

*for Lynne Liddell Doty*

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# Acknowledgments

I owe a debt to all those who read portions of this book at various stages of its composition, offering much valued editorial counsel: Joseph Carroll, Anja Müller-Wood, Brian Boyd, Mathias Clasen, Patricia Tarantello, and Jonathan Gottschall. Thanks are due also to Charles Duncan and Robert Funk, organizers of many SAMLA sessions on Darwinian Literary Studies; initial versions of several chapters were first tested in that forum. I am grateful as always to my colleague Victoria Ingalls of the Marist College science faculty. Our ventures in collaborative, interdisciplinary teaching have been a consistent source of intellectual stimulation, refining my understanding of evolutionary biology.

Permission to reprint chapters previously published, in whole or in part, by the following journals and presses is gratefully acknowledged:

“Male Reproductive Strategies in Sherwood Anderson’s ‘The Untold Lie.’” *Philosophy and Literature* 31, no. 2 (2007): 311-22. Reprinted in *Short Story Criticism*, vol. 142, edited by Jelena Krystovic, 114-19. Detroit and New York: Gale Cengage Learning, 2011.

“The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: The Story of a Successful Social Animal.” *Politics and Culture* (Spring 2010): 1-6. <https://politicsandculture.org/2010>.

“Nepotism in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘My Kinsman, Major Molineux.’” In *Telling Stories / Geschichten Erzählen: Literature and Evolution / Literatur und Evolution*, edited by Carsten Gansel and Dirk Vanderbeke, 296-309. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012.

“Paternal Confidence in Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘The Gilded Six-Bits.’” *Evolution, Literature, and Film: A Reader*, edited by Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gottschall, 392-408. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

“Biophilia in Thoreau’s *Walden*.” *South Atlantic Review* 79, no. 1-2 (2015): 1-24.

“The Role of the Arts in Male Courtship Display: Billy Collins’s ‘Serenade.’” *Philosophy and Literature* 41, no. 2 (October 2017): 264-71.

# Glossary

**Adaptation:** a change in the structure or functioning of an organism that makes it better suited to its environment (i.e., a heritable characteristic that tends to increase the fitness of individuals possessing it).

**Adaptive:** tending to increase the individual's fitness (i.e., conferring an advantage in terms of survival and reproduction). Note: any *adaptation* was, necessarily, *adaptive* at some point in an organism's evolutionary history, but changes in environment or ecological niche can reduce the benefits of a formerly advantageous adaptation.

**Alloparent:** an individual other than a biological parent who helps to care for juveniles.

**Altruism:** helping behavior provided at a cost to the performer (*See also Selfishness.*)

**Coefficient of relatedness:** the percentage of genes, on average, that two individuals share by common descent. The coefficient of relatedness between parent and child, or between full siblings, is .5 (i.e., they share one-half of their genes). That between aunts or uncles and nephews or nieces, or between grandparent and grandchild, is .25 (they share one-fourth of their genes).

**Fitness:** the reproductive success of an individual, commonly expressed in terms of the number of copies of his or her genes an individual succeeds in getting into the next generation.

**Direct fitness:** success resulting from the individual's personal reproductive efforts.

**Indirect fitness:** success resulting from the reproductive efforts of relatives with whom the focal individual shares genes, weighted according to coefficients of relatedness to the focal individual.

**Inclusive fitness:** The sum of an individual's direct and indirect reproductive success. (i.e., personal reproductive efforts and reproductive efforts of kin).

**Genotype:** the genetic constitution of an individual organism, i.e., the organism's full hereditary information. (*See also Phenotype.*)

**Hypergamy:** marrying someone superior to oneself, typically measured by social status or material wealth.

**Hypogamy:** marrying someone inferior to oneself, typically measured by social status or material wealth.

**Intersexual:** between or among members of the opposite sex (i.e., intersexual conflict = conflict between men and women).

**Intrasexual:** between or among members of the same sex.

**Kin selection:** selection for genes causing individuals to favor close kin (i.e., selection for behaviors that increase the inclusive fitness of the performer).

**Nepotism:** any discriminative behavior tending to favor an individual's relatives and hence to contribute to that individual's inclusive fitness.

**Parental investment:** any investment by a parent in an individual offspring that increases the offspring's chance of surviving (and of future reproductive success) at the cost of parental ability to invest elsewhere.

**Phenotype:** the manifest nature of an organism, including morphological, physiological, and behavioral attributes. (*See also* **Genotype**.)

**Proximate cause of behavior:** the internal reinforcing mechanism (e.g., hormonal or psychological) that triggers a behavior. (*See also* **Ultimate cause**.)

**Reproductive value:** an individual organism's expected future contribution to its own fitness.

**Residual reproductive value:** an individual's remaining reproductive value, as measured at a given point in time, taking into consideration age, sex, health, environmental conditions, and other pertinent factors.

**Selfishness:** behavior directed toward maximizing the survival and reproductive success of the performer. (*See also* **Altruism**.)

**Strategy:** a blind, unconscious behavior program.

**Ultimate cause of behavior:** the reason why a specific reinforcing mechanism (i.e., the proximate cause) evolved; that is, the survival-oriented or reproductive purpose it serves. (*See also* **Proximate cause**.)

# Introduction

This collection of essays offers evolutionary analysis of a dozen works from the American literary tradition. The aim is to create an interdisciplinary framework for examining key features of the chosen texts, offering an accessible introduction to Darwinian literary critical methodology in tandem with new insights into acknowledged classics. No specialized knowledge of evolutionary biology is needed to follow the lines of argument put forward. Essential terms and concepts, together with pertinent scientific research results, are explained in context, and a glossary is provided. Discussion integrates evolutionary analysis with examination of literary elements such as plot, setting, tone, theme, metaphor, symbol, characterization, and point of view. Connections are made throughout to existing commentary on the targeted texts, illustrating how Darwinian scrutiny can enrich, expand, confound, or reconfigure understandings derived from other critical approaches.

A central premise throughout is that literary works reflect—and reflect upon—universal attributes of an evolved human nature. Across genres, literature explores relationships between human organisms and their environments, cultural and physical; it represents reproductively driven activities, both direct and indirect. Characters compete for mates, resources, and status; they are motivated by desire, jealousy, envy, and vengeance. They employ both cooperative and coercive strategies, engage in both straightforward and duplicitous interactions. All these fitness-based manifestations of human striving necessarily find expression in human art. In the arena of literary make-believe, characters confront choices and difficulties mimicking those in real life, enabling readers to rehearse behavioral options, ponder social complexities, and study hypothetical life histories. From problem-solving to wish-fulfillment, art consistently reflects deep-seated human concerns. Prominent among these is a preoccupation with the human condition itself. Literature serves as a forum in which writers and readers can consider, celebrate, question, deplore, and defy

the forces constraining their existence. Stories, poems, and plays offer fascinating glimpses into the psyche of an animal intelligent enough to discern and assess the workings of its own mental and emotional processes. Individual texts do not merely illustrate the operations of evolved adaptations, moreover; they probe the workings of those adaptations in specific environmental contexts. Evolution may with reason be said to provide the stuff of art, since it forges the central comedy, irony, and tragedy of the human predicament.

The work of Charles Darwin, augmented by subsequent research in genetics and the behavioral and cognitive sciences, functions as the basis for adaptationist study of human communication, philosophy, and aesthetics. Literary Darwinism is a relatively young but fast growing branch of a multi-disciplinary enterprise. The intellectual rationale for undertaking evolutionary investigation of music, painting, drama, narrative, and poetry has been articulated by aestheticians and critics such as Ellen Dissanayake, Edward O. Wilson, Joseph Carroll, Robert Storey, Brian Boyd, Michelle Sugiyama, Blakey Vermeule, Lisa Zunshine, and Nancy Easterlin, to name some of the prominent thinkers in a growing field. Readers unfamiliar with the historical and theoretical foundations of Darwinian literary study will find useful commentary in works by these writers, who indicate how the explanatory power of evolutionary ideas can be brought to bear effectively on the arts.<sup>1</sup> Theoretical discussion has addressed broad-based questions such as the adaptive value of art or the cognitive basis of prosodic and narrative forms. Practical application has followed hard on the heels of theory. Examining works by authors representing different national

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1 See, for instance, Ellen Dissanayake, *What Is Art For?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988) and *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992); Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Joseph Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995) and *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) and “An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study, with Two Sequels,” in *Reading Human Nature: Literary Darwinism in Theory and Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011); Robert Storey, *Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996); Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2009); Michelle Scalise Sugiyama, “Reverse-Engineering Narrative: Evidence of Special Design,” in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, ed. Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005); Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006); Nancy Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

literatures and languages, Darwinian critics have offered evidence in recent decades that evolutionary psychological readings can correct misapprehensions and resolve ambiguities in literary texts, clarifying or revising long held understandings of aesthetic design and psychosocial significance.<sup>2</sup> Asking if, when, and how literary characters' behavior is *adaptive*, that is, whether it directly or indirectly promotes the passing on of genes, is the key to viewing canonical texts in a decisively new light: Darwinian analysis offers thought-provoking alternatives to Poststructuralist assumptions and practices.

The methodology utilized in this book relies on theory and research now current in the field of evolutionary biology rather than on individual authors' reading and interpretation of Charles Darwin's ideas. Authors writing after 1859 had opportunity to study Darwin's writing firsthand, clearly; they were exposed, as well, to public dissemination and discussion of his theories. Since Darwin was hardly the first scientist to take up the topics of fossil records and species extinction, moreover, many authors writing prior to publication of *The Origin of Species* had access to pre-Darwinian conceptions of evolution. A number of biographers and critics have traced the engagement of literary figures with Darwin's thinking and with that of his precursors, interpreters, defenders, and detractors. Bert Bender, for one, has investigated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American writers' familiarity with the Darwinism of their day, discussing in detail how "different writers construed evolutionary theory."<sup>3</sup> Such historical-biographical subject matter, interesting and valuable in its own right, does not form part of the project at hand. Darwinian literary analysis is not dependent upon an author's knowledge of evolutionary biology, nor is it undermined by an author's outdated or mistaken interpretations. If there is indeed a "universal human nature," as research in evolutionary

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2 Books and journal articles featuring practical application of Darwinian literary critical methods are too numerous to permit individual mention. Joseph Carroll provides a selective survey in "An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study," 9-12. Another useful starting-point is the special edition of *Style* devoted to analyses of individual works from the American French, Russian, and British literary traditions: "Applied Evolutionary Criticism," ed. Brett Cooke and Clinton Machann, *Style* 46, special issue, no. 3-4 (2012). Further illustrative examples are gathered together in Part IV ("Interpretations") of *Evolution, Literature, and Film: A Reader*, ed. Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gottschall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

3 Bert Bender, *Evolution and "the Sex Problem": American Narratives during the Eclipse of Darwinism* (Kent, OH and London: Kent State University Press, 2004), 232. See also his earlier book, *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871-1926* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).



psychology strongly indicates—that is, if “our thoughts, feelings, and behavior are the product of psychological adaptations” that have evolved over a period of millions of years—then literary representation of that human nature will prove susceptible to Darwinian examination with or without an author’s conscious focus on evolutionary ideas and themes.<sup>4</sup> The central principle guiding evolutionarily based criticism is that literature inevitably “reflects the structure and character of the adapted mind.”<sup>5</sup>

The twelve works selected for discussion represent a fairly wide sampling of well-known American authors and texts, ranging chronologically from Benjamin Franklin to Billy Collins. No such sampling will meet with perfect approval, not merely because of shifting notions of canon but because of the many and inevitable omissions. It would be impossible, clearly, to address all the acknowledged masterpieces of American literature in a single volume of essays. (Why Thoreau and not Emerson? Why Hawthorne and not Melville? Why Twain and not James?) The line-up of selections offered is to some extent arbitrary and accidental. In another lifetime, or in another book, things might fall out differently. It is chiefly the omissions that may rankle: the works chosen are much read, much admired, much taught, and they have attracted considerable bodies of secondary comment. The exception is Billy Collins, a successful contemporary writer whose poetry has yet to be subjected to the judgment of history; he is included in a forward-looking spirit, a nod to the continuously emergent nature of any tradition.

In addition to canonical status, choice of texts was influenced by the goal of illustrating a wide range of adaptationist concerns. Each essay focuses on a clearly defined topic, or cluster of topics, central to a particular literary work (nepotism, mate guarding, reciprocity, cheating, and deception, among others). The goal is not to identify every possible point of evolutionary interest in any one text but to choose a few of the most significant points for close study. Some topics lend themselves to tighter focus than others; for this reason, the essays are not uniform in length. Analyses are self-contained in terms of argument and reference, permitting readers to dip into the book’s contents selectively. The collection is unified by the focus on a single national literature, although

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4 John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, “Conceptual Foundations of Evolutionary Psychology,” in *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. David M. Buss (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), 5.

5 Joseph Carroll, “Literature and Evolutionary Psychology,” in *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. David M. Buss (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), 936.

no all-encompassing statement concerning the nature or development of American literary tradition per se is intended. Darwinian literary-critical methodology serves as the main cohesive principle. Looking at a wide range of fitness-driven motives and behaviors, the essays investigate how and why readers respond as they do to the imaginary predicaments of fictive persons and situations. The volume as a whole explores the potential of evolutionary theory to address fundamental questions of literary purpose, effect, and value.

# Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: The Story of a Successful Social Animal

Presented by its author and regarded by generations of readers as a pattern of the successful life, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* illustrates critically important adaptive goals and strategies. It is the story of an individual, rooted in a specific time and place, wrestling with universal human problems. Though very much a man of his own time, Franklin convincingly presents himself as a man for all times. His extraordinary career depends on his ability to assess his eighteenth-century colonial environment perceptively, responding in a canny way to its expectations and opportunities. Beginning with the assumption that wealth and status are objectives motivating much human striving, he offers readers a step-by-step account of the methods he used to acquire "Affluence" and "Reputation."<sup>1</sup> Though focusing thus on his own individual interests, he demonstrates that his personal goals can be achieved only within the framework of a human community. In his optimistically prosocial model of human life, then, distinctions between selfishness and altruism tend to blur. As he presents himself—and in this respect it is impossible to disagree with him—Franklin is a highly effective social animal. He deploys the principle of reciprocal altruism with intuitive insight and practiced skill; he negotiates the intricacies of dominance hierarchies with the utmost shrewdness; he identifies cooperation as a crucial component of his success, repeatedly discovering for readers' benefit that self-interest and collective well-being are inextricably intertwined.

Like any piece of autobiographical writing, Franklin's book represents a "dramatization and selective ordering of the varied materials" of its author's experience: it is, as one of his biographers has observed, "an elaborate fabrication, truthful in its details yet subtly misleading in its overall plan." All memoirists necessarily "project a pattern on their recollections" and hence

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1 Benjamin Franklin, "The Autobiography," in *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York and London: Norton, 1986), 1. All citations refer to this edition.

“distort the lives they describe.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, autobiography exercises a special fascination precisely because it offers more than description: analytical and evaluative commentary accompanies the chronicling of events. J. A. Leo Lemay, one of Franklin’s most discerning readers, calls his book “a major literary achievement, more complex, and in many ways, more artful, than a beautifully constructed novel.”<sup>3</sup> Like other literary artists, Franklin is “trying to make sense of the world, to construct usable models.”<sup>4</sup> It would be possible to undertake biosocial examination of his life *as lived*, with results almost certainly different, at least in some respects, from those that emerge from this examination of his life *as written*. Indeed, most twentieth-century discussions of the *Autobiography* note factual inconsistencies between the life and the book. Francis Jennings, for instance, offers a detailed and “strongly revisionist” analysis of Franklin’s personal history.<sup>5</sup> The discussion that follows treats the *Autobiography* as a product of conscious design and interpretative intent: it is a vehicle for conveying its author’s conceptions of human nature and social community. Discrepancies between auctorial assertion and ascertainable fact (whether caused by omission or embellishment) need not hamper consideration of the evolutionary issues raised, directly or indirectly, in the version of his life Franklin deliberately shaped for “Posterity” (1).

Never denigrating, disguising or disowning his ambitions, Franklin expends no energy on self-justification. He does not pretend, for instance, that the wealth and status he achieves are unsought, or mere by-products of intellectual, ethical, or spiritual questing; he presents them, rather, as deliberately formulated and unquestionably worthy ends.<sup>6</sup> He acknowledges no disadvantages to being rich and powerful, and he takes uncomplicated pride in having become so. The adaptive value of material prosperity and social status has been demonstrated repeatedly by sociological and anthropological

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2 Ormond Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and the Life* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 7, 8.

3 J. A. Leo Lemay, Franklin’s *Autobiography* and the American Dream,” in *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York and London: Norton, 1986), 349.

4 Joseph Carroll, “Wilson’s *Consilience* and Literary Study,” in *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 81.

5 Francis Jennings, *Benjamin Franklin: Politician* (New York and London: Norton, 1996), 204.

6 Seavey points out that Franklin’s unquestioning endorsement of wealth-building reflects attitudes generally prevalent in his time period: “traditional criticisms of avarice and of the sordidness of trade were muted in the eighteenth century as never before or since. Trucking and bartering were not merely inevitable but laudable.” *Becoming*, 36.

research.<sup>7</sup> Resources are obviously an essential component in the successful rearing of human offspring, who undergo a long period of dependency and require instruction in a host of skills, often complex, that will enable them to survive in their physical and social worlds. In consequence, as David M. Buss observes, “the evolution of the female preference for males who offer resources may be the most ancient and pervasive basis for female choice in the animal kingdom.”<sup>8</sup> Because access to goods and services depends to a considerable extent upon status, furthermore, a quest for dominance tends to go hand-in-hand with efforts to accumulate wealth. Women seeking mates respond to the current community standing, and probable future status, of potential partners as well as to resources on hand, seeking men who manifest “a strong proclivity to ascend the hierarchy of tribal power and influence.”<sup>9</sup> Such men are likely to exercise economic control in their social groups and thus prove able to provision offspring and long-term mates exceptionally well.

In describing his ambition to achieve “Affluence” and “Reputation,” Franklin does not specify enhanced mating opportunities as a motivating factor—nor would we necessarily expect him to do so (1). Because it has been selected for throughout human evolutionary history, the inclination to acquire resources and achieve status exerts a powerful effect on human behavior even in the absence of conscious thinking about the likely payoff in terms of fitness. Franklin’s ambitions are the proximate expression of an ultimate goal: wealth and power generally translate into more opportunities to pass on genes. This remains true whether or not he articulates the ultimate evolutionary function of his objectives. In taking for granted their universal desirability, moreover, he evinces awareness of their fundamental importance in human endeavors. He acknowledges the centrality of genetic continuity indirectly by formulating his autobiography at the outset as a letter to his son. He begins by asserting the importance of ancestry, emphasizing the general human wish to learn something about one’s forebears and, in turn, to pass on to descendents information about the present generation. Thus he is persuaded that his own “Posterity may like to know” how he achieved his success in life (1). He devotes several pages of his book to family history, attempting to define himself and his descendents in the context of preceding generations. He takes particular pleasure in learning that one of his uncles was a notably “ingenious” man who became

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7 David M. Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 22-25.

8 Ibid., 22.

9 Ibid., 30.

“a chief Mover of all public Spirited Undertakings” (3); clearly he is intrigued and gratified to find that some of the qualities he most values in himself have manifested themselves previously in the Franklin lineage. He comes close to couching this “extraordinary” resemblance in terms of genetic inheritance with a jesting comment about the possible “Transmigration” of personality traits (3).

Other references to family, scattered throughout the narrative, subtly reinforce the importance of kinship. Franklin expresses grief at the loss of a young son to smallpox, for instance, and he makes use of the occasion to offer advice about inoculation to other parents: he takes for granted that all parents will be “bitterly” saddened by the loss of a child, that they naturally seek to protect their offspring from harm (83). He also describes the assistance he renders to his elder brother James by educating the latter’s son and helping to establish him in business after James’s death. Even though Franklin explains his actions as an effort to make “Amends” to his brother (for having failed to complete the full term of his apprenticeship), his benevolence to his nephew is a clear instance of nepotism (83). In helping a young relative to prosper in life, he helps himself—by maximizing his own inclusive fitness: he increases the likelihood that the genes he shares with that nephew will be passed on. Again he illustrates his implicit recognition of the biological underpinnings of human striving.

He devotes the bulk of his autobiographical energies to illustrating his successes and describing “the conducting Means” he employed to achieve them (1).<sup>10</sup> He highlights, through repetition, the importance of “Industry and Frugality” in building wealth (74, 78, 79). Numerous anecdotes illustrate his willingness to work hard and to minimize expenses in order to achieve financial security. At the same time he underscores the importance of long-range planning. Industrious and thrifty habits help him to achieve prosperity because at every point in his life he has clearly identified goals: to educate himself, for example, to become a good writer, to own a business. Over time his goals expand in a variety of directions: to contribute significantly to scientific research, for instance, to exercise effective community leadership, and even to achieve “moral Perfection” (66): purposefulness is a leitmotiv in the *Autobiography*. For maximum effectiveness, moreover, “Industry and Frugality” must be supported by competence. Franklin offers evidence that his high level of skill (as press-man, compositor, and supervisor) is a key

10 Lemay analyzes the famous sentence in which Franklin introduces his purposes, demonstrating how he “carefully reworked” its syntax so as to highlight the phrase “conducting Means.” It is not *the nature* of his success, but *the means of achieving it*, that constitutes “the primary subject of his book.” Lemay, “American Dream,” 354, 355.

ingredient in his rapid rise to proprietorship of his own printing-house. Later, well-orchestrated exhibitions of competence bring in profitable jobs and increase demand for his services. His carefully honed skills as a writer likewise contribute to his rapid rise to prosperity, most importantly by ensuring the popularity of his newspaper and almanac.

In sum, Franklin harnesses exceptional skills, diligent work habits, and a thrifty lifestyle to high aspirations and sound planning. Setting out to develop and maintain this combination of qualities, he exhibits traits associated worldwide with “the sustained acquisition of resources over time.” In all societies, Buss observes, “young men are evaluated for their promise,” and “key signs” of future success include “education” and “industriousness,” along with ambition.<sup>11</sup> Enumerating “tactics” with proven effectiveness, Buss echoes Franklin with startling fidelity: he emphasizes the importance of “putting in extra time and effort at work, managing time efficiently, prioritizing goals.” Another strategy Buss identifies as critical is “working hard to impress others” and, unsurprisingly, image building is a recurrent theme in the *Autobiography*.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the detailed emphasis Franklin devotes to his arrival in Philadelphia provides a strong clue to the importance he places on community reputation and status.<sup>13</sup> He takes distinct pleasure in contrasting the picture he paints of a disheveled runaway boy with the prominent man he was later to become, that is, to “compare such unlikely Beginning with the Figure I have since made there” (20). From the very start he seeks to position himself advantageously in his community, to make a favorable impression on others. “I took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all Appearances of the Contrary,” he confides (54). For maximum effectiveness, an individual’s good qualities must be “visible to ... Neighbors” (49). Franklin is straightforward about his strategic efforts to create a good reputation for himself; he points out that those who obtain community regard are likely to have access to resources and influence. Potential customers, partners, and investors choose to do business with him because he wins a reputation for

11 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 30.

12 Ibid.

13 See Seavey, *Becoming*, 29-30; David Levin, “The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: The Puritan Experimenter in Life and Art,” *Yale Review* 53, no. 2 (1964): 258-59; Lemay, “American Dream,” 355; Robert F. Sayre, *The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 19; Robert F. Sayre, “The Worldly Franklin and the Provincial Critics,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 4 (1963): 516-17.

efficiency, speed, and cost-effectiveness. Managing his public image so successfully, he proves that he possesses a high degree of social intelligence: the ability to discern cultural norms and to assess probable penalties for deviation.<sup>14</sup> He is “constantly attuned to the expectations of those around him, responding swiftly to ... changing situations.”<sup>15</sup>

For the most part, he strives for congruence between his public image and his real self—that is, he wishes to be known for qualities he actually possesses—but there are interesting exceptions. He discusses at some length, for instance, the advantages to be derived from a reputation for humility, a virtue he reports having tried in vain to acquire. He did succeed to a considerable extent, he explains, in achieving “the *Appearance*” of humility (75). Avoiding “all direct Contradiction” and eschewing dogmatic terms such as “*certainly*” or “*undoubtedly*,” he trained himself to phrase his opinions more modestly and more tentatively than had been his habit (75). Although these modifications to his style of conversation did not reflect a real character change, he forthrightly admits, he concludes that they proved valuable, nonetheless, because his opinions found “a readier Reception” and he began to have “much Weight with ... Fellow Citizens” in civic and political matters (75, 76). Deliberately attempting to overcome a reputation for being “proud,” “overbearing” and “insolent,” he consciously forges a humble persona for himself, reaping “the Advantage of this Change in my Manners” (75). Despite the admitted disjunction between self and image, he does not condemn himself for dissimulation. Humble self-presentation may not be as admirable as genuine humility, but it is the next-best thing. Why?—because it fosters positive, productive sociopolitical interactions.

Consistently emphasizing the benefits of cooperative behaviors and attitudes, Franklin clearly indicates a commitment to the principles of reciprocal altruism. Reciprocity works in human communities by permitting benefits to be exchanged over time.<sup>16</sup> In this “very complex system” of human interaction, services or resources are given in the expectation of equal return

14 See Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 64-65.

15 John William Ward, “Who Was Benjamin Franklin?”, *American Scholar* 32 (1963): 553. For discussion of social intelligence, including its cognitive functioning, adaptive usefulness, and probable origins, see Pascal Boyer and H. Clark Barrett, “Domain Specificity and Intuitive Ontology,” in *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. David M. Buss (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005).

16 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 183-84.



(equal in value, not necessarily in kind) at a later date.<sup>17</sup> When the system functions properly, both parties stand to reap more in the way of benefits than they expend in costs. Illustration of this idea abounds in the *Autobiography*. Business partnerships are carried out most “amicably,” he explains, when “every thing to be done by or expected from each partner” has been “very explicitly settled” (91). He further advises readers: “always render Accounts and make Remittances with great Clearness and Punctuality,” since a demonstrated attentiveness to contracted obligations is “the most powerful of all Recommendations to new Employments and Increase of Business” (85). In a variety of contexts, throughout his narrative, Franklin emphasizes reciprocity as a cornerstone of social cooperation. Because undetected cheaters can obtain significant benefits, as Robert Trivers points out, cheating behavior is an inevitable hazard in reciprocal exchange. In consequence, humans have developed complex adaptive mechanisms for keeping track of reciprocal transactions and identifying unreliable exchange partners.<sup>18</sup> Franklin accordingly makes great efforts to win a reputation as a reliably cooperative community member. The emphasis he places on integrity is best understood in this context. He argues repeatedly that there is a positive correlation between the exercise of honesty and the acquisition of wealth. Keeping one’s word, paying on time, charging fair prices, treating competitors decently: such practices foster lucrative enterprises in the long run, he counsels, because they provide evidence of a dedication to reciprocal obligation. He models his personal style according to these principles too, observing that it costs relatively little to be agreeable instead of contentious, or modest rather than overbearing, but the payoff in terms of universal friendly regard is potentially enormous.

Franklin acknowledges the importance of tit for tat behavior with particular effectiveness when he reports his occasional lapses from its standards. He designates as *errata*, for example, his failure to fulfill the terms of his apprenticeship, his long unpaid debt to his brother’s friend Vernon, and the casual breaking of his tacit engagement to Deborah Read. Whenever possible he attempts to correct these asymmetrical transactions, often long after the fact. He indicates awareness of the human propensity to keep a mental scorecard of favors given and received.<sup>19</sup> Knowing that others will remark and resent any unequal exchanges, he goes to great lengths to prove (to readers as well

17 Robert Trivers, *Natural Selection and Social Theory: Selected Papers of Robert Trivers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25.

18 Trivers, *Natural Selection*, 38–46.

19 *Ibid.*, 38; Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 227.

as to his exchange partners) that he remembers his obligations and will not, in the long run, default on them. He offers as a role model for readers his friend Mr. Denham, a man who demonstrates his “good ... Character” by repaying “with Interest” debts incurred under an old bankruptcy and for which he already had “compounded” (39). Established in the Colonies, now far out of the reach of “his old Creditors,” Mr. Denham might have kept all to himself the “plentiful Fortune” his exertions in America earned for him, but he chooses instead to repair old reciprocal alliances (39). This, Franklin asserts, is the kind of behavior that enhances an individual’s reputation and thus is apt to glean long-term social and financial benefits.

Underlying much of his advice is the unstated premise that the social environment he and his readers inhabit is one in which crude displays of dominance—brute strength, reckless bravado, or ruthless bullying—will not prevail.<sup>20</sup> Describing himself as a natural leader, of an “early projecting public Spirit,” he learns to exercise dominance subtly, often from behind the scenes (7). Numerous incidents support his claim that a deliberately adopted pose of modesty assists him in bringing many a “Scheme” to fruition (64). To avoid attracting envy or resentment, he learns to keep himself “out of sight,” attributing his plans to “a *Number of Friends*” (64). He determines that it is wiser to lead inconspicuously, foregoing overt bids for power or admiration. Those shrewd enough to make “this little Sacrifice of ... Vanity” will find it “repaid” in long-term good will, he counsels (64): people are more inclined to offer praise voluntarily to those who do not demand it. Illustrating the superior effectiveness of gentle persuasion and indirect leadership, he rejects strong-arm tactics, “dogmatical” styles, and self-glorifying impulses (14). It is worth noting that he emphasizes pragmatic results rather than ethical considerations: one should avoid domineering behavior because it is ineffective.

Franklin’s views on this topic accord well with Christopher Boehm’s analysis of reverse hierarchies, in which “the united subordinates are constantly putting down the more assertive alpha types in their midst.” Societies Boehm describes as “egalitarian” engage in “vigilant suppression” of behaviors that might signal the emergence of despotically inclined leaders.<sup>21</sup> With his condemnation

20 See Trivers for discussion of “developmental plasticity,” which enables individuals to make behavioral choices suited to the immediate environment: “relevant parameters ... differ from one ecological and social situation to another.” *Natural Selection*, 46. Pinker’s book offers detailed consideration of “the dialectic between organism and environment,” which “constantly changes over historical time.” *The Blank Slate*, 127.

21 Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 3, 169.

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