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Narratives of the Self



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Preface

The 20th century proved to be a difficult time for the writer behind the literary text. While a number of modernist authors attained the status of celebrities, the prevalent tendencies of literary criticism spoke against the fetishization of the writer and turned towards the text itself, and not its originator, as the primary source of meaning.

New Criticism's ban on associating the work with the figure and life of the author is no longer in effect. While it worked, it was efficient in rooting out the practice of showing an interpretation of the writer's life as an explanation of their work, but was also instrumental in severing all the ties between the person and the work. The next blow, perhaps a much more serious one, came in the form of Roland Barthes' famous essay on the death of the author, depriving the act of writing of the glamour of individual creation and giving initiative to the reader instead. In the poststructural proliferation of fictions and voices, the voice of the writer is perhaps not unheard, but almost completely irrelevant.

While the postmodernist orthodoxy proclaimed its views on the relationship of the written world and the one who writes it, the readers chose their own way. The second half of the twentieth century became a great time for nonfiction literature – biographies, autobiographies, journalism, travel writing and forms situated between the traditionally accepted poles of fact and fiction. All of them were an answer to a great hunger for the real, which postmodernist literature could not satiate.

A similar turn finally took place in theory – the rapidly developing discipline of memory studies, methodologies based on phenomenology of the body and psychoanalysis, as well as politically engaged forms of literary criticism all moved towards an engagement with the real circumstances of creating and experiencing texts. The link between the writer and the text was regaining its importance. One could again legitimately ask the questions concerning the life hidden among the letters.

The strong reaction against treating the life of the author as the key to understanding the text has left an important remnant – the awareness that the relationship between the two is by no means trivial. Because of this lack of obviousness, it is the more exciting to see the different ways in which they could reinforce

each other or, on the contrary, create subtle tensions between the fiction and the underlying, but directly inaccessible fact. The purpose of this volume is to explore the territory between the writer's life and the text growing out of it in a possibly broad way, showing a wide range of literary phenomena (in both fiction and nonfiction) and theoretical approaches.

Part I: (Auto)Biographies

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Didactic Posturing: Strategies of Authorial Self-Fashioning in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*

1. Introductory Remarks

Benjamin Franklin holds a unique place in the history of American literature and culture. Born in 1706 as the tenth child of a Calvinist family in Boston and spending his childhood and youth in rather modest circumstances, he had risen to national and international fame when he died in 1790 at the age of 84. Having received only rudimentary school education, yet driven on by an inexhaustible thirst for knowledge, he self-schooled himself into an all-round expert in various fields of knowledge (history, philosophy, literature, journalism, mathematics, natural science etc.), which qualified him for the most diverse occupations (printer, journalist, writer, editor, politician, diplomat and inventor). He played a major role in the American Revolutionary War as co-author of the Declaration of Independence and later as United States Minister to France (1776–1885) and clever diplomat in the negotiations for the Treaty of Paris (1783) by which the United States became a sovereign nation.¹

While already the bare facts of this life story had all the ingredients to turn Franklin into a national icon, his carefully developed strategies of controlling and manipulating his public image deserve particular attention in this connection. As numerous critics have observed, Franklin was a man of “many masks” (Buxbaum 1987: 4). On the one hand, he had a predilection for hiding behind different pseudonyms and personae. On the other, he knew how to use his own biography as raw material to set himself up as an exemplary national – and ultimately international – model character. These efforts reach their culmination point in his famous *Autobiography* (1791) at which he worked at irregular periods from 1771 until his death.

1 For a comprehensive account of Franklin's life and achievement see Carl Van Doren's voluminous *Benjamin Franklin: A Biography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1987 [1938]). A recommendable newer biography is Gordon S. Wood's *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

With its heavy emphasis on useful instruction, the *Autobiography* can be regarded as the very prototype of didactic self-writing (Müller 2010: 27–29). With the notorious “Project of arriving at moral Perfection” (Franklin 1986: 66) in its thematic centre, it had a most controversial reception. Highly appreciated and used as a national guidebook to self-help and self-education, it was at the same time from the very beginning the target of the most severe attacks and polemics.² In particular, the author’s strategies to control and manipulate his public image – a trait which characterizes not only the *Autobiography* but his writings and self-performances in general – brought him the charge of being an insincere *poseur*. What is, however, often overlooked both by his admirers and his critics, is the humorously self-ironic stance by which the seemingly rigidly didactic posture is undermined and qualified. Before coming back to that point, let me begin with a few general remarks.

2. Literary Contexts and Influences

In order to approach Franklin’s work from the right angle, we have to be aware of the tradition in which he wrote.³ As he mentions in his *Autobiography*, he had been an avid reader from early on. His particular interest was focused on the kind of literature which he regarded as useful and instructive in terms of the theory and practice of human behaviour. Among works which impressed him the most, *Autobiography* lists, among others, the *Parallel Lives* of the Greek historian

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- 2 The negative image of Franklin has largely been fixed by 19th and 20th century writers such as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain and D.H. Lawrence. Irving’s portrait of Ichabod Crane in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is a sarcastic parody of what the author considered as the Franklinian spirit. A similar case is Judge Marmaduke Temple’s corrupt and opportunistic cousin Richard Jones in *The Pioneers*, whose first name is an ironic allusion to Franklin’s “Poor Richard”. For the negative responses of Poe (“The Business Man”), Melville (*Israel Potter*), Twain (“The Late Benjamin Franklin”) and Lawrence (the “Benjamin Franklin” chapter in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*) see the text material documented in the Norton Critical Edition of *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 259–266, 268–270, 272–274, 289–299. For a more comprehensive overview of the critical reception see P. M. Zall, *Franklin’s Autobiography: A Model Life* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), 11–20.
 - 3 In the following, I take up some observations from my earlier article “Moralistik im Dienst einer utilitaristischen Ethik: Benjamin Franklins *Autobiography*”, *Literatur und Moral*, eds. Volker Kapp and Dorothea Scholl (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2011), 437–455, in which I locate the *Autobiography* within the tradition of European ‘moralist’ writing.

Plutarch—a collection of biographies written to illustrate the virtues and vices of famous Greek and Latin men, the religious tracts of John Bunyan, in particular his allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* (1667), Cotton Mather's *Bonifacius: An Essay Upon the Good* (1710), Daniel Defoe's *Essay Upon Projects* (1697)—a collection of ideas for social and cultural improvement, as well as popular self-help literature in health care such as *The Way to Health, Wealth and Happiness* (1682–1692) by a certain Thomas Tyron. These few examples may suffice to indicate that Franklin's philosophy of the art of living encompasses a broad range of moral and ethical behaviour as well as the fundamental practicalities of physical well-being. With its emphasis on the practical side of people's everyday lives, the *Autobiography* sets a strong counterpoint against an abstractly idealistic view of human nature. This also concerns Franklin's frank propagation of the ethic of materialistic self-interest, which provoked the hateful scorn of many of his critics.

In his *Autobiography* Franklin also mentions other models for his writing practice. Thus, he informs the reader early in the book that one day he came upon a volume of the *Spectator*, a magazine founded by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, which, during the time of its publication (1711–1714), was one of the leading voices of English enlightenment ideas. Following the classical poetological formula of Horace's *De arte poetica* (“aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae”) that literature should both instruct and entertain, the magazine cultivated a casual conversational style which appealed to the literary tastes of the rising middle classes. Franklin regarded the style of the *Spectator* as an ideal model for his own writing, and, as he tells us in his *Autobiography*, he immediately started a systematic training program in order to learn how to imitate it.⁴ We can trace the effects of that model, for example, in the first part of the *Autobiography*, written in 1771, presented in the (fictitious) form of a private letter of the author to his own son. Ruminating about his early life, he pretends to censure himself for losing himself again and again in what he calls “little Anecdotes” (Franklin 1986: 1) and “rambling Digressions” (Franklin 1986: 8), yet then he justifies himself by letting his addressee know that this is after all a private conversation, expressing himself in the characteristic form of a witty aphorism: “[...] one does not dress for a private Company as for a public Ball” (Franklin 1986: 8).

4 For a discussion of the influence of the *Spectator* on Franklin's writing style see Janette Seaton Lewis, “A Turn of Thinking': The Long Shadow of the *Spectator* on Franklin's *Autobiography*”, *Early American Literature*, 13 (Winter 1978/79), 268–277, and Albert Furtwangler, “The *Spectator's* Apprentice”, Furtwangler, *American Silhouettes – Rhetorical Identities of the Founders* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 15–34.

In a preliminary summary, we can say that in both naming and displaying the influence of his literary models, the author of the *Autobiography* locates himself in a pointed gesture of literary posturing within the large field of the Western literary and philosophical tradition, demonstrating knowledge ranging from the works of the ancients up to the moral tracts of his own Puritan heritage and the prominent voices of the European Enlightenment.⁵

Although there is a gap of fifteen years between the composition of the first and of the second part of the *Autobiography*, the casual, conversational narrative style of the first part is continued throughout. The narrative is full of little anecdotes which serve to illustrate a moral and ethical point. These anecdotes are often accompanied by small character sketches which illustrate in a didactic manner typical forms of human behaviour. The narrative is, moreover, interspersed with reflexions, aphorisms and maxims taken from all kinds of literary and philosophical sources. A good example of this practice is the “Project at arriving at moral Perfection” (Franklin 1986: 66), in which Franklin presents his maxims for leading a perfect life in the form of a catalogue of thirteen virtues. That catalogue is framed by numerous quotations of the most diverse origins, consisting of a popular proverb, a line from the Old and from the New Testament, as well as mottos and maxims from both classic and contemporary authors.

This method of writing is already anticipated in Franklin’s earlier writings. He had established his literary reputation with *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, published between 1733 and 1759 under the pseudonym Richard Saunders, a series of fictional letters, each followed by a series of proverbs and maxims which were later assembled under the title “The Way to Wealth”. In his *Autobiography* Franklin characterizes “The Way to Wealth” retrospectively as a collection of “Proverbs, which contained the Wisdom of many Ages and Nations” (Franklin 1986: 79), a description which is also an apt characterization of the approach taken in the *Autobiography* itself.

5 Without going into the depths of theoretical discussion here, I use Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, as expounded in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) as the basis of my approach. The term ‘posture’, signifying an agent’s specific *manner* of taking up a position, is borrowed from Alain Viala, “Stylistique et sociologie: Classe de postures”, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, Tome 71 fasc. 3 (1993), *Langues et littératures modernes – Moderne taal- en letterkunde*, 615–624.

3. Authorial Strategies of Indirect Self-Advertisement

The aspirations of the *Autobiography*, however, go far beyond those of the earlier work. As already mentioned, Franklin started with the manuscript somewhere in 1771, at a time, that is, when America was still a British colony. When he continued with the second part in 1784, with the United States as a sovereign nation, Franklin saw the moment to change the direction of his autobiographical project by assuming the role of a national as well as universal model character. The way in which he articulates these aspirations is a good example of Franklin's clever strategy of authorial self-fashioning. Assuming a posture of what we could call arrogant humility, he lets others speak for himself. Two letters inserted between the first and the second part document that he had continued with the work at his autobiography because of the encouragement of two good friends. In the first letter Abel James, characterizing the project as "a Work which would be useful and entertaining not only to a few, but to millions" (Franklin 1986: 58), shows himself convinced that Franklin's full life story would set a powerful example fit to be imitated by young Americans:

I know of no Character living nor many of them put together, who has so much in his Power as Thyself to promote a greater Spirit of Industry and early Attention to Business, Frugality and Temperance with the American Youth. (Franklin 1986: 58)

The second letter, by Benjamin Vaughan, goes even further by ascribing to the project, in highly patriotic language, not only an exemplary status for "the manners and situation of a *rising* people" (Franklin 1986: 59), but also praises it as an example to the whole world: "Extend your views even further; do not stop at those who speak the English tongue, but [...] think of bettering the whole race of men" (Franklin 1986: 62).

By documenting his friend's letter, Franklin claims for himself not only a place, but even a superior position within the time-honoured tradition of Western writing: "[...] I do not think that the writings of Caesar and Tacitus can be more interesting to a true judge of human nature and society" (Franklin 1986: 59); "[...] it will be worth all Plutarch's Lives put together" (Franklin 1986: 61). In the eyes of the letter writer, the *Autobiography* owes its superior status firstly because it gives "a noble rule and example of *self-education*" (Franklin 1986: 59), and secondly by virtue of its author's frank acknowledgement of his simple origins:

Your account of yourself [...] will show that you are ashamed of no origin; a thing the more important, as you prove how little necessary all origin is to happiness, virtue, or greatness. (Franklin 1986: 60)

By way of that rhetorical construction Franklin is set up as the prototypical embodiment of the proverbial *common man* who, by force of his own will and initiative, has made it from low origins to wealth and social standing. In other words, the *Autobiography* offers an identity model which is particularly suited to the needs of a young, heterogeneous society in a historical climate of deep and rapid changes. It is these needs which are also at the basis of the ethical doctrine expounded by Franklin's own discourse.

One of the most conspicuous features of that doctrine is its radical utilitarianism. "Useful" and "utility" are recurring key words in the *Autobiography*.⁶ But, in contrast to the prejudices of many of Franklin's critics, this utilitarian ethic is not simply an ideology of unmitigated personal self-interest. To act in one's own self-interest is indeed approved of as an expression of natural human traits, but Franklin's real concern is how, given the less than ideal realities of human nature, the best possible amount of happiness can be achieved for both the individual *and* the larger community. Part of the answer to that problem is given in the before-mentioned "Project at arriving at moral Perfection" (Franklin 1986: 66).

3. The "Project at arriving at moral Perfection"

Franklin's plans for that project went back to the year 1760 when he wrote a letter to a friend in which he announced his intention to write a treatise under the projected title "The Art of Virtue". The basic idea behind that title was that virtue can be learned like any other art or occupation. In other words: that it not enough to give people moral instruction, but that they have to be provided with the principles, methods and instruments as well as with the practical training that is necessary to acquire those virtues:

If a Man would become a Painter, Navigator, or Architect, it is not enough that he is *advised* to be one, [...] but he must also be taught the Principles of the Art, be shewn all the Methods of Working, and how to acquire the *Habits* of using properly all the Instruments; and thus regularly and gradually he arrives by Practice at some Perfection in the Art. [...] My *Art of Virtue* has also its Instruments, and teaches the Manner of Using them. (Franklin 1997: 27)

This project is also mentioned in the before-mentioned letter by Benjamin Vaughan documented in the *Autobiography*, and Franklin expounds it at the beginning of the second part in a condensed form. Around 1730, he explains, he

6 For a discussion of Franklin's ethical utilitarianism see, among others, Frank Kelleter, "Franklin and the Enlightenment", *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Carla Mulford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 77–90, here 81ff.