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Orality and Literacy in Matter and Form: Ben Franklin's Way to Wealth

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The reader finishes Benjamin Franklin's *Way to Wealth*, first published as the preface to the silver-anniversary *Poor Richard's Almanach* of 1758, with the sense that an infinity of proverbs have followed one another in an endless sequence. With very few exceptions, Franklin took these proverbs, the "active ingredients" of the piece, from printed sources. They came immediately from his own twenty-four previous almanacs, but originally he had taken them from a handful of books which scholars assure us were his direct source of proverbial wisdom (Gallacher 1949:238-39; Newcomb 1957:3, 252; Amacher 1962:56-57). Franklin was, after all, city-born and city-bred, while by contrast proverbs are native to the world of agriculture, orality, and traditionalism. Proverbs embody the concrete and earthy morality of peasant shrewdness; as Walter J. Ong states it, they are situational and operational rather than abstract and speculative,¹ and they are formulated as concrete and earthy expressions in order to be memorable and readily available in the concrete and earthy situations of everyday peasant life (Ong 1982:33-36).

Among the quoted material in *The Way to Wealth*, some poetry stands out as exceptional, for by contrast with the proverbs it is highly literate—for instance:

I never saw an oft removed Tree,
Nor yet an oft removed Family,
That throve so well as those that settled be.

These regular iambic pentameter lines appear to be Franklin's own versification of one or two parallel sources (Gallacher 1949:247; Newcomb 1957:358). Often enough, it is interesting to note, the neo-classical verse of the eighteenth century was the swan song of the oral world, for in it may be seen oral content which has been

processed by literacy and put into typographic form. Pope's "What oft was thought but ne'er so well express'd" served as the elegy of this world, for Pope's successors in literature turned away from the received wisdom of the past and moved instead in the direction of novelties—"originality."

Franklin, very much a man of his era, did not personally research the world of rural orality for the proverbs of *Poor Richard's Almanack* and *The Way to Wealth*. Instead, he pruned them from collections of proverbs and aphorisms. He did not preserve them simply on account of their wisdom nor simply on account of their value as rural "reliques." Instead, he hunted them out in order to utilize them for a purpose even more practical than their own very practical wisdom. Franklin made use of them for twenty-four years to sell the almanacs he printed, and then in a valedictory mood, sailing across the ocean toward England during the summer of his retirement in 1767, he composed the preface for the next year, the last edition he would publish. His final careful culling of the proverbs in the former almanacs produced an item very different from its multiple sources, for Franklin made out of the oral, rural, moral proverbs a finished product which was literate and even typographic, urban and commercial, systematic and, strictly speaking, ethical. "There is a flower of religion, a flower of honor, a flower of chivalry that you must not require of Franklin," Parrington quoted Sainte-Beuve, noting that Ben "ended as he began, the child of a century marked by sharp spiritual limitations" (1930:178).

However much Franklin had turned his back on the older values of the medieval world, he was deeply concerned all his life long with method, with ethical behavior, and most especially with ethical education; and we may perhaps see in *The Way to Wealth* the sketch of a projected work on ethics concerning which he wrote Lord Kames three or four years later (Fiering 1978). "*The Way to Wealth*," Newcomb reminds us, "was unique in form and specific content, but in overall economic philosophy it can be reckoned as belonging to a type of then-popular literature" (1957:233). We will advert from time to time in this essay to the economic philosophy aspect of Franklin's work, but we will mainly try to deal in our special fashion with the aspects of "form and specific content" which make *The Way to Wealth* unique in the ethical literature of the world.

In classical, medieval, and Renaissance rhetoric, the term

“paroemia” meant the use of a proverb which effectively fit subject and circumstance. Rhetoricians identified paroemia as a form of allegory, along with irony, sarcasm, and four other related tropes (Migne 1850, vol. 82:115-16). As an instance of thinking in patterns rather than in cause-effect sequences, proverb and paroemia belonged to a conceptual style which was atavistic for an eighteenth-century scientist like Ben Franklin. But the proverb’s capacity for irony and sarcasm apparently recommended it to him and to many other sophisticated men of his day, who packaged their witty ideas in a form like that of rural proverbs, some of which Franklin used side by side with true folk proverbs both in the Almanacks and in *Way to Wealth*.

As many recent critics have noted, the proverbs of the 1757-58 Preface are not a random selection from those of the previous quarter-century. Franklin ignored the rowdier and randier proverbs which typified the earthy peasant world view and which characterized the humor of the British Empire before Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825) and Queen Victoria. Not for *The Way to Wealth* the likes of these proverbs from the barnyard:

The hasty Bitch brings forth blind puppies.
If God blesses a Man, his Bitch brings forth pigs [piglets].

Nor these from the bathroom:

Force shits upon Reason’s back.
The greatest monarch on the proudest throne is obliged to sit upon his own arse.

Nor these from the bedroom:

Neither a fortress nor a Maidenhead will hold out long after they begin to parley.
Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards.
Let thy maidservant be faithful, strong, and homely.
Squirrel-like, she covers her back with her tail.

Further, there were many proverbs such as the following which Franklin passed over because they did not have anything to do with the purpose of *Way to Wealth*:

Fish and visitors stink in three days.
Marry you Daughter and eat fresh Fish betimes.
The Tongue is ever turning to the aching Tooth.

And there was at least one which would have flatly contradicted the set purpose of the projected essay:

An Egg today is better than a Hen tomorrow.

Finally, though Franklin intended to formulate an ethical system which paralleled and “improved upon” the morality of organized religion, he did not want to contradict it openly, so he passed over such almanac proverbs as these, which attacked church functionaries:

The Bell calls others to Church, but itself never minds the Sermon.

Sound and sound Doctrine may pass through a Ram’s horn and a Preacher without straightening the one or amending the other.

The painful Preacher, like a candle bright, Consumes himself in giving others light.

The literal meaning of “painful” in the couplet is probably “painstaking,” though the “painsgiving” meaning is doubtless intended as well. And finally,

How many observe Christ’s Birth-day! How few his precepts! O! ‘tis easier to keep Holidays than Commandments,

a proverb which Franklin seems to have made up himself and which is particularly funny because of the adroit use of the zeugmas. Ultimately, of course, Franklin would not have wanted to exalt religious faith but instead to emphasize practical reason, so he of course avoided this emblematic epigram for which he had been indebted to Francis Quarles:

The Way to see by Faith is to shut the Eye of Reason; the Morning Daylight appears plain when you put out your Candle.

Franklin picked out only the comparatively dismal proverbs which had to do with two preconcerted theses: a man should be industrious, steady, and careful so that he will earn money, and he should be frugal and prudent so that he will keep it. Having chosen the proverbs from *Poor Richard’s Almanack* which inculcated these virtues, Franklin organized and unified them, with the aid of the technology of writing, into a logical structure resembling a systematic ethics—roughly the equivalent, for the industrial capitalism about to emerge in America, of the Code of

Hammurabi, the Ten Commandments, Solon's Laws, and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in their eras (Havelock 1978:42-43, 252-60). Having left behind the old manner of moral control, a literate society demands a systematic ethical code available in a written prototype and able to be interiorized as each individual's superego; whereas Adam and Eve reacted to their sin with shame, the sinful man or woman of a literate world reacts with guilt (Vigne 1967:1). Furthermore, the oral mentality would tend to judge that categorical thought tends to miss much of what matters most about the world, rendering mainly the unimportant, bloodless, uninteresting, and trivial; as Ong puts it, "closing your eyes and concentrating on abstract principles about animal coloration is a splendid way to get eaten by a bear. Better to open your eyes and see what that big white blotch is that's moving across the hill beyond the blackberry bushes" (1982:52, citing Luria 1976:54-55).

This codified and categorical aspect of *The Way to Wealth*, which results from Franklin's gathering the right proverbs under the implied headings, produces the needed abstract and systematic ethics. The headings are not made explicit, of course, so as to safeguard the pleasant illusion of an oral setting generated by the character Father Abraham and his speech at the "vendue" or auction of goods. But this illusion is only an illusion; the speaker Father Abraham is a fiction generated by the fictional pen of the fictional Poor Richard Saunders, and the setting is like that in a modern city zoo in which captive animals—here, captive proverbs—live in an artificial replica of their natural habitat (343):

'Tis true there is much to be done, and perhaps you are weak-handed, but stick to it steadily, and you will see great Effects, for *constant Dropping wears away Stones*, and by *Diligence and Patience the Mouse ate in two the Cable*; and *little Strokes fell great Oaks*, as Poor Richard says in his Almanack, the Year I cannot just now remember.

Methinks I hear some of you say, Must a Man afford himself no Leisure?—I will tell thee, my Friend, what Poor Richard says, *Employ thy Time well if thou meanest to gain Leisure*; and *since thou are not sure of a Minute, throw not away an Hour*. Leisure is Time for doing something useful; this Leisure the diligent Man will obtain, but the lazy Man never; so that, as Poor

Richard says, a *Life of Leisure and a Life of Laziness are two Things*. Do you imagine that Sloth will afford you more Comfort than Labour? No, for as Poor Richard says, *Trouble springs from Idleness, and grievous Toil from needless Ease. Many without Labour would live by their Wits only, but they break for want of stock.*

Thus a short sample of Father Abraham exhorting his listeners to lead industrious lives. The other half of his speech encourages them to save their hard-earned money by living frugally. A sample of the latter (346-47):

A Child and a Fool, as Poor Richard says, *imagine Twenty Shillings and Twenty Years can neer be spent, but Always taking out of the Meal-tub, and never putting in, soon comes to the Bottom;* then, as Poor Dick says, *When the Well's dry, they know the Worth of Water.* But this they might have known before, if they had taken his Advice: *If you would know the Value of Money, go and try to borrow some; for he that goes a-borrowing goes a-sorrowing;* and indeed so does he that lends to such People, when he goes to get it again.—Poor Dick farther advises, and says,

*Fond Pride of Dress is sure a very Curse;
E'er Fancy you consult, consult your Purse.*

And again, *Pride is as loud a Beggar as Want, and a great deal more saucy.* When you have bought one fine Thing you must buy ten more, that your Appearance may be all of a Piece; but Poor Dick says, *'Tis easier to suppress the first Desire, than to satisfy all that follow it.* And 'tis as truly Folly for the Poor to ape the Rich, as for the Frog to swell, in order to equal the Ox.

*Great Estates may venture more,
But little Boats should keep near Shore.*

'Tis however a Folly soon punished; for *Pride that dines on Vanity sups on Contempt*, as Poor Richard says. And in another Place, *Pride breakfasted with Plenty, dined with Poverty, and supped with Infamy.*

But this is a literary imitation of orality and not bona fide orality at all. The real milieu of *The Way to Wealth* is literacy.

The cause being evangelized is that of capital accumulation in the context of an emerging economic system made possible by Calvinism and brought into full being by Newton's theorizing and James Watt's steam engine. Moreover, the real setting is the city, that great synapse of the literate nervous system. The alphabetic method of organization usually produces something abstract, but by keeping his proverbs intact in their concreteness (indeed, by rewriting many of them so as to make them even more easily remembered), Franklin maintains the semblance of concrete peasant orality and nevertheless produces the Pelagian ethics of the City of Man (Ong 1982:33-36, 57-68).

By delivering his ethical gospel of industry and thrift into literate man's inmost being, Benjamin Franklin became the apostle of a new economic redemption. Whereas Abram Kardiner says that the medieval church "reproduc[ed] the parent-child relationship, thus externalizing the superego (or conscience) mechanisms, . . . the Calvinist dogma destroyed the externalized conscience and placed it where it could wield far more despotic power than was ever done by the church. The Reformation internalized conscience. . . . The most startling thing about the Reformation is that. . . this conscience still operated on the same factors which were emphasized by the old church, chiefly the pleasure-drives the repression of which were fundamental in the family disciplines. The doctrine exerted no restricting influence on the social and mercantile practices of the middle class" (1945:440). And the revolution in morality, he goes on, brought about other difficulties:

As far as impulse control was concerned, the Reformation made the psychological task more difficult. Man had to become his own judge, for with the break with the church went the opportunity to keep the conscience externalized. The internalization of conscience had an equivocal effect on social stability because it did not operate on those hidden forms of aggression concealed in commercial practice. It could only operate on those impulses which fell under disciplinary ban in childhood—chiefly the pleasure drives. . . . In practice Calvinism worked out so that repression of the pleasure drives acquired a reward in the new liberties, which became filled with new opportunities for self-assertion and aggression. . . .

Success in worldly life is one of the ways of establishing the fact that one is saved; hence industry is exalted to a high position, operating now with the sanction of the new church and in harmony with new social goals. The adoption of this new Calvinist plan of life—essentially the definition of bourgeois goals—by the lower classes led to a unique practice called Puritanism with its emphasis on industry and thrift (439-40).

The paternalistic mercantilism of Franklin's day was not the wave of his present, nor was it to be the wave of the future (Burke 1967:109). As the auditors of Father Abraham's discourse ignored his fatherly advice to them and "began to buy extravagantly" when the auction started, so the American colonies were about to reject the paternalistic and mercantilist reign of Georgian England. The old world of hierarchical structure, whether of honored age or of reverend order, was becoming a thing of the past; the old world of Augustinian Platonism and Thomistic Aristotelianism—both of them epistemologically realist—had given way to Occamist nominalism and the individualism it engendered; in Kenneth Burke's words, "Realism considered individuals as members of a group; . . . nominalism considered groups as aggregates of individuals" (1967:125-26)—that is to say, universal ideas are merely convenient words. Thus nominalism, when it arose toward the end of the Middle Ages, "undermin[ed] the group coordinates upon which church thought was founded and also prepared for the individualist emphasis of private enterprise" (Burke 1967:126). In the field of science, nominalism prepared the human mind to generate new and less rigidly "realist" notions of species, preparing the way for Buffon's and Darwin's careers, and hence it encouraged the shift of "natural philosophy" or "natural history"—what we call science—from the language of realist philosophy into the language of statistical mathematics.²

Above all, the world of *The Way to Wealth* is typographic. Though when he wrote it he was sitting in a deck chair in the middle of the Atlantic, fifteen hundred miles from the nearest printing press, Ben Franklin possessed always the mind and heart and inky soul of a printer. If mere literacy initiated mankind's fall from the peace of a communal agricultural maternal Eden into the warfare of individualistic urban mercantile competition, then typography, the epitome of literacy, has completed the process. Most popularly Marshall McLuhan, most broadly and deeply Walter

Ong, and most recently Werner Kelber have all sensitized us to this process, and Benjamin Franklin is capable of being Exhibit A for most of their assertions.³

The printed book is, after all, the first mass-produced, interchangeable-part item, and the fonts of type which print it are themselves systems of interchangeable parts. Further, a Bible or an almanac or any other book is mass-produced in order to be mass-marketed, and a Bible and an almanac—like as not Poor Richard's—formed the entire library of many Colonial and Federal American families, as Hawthorne suggested in "Roger Malvin's Burial" when he described "the current year's Massachusetts Almanac which, with the exception of an old black-letter Bible, comprised all the literary wealth of the family." Small wonder that the Bible as interpreted by Calvin and the almanac as shaped by Ben Franklin cooperated in creating the new urban man: mass-man, statistical man, rather than communal man—and what a difference *that* is!

Near the beginning of his work, Franklin identifies the simplest level of irony of Poor Richard's relationship with the proverbial content of Father Abraham's speech (340):

In my Rambles, where I am not personally known, I have frequently heard one or other of my Adages repeated, with "as Poor Richard says" at the End on't; this gave me some Satisfaction, as it showed not only that my Instructions were regarded, but discovered likewise some Respect for my Authority; and I own that to encourage the Practice of remembering and repeating those wise Sentences, I have sometimes *quoted myself* with great Gravity.

Judge then how much I must have been gratified by an Incident I am going to relate to you.

And Franklin returns to the explication of this most superficial irony at the very end (350): "The frequent mention [Father Abraham] made of me must have tired anyone else, but my Vanity was wonderfully delighted with it." The openly-admitted irony of Poor Richard Saunders's vanity as he serves as "frame-narrator" of the events of *The Way to Wealth* masks the deeper and much more effective irony of those events themselves. The people who hear Father Abraham's recital refuse to apply its moral lesson to their lives, bidding wildly when the

auction begins (350):

The old Gentleman ended his Harangue. The People heard it, and approved the Doctrine, and immediately practiced the contrary, just as if it had been a common Sermon; for the Vendue opened, and they began to buy extravagantly.

It is only the narrator Poor Richard who changes his mind and saves his money (350):

Not a tenth Part of this Wisdom was my own which he ascribed to me, but rather the Gleanings I had made of the Sense of all Ages and Nations. However, I resolved to be the better for the Echo of it; and though I had at first determined to buy Stuff for a new Coat, I went away resolved to wear my old One a little longer.

Thus Father Abraham's "common Sermon" fails to affect the common people; the oral presentation of folk wisdom has no impact on the communal audience which has been denominated with the plural terms "you," "the people," or "they." Poor Richard must then turn to the only target of the discourse to whom nominalism would attribute reality, the *individual* reader addressed in the *singular* by the *individual* writer (350): "Reader, if thou wilt do the same [as I did], thy Profit will be as great as mine. / I am, as ever, / thine to serve thee, / RICHARD SAUNDERS."

Thus, where the oral and communal has failed, the literate and individual still has hope of succeeding. By constructing a literate and even typographic object, Franklin has made the breakthrough from the ineffective old morality to a new world of system and ethics, offering his reader the raw materials from which to construct an "up-to-date" eighteenth-century superego. As Edward Gallagher notes, it is not the fifty-odd repetitions of "as Poor Richard says" which accomplish the goal but the single "as Poor Richard does" at the end which wins the day; it is not the mere knowledge of the practical proverbial wisdom of the peasant which will alleviate the lot of the plural people or the singular reader, but the concrete perception of its applicability and its concrete application now (Ross 1940:785-94; Gallagher 1973). Thus the early comic Poor Richard Saunders, hag-ridden by his wife Bridget, has given way to the persona of the successful almanack-maker with his store of "solid Pudding" on which to base his retirement, money to be spent or not according to his

discretion; and discreetly, Rich Richard Saunders will not be extravagant. The people entertain themselves by complaining about the bad times and the high taxes, thereby wasting their best time and taxing themselves by their idleness; and for them the homily is merely “live entertainment” even though Father Abraham explicitly applies its lessons to the concrete situation at hand, the “Vendue of *Fineries* and *Knick-knacks*” which is imminent. But although the reader should be quite entertained by the essay Franklin offers him, it is much more important that he should also be altered by it for the better—and not just by hard work and restraint on this one day but by hard work and restraint in his very being, in his innermost conscience, for the remainder of his life: “I live industriously and frugally; yet not I, but Poor Richard liveth industriously and frugally in me.”

Thus the early comic Richard altered during a quarter of a century into a role model (Newcomb 1957:27-29); his confession of innocent vanity brings the reader to trust him all the more as he invites that reader into the lonesome intimacy of an author's confidences: in the silent privacy of your reading these pages, unassailed by the temptations of a crowded auction of fineries and knickknacks, construct your individuality so that it is free of all the social pressures—like vanity, pride, and honor—which survive from the dying world of rural communities, the world of aristocrats, peasants, and the church. In this manner Benjamin Franklin tore apart the foundations of past culture, and with the lapidary proverbs which were its building blocks he built a new structure altogether, a barricade of literacy, typography, and systematic ethics with which to overthrow that dying world. And that barricade has become in its turn the foundation of that new world—our world—which has appeared in place of the old.

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Notes

¹See Redfield 1947:300, 1960:78; Wolf 1966:99; Stavenhagen 1975:66; Ong 1982:49-57.

²Lovejoy 1959:88-93; on Franklin's philosophy of science, Jorgenson 1935, McKillop 1948.

³See especially McLuhan 1962:18-23, 124-26, 153-55; Ong 1982; Kelber 1983.

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