Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.

2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.

3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

**Citizen Ben’s 7 Great Virtues**

TIME – Walter Isaacson

His arrival in Philadelphia is one of the most famous scenes in autobiographical literature: the bedraggled 17-year-old runaway, cheeky yet with a pretense of humility, straggling off the boat and buying three puffy rolls as he wanders up Market Street. But wait a minute. There's something more going on here. Peel back a layer and we can see him as a 65-year-old wry observer, sitting in an English country house, writing this scene, pretending it's part of a letter to his son, an illegitimate son who has become a Royal Governor with aristocratic pretensions and needs to be reminded of his humble roots.

A careful look at the manuscript peels back yet another layer. Inserted into the sentence about his pilgrim's progress up Market Street is a phrase, written in the margin, in which he notes that he passed by the house of his future wife Deborah Read and that "she, standing at the door, saw me and thought I made, as I certainly did, a most awkward ridiculous appearance." So here we have, in a brief paragraph, the multilayered character known so fondly to his author as Benjamin Franklin: as a young man, then seen through the eyes of his older self and then through the memories later recounted by his wife. It's all topped off with the old man's deft little affirmation--"as I certainly did"--in which his self-deprecation barely cloaks the pride he felt regarding his remarkable rise in the world.

Benjamin Franklin is the founding father who winks at us. George Washington's colleagues found it hard to imagine touching the austere general on the shoulder, and we would find it even more so today. Jefferson and Adams are just as intimidating. But Ben Franklin, that genial urban entrepreneur, seems made of flesh rather than of marble, addressable by nickname, and he turns to us from history's stage with eyes that twinkle from behind those newfangled spectacles. He speaks to us, through his letters and hoaxes and autobiography, not with orotund rhetoric but with a chattiness and clever irony that is very contemporary, sometimes unnervingly so. We see his reflection in our own time.

He was, during his 84-year life, America's best scientist, inventor, diplomat, writer and business strategist, and he was also one of its most practical, though not most profound, political thinkers. He proved by flying a kite that lightning was electricity, and he invented a rod to tame it. He devised bifocal glasses and clean-burning stoves, charts of the Gulf Stream and theories about the contagious nature of the common cold. He was a pioneer of do-it-yourself civic improvement, launching such schemes as a lending library, volunteer fire corps, insurance association and matching-grant fund raiser. He helped invent America's unique style of homespun humor and philosophical pragmatism. In foreign policy, he created an approach that wove together idealism with balance-of-power realism. In politics, he proposed seminal plans for uniting the colonies and creating a federal model for a national government. And he was the person most responsible, of all the Founders, for instilling in the new nation the virtue that is central to its role in the world struggle: that of tolerance, specifically religious tolerance.

Instinctively more comfortable with democracy than were his fellow Founders and devoid of the snobbery that later critics would feel toward his own shopkeeping values, he had faith in the wisdom of the common man and felt that a new nation would draw its strength from what he called "the middling people." Through his self-improvement tips for cultivating personal virtues and through his civic-improvement schemes for furthering the common good, he helped to create, and to celebrate, a new ruling class of ordinary citizens who learned to be tolerant of the varied beliefs and dogmas of their neighbors.

Franklin has a particular resonance in 21st century America. A successful publisher and consummate networker with an inventive curiosity, he would have felt right at home in the information revolution. We would admire both his earnestness and his self-aware irony. And we would relate to the way he tried to balance, sometimes uneasily, a pursuit of reputation, wealth, earthly virtues and spiritual values.

Some who see the reflection of Franklin in the world today fret about a shallowness of soul and a spiritual complacency that seem to permeate a culture of materialism. They say that he teaches us how to live a practical and congenial life but not an exalted existence based on great spiritual passions. Others see the same reflection and admire the basic middle-class values and democratic sentiments that now seem under assault from elitists, radicals, religious fanatics and other bashers of modernity and the bourgeoisie. His admirers look upon Franklin as an exemplar of the personal character and civic virtue that are too often missing in today's world.

Much of the admiration is warranted, and so too are some of the qualms. But the lessons from Franklin's life are more complex than those usually drawn by either his fans or his foes. Both sides too often confuse him with the striving pilgrim he portrayed in his autobiography. They mistake his genial moral maxims for the fundamental faiths that motivated his actions.

His morality was built on a sincere belief in leading a virtuous life, serving the country he loved and hoping to achieve salvation through good works. That led him to make the link between private virtue and civic virtue and to suspect, based on the meager evidence he could muster about God's will, that these earthly virtues were linked to heavenly ones as well. As he put it in the motto for the library he founded, "To pour forth benefits for the common good is divine."

It is useful for us to engage anew with Franklin, for in doing so we are grappling with a fundamental issue: How does one live a life that is useful, virtuous, worthy, moral and spiritually meaningful? For that matter, which of these attributes is most important? These are questions just as vital for a self-satisfied age as they were for a revolutionary one.

**Reflection Prompt:**

**Do you agree with the author’s opinion that it is useful for modern Americans to engage with Ben Franklin and consider his virtues? Is he a good role model? (This may be easier to discuss after we read an excerpt from his autobiography in class.)**

**Consider the questions at the end of the article. You may answer those as well.**