987, p. 320)

Credit is based on appearance:

The most trifling Actions that affect a Man’s Credit, are to be regarded. The Sound of your Hammer at Five in the Morning or Nine at Night, heard by a Creditor, makes him easy Six Months longer. But if he sees you at a Billiard Table, or hears your Voice in a Tavern, when you should be at Work, he sends for his Money the next Day. [...] Creditors are a kind of People, that have the sharpest Eyes and Ears, as well as the best Memories of any in the World. (p. 320)

On the one hand, Franklin here expresses the severity regarding the self-policing of minute detail (‘trifling Actions’) for which he has become well known. On the other hand, he evades altogether the question of the source, not of credit, but of wealth. The work he discusses here is imaginary: it is done under the imagined gaze of the creditor, its object is the extension of further credit (in the form of time). Despite its heavy burden of self-policing, Franklin’s advice is, as he might put it, free and easy in one specific way: in the sense that money simply begets more money. Once wealth is equated with money, money with credit, the conceptual field shifts definitively to the realm of exchange — where what counts are appearance and the velocity of money’s circulation.

Franklin’s political economy is largely forgotten or, when remembered, assimilated as an inheritor of the concepts of William Petty and an astute classical precursor of Ricardian economics. Franklin’s substantial and enduring cultural impact, on the other hand, endures in the influence of his writings on what he might call character: texts like the ‘Advice to a Young Tradesman’ and the life-narrative fragment he left at his death. What is the relationship between Franklin’s understanding of the money form and the narrative form of his autobiography? This question underlies a more general one about the production of the autobiographical subject’s narrative centrality. How does the life take shape through the formal manipulation of narrative episodes and the other figures (the other characters) they contain? How is social antagonism registered in and managed by the narrative structure of Franklin’s episodic memoir? To elaborate these questions, I will examine the Autobiography’s most famous use, and perhaps its trickiest use, of episodic form — in the so-called ‘errata’ with which Franklin organizes his text.

Franklin’s memoirs are famous for nothing more than their author’s insistence on referring to his mistakes as ‘errata’, and for his printerly avowal that the errata could be
corrected – if not in this world then, as his famous auto-epitaph announced in 1728, ‘In a new & more perfect Edition’ (Franklin 1987, p. 91). Franklin relates five errata explicitly as such: (1) his assertion of freedom from his indentures to his brother James; (2) his illegitimate use of the money he collects on behalf of Samuel Vernon; (3) his breaking ties with his future wife, Deborah Read, and his philandering – what he later calls ‘Giddiness and Inconstancy’ – while in London; (4) his writing the freethinking pamphlet *A Dissertation on Liberty & Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* in response to William Wollaston’s *Religion of Nature Delineated*; and (5) his attempt at ‘Familiarities’ with his friend Ralph’s sometime companion, Mrs. T. All of these are named as errata in Part One; of the three that are ‘corrected’, only one – Franklin’s conflict with his brother – lingers until Part Three. The publication of the retort to Wollaston is never mentioned again. If we exclude this last (Franklin never explains why this is an error, implying only youthful arrogance, and its importance seems doubtful; moreover, it is implicitly corrected by the lifetime of publications that follows it), and if we assume that the advances on Mrs. T. are ‘covered’ (in Franklin’s actuarial logic) by the marriage with Deborah Read, then the story offers us three complete circuits of error and amendment:

1. Clashes with brother James
   → Helps nephew adjust to the printing business after James’ death
2. Spends Vernon’s money en route to Philadelphia
   → Repays debt after effectively finessing his need for forbearance
3. Breaks off engagement with Deborah Read and philanders in London
   → Marries Read in 1730

The model for each of these sequences is a kind of cleansed version of the second one: a simple debt repaid. Here are the circumstances of the Vernon episode. In Newport, Franklin visits his brother John, who asks him to convey a repayment (a significant £35) to Samuel Vernon upon his return to Pennsylvania. En route, however, Franklin and his friend Collins spend most of the money to defray the costs of travel, mainly due to Collins’ high-priced ‘Dramming’ (Franklin 1987, p. 1337). Soon after their return to Philadelphia, Collins goes off to Barbados to tutor a gentleman’s sons, promises to repay his debt to Franklin and, true to his ‘sotting’ form, is never heard from again.

Franklin’s correction occurs several years later, after he has left the printing house of Samuel Keimer with capital supplied by his partner Hugh Meredith’s father. Franklin has just written of his newly flourishing newspaper (purchased from Keimer) and of the financial boon resulting from his circle of friends in the Pennsylvania State House, when Vernon returns to the story:

Mr Vernon about this time put me in mind of the Debt I ow’d him:—but did not press me.—I wrote him an ingenuous Letter of Acknowledgments, crav’d his Forbearance a little longer which he allow’d me, & as soon as I was able I paid the Principal with Interest & many Thanks.—So that Erratum was in some degree corrected. (p. 1366)

What has occurred between the young Franklin’s assumption of responsibility for the cash and its repayment? It is expressible in the form of ‘Interest & many Thanks’. That is, the period of the *Autobiography* between the two moments, the arc of an episode delimited by the erratum and its correction, is expressed in the circulatory form of money-time: the time in between the loan (in this case, Franklin’s possession of the money) and the remittance.\(^1\) When represented as the period of the circulation of money, duration not
only loses much of its qualitative character, but it also becomes radically, retrospectively, compressible. If there is something new and peculiar in Franklin’s use of the trope of the erratum, it is not just that the notion of superficial ‘mistake’ replaces that of fundamental ‘sin’ from Christian conversion narratives; it is that this mode of presentation distorts, delimits, and binds narrative time.²

In a passage that has become central to theories of narrative representation, Freud (1961) writes of the pleasure principle as the drive to lower an ‘undesirable tension’ in the mind: pleasure and unpleasure are related to ‘the quantity of excitation that is present in the mind but is not in any way “bound”’. Unpleasure is the increase in such tension, pleasure is its diminution, and Freud notes that the feeling is probably determined by ‘the amount of increase or diminution in the quantity of excitation in a given period of time’. The reality principle, on the other hand, enables the subject to delay pleasure, to put up with tension when faced with the prospect of future gratification; it is an instinct of ‘self-preservation’ (pp. 4, 7; emphasis in original). What we see in Franklin’s use of the metaphor of erratum and correction is the development of a structure of self-preservation that transforms the apprehension of time and duration in the Autobiography. It is not that ‘nothing happens’ in between the error and its amendment; quite the contrary, Franklin is able, through the series of errata, to mitigate the force, to bind the energy, of narrative events: to distribute attention in determinate ways across the narrative text. In effect, he produces a second temporality that operates alongside the primary one of the narrative. In the first, events follow one another simply in time: sometimes in a relation of cause-and-effect, sometimes merely through the logic of metonymy or experience (one thing after another). In the second, periods of time are produced through the structure of the erratum and its correction: phases of experience are delimited along the vector of the organizing mistake and its resolution. This narrative strategy is all the more remarkable for its significant success in producing an almost literal ‘self-preservation’: the staging of the Franklin character-narrator as a static and stable unity – static and stable in precisely the way he describes the art of appearances in his advice to the young tradesman. The structuration of Franklin’s errata-episodes differs from the economy Freud describes insofar as it is not the amount of unbound stimulus that is concentrated (or cathected), but rather the experience of the period of time as given by the narrative. If there is an entrepreneurial dimension to Franklin’s memoirs at the level of form, it is here: for the debt itself is the precondition for the performance of creditworthiness. Stability emerges out of the oscillation of debt and repayment.

Franklin acknowledges other mistakes in the Autobiography: his errata are not the only ones, nor are they the only missteps Franklin uses as instructions to the reader. And that is precisely the point: by selecting moments and naming them ‘errata’, Franklin establishes a kind of punctuation system in his narrative. ‘Corrections’, then, mark the recurrence to the original moment of error and, in erasing it, they squeeze both the temporal and the character development of the narrative into a manageable mass of (inert) meaning. As development is compressed, so contingency evaporates from the Autobiography: erratum and correction are joined, like systole and diastole, along the axis of their separation. Unlike real slips of the compositor’s hand, Franklin’s errata come into the narrative world already married to their corrections.

Already joined, but elaborated through narration nonetheless – and this is a crucial point. We need to take the measure of the Autobiography’s dynamic unfolding in the structuration of episodes, for the logic of money-time lends itself all too easily to a
synchronic analysis in which the passage of time is, accidentally as it were, excluded. Indeed, this is Franklin’s intention: to demolish the developmental aspects of time. Bourdieu (1977) has indicated the trouble with such a ‘detemporalizing’ style of observation, which may (and with distorting effects) freeze a practice into a structure: detemporalization produces pernicious effects ‘when exerted on practices defined by the fact that their temporal structure, direction, and rhythm are constitutive of their meaning’ (p. 9; emphasis in original). In the case of Franklin, the moment of his correction of the erratum does not open onto a reflection on changes that occurred during the time in between, but instead encloses that in-between time within a statically defined period: repayment predetermined by debt, amendment awaiting delivery from within the integument of error. And yet the smooth flow of events in the form of credit-and-debit relationships appears as such only if, as in Franklin’s writings on money, we limit our focus to circulation. Franklin’s break with his brother is not so tidy, and I want to linger on its details in order to draw out the ways it exemplifies the occlusions that generate the appeal of the Autobiography’s life-narrative model.

Here is the scene. Franklin has just assumed formal, though not actual, control over the printing of his brother’s newspaper, the New-England Courant (James had been barred from publishing for offending the clerical authorities in Boston). This state of affairs forces James to publicly release Franklin from his service, while they privately arrange for the continuation of the indentures through the original term:

I took upon me to assert my Freedom, presuming that he would not venture to produce the new Indentures. It was not fair in me to take this Advantage, and this I therefore reckon one of the first Errata of my Life: But the Unfairness of it weigh’d little with me, when under the Impressions of Resentment, for the Blows his Passion too often urg’d him to bestow upon me. Tho’ He was otherwise not an ill-natur’d Man: Perhaps I was too saucy & provoking. (p. 1325)

Franklin’s emphasis on James’ ‘tyrannical’ and ‘passionate’ nature interlocks neatly with contemporary language in the attack on illegitimate monarchy. So the episode is most often read as a declaration of independence: Franklin is simply too good, and too big, for the small world of the eighteenth-century smallholder-class family. In this reading, the remainder of the Autobiography confirms the early inkling that Franklin sprang fully formed into the world, ill-equipped for nothing other than indefinite apprenticeship to an unworthy master.

When we examine the whole arc of the erratum-correction sequence, we see exactly how big Franklin represents himself to be, and how unworthy James appears in contrast – and, most to the point, the peculiar way Franklin establishes both characteristics. The fracture in the family is written in the very form of Franklin’s narration. Franklin writes of his return-visit to New England and his visit to his brother, who has relocated to Newport:

Our former Differences were forgotten, and our Meeting was very cordial and affectionate. He was fast declining in his Health, and requested of me that in case of his Death which he apprehended not far distant, I would take home his Son, then but 10 Years of Age, and bring him up to the Printing Business. This I accordingly perform’d, sending him a few Years to School before I took him into the Office. His Mother carry’d on the Business till he was grown up, when I assisted him with an
Assortment of new Types, those of his Father being in a Manner worn out.— Thus it was that I made my Brother ample Amends for the Service I had depriv’d him of by leaving him so early.— (pp. 1401–1402)

The key point to extract from the entire erratum-correction movement here is that Franklin represents himself, from the beginning, as occupying the role of paternal authority. We might then describe the conflict between Franklin and James as one based on scarcity: they both, in effect, want to occupy the same social position and, unfortunately for the integrity of the family, there is only one slot available (in a passage that links the two we are examining, the father is notably reduced to the status of mediator between the battling sons).

Visiting his dying brother in Newport, Franklin makes the most, in narrative terms, of James’ weakened state. The death of James, written into the structure of the characters’ relationship from the get-go, shifts Franklin into the paternal position he has occupied symbolically from the start. Apprenticing the son to nurture him in the printing business, Franklin becomes surrogate father to his brother’s child. Relieving the mother’s burden through the training of the son, Franklin becomes surrogate husband to his brother’s wife. And Franklin underscores both points in his most characteristic fashion, through a cruelly customized variation on his metaphors of printing: ‘I assisted him with an Assortment of new Types, those of his Father being in a Manner worn out’. Like a transfusion of new, vital blood into a weak and withered body, Franklin takes up the role of the good father and restores James’ family: the son is schooled and trained, the mother is returned to her properly inactive position, and future material well-being is secured. Providing ‘new Types’ to the son, Franklin erases James’ ‘worn out’ impression, replacing it with his own.

Lest the reader underestimate the extent of Franklin’s superiority, he emphasizes that ‘I made my Brother ample Amends’. This is the only occasion in which Franklin uses a modifier to accentuate the plenitude of a correction. The point is that Franklin was ‘ample’ from the start. Money-time asserts that the only duration is that stretch of sameness between the assumption of the debt and its repayment; the condition for the debtor assuming the debt is an already evident worthiness, and when the circuit has been completed, it is as though precisely nothing has occurred: the repayment of a debt is the return to the prior state of worthiness. By punctuating his narrative with the three major erratum-correction sequences, Franklin institutes a narrative form that obliterates duration in the service of a static, and ample, self-characterization. Money, as Franklin has told us, begets more money.

Here we begin to see the form of Franklinian self-representation through competition. Franklin’s technique of narrative binding through recursion, in the errata, demonstrates the amenability of structure and formality to the representation of success in social competition. We might bring out the distinctiveness of this technique by contrasting the Franklinian mode of success with the relationship between prose and social competition in Balzac’s novels, as described by Moretti (2000):

[...]In a narrow and competitive universe, every action is like the proverbial snowball: it becomes each time an avalanche, generating a myriad of echoes and replies that can no longer be controlled or opposed. Each action, once performed, can never be undone, cancelled. It is the triumph of prose as defined by classical rhetoric. (p. 162)
Franklin certainly operates in a world of prose, but the Autobiography is starkly architectonic when viewed against the prosy avalanche of Balzac's novels. In Franklin, then, we find a contradiction between theme and form: the thematics of the snowball (action following upon action, error upon error, triumph upon triumph) versus the formal binding of episodes through recursive distortions of duration. Relational competition has been reshaped into the smooth line of circulation.

**Success and Failure**

The Boston in which Franklin was indentured to James was defined, on one side, by ambition and the fruits of speculative adventure in a thriving merchant port town; on the other side, it was marked by a turbulence that seemed to bring ashore only the perils, and none of the pleasures, of the sea voyage. Franklin represents his own position in the early sections of the Autobiography as locked between the rigid track of the tradesman and the freedom of the sea. The problem of social failure is registered in the narrative not by its substantial presence – Franklin is provided with perfect opportunities to learn three trades – but by the force with which the young Franklin is jostled through the three trades, and by the resistance he puts up when at last confronted with the beginnings of a livelihood in apprenticeship. As he writes, in a phrase that manages to linguistically perform the battle for agency, ‘I stood out some time, but at last was persuaded’. Franklinian entrepreneurism emerges out of novel opportunities for success that take shape within a field of novel opportunities for failure.

That Franklin’s version of success is defined against social failure becomes most evident in relation to the great counterpoint to Franklin in the period, John Fitch. Fitch was a Philadelphia metalworker who invented a steamboat, failed to secure a patent on it, and committed suicide in 1798. Like Franklin’s, Fitch’s memoirs (which are in fact two different manuscripts: the Life and the so-called Steamboat History, which relates Fitch’s tribulations with his invention) were not delivered into print by their author. Whereas Franklin ‘published’ his memoirs in manuscript form, Fitch deposited his at the Library Company of Philadelphia in 1792, with instructions to keep them sealed for thirty years. Fitch had two reasons for wishing that his memoirs remain secret. First, he had been involved in a marriage of form to the mother of his friend Harry Voigt’s illegitimate child, and he wanted to protect the reputations of those involved; second, and more to the immediate point, Fitch was so convinced that the world was against him that he assumed the US government would destroy his text before it could be circulated. As he wrote in one of his letters to the Library Company:

> the warmth of the present age is so much in favour of the first officers of the Government whom I have so strenuously called in question their candour that I much fear they would be destroyed without ever giving the world an opportunity of knowing in what manner I have been treated by them. (Fitch 1976, pp. 207–208; spelling and punctuation as in original)

Like Franklin’s text, Fitch’s memoirs are composed in sections: six large quarto writing tablets comprise his Life and Steamboat History. But in Fitch’s life memoir, episodic poetics takes another form entirely – a form that expresses the value of the life in ways that are incompatible with the structural metaphor of the liquidity of currency. Whereas Franklin uses the errata-correction sequence to control – to bind and configure – narrative
time, Fitch’s narrative is marked everywhere by the central figure’s inability to control anything at all. Thus whereas the Franklin of the Autobiography succeeds because he is never too much of one thing, Fitch fails, according to his account, because he can never be enough of anything: episodic consolidation is replaced by episodic diffusion. But at the same time, in another turn of the episodic dialectic, Fitch also finds that he is too much of a bad thing, and that his fundamental lack defines him throughout life – just as Franklinian fullness stands in productive tension with Franklin’s representation of himself as permanently fungible. This sense of deficiency figures even in the description of his birth, and the deletions in the manuscript serve to emphasize Fitch’s vexed liminal perspective – and the extent to which Fitch conceives of his failure as a predestined condition. Like a bad banknote, Fitch is not simply valueless; he lives, as it were, outside the law of value itself:

The House that I was born in was upon the line between Hartford and Windsor but as the bigest part of the Place was in Windsor it was said that I was born in Windsor but from the singularity of my make shape and disposition and [inserted between lines: fortune in this World] I am inclined to believe that I should be born upon the very line itself it was the design of Heaven that I should be born on the Very line and not in any township whatever yet am happy that it did not happen also between two states that I can say that I was born somewhere. (vol. 1, p. 4; spelling and punctuation as in original)

Perhaps the most dramatic contrast with Franklin is in Fitch’s inability to circulate as a character like Franklin, who drifts serendipitously from event to event, episode to episode, accumulating credit. Fitch is marked by a fundamental lack, a primary stain that is registered in his narrative through his return to a childhood trauma, when he was wrongly blamed and beaten for a fire in his family home:

And when I had the first extinguished notwithstanding my painful hands and smarting face which was then covered in blisters I went to relate the tale to my elder bretherin but I no sooner arrived at the yard than my brother fell foul of me boxing my ears and beating me beyond reason for the greatest fault and would not give me leave to say a word in my behalf. And as my father had that evening gone acourting I had nowhere to apply to for redress therefore was obliged to submit not only to the greatest indignities but the greatest injustice. On the return of my father I made my complaints but without any satisfaction or redress. This Sir being what I may call the first act of my life seemed to forebode the future rewards that I was to receive for my labours thro’ life which has generally corrisponded exactly with that. (Fitch 1976, p. 23; spelling and punctuation as in the original)

For Fitch, failure – and not Franklinian success – is inscribed from the start, and the most dramatic formal contrast between the two memoirs is Franklin’s ability to effectively manipulate the flow of his narrative, while Fitch never exceeds the paradigmatic failure of his youth. Where Franklin obscures the production of his successes through competition with other characters and limits his representation to the moment of circulation, where value simply accrues, Fitch instantiates the failure to circulate. In this way, Fitch’s memoirs powerfully illustrate the unsteady world that is imperfectly suppressed in Franklin’s narrative. When viewed together, the two models for representing a life indicate both the
flexibility of episodic narrative structure and the extent to which the Franklinian version of success triumphed historically.

Rufus Griswold, writing in his nostalgic The Republican Court; or, American Society in the Days of Washington (issued in parts in 1856), describes Fitch in shrill terms. In effect, Fitch is included in the Republican Court only to indicate exactly who must be excluded from its ranks; the brevity of the passage conveys the completeness of Fitch’s failure:

John Fitch, who had invented the steamboat, was wearying incredulous people with applications for money for new experiments, and with his confident predictions of the time when the Atlantic should be crossed by steam in a fortnight. Soon after, baffled and disheartened, he retired to Kentucky and selected a grave beside the Ohio, that his restless spirit might be lulled to repose through coming ages by the music of steam engines ascending and descending that majestic river. (p. 265)

Griswold’s account shows the divergence between Franklinian and Fitchian episodic structure to be a culturally recognizable one. Writing in the antebellum period, Griswold was himself unavoidably shaped by the Franklinian model; his image of the steamboats ascending and descending, easing Fitch to rest through an oscillation that amounts to stasis, elegantly – painfully – captures the narrative form of Fitch’s Life.5

Simmel (1950) expresses something of this contradictory structure of opportunity in his account of what he terms ‘the antinomy between freedom and equality’ that emerges in the eighteenth century:

[...]his need for the freedom of the individual who feels himself restricted and deformed by historical society results in a self-contradiction once it is put into practice. For evidently, it can be put into practice permanently only if society exclusively consists of individuals who externally as well as internally are equally strong and equally privileged. Yet [...] the power-giving and rank-determining forces of men are, in principle, unequal [...]. Therefore, complete freedom necessarily leads to the exploitation of this inequality by the more privileged, to the exploitation of the stupid by the clever, of the weak by the strong, of the timid by the grasping. (p. 65)

Franklin communicates this condition throughout the Autobiography, but most sharply in his account of the formative conflict with the brother. For it is in that collision between two characters, each with a claim to the same socio-narrative position – James thematically, through his role as older brother and boss; Franklin formally, through his role as narrator and central figure developed, as it were, against James-as-ground – it is in this collision between James and Franklin that the Autobiography registers both the primary struggle over scarce resources and the narrative struggle through which the autobiographical subject is dynamically forged. Through attention to the episodic poetics of the money form, we are able to see how Franklin effectively lifts the Franklin character from the story to the discourse: how, that is, the version of the successful Franklin who narrates the Autobiography is developed through the narration itself.6 That Fitch’s narrative presents an interiority mostly absent from Franklin’s should also indicate to us how much the Franklinian fiction of competitive success as rule determines the contrary model of failure as exception – despite the fact that in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century, Fitches outnumbered Franklins.
In recognizing the production of Franklin’s centrality within the structure of the family, we can now more fully register the importance of the money form to the episodic configuration of the erratum-correction sequence. The ‘ample’ quality that Franklin assigns himself is both constant and fully realized only in the second half of the movement, the repayment. We see this in its most condensed form in that charged phrase, ‘I made my Brother ample Amends’. In other words, Franklin’s ‘ampleness’ is constituted through a narrative process – a narrative process that is, in the structure of the episodic sequence, denied or negated. In hardening the form in this way, Franklin effects a major reduction of the brother – a reduction that operates across the Autobiography. What the narrative finally enacts is the development of ‘Benjamin Franklin’ at the expense of all the other figures (the other characters) through which Franklin derives his narrative energy. And, as the example of John Fitch most trenchantly demonstrates, this need not be understood as a feature of autobiography as such, or even autobiography at the turn of the nineteenth century. The aesthetic achievement of Franklin’s form is to generate a powerful actualization of the individual figure out of a field of others: the reduction of everyone else is exactly what produces Franklin in all of his textual density.

But this kind of narrative episodic poetics is inseparable from the social competition through which it is realized. Franklin’s creation of a structure to contain and re-purpose social antagonism is inevitably embedded in the history it takes as its raw materials. Rather than resist the emergence of what Simmel recognized as the antinomy between freedom and equality, Franklin embraces it, he puts it to work. He relishes, as Simmel might have said, his strength and his cleverness amidst the weak and the stupid, and he swallows the whole with what we might call a world-historically ample appetite.

For the late-seventeenth-century autobiographer Francis Kirkman, the accumulation of seemingly limitless narrative digressions was the point of the story: ‘[n]arrative control’ was, for him, ‘an ethical act, for it ensures that however much we wander, we will not err’ (McKeon 1987, p. 247). Stephen Burroughs (1988), the American forger, counterfeiter, and memoirist, referred to the picaresque plot of his own life narrative (first published in 1798) as ‘the chain which has connected these events together’, and explicitly related that chain to those that led him into error, ‘those chains of habit which education has forged’ (pp. 3, 34). Both writers orient themselves in relation to error, and we may, finally, find a similar circularity in Franklin’s Autobiography, in which even to err is not to err, and to assume a debt is to obtain credit. The Franklin character-narrator’s capacity for configuration enables any ex post choice to appear as the correct choice. In the Autobiography’s perverse teleology, Franklin is always – as the narrative’s frequent prolepses hint – at the end.

‘Infinitely various are the incidents of one man’s life which cannot be reduced to unity’ (Aristotle 1961, p. 67). Aristotle was no doubt correct in his assertion, which encompasses, too, the social relationships and antagonisms that constitute those incidents; the persistent appeal of Franklin’s strange illusion of unity speaks to the unresolved question of what a ‘life’ may be in an antagonistic society, one in which the law of abstract value trumps the relationships that both produce that value and suffer under its rule. Franklin was an agile swimmer who recounts in Part One of the Autobiography not only the pleasures of swimming in the Thames and delighting crowds of Londoners, but also of giving swimming lessons to his friends, and the Autobiography is in many ways
itself a swimming lesson – though one that does its best to help us forget that the liquid life is very rare indeed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their attention to earlier versions of this essay, the author is grateful to Jim Green, Christopher Looby, Joel Pfister, Kara Wittman, Bryan Wolf, and Alex Woloch. The Library Company of Philadelphia generously supported the research.

NOTES

1. Critics have noted the resemblance between Franklin’s narrative persona and the money form; my focus here is on the representation of time as money-time. Mitchell Breitwieser (1984), who in many ways set the standard for critical commentary on Franklin, compares Franklin and the money form at some length, with a rich discussion of ‘bourgeois capital as a form of metaphysics, rather than as a practical opponent to metaphysics’ (pp. 219n17, 202–230).

2. The distinctiveness of Franklin’s narrative representation may be seen by contrast with John Adams’ autobiography (1961), written in the first decade of the nineteenth century and unpublished in his lifetime, which articulates the relation between life-event and temporality in a manner much more consonant with Protestant severity than Franklin’s. The very terms of Adams’ text would be unintelligible in Franklin’s:

   I learned in my Youth in America, that Happiness is lost forever if Innocence is lost, at least until Repentance is undergone so severe as to be an overballance to all the gratifications of Licentiousness. Repentance itself cannot restore the Happiness of Innocence, at least in this Life. (vol. 3, p. 261)

Adams’ own narrative devolves into a massive collection of already-written documents (letters, diary entries, etc.), but Farrell (1989) has argued that it is organized nonetheless around a ‘Ciceronian ideal’: a ‘rhetorical autobiography’ that recounts the major ‘rhetorical events’ in the life, and part of Adams’ effort to establish himself as an orator-statesman (pp. 513, 521) Thus in Adams, too, linear temporal unfolding is subordinated to an episodic narrative logic.

3. For good accounts of these dynamics, see Smith (1988) and Henretta (1965). On inequality and socioeconomic change as they relate to the life of Franklin, see Nash (1977), Smith (1988, 1990, 2004), and the essays in Middleton and Smith (2008).

4. Rigal (1998) contrasts Franklin’s flight to ‘freedom and independence’ in Philadelphia with Fitch’s ‘irredeemable’ entrapment within ‘patriarchal forms of “tyranny”’ (pp. 60–61). Caric (1997) has connected Fitch’s failure to conceptions of the labouring body during the period of transition between manufactory and industrialism.

5. Griswold’s effort to imagine the United States through biography is itself a noteworthy development of Franklinian exemplarity, one that entails imagining history in terms of biographical episodes; its wider cultural purchase is illustrated by an advertisement (printed on the back wrapper of one of the book’s parts) for The Pictorial Cyclopaedia of Biography: Embracing a Series of Original Memoirs of the Most Distinguished Persons of All Times:
A good Biographical Dictionary has long been a desideratum with the public. No book has been published for a long time which gave in a compact form for ready reference memoirs of all the distinguished persons who have figured in the world. Such a volume is of inestimable value, and should be placed side by side with a Dictionary of the English Language. The Scholar, the Merchant, the Statesman or the Mechanic, the Farmer or the Lawyer, may well dispense with many other books which are nevertheless of Standard Value, but he cannot if he read a book, a magazine, or a newspaper, (and who does not?) fail to have frequent cause for reference to a Biographical Dictionary.

The contrast between the biographies within the dictionary (each unique) and the readers of those biographies, who can only be typified ('The Scholar, the Merchant, the Statesman or the Mechanic') underscores the point.

6. On the analytical distinction between story and discourse, see Chatman (1978): ‘Every narrative – so this theory goes – is a structure with a content plane (called “story”) and an expression plane (called “discourse”)’ (p. 146).

REFERENCES


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