

Taking the Enlightenment Abroad: Thomas Jefferson in France

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When talking about the Enlightenment in America, scholars have often implicitly portrayed as traveling from East to West across the Atlantic, although they have also recognized that the American Enlightenment differed from its various manifestations in Europe. Henry Steele Commager argued that “the Old World imagined the Enlightenment and the New World realized it.”¹ Commager also assumed the unitary identity of an international Enlightenment rather than the existence of numerous separate Enlightenments that shared many values but were expressed in differing ways in different nations at different times. Peter Gay thus asserted, “There were many philosophes in the eighteenth century, but there was only one Enlightenment.”² Yet the concerns and consequences of the English Enlightenment beginning with Newton, Locke, and Shaftesbury seem different from those of the French Enlightenment of Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Diderot to say nothing of those of the German-speaking Enlightenment of Lessing and Kant. Enlightenment, *éclaircissement*, and *aufklärung* are not precisely synonymous, even if all of these phenomena in their varying ways shared in Kant’s definition of enlightenment as “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. ... Sapere aude! ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’” said Kant, “That is the motto of enlightenment.”³ It is perhaps more useful to think of multiple Enlightenments occurring in places as different as Philadelphia, St. Petersburg and Naples, each with its own characteristics and developments but each with its intellectual connections to the larger Atlantic world that contained them all. The Enlightenment was an age of corresponding

societies and prolific correspondents sharing scientific information, political ideas, historical interpretations, aesthetic and social theorizing to a broad range of recipients.

The Enlightenment was a phenomenon of traveling ideas, impelled by men and women of curiosity about the world and desire to make it a better place. Ideas traveled in manuscript, in the letters and reports written by enlightenment thinkers, but it traveled above all in pamphlets and books, printed material that was implicitly available to a wide audience over space and time. Books became a medium through which Thomas Jefferson communicated with an extended body of friends and associates in the transatlantic world. He loaned books to others, invited them to use his library, bought books for them, recommended lists of books that they might read for various purposes, and encouraged the creation of libraries that would make books available to larger publics. It was in this sense that Jefferson stood out as an enlightened “colporteur,” a term that needs some special interpretation to apply to his activities. Colporteurs were traveling booksellers in the years from the seventeenth to nineteenth century who sold at public fairs and markets a wide range of popular materials: bibles, chapbooks, cookbooks, medical books, primers, almanacs, manuals, romances, fairy tales and tales of adventure. Colporteurs were on the bottom rung of the business of book distribution, and the materials they carried were often of a dubious character, yet they spoke to the imaginative desires and needs of ordinary people. In a revolutionary age, however, these desires often underwrote or prophesied enormous political and social change.⁸ Jefferson was not usually dealing in popular or trashy materials when he provided books or reading lists to others, but he was responding to the imaginative and intellectual needs of people who desired to change themselves and the world they lived in. For Jefferson, the

practice of freedom and his faith in the progress of the human mind--the ultimate fruits of reason according to Enlightenment belief--was grounded in his wide reading and in the books he wanted to make available to others. Jefferson was an agent of intellectual change whose dissemination of ideas influenced both the Old World and the New, perhaps most obviously in the words of his Declaration of Independence but also in his involvement in the world of books and print.

Jefferson early on acquired a reputation as a bibliographic authority. Edmund Randolph, his contemporary, noted that "it constituted a part of Mr. Jefferson's pride to run before the times in which he lived....He had been ambitious to collect a library, not merely amassing a number of books, but distinguishing them in subordination to every art and science." Even more impressive, Randolph maintained, was the fact that "this library was at this time more happily calculated, than any other private one, to direct to objects of utility and taste, to present to genius the scaffolding, upon which its future eminence might be built, and to approve the restless appetite which is too apt to seize the mere gatherer of books." Jefferson's success as a lawyer was based on his extensive reading in the law, whereas his colleague and sometime rival Patrick Henry relied on his natural powers of oratory. As Randolph observed, "Mr. Jefferson drew copiously from the depths of the law, Mr. Henry from the recesses of the human heart."¹⁰ Aspiring lawyers frequently called on Jefferson for advice; he responded with recommendations for a heavy course of reading and study.¹¹ One of the earliest and most interesting recognitions of Jefferson's knowledge of books, however, came in a request from Robert Skipwith, the brother-in-law of his future wife. Skipwith asked Jefferson to recommend volumes for a gentleman's library "suited to the capacity of a common reader who

understands but little of the classicks and who has not leisure for any intricate or tedious study.”¹² Jefferson replied with a list of books that would have cost eight times as much as Skipwith intended but which, he pointed out, could be acquired over a period of several years.

Given Skipwith’s admission of little knowledge of the classics, Jefferson only recommended English language texts, either by origin or in translation. He was himself a devoted reader of the classics in the original languages. In 1800 he wrote to Joseph Priestley that “to read the Latin & Greek authors in their original is a sublime luxury; and I deem luxury in science to be at least as justifiable as in architecture, painting, gardening or the other arts. I enjoy Homer in his own language infinitely beyond Pope’s translation of him.... I thank on my knees him who directed my early education for having put into my possession this rich source of delight.”¹³ After he sold his library to the nation in 1815, he immediately began assembling a new library in which the classics played a major part. Many of his recommendations, however, followed Skipwith’s preferences for lighter reading; he included more contemporary fiction than he ever recommended to anyone else. Yet he also included a selection of more serious titles that would challenge many readers and that could prove useful in the years ahead, books that Skipwith “might in time find convenient to procure.”¹⁴ Jefferson himself was not a great reader of fiction, but he justified Skipwith’s taste while elevating it at the same time by offering a defense of the utility of fiction “to fix... the principles and practices of virtue.” “When any original act of charity or gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination,” wrote Jefferson, “we are deeply impressed with it’s beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary

when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with it's deformity, and conceive an abhorrence of vice. Now every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions, and dispositions of the mind, like limbs of the body acquire strength by exercise."¹⁵ This letter lays out two of Jefferson's primary criteria for a library, its potential usefulness and its ability to support the growth of the human mind, reflected by his comment that the library could be acquired over a period of years during which Skipwith might add responsibilities and areas of interest. At the same time it implicitly agrees with him on a third criterion, its inherent pleasureableness. If these recommendations reflected Jefferson's pleasures to some degree, they ultimately accommodated Skipwith's, but libraries for Jefferson were always associated with pleasure.

Utility was always an essential measure for Jefferson's recommendations for his friends' reading, but he did not overlook the importance of enjoyment, of the power of books to engage the better feelings of readers. He could prescribe a rigorous course of reading for a young student of the law that began with recommendations to familiarize himself with the natural sciences, ethics, and religion early in the morning, move on to four hours of reading in the law, and to follow with an hour of reading politics and the rest of the afternoon reading history. Presumably there would be a break for dinner and exercise, but "from Dark to Bed-time" the student was advised to read "belles lettres, criticism, Rhetoric, Oratory," especially Shakespeare, "who must be singled out by one who wishes to learn the full powers of the English language."¹⁶ This recommendation, originally drafted when Jefferson was only recently released from his own studies of the law, undoubtedly reflected his own strenuous reading habits. For a different sort of

recipient a later letter about a course of reading for a young woman is equally revealing, both for its seriousness and its accommodation of the role of pleasure and feeling in reading appropriate for a woman. Responding in 1818 to a request from Nathaniel Burwell about “a plan for female education,” Jefferson warned against the “inordinate passion prevalent for novels” in which “reason and fact, plain and unadorned, are rejected.” Nevertheless, he admitted that some novels are “interesting and useful vehicles of sound morality.” He recommended Don Quixote, Gil Blas, Marmontel’s Contes Moreaux, and novels by Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth (“they are all good,” he noted), Madame de Genlis, and William Godwin’s Caleb Williams. The reading list here begins with a number of works in classical and modern history, with the classical titles recommended in translation. It also includes several works in French, such as the sermons of Massillon and Bourdaloue, Fenelon’s Telemaque, and the plays of Moliere, Racine, and Corneille. Shakespeare, Dryden’s tragedies, Milton’s Paradise Lost, Pope’s works, and James Thomson’s The Seasons also enter the list. Except perhaps for the fiction recommendations, this selection is hardly au courant in 1818--he included neither Wordsworth or Coleridge nor any other contemporary poets--but it does provide a plan of reading that suits what a well-educated woman would find morally instructive and imaginatively engaging. Utility and pleasure remained the criteria, but here accommodated to a woman’s taste and background, with a special emphasis on the cultivation of sentiment.¹⁷

Jefferson divided his recommendations for Skipwith into nine categories. “Fine Arts” amounted to the largest; when combined, the categories of ancient and modern history ranked second. Among the fine arts selections, he recommended the novels of

Smollett, Fielding, Richardson and Sterne--his own favorite novelist--as well as Don Quixote, Rousseau's La nouvelle Heloise, and Emile in translation, together with a number of other popular contemporary works of fiction. He included an extensive list of dramatists--he may well have frequently encountered Skipwith at the playhouse that he attended when in Williamsburg while the court and the legislature were in session. Pope, Milton, Chaucer, Spenser, and Dryden joined a crowd of eighteenth-century poets, and the category of fine arts also found room for books on gardening and painting. The categories of "Politicks" and "Law" together included only eleven titles, but they provided a foundational course of citizenship for a progressive Virginia gentleman in 1771. Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws accompanied his treatise on the rise and fall of Roman government. They joined with Locke and the writings of Algernon Sidney to ground readers in thinking about republican forms of government. Lord Kames's Principles of Equity and William Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England would have been useful for the inevitable encounters a Virginia planter would have with the law, whether as jurist, juryman, or as a citizen before the court.

The list also reflects Jefferson's own reading at the time. His legal commonplace book suggests that he had been reading Montesquieu not long before, and his recommendations under the category of "Religion" speak to his own tendency toward skepticism at this time. The Bible was included under the category of "Antient History," while the religious recommendations included Epictetus, Cicero's Tusculan Disputations, Hume's Essays, Lord Bolingbroke's philosophical works, and Kames on natural religion, none of which would have supported traditional notions of piety or religion. Two volumes by William Sherlock represent the sole appearance of orthodox Christian

writing, unless you count Lawrence Sterne's seven volumes of sermons (and the author of Tristram Shandy was hardly a traditional Christian).¹⁸ Jefferson's advice for Skipwith paralleled recommendations that he later made for his nephew, Peter Carr. "Fix reason firmly in her seat," he wrote, "and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.... Read the bible then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus."¹⁹ A library not only reflected the mind of its makers, it also had the power to shape the minds of its users. Yet Jefferson did not intend it to be a means of propagandizing for his own views in any blatant manner. The books that he recommended to Skipwith on religion could not simply be reduced to the level of tracts urging disbelief; they would make a reader think and re-examine his or her own principles. The Skipwith library was a collection to grow on, "an exercise of our virtuous dispositions" that went well beyond responding to moral fictions.

With its larger network of book dealers, Jefferson continued to purchase books even more enthusiastically when he arrived in Philadelphia in 1775. Douglas L. Wilson has noted that he recorded in 1776 more purchases in his Memorandum Book than he had in any previous year.²⁰ By 1783 the library contained 2,640 volumes, nearly double the size it had been a decade earlier. He acquired books from the estates of Virginians such as Peyton Randolph, Richard Bland, and William Byrd, who had accumulated important libraries of their own. He purchased books from friends such as John Randolph, who left the country at the outbreak of the Revolution, or even from enemies such as Governor Dunmore. His library became in effect an archive of the history of book collecting in Virginia. It connected him to its past even as he was working to create a different future.

In the years following the Revolution, however, Jefferson arrived at a clearer sense of how the exercise of reason in pursuit of knowledge could be an instrument of social formation, and in the same period he discovered how a library could reflect the human mind and become an instrument of progress.

He had always been interested in enlarging the bounds of sociability by inviting correspondents from Skipwith to Joseph Priestley to Maria Cosway, the English artist he met in Paris, to take up residence in the neighborhood of Monticello, but it was through the medium of epistolary exchanges that he developed a network of intellectually inclined friends who became, in effect, citizens of that great Enlightenment institution, the republic of letters. In the early 1780s he received a questionnaire from the secretary of the French legation in Philadelphia asking for information on Virginia, and he began compiling information for his book Notes on the State of Virginia by gathering information from various correspondents. His book project established transatlantic relationships with readers in France, where it was first published, and it enhanced intellectual and imaginative bonds among the American correspondents who contributed to his knowledge. A crucial problem for the American nation in its first years was to establish feelings of shared citizenship across disparate spaces among the thirteen states and even within the territory of a large state like Virginia. Trade had long assisted this development, and the Revolutionary war effort provided a shared sense of trial and achievement among its veterans, but Jefferson, who was neither a merchant nor a military man, worked to create national bonds within a network of information and learning. A further problem for the new nation was to create a respectable position for itself in the

world, and Jefferson's network of intellectual exchange formed transatlantic connections as well.

In the early 1780s Jefferson gained access to the most remarkable literary accomplishment of the Enlightenment, the French Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond D'Alembert. In gathering material for Notes he hoped to obtain a copy of the Encyclopédie but was at first deterred by the wartime difficulties involved in Atlantic shipping. In December, 1780, however, he learned that merchants in Alexandria had a 28-volume set for sale for the sum of fifteen hogsheads of tobacco or £90,000 in inflated American currency. He jumped at this opportunity, and he hoped to make these books available for public use rather than merely for a part of his own collection.²¹ The Encyclopédie, which had a considerable impact on his thinking, was prefaced with a "Preliminary Discourse" by D'Alembert, who sought to explain the organization of the contents as part of a "tree of knowledge" that would reveal the connections between the various sciences, arts, and trades. The "Preliminary Discourse" began with an account of how the human mind over time acquired knowledge about itself in a series of steps and categories, the terms of which D'Alembert drew from the writings of Sir Francis Bacon. Since "memory, reason (strictly speaking), and imagination are the three different manners in which our soul operates on the objects of its thoughts," the Encyclopédie would accordingly be organized with three simultaneously operating systems of reference. The articles would be listed alphabetically according to the name of the science to which the article belongs, but they would also be referenced to their position among the branches of the "tree of knowledge," which was represented by an

accompanying chart expanding the categories of memory, reason, and imagination. Meanwhile, a system of cross-references, les renvois, would connect them to other articles discussing related bodies of knowledge.²² With its numerous links and references the Encyclopédie aspired to become the information highway of the eighteenth century, but it was structured according to a model of the human mind itself.

Jefferson began to organize his own library by subject according to the Encyclopédie's categories of memory, reason, and imagination. His 1783 catalogue applied these categories respectively to books on history, philosophy, and the fine arts, ultimately divided into 46 specific subcategories.²³ He later claimed that he "took the basis of its distribution from Lord Bacon's table of science," but he seems in fact to have followed the model of the Encyclopédie. D'Alembert had made a point of differing from Bacon by placing reason before imagination in the list of faculties of the human mind, just as Jefferson later did. Because Jefferson's library, like the Encyclopédie, was shaped to a model of the mind, it would be open to whatever the mind might later conceive. When he explained his system of classification to George Watterston, the librarian of Congress, he emphasized its relative ease of use but also its adaptability to further expansion. As he noted, his catalogue reflected his own reading habits: "Thus the law having been my profession, and politics the occupation to which the circumstances of the times in which I have lived called my particular attention, my provision of books in these lines, and in those most nearly connected with them was more copious, and required in particular instances subdivisions into sections and paragraphs, while other subjects of which general views only were contemplated are thrown into masses. A physician or

theologist would have modified differently.”²⁴ Future acquisitions could be added to the library simply by refining and expanding the subdivisions.

If the library was a record of the progress of the human mind, for Jefferson it was a machine oriented toward the future, the world that progress might bring to us, much as the Encyclopédie was for D’Alembert. For the latter the tree of knowledge was also a map of the world but a map with many gaps. “The universe is but a vast ocean,” D’Alembert wrote, “on the surface of which we perceive a few islands of various sizes, whose connection with the continent is hidden from us.” The human problem was to make the connections that would produce the kind of future knowledge that Bacon thought “should contribute to making us happier or better.”²⁵ Jefferson thought one of the advantages of his classification system was that “when we wish to consider a particular [subject], of seeing at a glance the books which have been written on it, and selecting those from which we effect most readily the information we seek.”²⁶ Just as he might have hoped that Robert Skipwith would connect the dots when he read the recommended books on religion, so Jefferson recognized the library as a means of connecting disparate bits of knowledge that could make people happier or better.

Making connections, so important in the Encyclopédie, became a major theme in Jefferson’s library and in his life. His correspondence networks gave him pleasure and enlarged his vision of the world, and this correspondence frequently involved books. Before he left for France in 1784 to serve as an envoy with John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, he supplied books to James Madison and James Monroe. Madison, obviously thinking about American constitutional problems, had expressed particular interest in “whatever may throw light on the general Constitution and droit public of the several

confederacies which have existed.”²⁷ Monroe purchased a small but wide-ranging collection that included volumes, mostly in French, which Jefferson had previously lent to various members of Congress. Among them were works of the Swiss physician Samuel Tissot, the Marquis de Chastellux’s treatise on public happiness, a book on chess, Emeric Vattel’s Questions de Droit Naturel, the works of the abbé Mably, and Pieter van Muschenbroek’s Cours de Physique Experimentale e Mathematique.²⁸ Jefferson must have been confident that when he arrived in Paris he would readily be able to replace these volumes, and indeed he immediately began acquiring books. Among the entries in his Memorandum Book for July 31, 1784, the day he landed in Le Havre, is an expenditure of four francs ten sous for books, and one of his first purchases in Paris a week later was fifty-eight francs worth of books from Jean Claude Molini, who dealt mainly in Italian books.²⁹

In the last months before he left America, Jefferson acquired books and information to take with him across the Atlantic. In Philadelphia he thanked his friend Charles Thomson for helping him acquire several volumes of the journals of Congress and mentioned that if he had Notes on the State of Virginia printed in Paris, he would both send Thomson a copy and “take the liberty of adding some of your notes.”³⁰ A Dutch visitor, Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, talked with him in New York and gave him a list of questions concerning American commerce that Jefferson adapted and used to query informants in the New England states. Since his mission in Europe was to negotiate treaties of amity and commerce, this would be useful to him and the replies would assist him in answering van Hogendorp’s questions. In New Haven he called on Reverend Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale, for a discussion of fossils and of the bones of

the mammoth, and he also received from the author John Trumbull a copy of his satiric poem McFingal. Trumbull wished “for the honour of being approved by a Gentleman, who joins to his public virtues, so great a share of literary merit,” but, he owned, “I depend more on the partiality of patriotism to the productions of our native country.”³¹ For Jefferson, Enlightenment colportage--the exchange of information and ideas--was ultimately an act of patriotism that would be no simple matter of one-way traffic across the Atlantic, flowing from East to West, but a mutually enriching process that furthered the enlightenment of both Europeans and Americans. If Jefferson was interested in importing the latest European thinking to America, he was equally interested in exporting American knowledge to Europe.

Paris, however, provided a book market unlike any Jefferson had encountered in provincial America. The variety of offerings was enormous, and the entries in his memorandum books suggest that he bought books more frequently here than at any other time or place in his life. Jean Claude Molini’s Italian bookshop, a valuable stop for an apprentice diplomat who was brushing up on his languages, was only his first visit to a Paris book-dealer. In the subsequent months and years he spent many hours haunting bookshops and the barrows of dealers along the Seine and identifying favorites such as Jacques-Francois Froullé. When he wrote to Samuel Harrison Smith in 1814, proposing to sell his library to Congress as replacement for the one the British had burned earlier in the year, he described those days of book hunting. “While residing in Paris,” he recounted, “I devoted every afternoon I was disengaged for a summer or two, in examining all the principal bookstores, turning over every book with my own hand, and putting by everything which related to America, and indeed whatever was rare and

valuable in every science.” In addition, he noted, “I had standing orders during the whole time I was in Europe, on its principal book-marts, particularly Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Madrid and London, for such works relating to American as could not be found in America.”³² One result of these book-buying forays was a stream of paper going back across the Atlantic to a network of friends and acquaintances interested in politics, science, and commerce. Several correspondents received copies of Jean-Baptiste Dubucq’s pamphlet on trade with the West Indies, for example; Charles Thomson, the secretary of the American Philosophical Society, received “a pamphlet on the subject of animal magnetism,” and Ralph Izard of South Carolina obtained the Bibliothèque Physico-Économique.³³ This only samples books and pamphlets sent during Jefferson’s first months in Paris; in subsequent years the flow continued. By the time he returned home from France, he had added more than 1,850 titles to his library in addition to those he had sent to his friends.³⁴

In 1783, the year before Jefferson left for France, he and Madison together drew up a list, containing over 300 titles and based on the most recent catalogue of his own library, of “books proper for the use of Congress.” An economy-minded set of legislators rejected the proposal to purchase what would have been the first Library of Congress, however.³⁵ The first title on this list was a new project then underway in Paris, the Encyclopédie Méthodique--published in serial form by a remarkable book entrepreneur, Charles-Joseph Panckoucke.³⁶ With its first volume appearing in 1782, the Encyclopédie Méthodique was designed as a new and enlarged edition of the Encyclopédie of Diderot and D’Alembert. While the entries within Diderot’s encyclopedia were arranged in alphabetical order, the Méthodique was organized in sets of alphabetized topical volumes

referred to as dictionaries. Originally intended to encompass fifty-three volumes, by the time publication ceased in 1832 it ran to one hundred sixty-six and a half, and it purported to offer the most up to date information and thinking on a vast array of topics. In 1783 Jefferson had suggested that Panckoucke set up an agent in Philadelphia to take subscriptions for the Encyclopédie. This came to nothing, but once in Paris Jefferson lost little time in acquiring Panckoucke's encyclopedia. Three weeks after his arrival in Paris he repaid his friend the Marquis de Chastellux for a subscription to the Encyclopédie Méthodique, which he had arranged even before he left America.³⁷ Jefferson maintained his subscription until he sold his great library in 1815, and while he was in France he also arranged to supply volumes of Panckoucke's Encyclopédie to friends in the United States. He regularly passed on new installments to Benjamin Franklin, James Madison the statesman and James Madison the president of William and Mary College, James Monroe, Francis Hopkinson, Edmund Randolph, and Dr. James Currie, among others. He would soon become more closely involved with the Encyclopédie Méthodique than merely serving as a book agent, however.

A few months after his arrival in France, he tried to persuade his friends Madison and Monroe to join him the following summer. "Say that the whole [cost of the trip] would be 200 guineas," he told Madison. "You will for that have purchased the knowledge of another world."³⁸ Jefferson was no star-struck tourist in Europe, however. Already in November of 1784 he delivered the first of his many warnings against sending young Americans to Europe. "From what I have seen here I know not one good purpose on earth which can be effected by a young gentleman's coming here," he informed Charles Thomson. "He may learn indeed to speak the language, but put this in the scale

against the other things he will learn and evils he is sure to acquire and it will be found too light. I have always disapproved of a European education for our youth from theory: I now do it from inspection.”³⁹ The Europe that Jefferson found attractive was suitable only for fully-formed republicans, and it was particularly found in its book culture. Writing to Charles Bellini, he decried the lack of “domestic happiness.... In lieu of this are substituted pursuits which nourish and invigorate all our bad passions, and which offer only moments of extasy amidst days and months of restlessness and torment.” He considered Europe “very much inferior... to the tranquil permanent felicity with which domestic society in America blesses most of it’s inhabitants, leaving them to follow steadily those pursuits which health and reason approve, and rendering truly delicious the intervals of these pursuits.” Setting aside for the moment Jefferson’s vision of American domestic happiness as a patriotic fantasy, the conclusion he drew from this was that “in science, the mass of people is two centuries behind ours, their literati half a dozen years before us. Books, really good, acquire just reputations in that time, and so become known to us and communicate to us all their advances in knowledge. Is not this delay compensated by our being placed out of the reach of that swarm of nonsense which issues daily from a thousand presses.”⁴⁰

If Jefferson arrived in France eager to immerse himself in a world of really good books and to spread the news of them to his friends back home, he also was determined to combat the “swarm of nonsense” about America that issued from European presses. He combatted misleading and deceptive anti-American accounts in British newspapers, and in his Notes on the State of Virginia he launched a frontal assault on the potentially most damaging slur on American possibilities. His Notes originated as answers to a

questionnaire circulated in 1780 by the secretary to the French legation seeking information on the American states. As he developed his extensive answers to the queries, Jefferson undertook to refute the assertions of George Louis LeClerc, the Comte de Buffon, the leading French natural historian, that the supposedly wet and cold climate of the new world produced only small and degenerate life forms, including the human beings who lived there. In Query Six, the longest in the book, Jefferson amassed detail about the relative sizes of European and American animals, about the climate, and about the cultural accomplishments of both Indians and European Americans in order to prove Buffon wrong. He even obtained from General John Sullivan of New Hampshire the prepared skeleton, hide, and antlers of a moose to give Buffon as evidence of large animals in America. Refuting Buffon was important because his theory of degeneration, if true, did not promise much for future American citizens, who would be condemned to physical and mental inferiority. In addition, many other Europeans shared Buffon's theories of American degeneration. Since Buffon stood as the most prominent and authoritative exponent of these theories, however, it was logical to direct a counterargument toward him.

The Abbé Raynal had promulgated this theory in his popular and widely reprinted Histoire des Deux Indes, a book that Jefferson characterized as “the effusions of an imagination in deliris.”⁴¹ In 1785 Jefferson published a limited edition of his Notes on the State of Virginia that criticized Raynal as well as Buffon and other French naturalists. In January of 1786 the Duc de La Rochefoucauld sent a letter introducing Jean Nicolas Dêmeunier, who was preparing the dictionary on L'économie politique et diplomatique for the Encyclopédie, and noted that Dêmeunier had already written and published

articles on North and South Carolina in the first of the four volumes that would cover this topic. Would Jefferson speak with him and share information about America for articles in preparation for the rest of the volume?⁴² Jefferson was unhappy to discover that Raynal was a major source for much of D meunier’s information, and in several meetings and a lengthy set of written responses he tried to set him straight. He drafted an extensive set of replies to D meunier’s first queries by January 24, answered a second set by early February, and made extensive observations on the draft of D meunier’s article on the United States. He also made sure that D meunier had access to a copy of Notes for his article on Virginia. As a result the article on the United States swelled in length. France received forty pages in the printed version and England fifty, but the United States, younger and more sparsely populated, occupied eighty-nine pages.⁴³ The article on Virginia was longer than any other state’s entry and drew heavily on Notes on the State of Virginia. Jefferson’s intervention was not wholly successful, however, for as he later observed when forwarding the volume to a correspondent, “with respect to the article (Etats unis) of the Encyclopedie now inclosed I am far from making myself responsible for the whole of the article. The two first sections are taken chiefly from the Abb  Raynal, and they are therefore wrong exactly in the same proportion.”⁴⁴

Jefferson wanted to get the facts right. He wrote extensively to correct the estimates of the population of the American states, for example, and on the extent and variety of the American post-revolutionary debt. As a diplomat, he also wished to put the best face possible on American affairs. Referring to the debt, he remarked that “those who talk of the bankruptcy of the U.S. are of two descriptions. 1. Strangers who do not understand the nature and history of our paper-money. 2. Holders of that paper-money

who do not wish that the world should understand it.” His attempts to suggest that the United States was fiscally sound were a bit like his own efforts late in life to optimistically understate the seriousness of his own financial situation when he was, for all practical purposes, bankrupt. Similarly, his assurance that “the Confederation is a wonderfully perfect instrument, considering the circumstances under which it was formed,” does not quite conform to the growing realization in America in the mid-1780s that the Articles of Confederation had serious defects. He and John Adams were desperately trying to arrange loans from European bankers in order to keep the new nation afloat; it was crucial to maintain that the United States was politically stable and able to pay its debts. Jefferson’s facts were more reliable than the Abbé Raynal’s, but they were not entirely free from what is now called “spin.”⁴⁵

In other areas Jefferson’s observations were colored by his own ideological biases. Writing in the world of the philosophes, he himself took on the role of philosophe, aware that facts were always embedded in the context of specific political realities only made visible to rational analysis. Explaining why Rhode Island, the smallest state, was so often able to block “useful proposition[s],” he asserted that “the cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous citizens and possess most of the amor patriae. Merchants are the least virtuous, and possess the least of the amor patriae.” Because of its geography, “there is not a single man in Rhode island who is not a merchant of some sort.”⁴⁶ Well, not exactly accurate as to detail, but if the United States was to be thought of as a republican experiment, then it might seem appropriate to apply as explanatory tools republican concepts like the importance of the virtuous citizen and the public good.

Jefferson was also careful to explain the system of indentured servitude by which immigrants were able to pay for their passage across the Atlantic by entering into labor contracts of up to seven years. He echoed the argument of Guillaume de Crèvecoeur by describing the system of indenture as a progressive means of individual self-improvement that, rather than being a flaw in the American scheme, was a testimony to its promise. “So desirous are the poor of Europe to get to America, where they may better their conditions that, being unable to pay their passage, they will agree to serve two or three years, on their arrival there, rather than not go,” he wrote. “During the time of that service they are better fed, better clothed, and have lighter labour, than while in Europe.” Yet some claimed “that these people are deceived by those who carry them over.” The truth was that, in America, “this deception” was never “heard of. The individuals are generally satisfied in America with their adventure, and very few of them wish not to have made it.”⁴⁷ Remarks like these accorded with the general tenor of Jefferson’s observations for D meunier. They insisted on the progressive quality of American life, on the general improvement of conditions for ordinary people. His observations, concerned with getting right the details of present-day America, also conveyed a strong sense of what America might become, of its true character as a land that would make good on its promising beginnings. It was the duty of the philosophe to delineate just where that promise revealed itself, even if not all indentured servants were happy with the bargain they had made..

Admitting to the existence of slavery in America, Jefferson optimistically asserted the existence of growing sentiment in favor of abolition in the South, particularly in Virginia, where “I flatter myself it will take place there at some period of time not very

far distant.”⁴⁸ Jefferson was aware that abolition would be more difficult than this. His fears of antagonizing his fellow Virginians over his strictures on slavery in Notes hindered him from circulating the book widely at home, but the enlightened circles of Paris allowed him to extend his imagination about the possible future of America. If Jefferson was a philosophe, at least for a moment in his life, then consider that the French philosophes were not mere theorists but frequently men of affairs active in business, politics, and the professions. Jefferson had always his eye on the future, but as a shrewd politician he was aware of the necessity of persuading his fellow citizens of the possibilities and rewards of a democratic future. Keeping the passions of men on his side was essential, and a promising way to do this was to engage the republic of letters on behalf of America.

In describing the affair of the Cincinnati, the organization of Revolutionary War officers that threatened to be the foundation for a hereditary elite, he concluded by asking D meunier “to avail us of his forcible manner to evince that there is evil to be apprehended even from the ashes of this institution, and to exhort the society in America to make their reformation complete; bearing in mind that we must keep the passions of men on our side even when we are persuading them to do what they ought to do.”⁴⁹

Julian Boyd has noted that, although Jefferson described himself as “one who was an enemy to the institution from the first moment of it’s conception,” he went on to pen “what is probably the best apology for the origins of the Society of the Cincinnati ever written.”⁵⁰ Jefferson created a sentimental narrative that posited the origins of the Society in a burst of affection and benevolence that broke out among the officers as they were about to disperse at the end of the war. They formed their organization in order to

enjoy “the pleasure of seeing each other again, by the sweetest of all consolations, the talking over the scenes of difficulty and endearment they had gone through.” They would additionally be able to support their brothers who had fallen into economic hardship. Washington, moved by this expression of “benevolence and friendship,” thought it would be an “instrument the more for strengthening the federal band, and for promoting federal ideas.” When the Society came under attack as a danger to a republican, egalitarian society, Washington urged his fellow officers to suppress the Cincinnati; their opposition “was observed to cloud his face with an anxiety that the most distressful scenes of the war had scarcely ever produced.” However, when the acceptances of membership arrived from the French officers who had been invited to join, it seemed impossible to undo what had been done, other than to recommend various reforms to accord with the republican spirit of the country. In America, Jefferson concluded, “no other distinction between man and man had ever been known, but that of persons in office exercising powers by authority of the laws, and private individuals.... But of distinctions by birth or badge they had no more idea than they had of the mode of existence in the moon or planets. They had heard only that there were such, and knew that they must be wrong.” Jefferson’s apology for the Cincinnati successfully connected a story of overflowing heartfelt sentiment with one of national unity and republican principle even as it subtly suggested that the undemocratic distinction it promised was a European and not an American problem. The Society retained its life because of the eager embrace of the French officers, and the threat it posed to republicanism was most to be felt “in Europe only, where the dignity of man is lost in arbitrary distinctions.”⁵¹ Jefferson’s recasting of the story of the Cincinnati as a tale of “benevolence and

friendship” attempted to engage the passions of men in both America and France with a narrative of sentiment and republican, rational principle. In America the members of the Cincinnati would be among the leaders of the new governments, and their support for republican principle would be crucial. In France the gentle critique of “arbitrary distinctions” could be useful and appreciated in enlightened circles.

In the case of D meunier’s dictionary, he had some success as well in reaching out to an enlightened audience, despite his failure to completely eradicate the traces of the Abb  Raynal. Most of his suggestions made their way into the published version, including some mildly radical bits such as the text of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and Jefferson’s praise of an American federalism that had been accused of lacking “energy”--the ability to forcefully exert power when necessary. Jefferson admitted this was true but a mere “inconvenience. On the other hand,” he stated, “that energy which absolute governments derive from an armed force, which is the effect of the bayonet constantly held at the breast of every citizen, and which resembles very much the stillness of the grave, must be admitted also to have it’s inconveniences. We weigh the two together, and like best to submit to the former. Compare the number of wrongs committed with impunity by citizens among us, with those committed by the sovereigns in other countries, and the last will be found most numerous, most oppressive on the mind, and most degrading of the dignity of man.”⁵² These were potentially dangerous words in France of the ancien r gime, but Jefferson must have been persuasive when delivering them to the man who was one of the censeurs royal and the secretary to the king’s brother. When D meunier thanked Jefferson for meeting with him and commenting so extensively on his manuscript, he praised his lively and diligent attention

to his text and congratulated America on having such a citizen. “I count as moments of pleasure and good fortune those in which you have allowed me to listen to you,” he concluded, and in the published article on Virginia he cited Jefferson one of its citizens “les plus respectables... par ses lumières,” his enlightenment.⁵³ If Jefferson found pleasure in his books, he found as much or more in talking with his friends and acquaintances about the core values of the Enlightenment, about the dignity of man, and the value of learning for the virtuous citizens of a republic.

Jefferson’s involvement with the Encyclopédie Méthodique as consumer, unofficial book agent, and consultant for the volume on political economy and diplomacy did not lead to the abolition of slavery in Virginia or to the perfected republic that he dreamed of in which the dignity of man was always honored, and it certainly did not initiate the French Revolution. But his work was a commitment to the future, to what the philosopher and critic Jürgen Habermas has often described as the unfinished project of the Enlightenment, the pursuit of reason and justice that is yet to be fully realized. In the Encyclopédies, both Diderot’s and Panckoucke’s, had been planted the seeds of things to come. The Encyclopédie Méthodique, like its predecessor, was a project that aimed to effect society from the top down by encouraging an elite to use its reason about all of life’s activities in the hope that reason would spread itself beyond this elite. Jefferson claimed that in America “no other distinction between man and man had ever been known, but that of persons in office exercising powers by authority of the laws, and private individuals. Among these last the poorest labourer stood on equal ground with the wealthiest Millionary.”⁵⁴ If he was confident of the ordinary man’s ability to govern himself, he also believed that the benefits of formal learning might be spread down from

intellectuals and leaders in the sciences and professions. His schemes for public education in Virginia sketched out a hierarchy of schools from the most basic level to the university, but the university was the only one he saw into existence. Robert Darnton has described “browsing through the Méthodique [as] like strolling through a university: first one passes the small but elegant mathematics building; Art and Music stands to the left, History and Literature to the right; the natural sciences dominate a vast quadrangle near the gymnasium and swimming pool; and beyond them loom the law and medical schools.”⁵⁵ There were many influences and motives for Jefferson’s last great Enlightenment project, the University of Virginia, but it is not beyond reason to see one of its roots in his activities in France in the 1780s. At the center of his design for the university’s buildings was the Rotunda that would house the library, complete with books that he had himself selected. He surely knew that a university’s students and even its faculty come and go, but its library is its heart.

Notes

- ¹ Henry Steele Commager, Jefferson, Nationalism, and the Enlightenment (New York, 1975), 3.
- ² Peter Gay, The Enlightenment: An Interpretation: The Rise of Modern Paganism (New York, 1966), 3.
- ³ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” in Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals and What Is Enlightenment, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, 1959), 85. The meaning and significance of the Enlightenment has been troubled, to say the least, in the last half century; for a review of different interpretations, see Richard Butterwick, “Peripheries of the Enlightenment: An Introduction,” in Peripheries of the Enlightenment, ed. Butterwick, Simon Davies, Gabriel Sanchez Espinosa. SVEC, 2008:01, 1-16.
8. My notion of the colporteur owes largely to Ernst Bloch, author of The Principle of Hope, which speaks to a theory of “anticipatory illumination.” See Jack Zipes, “Introduction,” in Ernst Bloch, The Utopian Function of Art and Literature (Cambr⁸ Henry Steele Commager, Jefferson, Nationalism, and the Enlightenment (New York, 1975), 3. The ultimate American colporteur, however, who dealt in the kinds of materials that his European counterparts did, was surely Mason Locke Weems.
10. Edmund Randolph, “Edmund Randolph’s Essay on the Revolutionary History of Virginia (1774-1782),” Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 43 (1935): 122-23.
11. Cf. TJ to John Minor, 30 August 1814, Ford, 9:480-84. Note also letter of 5 February 1769 to Thomas Turpin, TJP, 1:25.

12. Robert Skipwith to TJ, 17 July 1771, *ibid.*, 74-75.
13. TJ to Joseph Priestley, 27 January 1800, *ibid.*, 31:340.
14. On Jefferson's attempt to meet Skipwith's expectations but also to include his own preferences, see Douglas L. Wilson, "Thomas Jefferson's Library and the Skipwith List," Harvard Library Bulletin, New Series 3 (Winter 1992-93): 56-72.
15. TJ to Robert Skipwith, 3 August 1771, TJP, 1:76-81.
16. TJ to Minor, 30 August 1814, Ford, 9:480-84. The original plan of study was written out much earlier, probably around 1770, and included in this letter on additional pages.
17. TJ to Nathaniel Burwell, 1 April 1818, TJ Papers, Lib. Cong. The letter has been widely reprinted, but not so the attached reading list. I am grateful to Christine Coalwell McDonald for pointing this out to me.
18. TJ to Skipwith, 3 August 1771, TJP, 1:76-81.
19. TJ to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, *ibid.*, 12:15.
20. Douglas L. Wilson, Jefferson's Books (Charlottesville, Va., 1996), 23.
21. TJ to D'Anmours, 30 November 1780, TJP, 4:168; Amable and Alexander Lory to TJ, 16 December 1780, *ibid.*, 211; TJ to John Fitzgerald, 27 February 1781, *ibid.*, 5:15.
22. D'Alembert, Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedie of Diderot, trans. Richard N. Schwab (Chicago, 1995), 50, 57.
23. Wilson, Jefferson's Books, 36-41.
24. TJ to George Watterston, 7 May 1815, TJW, 1367.

25. D'Alembert, Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedie of Diderot, 49, 75. On the metaphor of the map in the Encyclopédie, see David Bates, "Cartographic aberrations: epistemology and order in the encyclopedic map," in Using the Encyclopédie, 1-20.

26. TJ to Watterston, 7 May 1815, TJW, 1367.

27. James Madison to TJ, 16 March 1784, TJP, 7:37.

28. List of Books Sold to James Monroe, 10 May 1784, *ibid.*, 240.

29. Bear and Stanton, eds., Jefferson's Memorandum Books, 556, 558.

30. TJ to Charles Thomson, 21 May 1784, TJP, 7:282.

31. John Trumbull to TJ, 21 June 1784, *ibid.*, 317.

32. TJ to Samuel Harrison Smith, 21 August 1814, TJW, 1353.

33. TJ to James Monroe, 6 February 1785, TJP, 7:640; TJ to Richard Henry Lee, *ibid.*, 644; TJ to Charles Thomson, 11 November, 1784, *ibid.* 518. Izard to TJ, with Reports on the Trade of South Carolina, 10 June 1785, *ibid.*, 195.

34. Douglas L. Wilson, "Thomas Jefferson's Library and the French Connection," Eighteenth-Century Studies, 26 (1993), 682.

35. Report on a Committee to Prepare a List of Books for Congress, [24 January 1783,] TJP, 6:216. See also Fulmer Mood, "TITLE OF ARTICLE?," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 72 (1948): 3-24.

36. For Panckoucke's career, see Suzanne Tuccoo-Chala, Charles-Joseph Panckoucke et la Librairie Franciase 1736-1798 (Pau, [ITALY ?] 1977). For Panckoucke and the Encyclopédie Méthodique see Robert Darnton, The Business of

Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie 1775-1800 (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), esp. 395-459.

37. TJ to David S. Franks, [March or April 1783,] TJP, 6:258; Bear and Stanton, eds., Jefferson's Memorandum Books, 560.

38. TJ to James Madison, 8 December 1784, TJP, 7:559.

39. TJ to Charles Thomson, 11 November 1784, *ibid.*, 519.

40. TJ to Charles Bellini, 30 September 1785, *ibid.*, 569.

41. "Notes on the Letter of Christoph Daniel Ebeling," Papers, 28:509.

42. La Rochefoucauld to TJ, 4 January 1786, *ibid.*, 9:150.

43. "The Article on the United States in the Encyclopédie Méthodique" in *ibid.*, 10:9. Julian Boyd's lengthy note on the exchanges between Jefferson and Dèmeunier is the best account of this episode. See *ibid.*, 3-65.

44. TJ to G. K. van Hogendorp, 25 August 1786, *ibid.*, 299.

45. *Ibid.*, 17, 14.

46. *Ibid.*, 16.

47. *Ibid.*, 32.

48. *Ibid.*, 18.

49. *Ibid.*, 54.

50. *Ibid.*, 6.

51. *Ibid.*, 48-52.

52. *Ibid.*, 19-20; for the French translation of this passage, see p. 8.

53. Ibid., 65. Literally, “Lorsque Je Songe à la vivacité de Son Zele, Je Felicite L’Amerique d’avoir un pareil Citoyen, et Je Compte pour des momens de plaisir et de bonheur, Ceux où il m’est permis de L’Ecouter.”

54. Ibid., 52.

55. Darnton, The Business of Enlightenment, 451. On the “top-heavy diffusion process” of the Enlightenment, see p. 526.