THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTERS OF JOHN ADAMS AND THOMAS JEFFERSON, 1812--1826

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For my part, I would alarm and caution even the political and business reader, and to the utmost extent, against the prevailing delusion that the establishment of free political institutions, and plentiful intellectual smartness, with general good order, physical plenty, industry, etc., (desirable and precious advantages as they all are,) do, of themselves, determine and yield to our experiment of democracy the fruitage of success....

I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ'd in, (for all this hectic glow, and these melo-dramatic screamings,) nor is humanity itself believ'd in....

WALT WHITMAN

These words of Whitman were written in 1871. But they are not dated. The difficulties in achieving democracy were fully realized even at the beginning of the nation. Indeed, the criticism of some of the founding fathers went very deeply into the future of democracy. It is instructive today to return to these men. In particular, to read John Adams and Thomas Jefferson together is a rewarding experience. No writers in our literature have been more conscious of the dangers that lay ahead. Yet none have believed more strongly that the long road to democracy was worth travelling. We feel in them a breadth of view and, to paraphrase Whitman, a belief in humanity that make the mutterings of pessimism and the "melo-dramatic screamings" of nationalism seem strangely unreal and inconsequential.

To an unusual degree the two men complement each other. We cannot well understand one without understanding the other. And the place where they meet most candidly is their letters, especially the letters written over a period of fifteen years after they had retired from public life. In this period they were trying to draw each other out; and it must be admitted that they succeeded. They succeeded better, probably, than they realized. Some wholly fortuitous accidents contributed to bring out in sharpest relief the greatness of both men. Among these were their temperamental differences and the similarities of their experiences. The Plutarchian parallels of their lives are remarkable.

Adams was seven and a half years Jefferson's senior. After graduating from Harvard in 1755 at the age of nineteen,

he taught school, drifted into rather than entered the law; and, finally settling down in Boston with his wife, the edified and edifying Abigail, he gradually, more by industry than easy popularity, worked his way up to a position of prominence, first in the city, then in colonial affairs. Jefferson, too, studied law after graduating from the College of William and Mary, and, somewhat more rapidly than Adams, became a leader in state affairs, helping to found the Virginia Committee of Correspondence, serving as delegate to the Second Continental Congress and, in 1779, as governor.

Their first close association dates from June 1776, when they were both members of the committee appointed to draw up a declaration of independence. Jefferson, when he had written it, submitted it to Adams and Franklin for their comments. And it was Adams who presented the document to Congress and defended it the most vigorously.

Both served as ministers abroad, Adams in two terms between 1778 and 1788, Jefferson in a longer stay of one term, 1784-89. It was during Mrs. Adams' brief visit in Europe that she had occasion to reassess the pleasures of American society. Under our necessity of remembering her later animosity toward Jefferson, it is pleasant to record that in 1785 she thought him "one of the choice ones of the earth,"[1] and that Jefferson, when he was in Paris, returned the com-

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[1] To Mrs. Cranch, Auteuil, May 8. Letters of Mrs. Adams, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little and Brown, 1840), II, 94.

pliment in deed if not in kind by buying "two pair of corsets"[2] for her daughter, trusting only to memory for the correct size.

In 1789 Adams began his eight years as Vice President under Washington, served as President until 1801, and then retired. Jefferson was Vice President under Adams, President during the following eight years, and retired to Monticello in 1809.

It might seem that fate, having written lives so unusually parallel, could allow the resulting correspondence to write itself. Yet for this we are indebted to another.

In the press of official duties, as Vice President and President, the two conscientious men had sometimes delivered opinions or passed measures in which personal feelings had not been the first consideration. Especially, to Adams' "midnight appointments" had been added, by ignorance, Jefferson's removal of Adams' son from a public office, and to these had been added small differences in political opinion and the abuse of their names by the busybodies of party newspapers. The accumulation had become a silent blockade between them, and neither knew how to remove it.

Dr. Benjamin Rush knew both men well. In the Dictionary of American Biography Rush figures as an authority in public health, famous in his day, in medical theory something of an over-enthusiastic innovator. His greater suit

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[2] To Mrs. William S. Smith, Paris, Jan. 15, 1787. Sara N. Randolph, The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1871), p. 78.

to fame might lie in what he did after Jefferson had retired to Monticello. Here he saw the only two ex-Presidents of the United States, men who had been engaged the most closely and most happily in national affairs, living in silent exclusion from each other, and both aware, as he well knew, that the causes of that silence were petty. This, he thought, was regrettable. In 1811, writing now to one, now to the other of his two friends he urged their reconciliation. The quick replies he received are worth quoting.

Adams wrote:

> You exhort me to 'forgiveness and love of enemies,' as if I considered, or ever had considered, Jefferson as my enemy. This is not so; I have always loved him as a friend. If I ever received or suspected an injury from him, I have forgotten it long and long ago, and have no more resentment against him than against you.[3]

And Jefferson replied:

> I wish...but for an apposite occasion to express to Mr. Adams my unchanged affections for him. There is an awkwardness which hangs over the resuming a correspondence so long discontinued, unless something could arise which should call for a letter. Time and chance may perhaps generate such an occasion, of which I shall not be wanting in promptitude to avail myself.[4]

In the following month the correspondence began. From January 1812 until their deaths almost, letters shuttled

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[3] Quincy, Dec. 25, 1811. Paul Wilstach (ed.), Correspondence of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1925), pp. 29-30.

[4] Poplar Forest, Dec. 5, 1811. The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), XIII, 116-7. [This is the "Memorial Edition." Further references to this edition will be designated "M.E."]

back and forth between Quincy and Monticello fairly regularly, sometimes in rapid succession. Adams once wrote two letters on the same day. The mere quantity (about one hundred letters) is a good confirmation of the doctor's guess --and a monument to his good will. It is even better to find Adams saying, in 1818: "While you live, I seem to have a bank at Monticello, on which I can draw for a letter of friendship and entertainment, when I please."[5] That there was possible in the correspondence a freedom of expression that had usually been denied them may be appreciated too from another letter of Adams':

> I cannot contemplate human affairs without laughing or crying. I choose to laugh. When People talk of the Freedom of Writing, Speaking or Thinking, I cannot choose but laugh. No such thing ever existed. No such thing now exists; but I hope it will exist. B ut it must be hundreds of years after you and I shall write and speak no more.[6]

By a strange coincidence, the two men died on the same day, and the day was July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Such are some of the lucky chances, the curious symmetries that fate itself, we might say, has contributed to this book. "You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other,"[7] wrote Adams; and though there proved to be not much, after all, to "explain," there was much to say. It is the lot of few men to accumulate such

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[5] Quincy, Dec. 8. Wilstach, op. cit., p. 163.

[6] Quincy, Aug. 15, 1817. Ibid., p. 160.

[7] Quincy, July 15, 1813. M.E., XIII, 315.

wealthy memories as were theirs--and then to have a sound and serene old age from which to view them. Much of the best of both men is here: never were their minds freer from distracting cares, and rarely had they enjoyed such privacy of expression. The years are illumined as they pause in this final survey; and the light is that of an Indian summer, or of that hour before sunset, that Horace called the friendly time, when the shadows lengthen behind the hills and the yokes are lifted from the tired oxen.

It is early in the correspondence that their discussion of government begins. As he told Rush, Jefferson had thought the "misunderstanding...highly disgraceful to us both, as indicating minds not sufficiently elevated to prevent a public competition from affecting our personal friendship;"[8] and in an early letter to Adams he dismisses with finality the subject of political differences. They were not worth writing about.

> Men have differed in opinion, and been divided into parties by these opinions, from the first origin of societies, and in all governments where they have been permitted freely to think and to speak. The same political parties which now agitate the United States, have existed through all time. Whether the power of the people or that of the αριστοι should prevail, were questions which kept the States of Greece and Rome in eternal convulsions, as they now schismatize every people whose minds and mouths are not shut up by the gag of a despot. And in fact, the terms of whig and tory belong to natural as well as to civil history. They denote the temper and constitution of mind of different individuals.[9]

To another man than Adams, these words might have closed the subject. But Jefferson's idea of a "natural history" classification fell under sensitive eyes. Disposed as he had always been to expose fallacies and inconsistencies in thought and behavior, and confirmed in these habits, more than Jefferson was, by his legal training, Adams is reminded almost at once of a time, thirty years ago, when he had intended "to write something upon aristocracy."[10] Obstacles had intervened, and he had remained, as he says, "so unfor-

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[8] Monticello, Jan. 16, 1811. M.E., XIII, 8.

[9] Monticello, June 27, 1813. M.E., XIII, 279-80.

[10] Quincy, July 9, 1813. M.E., XIII, 305.

tunate" as never to be able to make himself understood. But popular misconceptions on the subject had not decreased--nor had Adams' exasperation at them. He replies at once.

> It is a fine observation of yours, that 'Whig and Tory belong to natural history.' Inequalities of mind and body are so established by God Almighty, in His constitution of human nature, that no art or policy can ever plane them down to a level. I have never read reasoning more absurd, sophistry more gross, in proof of the Athanasian creed, or Transubstantiation, than the subtle labors of Helvetius and Rousseau, to demonstrate the natural equality of mankind. Jus cuique, the golden rule, do as you would be done by, is all the equality that can be supported or defended by reason, or reconciled to common sense.[11]

The arbitrary manner in which Adams has translated Jefferson's differences into "inequalities" suggests that Adams was uncertain how fully Jefferson realized the popular misconceptions. There was a distinction to be made between political equality and "natural equality." Partly responsible, as he was, for the famous clause "all men are created equal," Adams had been amazed and mortified to find that it had been repeatedly misunderstood. He makes his meaning doubly clear by describing the fate of the French Revolution as an example of an attempt to use "natural" equality as a basis for government. As he recalls it, Jefferson had disagreed with him.

> The first time that you and I differed in opinion on any material question, was after your arrival from Europe, and that point was the French Revolution.
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> You were well persuaded in your own mind, that the nation would succeed in establishing a free republican government. I was as well persuaded in mine, that a project of such a government over five and twenty millions of people, when four and twenty millions and five hundred thousand of them could neither read nor write, was as unnatural, irrational and impracticable as it

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[11] Quincy, July 13, 1813. M.E., XIII, 307-8.

> would be over the elephants, lions, tigers, panthers, wolves and bears in the royal menagerie at Versailles.[12]

Although there is no evidence of this disagreement in his letters, it may be that in conversation Jefferson had left Adams with the impression that he thought the French revolutionists could succeed in establishing a republic. In replying, Jefferson makes only brief reference to it, saying that he thought any hopes of "rational action" by "the canaille of the cities of Europe, ...debased by ignorance, poverty, and vice,"[13] had been doomed to failure from the start. He is much more interested in expressing his agreement with Adams on the subject of natural inequality. It was, of course, a paradox that natural inequality and political equality coexisted in the new republic. All rational men, too, must recognize the paradox; but he makes it apparent in his reply that he was not going to be greatly bothered by it. It was not a deadlock--and it might even be advantageous.

> I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. Formerly, bodily powers gave place among the aristoi. But since the invention of gunpowder has armed the weak as well as the strong with missile death, bodily strength, like beauty, good humor, politeness and other accomplishments, has become but an auxiliary ground of distinction. There is also an artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class. The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society.... May we not even say, that that form of government is the best, which provides the most effec-

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[12] Quincy, July 13, 1813. M.E., XIII, 306-7.

[13] Monticello, Oct. 28, 1813. M.E., XIII, 401-2.

> tually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government? The artificial aristocracy is a mischievous ingredient in government, and provision should be made to prevent its ascendency.... I think the best remedy is exactly that provided by all our constitutions, to leave to the citizens the free election and separation of the aristoi from the pseudo-aristoi, of the wheat from the chaff. In general they will elect the really good and wise. In some instances, wealth may corrupt, and birth blind them; but not in sufficient degree to endanger the society.[14]

In expressing this confidence in the good judgment of his fellow citizens, Jefferson seems to be flying directly in the face of Adams' persuasion. Adams had invoked historical authority for the fact that "birth and wealth together have prevailed over virtue and talents in all ages. The many will acknowledge no other 'αριστοι.'"[15] It is true that Jefferson had always assumed some virtue indigenous to his countrymen that would except them from the category of "all ages." They were in some ways select. In Paris he had often drawn this contrast:

> If all the sovereigns of Europe were to set themselves to work, to emancipate the minds of their subjects from their present ignorance and prejudices, and that, as zealously as they now endeavor the contrary, a thousand years would not place them on that high ground, on which our common people are now setting out. Ours could not have been so fairly placed under the control of the common sense of the people, had they not been separated from their parent stock, and kept from contamination, either from them, or the other people of the old world, by the intervention of so wide an ocean.[16]

But in replying to Adams he is quite willing not to insist upon this natural superiority, and he follows his expression

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[14] Monticello, Oct. 28, 1813, M.E., XIII, 396-7.

[15] Quincy, July 9, 1813. M.E., XIII, 306.

[16] To Mr. Wythe, Paris, Aug. 13, 1786. M.E., V, 396.

of confidence with an explanation more congenial to a sceptic. He notes as characteristic in Massachusetts and Connecticut "a traditionary reverence for certain families, which has rendered the offices of the government nearly hereditary in those families.... In Virginia we have nothing of this."[17]

As a matter of fact, the very citizens whom Jefferson had drawn for Adams, sturdily separating the wheat from the chaff, were not quite the pure, Rousseauistic sons of nature that Adams had presumed Jefferson approving in France as fit for that office; nor were they merely the pure, wholesome American stock Jefferson himself had sometimes described. He goes on to mention two Virginia laws that might account for some difference between the people of Massachusetts and Virginia.

> At the first session of our legislature after the Declaration of Independence, we passed a law abolishing entails. And this was followed by one abolishing the privilege of primogeniture, and dividing the lands of intestates equally among all their children, or other representatives. These laws, drawn by myself, laid the axe to the foot of pseudo-aristocracy.[18]

A third law, regarding education, had not been passed. As Jefferson had always considered this the most important of the three, it is worth noticing its emphasis on "selection." The word recognizes the fact of natural inequality less pungently than an earlier sentence in the Notes on Virginia--"By this means twenty of the best geniuses will be

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[17] Monticello, Oct. 28, 1813. M.E., XIII, 398.

[18] Ibid., p. 399.

raked from the rubbish annually"[19]--; but it serves.

> And had another which I prepared been adopted by the legislature, our work would have been complete. It was a bill for the more general diffusion of learning. This proposed to divide every county into wards of five or six miles square, like your townships; to establish in each ward a free school for reading, writing, and common arithmetic; to provide for the annual selection of the best subjects from these schools, who might receive, at the public expense, a higher degree of education at a district school; and from these district schools to select a certain number of the most promising subjects, to be completed at an university, where all the useful sciences should be taught. Worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life, and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts.[20]

He sums up:

> The law for religious freedom, which made a part of this system, having put down the aristocracy of the clergy, and restored to the citizen the freedom of the mind, and those of entails and descents nurturing an equality of condition among them, this on education would have raised the mass of the people to the high ground of moral respectability necessary to their own safety, and to orderly government; and would have completed the great object of qualifying them to select the veritable aristoi, for the trusts of government, to the exclusion of the ps eudalists.[21]

Here, then, was a fair clearing up of Adams' doubts as to Jefferson's awareness of the full implications of the bare term "equality," and a hopeful counter-suggestion to the historical preferences of the masses for "birth and wealth."

More significantly, the letter shows that Jefferson did not consider the "natural man," even the good "natural man"

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[19] M.E., II, 203.

[20] Monticello, Oct. 28, 1813. M.E., XIII, 399-400.

[21] Ibid., M.E., XIII, 400-1.

of the United States, reconcilable to citizenship in a republic as he was. He cites three laws which might help to make him fit to govern himself. They are laws which, as they might be resented by an Indian as intrusions upon his personal "liberty," are, Jefferson thinks, fundamental to the structure of any government extending over so many naturally unequal people and over so broad a territory as that represented by the government of the United States. In this conception of republican citizenship two significant features emerge.

Of the three laws mentioned, two are restrictive or prohibitive; the third--more correctly a bill, rather than a law--is quite the opposite of restrictive. The bill for "the more general diffusion of learning" is an offer, a tender of emancipation, one might say. Inasmuch as, in writing to Adams, Jefferson only implies its ranking importance among the three, we may note from a letter of 1786 an explicit statement. "I think by far the most important bill in our whole code, is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people."[22] And from this opinion he never swerved. That the most important law a republic could have is in its very nature the opposite of restrictive--that fact itself is significant of a certain bias in Jefferson's thinking on government.

The other significant feature of Jefferson's conception of republican citizenship is one that reflects considerable

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[22] To Mr. Wythe, Paris, Aug. 13, 1786. M.E., V, 396.

light over his whole philosophy of government. It disproves Adams' supposition that he favored ochlocracy for the United States and makes coherent a number of single statements that have divided his critics to this day. In a letter of July 13, 1813, Adams himself had charged Jefferson with a "steady defence of democratical principles"[23]--which had "laid the foundation" of his "unbounded popularity." Of course, the meaning of the word has changed: at the time its strict meaning was "ochlocratic," and its example the government of the Greek city-states, where men voted directly or not at all.[24] Once when defining terms for a correspondent, Jefferson himself called democracy "the only pure republic," and the government of the United States a "representative democracy" or "a republican, or popular government, of the second degree of purity."[25] The significance of Adams' misplaced supposition, however, is not reached by any semantic exercises, --the less so as we find Jefferson approving, and with perfect consistency, communism, anarchy, and monarchy![26] The reason for Jefferson's choice of a republican government for the United States may be found in this same letter of definitions.

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[23] Quincy. M.E., XIII, 309.

[24] Madison in The Federalist, No. 10 (1787), defines a pure democracy as "a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person." A republic is "a government in which the scheme of representation takes place." (Ed., Edward Mead Earle [Washington: National Home Library Foundation, n. d.], pp. 58, 59.)

[25] To Isaac H. Tiffany, Monticello, Aug. 26, 1816. M.E., XV, 65.

[26] Communism: M.E., XV, 399. Anarchy: M.E., II, 128-9. Monarchy: M.E., XV, 22.

It is a reason open to easy misunderstanding, especially by a Puritan New Englander. The ochlocratic Greeks, Jefferson said, "knew no medium between a democracy (the only pure republic, but impracticable beyond the limits of a town) and an abandonment of themselves to an aristocracy, or a tyranny independent of the people."[27] And he added:

> It seems not to have occurred [to them] that where the citizens cannot meet to transact their business in person, they alone have the right to choose the agents who shall transact it; and that in this way a republican... government...may be exercised over any extent of country.[28]

In large measure, then, Jefferson's "steady defence" of republican principles was based on no sanctioned authorities but on certain hard facts; he was seeking the "practicable." The word recurs in the conclusion of this same letter: "My most earnest wish is to see the republican element of popular control pushed to the maximum of its practicable exercise."[29] Again, when writing of the three conditions under which societies exist--one, without government; two, under governments "wherein the will of everyone has a just influence;" and three, under governments of force--, he said: "It is a problem, not clear in my mind, that the first condition is not the best. But I believe it to be inconsistent with any great degree of population."[30] Thus, Jefferson's whole approach to the problem of the adjustment of natural

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[27] M.E., XV, 65.

[28] Loc. cit.

[29] Ibid., p. 66.

[30] To Madison, 1787. Saul K. Padover (ed.), Democracy (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939), p. 30.

rights to government has already made the assumption that "what is practicable must often control what is pure theory"[31] and has recognized the basic fact that the conditions which any large society must always accept and must base their government upon are in the nature of "necessary evils."

Jefferson concludes his long letter with these words:

> If we do not think exactly alike as to its [the Constitution's] imperfections, it matters little to our country, which, after devoting to it long lives of disinterested labor, we have delivered over to our successors in life, who will be able to take care of it and of themselves.[32]

This is a conclusion typical of Jefferson. The serenity of his hope in the future may in part derive from the slower pulse of old age; but the virtue of disinterestedness he had prized even as a young man, and he was by nature sanguine. It may be imagined how to a man of choleric temper, like Adams, there is something in this ease, this almost urbane hopefulness, that teases.

Although Adams certainly did not think Jefferson insincere, it is apparent from his reply that he was emotionally ill at ease in the presence of such ready faith in posterity. In argument he was not accustomed to concede a single point beyond what could be clearly disproved. Jefferson was one of the most impenetrable of men: his hopefulness and idealism, though temperamentally genuine enough, are by no means equat-

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[31] To Du Pont de Nemours, Washington, Jan. 18, 1802. Dumas Malone (ed.), Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930), p. 40.

[32] Monticello, Oct. 28, 1813. M.E., XIII, 403.

able with his ideas. Adams' ideas, too, are not equatable with his fondness for controversy. He has been called "the most profound student of government that this country ever produced;"[33] and this correspondence hardly detracts from that reputation. In replying, Adams sets himself to examine more narrowly the statics of Jefferson's social philosophy.

There is a deep saying by John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the United States, that might caption Adams' reply.

> I do not expect that mankind will, before the millennium, be what they ought to be; and therefore, in my opinion, every political theory which does not regard them as being what they are, will prove abortive.[34]

The italics are Jay's; they might be Adams'. Before considering any further the laws that might be designed to fit men to be citizens of a republic, he retraces the definitions of natural inequalities, trying to etch a little deeper into the facts, to excise all traces of wishful thinking.

> We are now explicitly agreed upon one important point, viz., that there is a natural aristocracy among men, the grounds of which are virtue and talents.... But though we have agreed in one point, in words, it is not yet certain that we are perfectly agreed in sense. Fashion has introduced an indeterminate use of the word talents. Education, wealth, strength, beauty, stature, birth, complexion, physiognomy, are talents, as well as genius, science, and learning. Any one of these talents that in fact commands or influences two votes in society, gives to the man who possesses it the character of an aristocrat, in my sense of the word. Pick up the first hundred men you meet, and make a republic. Every man will have an equal vote; but when deliberations and discussions are opened, it will be found that twenty-five, by their talents, virtues being equal, will be able to carry fifty

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[33] Albert Jay Nock, Memoirs of a Superfluous Man (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943), p. 135.

[34] Loc. cit.

votes. Every one of these twenty-five is an aristocrat in my sense of the word; whether he obtains his one vote in addition to his own, by his birth, fortune, figure, eloquence, science, learning, craft, cunning, or even his character for good fellowship, and a bon vivant.

What gave Sir William Wallace his amazing aristocratical superiority? His strength. What gave Mrs. Clark her aristocratical influence--to create generals, admirals, and bishops? Her beauty. What gave Pompadour and Du Barry the power of making cardinals and popes? And I have lived for years in the Hotel de Valentinois, with Franklin, who had as many virtues as any of them. In the investigation of the meaning of the word 'talents', I could write 630 pages as pertinent as John Taylor's, of Hazlewood; but I will select a single example; for female aristocrats are nearly as formidable as males. A daughter of a greengrocer walks the streets in London daily, with a basket of cabbage sprouts, dandelions, and spinach, on her head. She is observed by the painters to have a beautiful face, an elegant figure, a graceful step, and a debonair [sic]. They hire her to sit. She complies, and is painted by forty artists in a circle around her. The scientific Dr. William Hamilton outbids the painters, sends her to school for a genteel education, and marries her. This lady not only causes the triumphs of the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar, but separates Naples from France, and finally banishes the king and queen from Sicily. Such is the aristocracy of the natural talent of beauty. Millions of examples might be quoted from history, sacred and profane, from Eve, Hannah, Deborah, Susanna, Abigail, Judith, Ruth, down to Helen, Mrs. de Mainbenor, and Mrs. Fitzherbert. For mercy's sake do not compel me to look to our chaste States and territories to find women, one of whom let go would in the words of Holopherne's guards, deceive the whole earth.[35]

It is apparent that Adams still is by no means certain that his friend Jefferson meant strictly and exactly what he has said on this subject. Adams, of course, is reasoning with strictness and exactness, as he always did; but the very thoroughness of his argument is almost a dead give-away that Jefferson's famous "impenetrability" did not wholly fool him. He seems to be trying to draw Jefferson out. Considering only the actual facts, did his friend Jefferson believe "the

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[35] Quincy, Nov. 15, 1813. XIV, 1-4.

doctrine," the "utterly baseless fiction" "that all men are, in any sense, or have been, at any time, free and equal"?[36] The words are T. H. Huxley's; their aptness may emphasize for us the fact that Adams has touched what has always been the classic argument against democracy, and the weakest point in its logic. Natural inequality causes political inequality.

But the picture of Lady Hamilton suggests to Adams something more fundamental. The response to beauty is that of the emotions, not the reason. Is it not apparent, as things happen in this world, that the natural aristocracy of those talents which appeal to the emotions exceeds in influence that of those talents which appeal to the reason? And yet, is this surprising? What is man?--

> Your commentary on the proverbs of Theognis, reminded me of two solemn characters; the one resembling John Bunyan, the other Ben Franklin. Torrey, a poet, an enthusiast, a superstitious bigot, once very gravely asked my brother, whether it would not be better for mankind if children were always begotten by religious motives only? Would not religion in this sad case have as little efficacy in encouraging procreation, as it has now in discouraging it? I should apprehend a decrease of population, even in our country where it increases so rapidly.
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> In 1775, Franklin made a morning visit at Mrs. Yard's, to Sam Adams and John. He was unusually loquacious. 'Man, a rational creature!' said Franklin. 'Come, let us suppose a rational man. Strip him of all his appetites, especially his hunger and thirst. He is in his chamber, engaged in making experiments, or in pursuing some problem. He is highly entertained. At this moment a servant knocks. "Sir, dinner is on the table." "Dinner! pox! pough! but what have you for dinner?" "Ham and chickens." "Ham! and must I break the chain of my thoughts to go down and gnaw a morsel of damned hog's arse? Put aside your ham; I will dine to-morrow."' Take away appetite, and the present gen-

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[36] On the Natural Inequality of Man (1890).

> eration would not live a month, and no future generation would ever exist; and thus the exalted dignity of human nature would be annihilated and lost, and in my opinion the whole loss would be of no more importance than putting out a candle, quenching a torch, or crushing a firefly, if in this world we only have hope.[37]

Adams sums up his view of the nature of man in one sentence: "It should seem that human reason, and human conscience, though I believe there are such things, are not a match for human passions, human imaginations, and human enthusiasm."[38]

But Adams is not yet finished. This irrational creature, man, does not exist in a state of nature but in society, under government. And under government, do all of man's passions and appetites exist merely for themselves? Rather do they often not minister to the satisfying of some larger, more sustained passion? He gives the answer in one sweeping view of society.

> When I consider the weakness, the folly, the pride, the vanity, the selfishness, the artifice, the low craft and mean cunning, the want of principle, the avarice, the unbounded ambition, the unfeeling cruelty of a majority of those (in all nations) who are allowed an aristocratical influence, and, on the other hand, the stupidity with which the more numerous multitude not only become their dupes, but even love to be taken in by their tricks, I feel a stronger disposition to weep at their destiny, than to laugh at their folly.[39]

Love of power, this was the controlling passion--the passion of those, at least, who could in any way satisfy it: and for the others, there was the equally irrational respect for power. This Janus-god of power pulled the strings; and

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[37] Quincy, Nov. 15, 1813. XIV, 4-5.

[38] Quincy, Feb. 2, 1816. XIV, 424.

[39] Quincy, Nov. 15, 1813. XIV, 1-2.

whichever way it faced, it was in opposition to republican government. Indeed, it actually derived added strength from the government that had proclaimed that all men are created "free and equal."

If political theory should regard men "as being what they are," one might find Adams considering the Declaration of Independence a palimpsest. Under its hopeful hieroglyphs an older declaration had irrevocably inscribed: We hold these truths to be inescapable--that all men are created naturally inequal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable appetites; that among these are life, license, and the pursuit of power....

The expression of this pursuit of power Adams frequently refers to as "the spirit of party." Its effects he could trace throughout the history of civilization, and all of its effects were bad. At one time, for instance, he writes:

> While all other sciences have advanced, that of government is at a stand; little better understood; little better practised now, than three or four thousand years ago. What is the reason? I say, parties and factions will not suffer, or permit improvements to be made....[40]

Or again:

> Despotical, monarchical, aristocratical and democratical fury have all been employed in this work of destruction of everything that could give us true light, and a clear insight of antiquity. For every one of these parties, when possessed of power, or when they have been undermost, and struggling to get uppermost, has been equally prone to every species of fraud and violence and usurpation.[41]

"The spirit of party," as it has more strength, so it has

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[40] Quincy, July 9, 1813. M.E., XIII, 303-4.

[41] Quincy, Dec. 25, 1813. M.E., XIV, 37-8.

less conscience, less intelligence, less "moral respectability," as Jefferson would say, than individual force. "When and where," asked Adams, "were ever found, or will be found, sincerity, honesty, or veracity, in any sect or party in religion, government ,or philosophy?"[42] To institutionalize any great idea is inevitably to degrade it, and hence ultimately to destroy its own strength.

Finally, it is this spirit of party that will undermine the tidy statics of Jefferson's distinction between "natural" and "artificial" aristocracies.

> When aristocracies are established by human laws, and honor, wealth and power are made hereditary by municipal laws and political institutions, then I acknowledge artificial aristocracy to commence; but this never commences till corruption in elections become dominant and uncontrollable. But this artificial aristocracy can never last. The everlasting envies, jealousies, rivalries, and quarrels among them; their cruel rapacity upon the poor ignorant people, their followers, compel them to set up Caesar, a demagogue, to be a monarch, a master; pour mettre chacun à sa place. Here you have the origin of all artificial aristocracy, which is the origin of all monarchies. And both artificial aristocracy and monarchy, and civil, military, political, and hierarchical despotism, have all grown out of the natural aristocracy of virtues and talents.[43]

For a moment Adams becomes ironical:

> We, to be sure, are far remote from this. Many hundred years must roll away before we shall be corrupted. Our pure, virtuous, public-spirited, federative republic will last forever, govern the globe, and introduce the perfection of man; his perfectibility being already proved by Price, Priestley, Condorcet, Rousseau, Diderot, and Godwin.[44]

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[42] Quincy, June 20, 1815. M.E., XIV, 321.

[43] Quincy, Nov. 15, 1813. M.E., XIV, 6.

[44] Loc. cit.

And finally, summing up his letter, he concludes in earnest:

> You suppose a difference of opinion between you and me on the subject of aristocracy. I can find none. I dislike and detest hereditary honors, offices, emoluments, established by law. So do you. I am for excluding legal, hereditary distinctions from the United States as long as possible. So are you. I only say that mankind have not yet discovered any remedy against irresistible corruption in elections to offices of great power and profit, but making them hereditary.[45]

Thus has Adams tried to define his expectations of men as they are. As regards individuals, they are imperfectly rational--capable of reason, perhaps, but no more. The mass are swayed more by "talents" than by worth; the elite are moved more by love of power than by the social good. Indeed, political jobholding has the most appeal to the unscrupulous, the clever, the thick-skinned. "Xenophon says," said Adams, "that the ecclesia always choose the worst men they can find, because none others will do their dirty work."[46]

When Jefferson comes to reply to Adams, two months later, he has little to add in the way of general observations. He could have quoted, from letters he had already written, some quite satisfactory generalizations on several points in Adams' letter. For instance, there was this, from 1795:

> I do not believe with the Rochefoucaulds and Montaignes, that fourteen out of fifteen men are rogues; I believe a great abatement from that proportion may be made in favor of general honesty. But I have always found that rogues would be uppermost, and I do not know that the

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[45] Quincy, Nov. 15, 1813. M.E., XIV, 7-8.

[46] Quincy, July 9, 1813. M.E., XIII, 306.

> proportion is too strong for the higher orders, and for those who, rising above the swinish multitude, always contrive to nestle themselves into the places of power and profit. These rogues set out with stealing the people's good opinion, and then steal from them the right of withdrawing it, by contriving laws and associations against the power of the people themselves.[47]

Or there was this, from the Notes on Virginia, wherein he foresaw the source of perhaps the most disintegrating process that derived from the love of power, economism:

> But is the spirit of the people an infallible, a permanent reliance? Is it government? Is this the kind of protection we receive in return for the rights we give up? Besides, the spirit of the times may alter, will alter. Our rulers will become corrupt, our people careless. A single zealot may commence persecutor, and better men be his victims. It can never be too often repeated, that the time for fixing every essential right on a legal basis is while our rulers are honest, and ourselves united. From the conclusion of this war we shall be going down hill. It will not then be necessary to resort every moment to the people for support. They will be forgotten, therefore, and their rights disregarded. They will forget themselves, but in the sole faculty of making money, and will never think of uniting to effect a due respect for their rights. The shackles, therefore, which shall not be knocked off at the conclusion of this war, will remain on us long, will be made heavier and heavier, till our rights shall revive or expire in a convulsion.[48]

But, after all, the two men agreed on fundamentals. Much of Jefferson is revealed in what he found unnecessary to say to Adams. In replying he contents himself with offering merely two examples of corruption through love of power. For one, he traces "a curious instance of one of these pious frauds in the laws of Alfred,"[49] and goes into scholarly detail to show how "Our judges, too, have lent a ready hand to further these frauds, ...to extend the coer-

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[47] To Mann Page, Monticello, Aug. 30. M.E., IX, 306.

[48] M.E., II, 224-5.

[49] Monticello, Jan. 24, 1814. XIV, 72.

cions of municipal law to the dogmas of their religion...."[50] For another instance, he refers to the textual corruption of the New Testament. To pick out the parts that "have proceeded from an extraordinary man" and the parts that have proceeded from "very inferior minds" "is as easy...as to pick out diamonds from dunghills."[51]

> In extracting the pure principles which he [Jesus] taught, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests, who have travestied them into various forms, as instruments of riches and power to themselves.[52]

Adams already knew of the little Bible Jefferson had compiled on this principle.

Far as the two friends have pursued the implications of Jefferson's off-hand remark on the "natural history" of Whig and Tory, they have not disagreed on facts. The facts show the natural depravity of man. Little more could be added to what they have said, and they themselves, apparently, considered the subject closed. But the question which naturally arises--Is there any hope?--works itself out into the open in their letters a year later.

Late in 1815 a letter from Adams praising the achievements of the eighteenth century provokes a spirited exchange of letters. In reply Jefferson agrees with Adams in noting

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[50] Monticello, Jan. 24, 1814. M.E., XIV, 73.

[51] Ibid., p. 72.

[52] Monticello, Oct. 13, 1813. M.E., XIII, 389.

a high level of achievement in "the sciences and arts, manners and morals"[53] of the eighteenth century and then an abrupt decline. The question he asks offers Adams the opportunity to explain as much the virtues as the vices of an historical epoch.

> How...has it happened that these nations, France especially and England, so great, so dignified, so distinguished by science and the arts, plunged all at once into all the depths of human enormity, threw off suddenly and openly all the restraints of morality, all sensation to character, and unblushingly avowed and acted on the principle that power was right?[54]

The question itself is impressive. The effect of the "convulsions" at the close of the century had probably been, Jefferson thought, "the destruction of eight or ten millions of human beings;"[55] and he takes for granted, as though referring to a Euclidean principle too familiar even to be mentioned, a causal relation between this slaughter and the fact that the nations had acted on the principle that "power was right."

The reply to this question is thrown out almost casually, in a letter full of idiosyncrasies.

> I know not what answer to give you, but this, that Power always sincerely, conscientiously, de tres bon foi, believes itself right. Power always thinks it has a great soul, and vast views, beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God service, when it is violating all His laws. Our passions, ambition, avarice, love, resentment, etc., possess so much metaphysical subtlety, and so much overpowering eloquence, that they insinuate themselves into the understanding and the

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53 Monticello, Jan. 11, 1816. XIV, 393.

54 Ibid., p. 394.

55 Ibid., p. 395.

conscience, and convert both to their party....[56]

This is Adams' answer to the question "How...has it happened that these nations...acted on the principle that power was right?".

A reader may be tempted to protest that Adams did not mean exactly what he says. One may regret the essay, or the book, that he did not write on this text; but he did mean exactly what he says. "Style," he writes later,--"Style has governed the empire"[57]: lamenting not so much the fact that the majority of our great literary figures have been endowed with far less wisdom and knowledge than with communicative skill, as the fact that it is style, eloquence that appeals to men more than truth. The process is bipolar.

It is more than rationalization that Adams is condemning. He means more than that nations have acted on the principle that power was right because they could, both consciously and unconsciously, rationalize power successfully. Apart from all processes of rationalization, there was a body of common "moral ideas" in society, purportedly distinguishing between good and evil. Actually, Adams thought, it was not between good and evil that they distinguished: it was between the creditable and the discreditable. This pseudo-morality was highly praised, and by state, church, and school the greatest efforts were made to institutionalize it: but Adams thought that from it power derived its greatest strength.

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[56] Quincy, Feb. 2, 1816. M.E., XIV, 426.

[57] Quincy, Dec. 16, 1816. M.E., XV, 91.

Even by itself it was not always good, and later on he equates some of the creditable ideas of this pseudo-morality with the evil of true morality. "Will you tell me," he asks Jefferson,

> how to prevent riches from becoming the effects of temperance and industry? Will you tell me how to prevent riches from producing luxury? Will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing effeminacy, intoxication, extravagance, vice and folly?[58]

Adams leaves little doubt in our minds, as we shall see, that all the common virtues, except two, are not in themselves good; lacking these two, they may likely be, as Aldous Huxley has expressed it, only "the means for doing evil more effectively."[59] In regard to Jefferson's question, the sum of Adams' answer is to show that the good repute in which a number of minor virtues are held gives carte blanche to power to rationalize.

In his analysis is implied whatever positive criticism he could honestly give. For once, however, Adams is explicit. He goes on to draw a constructive program for society. It is quite simple. "Truth must be more respected than it has ever been, before any great improvement can be expected in the condition of mankind."[60]

A concise answer--but by no means a close-lipped, complacent, Olympian answer. It is uttered professionally, with the detachment and precision of a social philosopher giving

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58 'Montezillo', Dec. 21, 1819. M.E., XV, 236.

59 Ends and Means (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), p. 142.

60 Quincy, Feb. 2, 1816. M.E., XIV, 425-6.

a principle. Adams was warm-hearted enough, tolerant, rather less of a stern Puritan than biographers commonly report him. In fact, in his insistence on including respect for truth in the foundation of morality, he is actually opposed to popular Christianity. Good intentions were not enough. Of a mere good-willer in government he might have said what Victor Hugo said of Napoleon, and with even more authority: Il genaft Dieu. Adams thought it likely that men would mock truth for centuries to come, perhaps always; but he knew that the world was so made that punishment would attend ignorance, whether it was well-intentioned or not.

We remember that Adams thought it impossible for power or "the spirit of party" to have respect for truth: "sincerity, honesty, or veracity" were simply not in them. They did not seek knowledge; and respect for truth could not be expected of them. These virtues were realizable then only in the will of the individual. In short, no government is good unless the people are good; and at least half of goodness is respect for truth. Yet respect for truth, knowledge --after all these things do many of our educators claim to seek, and nothing seems to be added to their efforts but the production of foxier and foxier little foxes.

Of knowledge Jefferson had much to say. In the sixty odd years of his correspondence he struck off many a sentence on the pursuit of truth which stick in the mind, as Thoreau said, like burrs.

One could compile from his writings an outline of the natural laws of truth--an outline of the government of that

other country that has no national boundaries and of which Jefferson was preeminently a patriot. Yet we know most of these natural laws, and there are writers who can give us detailed accounts of them. We need not go to Jefferson to be told that knowledge is hardly won.

> A patient pursuit of facts, and cautious combination and comparison of them, is the drudgery to which man is subjected by his Maker, if he wishes to attain sure knowledge.[61]

Again, the need for discipline in the pursuit of knowledge is no new idea--although it provokes Jefferson to one of the rarest of his emotions, sarcasm.

> Our post-revolutionary youth are born under happier stars than you [Adams] and I were. They acquire all learning in their mother's womb, and bring it into the world ready made. The information of books is no longer necessary; and all knowledge which is not innate, is in contempt, or neglect at least. Every folly must run its round; and so, I suppose, must that of self-learning and self-sufficiency; of rejecting the knowledge acquired in past ages, and starting on the new ground of intuition.[62]

We know as well as Jefferson did that one law of knowledge is that there is no law guaranteeing its home: that although one may have to cross leagues in space and centuries in time to find the most suitable architecture for a capitol building, one may also find the most suitable, the most <u>true</u>, in today's discovery.

> Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched. They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human, and suppose what they did to be beyond amendment. I knew that age well;

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[61] <u>Notes on Virginia</u>. M.E., II, 97.

[62] Monticello, July 5, 1814. M.E., XIV, 150.

> I belonged to it, and labored with it. It deserved well of its country. It was very like the present, but without the experience of the present; and forty years of experience in government is worth a century of book-reading; and this they would say themselves, were they to rise from the dead.[63]

Important as these ideas are, familiar as they sound to us, there is yet one quality implicit in them and in all of Jefferson's actions and writings which more than anything else distinguishes his and Adams' "knowledge" and "respect for truth" from the popular meanings of those terms. This quality is implied as clearly as anywhere in one sentence of his letter on the eighteenth century. It follows as a generalization upon the achievements of that century.

> I think, too, we may add to the great honor of science and the arts, that their natural effect is, by illuminating public opinion, to erect it into a censor, before which the most exalted tremble for their future, as well as present fame.[64]

Knowledge, then, was not something to be either permitted or disallowed. It derived no sanction from "the most exalted" nor from government nor from any authority. On the contrary, all these were the judged: "the people themselves," "the only safe depositories"[65] of government, being informed and "illuminated" by the knowledge and truth of science and the arts, --they were the judges. True knowledge, in his opinion, was disinterested. As he had written earlier, in some of the unforgettable pages of the Notes on Virginia: "It is

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[63] To Samuel Kercheval, Monticello, July 12, 1816. M.E., XV, 40.

[64] Monticello, Jan. 11, 1816. M.E., XIV, 393-4.

[65] Notes on Virginia. M.E., II, 207.

error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself."[66]

Indeed, truth could stand only by itself. The moment it presupposed its conclusions, it was no longer truth. It became a shade, wandering like Adams' party virtues among ideas of the creditable and discreditable; its proponents, like the "retained attorney" of Emerson's essay, became all those whose

> conformity makes them not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four not the real four: so that every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to begin to set them right.[67]

Yet there is a deeper seriousness in the conclusion of Jefferson and Adams on the fate of truth than in that of Emerson. There is an urgency of appeal that strikes more solemnly on our ears than our national optimism would care to allow. It is the distinctive contribution of their minds to our cultural heritage that they drew a connection--a connection so stringent as to amount to the cause and effect of a natural law--between knowledge, or respect for truth, and a working democracy: between the "moral respectability" of citizens and a good government.

The indivisible relation of these factors is constated again and again, utterly without qualification. "All," said

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[66] M.E., II, 222.

[67] "Self-Reliance". Essays (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, n. d.), I, 40.

Adams, "will depend on the progress of knowledge."[68] And Jefferson: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."[69]

Ignorance--freedom: these were the eternal antagonists. As Jefferson said of the Spanish revolutionaries: "the dangerous enemy is within their own breasts."[70] No laws made a people free, no system of government could create freedom. At best they served as a fence serves an orchard: it might keep out the hares, but one did not expect it to bear apples. Only men liberated by knowledge knew what liberty was. In 1810 Jefferson wrote Kosciusko of his hopes:

> A part of my occupation, and by no means the least pleasing, is the direction of the studies of such young men as ask it. They place themselves in the neighboring village, and have the use of my library and counsel, and make a part of my society. In advising the course of their reading, I endeavor to keep their attention fixed on the main objects of all science, the freedom and happiness of man. So that coming to bear a share in the councils and government of their country, they will keep ever in view the sole objects of all legitimate government.[71]

Knowledge--or science, as Jefferson sometimes called it--was no gift: it was achieved by will. As it was "more important in a republican than in any other government,"[72] so it might be said that the society whose creation had been an expression of will rather than of obedience, and which

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[68] Quincy, Feb. 2, 1816. M.E., XIV, 427.

[69] To Colonel Charles Yancey, Monticello, Jan. 6, 1816. M.E., XIV, 384.

[70] To Adams, Monticello, May 17, 1818. M.E., XV, 170.

[71] Monticello, Feb. 26, 1810. XII, 369-70.

offered nominally the greatest freedom, demanded only a fair price: the greatest responsibilities.

Such is their conclusion. Laws may be indirectly an assistance toward progress; but the origin of good laws, as of all progress, is within the individual. In effect, the only hope of man is man himself.

But one may still want to echo Adams' question. "All will depend on the progress of knowledge," he had said. "But how shall knowledge advance?"[73]

The obstacles in the way were large. There was, on the one hand, the spirit of party: the vapors of partisanship: the clothes and uniforms that make complacency creditable, the comforts of creeds, slogans, catchwords, half-truths, offered by sects and societies and nations themselves. On the other hand, there was an even larger obstacle, the very nature of man. "It should seem that human reason, and human conscience, though I believe there are such things, are not a match for human passions, human imaginations, and human enthusiasm."[74] And Jefferson was no less realistic than Adams:

> In the whole animal kingdom I recollect no family but man, steadily and systematically employed in the destruction of itself. Nor does what is called civilization produce any other effect, than to teach him to pursue the principle of bellum omnium in omnia on a greater scale, and instead of the little contest between tribe and tribe, to comprehend all the quarters of the earth

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[72] To _____, Monticello, Sept. 28, 1821. M.E., XV, 339.

[73] Quincy, Feb. 2, 1816. M.E., XIV, 427.

[74] Ibid., p. 424.

in the same work of destruction.[75]

Adams hoped knowledge would advance. Like Jefferson, he thought man was improvable, though not perfectible. Yet for him the record of history over two thousand years was discouraging to hopes of rapid progress. He found himself thus rationally confirmed, as it were, in his disposition to mark the retrogressive aspects of civilization, the absurdities and inconsistencies of human behavior. In his correspondence with Jefferson he carries his constructive criticism little further than his question: "How shall knowledge advance?".

Jefferson was by temperament as much disposed to mark the hopeful aspects of civilization and of human behavior as Adams was the unhopeful. This difference between them --roughly, that of the idealist from the realist--adds to the correspondence a certain artistry of dialogue, a dramatic unity that art itself could hardly improve. Yet Jefferson's awareness of Adams' bias has a slightly constraining effect upon him. The textually illuminating factor in any study of Jefferson may be uncovered in a comparison of this correspondence with much of Jefferson's other correspondence. The sharpest difference between Adams and Jefferson is not that the one was a realist and the other an idealist, but that the appeal of Adams' writings is to the will, the appeal of Jefferson's to the imagination. Jefferson was more interested in action than was Adams: the idea expressed in

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[75] To James Madison, Monticello, Jan. 1, 1797. M.E., IX, 359-60.

words was good enough, but it was better when expressed in act. The most effectual impetus to action is the imagination: it is the more closely allied with the major ingredients of a human being, his passions. Strategically Jefferson's habit was to "seize by the smooth handle" those very ingredients that Adams preferred to see always in opposition to "human reason and human conscience." (It is, accordingly, fairly easy to find apparent contradictions in Jefferson's letters: if at one time he may be found describing the actual facts, more frequently he will be found describing the goal beyond, or selecting the hopeful features of those facts, in order that they might be transcended.) At any rate, however scant excuse Jefferson may have found for appealing to the imagination of a man like Adams, he does not leave unexpressed some of his rational hopes of the progressive evolution of knowledge.

There were certain instruments helpful to the advance of knowledge, such as "the art of printing," public education, and newspapers. Jefferson was hopeful of all these, but did not live long enough to be disappointed in more than one of them. "Were it left to me," he said in 1787, "to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."[76] We may set opposite this another statement from early in his career: "mankind soon learn to make interested uses of every right and power which

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[76] To Colonel Edward Carrington, Paris, Jan. 16. M.E., VI, 57-8.

they possess, or may assume."[77] Perhaps we have here an instance of a particularly hopeful "appeal to the imagination:" assume that the press will be truthful, and there is a possibility that it will try to be so; assume the opposite--assume the actual facts--and the press will certainly take you at your word. Or was there a little empty rhetoric in Jefferson's apparently realistic statements? Did he always underestimate the strength of "the spirit of party?" We know what Adams said in 1817 on the beginnings of the University of Virginia.--

> I wish you, Mr. Madison, and Mr. Monroe, success in your collegiate institution. And I wish that superstition in religion, exciting superstition in politics, and both united in directing military force, alias glory, may never blow up all your benevolent and philanthropic lucubrations. But the history of all ages is against you.[78]

It is easy to imagine the gloomy consolation many a modern reader receives from Adams. Yet one can imagine too what might have been Jefferson's reply! "The history of all ages, Mr. Adams," he might have muttered--more to himself than to Adams, "--the history of all ages is <u>always</u> against ...the future." Instruments never had worked perfectly. They never would. It was in his capacity as a citizen with a conscience and as a public official with a conscience that Jefferson's efforts to realize his responsibilities by means of instruments must be viewed. The <u>principles</u> governing the

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[77] Gilbert Chinard, <u>Thomas Jefferson</u> (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), p. 125.

[78] Quincy, May 18, 1817. M.E., XV, 120.

advance of knowledge were the only things he knew unsusceptible of change; and in the drift of his life and thought these occupy the major place, It is, perhaps, what one may call the wisdom of Jefferson that he never made the common mistake of identifying the worth of his ideals with the success or failure incident to the instrumentation of them.

One principle favorable to a belief in the progressive evolution of knowledge Jefferson found exemplified in the very ashes of the eighteenth century. The decline of that century, the "sudden apostasy from national rectitude" was a fact, he admitted, and an earlier prophecy of Adams' had been fulfilled. Yet were not the great achievements of that century equally a fact? Might not one fact be as susceptible of results as another?

> ...although your prophecy has proved true so far, I hope it does not preclude a better final result. That same light from our west seems to have spread and illuminated the very engines employed to extinguish it. It has given them a glimmering of their rights and power. The idea of representative government has taken root and growth among them.[79]

Ideas were living things. History was more than a husk-heap. Ideas were seeds: incalculable forces loose in the air, stirring in the soil, finding even in the thickest wall a crevice....

> A first attempt to recover the right of self-government may fail, so may a second, a third, etc. But as a younger and more instructed race comes on, the sentiment becomes more and more intuitive, and a fourth, a fifth, or some subsequent one of the ever renewed attempts will ultimately succeed.[80]

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[79] Monticello, Jan. 11, 1816. M.E., XIV, 395-6.

[80] Monticello, Sept. 4, 1823. M.E., XV, 465.

The very nature of ideas was a hopeful answer to the question "How shall knowledge advance?" Ideas themselves were force, and the better ideas might develop through and because of opposition.

The principle suggests its corollary. Some truths were "self-evident." That is, the constitution of the human mind, its innate and unchanging character, was already adapted to find "truth" in certain ideas and "falsehood" in certain others; "good" in certain acts, "evil" in others. In Leibniz' classic image, contrasting the premises of empiricism and of rationalism--

> ...if the soul were like these empty tablets, truths would be in us as the figure of Hercules is in a block of marble, when the block of marble is indifferently capable of receiving this figure or any other. But if there were in the stone veins, which should mark out the figure of Hercules rather than other figures, the stone would be more determined toward this figure, and Hercules would somehow be, as it were, innate in it, although labor would be needed to uncover the veins, and to clear them by polishing, and thus removing what prevents them from being fully seen.[81]

Jefferson's rationalistic beliefs are, then, the corollary principle in which he found sustaining hopes of the advance of knowledge. Such beliefs themselves had the energy of ideas: there is psychological wisdom as well as verifiable fact in his observation upon the growth of ideas. Knowledge will advance by the belief that there is such a thing as knowledge--and by the belief that human reason can attain to it.

There is a tendency nowadays to believe that liberty is

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[81] New Essays on the Human Understanding (1704), p. 366.

anarchic. It is worth noting, then, in these very reasons Jefferson advanced for believing in the possible progress of knowledge that the liberty which knowledge brings is the best unifying force a society could desire. It is actually the strongest--the most practical. The things that separated men, that set one group over against another, were not their respect for truth but their respect for half-truths, for interested falsehoods.

In the sphere of religion alone, Jefferson often made reference to the fact that

> It is the speculations of crazy theologists which have made a Babel of a religion the most moral and sublime ever preached to man, and calculated to heal, and not to create differences.[82]

And the same principle held true in the general realm of science.

Ideas of the true and of the good existed innately in all normal men. If the laws of a country permitted free inquiry, the concealing marble might gradually be chipped away. That which was left--that which was common to all men: that <u>was</u> the commonwealth. Knowledge, respect for truth, "moral respectability:" these were the goal. In the long run, these were the only things that <u>worked</u>.

"I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past,"[83] said Jefferson once. As we reach the conclusion of this dialogue on government, we probably have al-

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[82] To Ezra Styles, Monticello, June 25, 1819. M.E., XV, 204.

[83] To Adams, Monticello, Aug. 1, 1816. M.E., XV, 59.

ready noticed that the image of the future invoked by both men has a certain human quality. It is an ideal future, but it is humanly ideal. There is about it none of that strenuous theorizing, none of that tidy, perfectly thought-out, logically solid structuralism of more famous philosophies. The irony and realism of Adams, the scepticism and practical wisdom of Jefferson are mingled with the very texture of their "dreams." And it is this emotional alloy, this human quality in their thought which is its strength.

There is, for instance, especially in Jefferson's thoughts on progress, much homely wisdom on the "snail-paced gait" of "the advance of new ideas on the general mind."[84]

> ...the ground of liberty is to be gained by inches.... It takes time to persuade men to do even what is for their own good.[85]

> A forty years' experience of popular assemblies has taught me, that you must give them time for every step you take. If too hard pushed, they balk, and the machine retrogrades.[86]

As old age gathered, he felt more poignantly the creeping slowness of "advance." He was working almost against time to get the new university started, but still the homely counsel he offers Dr. Cooper on patience merges more into a philosophy of government than into that of a merely personal resignation.

> I agree with yours of the 22d, that a professorship of Theology should have no place in our institution. But

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[84] To Joel Barlow, Washington, Dec. 10, 1807. M.E., XI, 400.

[85] To the Rev. Charles Clay, Monticello, Jan. 27, 1790. M.E., VIII, 4.

> we cannot always do what is absolutely best. Those with whom we act, entertaining different views, have the power and the right of carrying them into practice. Truth advances, and error recedes step by step only; and to do our fellow men the most good in our power, we must lead where we can, follow where we cannot, and still go with them, watching always the favorable moment for helping them to another step.[87]

"Those with whom we act...have the power and the right...." What, we say, could be more Jeffersonian? The right of any person or nation to impose any idea or government upon another he had always denied, however much it might be to "their own good." "It is our duty," he might say, "to wish them independence and self-government, because they wish it themselves, and they have the right, and we none, to choose for themselves."[88] But more than this he would not say. To effect beneficial change, "reason and persuasion are the only practicable instruments."[89] "Go on then," Thomas Paine, "in doing with your pen what in other times was done with the sword: show that reformation is more practicable by operating on the mind than on the body of man."[90]

What more Jeffersonian? Even as we recognize the mere good sense of seeking the "practicable," we are conscious

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[86] To Joel Barlow, Washington, Dec. 10, 1807. M.E., XI, 400-1.

[87] Monticello, Oct. 7, 1814. M.E., XIV, 200.

[88] To Adams, Monticello, May 17, 1818. M.E., XV, 170.

[89] Notes on Virginia. M.E., II, 223.

[90] Bernard Mayo (ed.), Jefferson Himself (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), p. 184.

too of the personal distinction of his mind, of a patrician fineness of taste that instinctively reluctd at intermeddling, at playing the virtuous missionary. And this quite personal element we cannot separate out of the study of his ideas.

One might, again, consider the noble strength of those ideals of liberty and knowledge, so often and so memorably expressed in his writings--and consider them alone. How aptly they fit themselves to a model portrait, a master's thesis, a Sunday-school lesson! On the other hand, there is the audacity almost of genius in a man who could say--and in a Presidential inaugural address!--"Let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty and even life itself are but dreary things."[91] One might recall the Declaration itself. Stripping off our dulled familiarity and reading it afresh, is there not something shocking, something close at hand and so alive that if one cut it, it would bleed, in that unpolitical, untheoretical word "happiness?" The word borders on not being dignified. It is shamelessly human.

There is in Adams too, at least in his old age, such tempering of sagacity and intelligence and genuine erudition by a quite personal wisdom as to make a brashly intellectual criticism of his thought somehow insubstantial. He apparently reached that ripeness of judgment so that he could say sincerely, with Socrates: I know that I know nothing. And

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[91] March 4, 1801. M.E., III, 318.

when it came to giving sound, philosophic advice, his erudite and analytical genius could come out with such an ultimatum as this:

> Vain man! mind your own business! Do no wrong; --do all the good you can! Eat your canvas-back ducks! Drink your Burgundy! Sleep your siesta when necessary, and TRUST IN GOD![92]

It is perhaps not surprising that "intellectual smartness" fails to understand democracy. Democracy is not a very logical idea. But Adams and Jefferson seem to have understood it. Perhaps those best understand it who can feel with reason the importance of happiness and siestas, who can reason with feeling on the importance of freedom and truth. Humanity is worth "believing" in. And as Jefferson said, "The earth belongs to the living, not to the dead."[93]

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[92] Quincy, May 26, 1817. M.E., XV, 122.

[93] To John W. Eppes, Monticello, June 24, 1813. M.E., XIII, 270.

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