Thomas Jefferson and Great Britain in Peace and War

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My subject is Thomas Jefferson’s attitude toward Great Britain in peace and war. And since I am now more practising novelist than scholar, let me begin by sketching a scene.

In early March 1786 Jefferson, who was at that time the American Minister Plenipotentiary to France, was invited by John Adams, his counterpart in England, to come to London for a conference on certain matters of trade. They were to confer in London because Adams was a cranky man who disliked Paris very much, and also because representatives from Portugal and Tripoli were resident then in London. Adams hoped to arrange commercial treaties on the spot between those countries and the fledgling new nation of the United States. He also had dim (and unrealistic) hopes that the British government itself would be willing to discuss commercial treaties with them.

Jefferson’s trip from Paris to London took six days. He arrived late in the day on March 11, spent one night at Adams’s house in Grosvenor Square —then and now the site of the American embassy— and the next day rented rooms for himself and his French manservant at 14, Golden Square, not very far away. He promptly hired a coach, a chariot, two horses, and an English coachman. And he likewise purchased a new pair of fine dress gloves—these were to wear when (and if) he was presented to the King.

On Wednesday afternoon, March 17, Adams and Jefferson went to the palace of St. James for George III’s regular weekly levee. Most of the British court was present, as usual. Most of the foreign diplomats were present. Adams and Jefferson walked to their places in a great semi-circle of starched shirts and waited. After a time, ceremoniously, the monarch entered. Slowly he made his way along the semi-circle, gradually approaching the two American statesmen. He chatted with courtiers. He bowed to old acquaintances. His red Teutonic face with its bushy white eyebrows was fixed in an expression of cordial and professional politeness.

He reached Jefferson. That is to say, he reached a strikingly tall red-headed man in his middle forties, dressed except for the fine new English gloves in the latest Parisian fashion. A man known to him, moreover, as the author of an extraordinarily influential
revolutionary pamphlet from the year 1774, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. And worse still, the author of the actual *Declaration of Independence* of July 4, 1776, which had launched the long war of American rebellion that had concluded, in fact, only three years earlier with a humiliating British defeat. Adams, eager to be helpful, stepped forward and courteously presented his fellow ambassador to the King. Every eye in the room turned toward them. Jefferson bowed to the king, also with great courtesy. George III looked down at him coldly, said not a word, and then abruptly, swiftly turned on his heel, leaving Thomas Jefferson with a summary view of nothing but the royal Hanoverian rump (Malone 1951, 54-55).

6 It was a deliberate and calculated insult, and Jefferson never forgot it. Thirty-five years later, writing an autobiographical sketch for his family, he still sounds furious. “On my presentation as usual to the King and Queen at their levees,” he says, “it was impossible for anything to be more ungracious than their notice of Mr. Adams & myself. I saw at once that the ulcerations in the narrow mind of that mulish being left nothing to be expected on the subject of my attendance…” (Jefferson Peterson 57). And in fact, for the rest of Jefferson’s stay in England, another five weeks, his only visit ever to that country, the government’s ministers took their cue from the King and flatly ignored him; they declined to answer his letters and spoke with him only when their paths happened by accident to cross. Jefferson was a particularly sensitive and thin-skinned individual. He smarted under this British coldness, which must have put him in mind of Samuel Johnson’s notorious remark a few years before: “I am willing to love all mankind, except an American” (Boswell 946).

7 A year after his visit to London, still furious, Jefferson blurts out in a letter to a friend that the British “of all nations on earth... require to be treated with the most hauteur. They require to be kicked into common good manners” (Jefferson Boyd 12:193). And yet there is another side to the ledger. Jefferson was born and reared a British subject. His language and education were English. His ancestry was English and Welsh. Much as he identified himself as an American—he seems to have devised the very word “Americanism”—some part of his core nature was ineradicably English, and it was impossible for him to visit the Mother Country and come away merely angry. We may note, for example, the pleasure he took in that most eighteenth-century of English achievements, its gardens.

8 On April 4, 1786, after his snub by the King, Jefferson and Adams set out from Surrey to make a tourist circuit as far north as Birmingham and as far west as Oxford. Jefferson carried with him his personal copy of Thomas Whately’s *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1771), which he had brought over from Virginia, and a notebook reprinted in his collected works and entitled “A Tour to Some of the Gardens of England” (Jefferson Peterson 623-28). He visited Chiswick and Hampton Court. He stopped at Twickenham to see Alexander Pope’s celebrated garden and grotto. He went two days in succession to see Lord Loughborough’s Woburn Old Farm, whose sand and gravel paths and general landscape pleased him enormously. Later in the tour he saw the poet Shenstone’s garden and then the garden of Hagley Hall, which was the ancestral home of Lord Lyttleton, whose legal volumes on English property law Jefferson had read as a student. Here, as at the other gardens, Jefferson made careful notes and drawings, to be used afterwards when he returned to Virginia and set about redesigning his own celebrated house on top of a hill, “Monticello” (from Hagley Hall he took the idea of “roundabouts,” for example [Shackelford 57]).
But English gardens were not the only things British that Jefferson found himself admiring. He took deep pleasure in the company of certain English political radicals, notably Joseph Priestley and Richard Price, and he discussed seriously the question of the abolition of slavery with Sir John Sinclair. He studied the Palladian architecture that he discovered everywhere in London. He saw the famous Mrs. Siddons act at Drury Lane as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and as Lady Macbeth. And above all he bought things. Jefferson was an acquisitive personality who deeply valued fine craftsmanship and mechanical ingenuity. He regarded the English as unsurpassed in these areas, and he took full advantage of his London sojourn to visit every interesting shop he could find. He bought scientific instruments — a British thermometer, a British protractor, telescope, microscope, hydrometer. He had a model made of a portable copying press, bought a self-sealing candlestick, and several sets of newly improved oil lamps. He ordered a British carriage to be built for him — and shipped to him in Paris — he ordered a British harpsichord for his daughters. And finally he visited the steam mill at Blackfriars Bridge, where he saw the newly developed mills and engines manufactured by Watt and Boulton, and in an enthusiastic letter to a friend in America he predicted that Watt’s steam engines would soon be able to navigate boats and one day would transform the face of American commerce (Shackelford 45).

A nation, on the one hand, that required to be kicked into common good manners. On the other hand, a nation with a tradition of radical political thought, the world’s leader in the mechanic, aesthetic, and commercial arts — Jefferson is one of the great representative figures of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment: his deep ambivalence toward the culture, the world of Britain in war and peace is worth looking at more closely.

“Eternal War”

What are the sources of Jefferson’s steady and nearly life-long hostility towards Britain, which he once described in a letter to La Fayette as “eternal war” (Jefferson Peterson 1366)? We may start with the personal and proceed to the general and representative. The most personal reason of all, perhaps the most intimate and private reason he had for disliking British manners and character, is that his mother Jane Randolph Jefferson was born in London, baptized at Shadwell Parish church, and apparently spoke all her life with an English accent. And Thomas Jefferson evidently disliked his mother very much. The record leaves little room for doubt. In a vast correspondence and legacy of papers, Jefferson refers directly to his mother Jane only twice, and one of those instances is a casual reference in passing, in a letter to her brother in London: “The death of my mother you probably have not heard of. This happened on the last day of March after an illness of not more than an hour. We suppose it to have been apoplectic” (Brodie 32-33). From several sources one can infer that Jefferson’s mother was probably of an interfering nature. There is evidence to suggest that she was proud of her English ancestors, the Randolphs, and frequently contrasted her lineage with the less-distinguished one of her husband Peter, Jefferson’s beloved father who died when Jefferson was a boy. On the first page of his *Autobiography* Jefferson remarks rather caustically that his mother’s family “trace their pedigree far back in England & Scotland, to which let everyone ascribe the faith & merit he chooses” (Jefferson Peterson 3).

There is also a second highly personal reason for Jefferson’s hostility to Britain, less speculative than this. Let me sketch it in another scene. This time the setting is
Charlottesville, Virginia, an ocean away from London, and the date is June 4, 1781 in the midst of the war of the American Revolution. For several weeks Lord Cornwallis’s troops had been menacing the Southern half of Virginia, raiding and marauding almost with impunity, just as the traitor Benedict Arnold’s troops had done six months earlier. At a little past midnight in a village tavern some thirty miles from Charlottesville, a huge young man, small-faced as a bear but taller even than Jefferson, suddenly put down his glass of whiskey and cocked his ear to listen. The young man, Jack Jouett by name, was a member of the Virginia militia and had just stopped in at the Cuckoo for a last drink after a hard day’s patrol, and then a dirty bunk upstairs. Even in the warm June night he still wore his long scarlet militia coat and his new captain’s bars, which he meant to show his father in Charlottesville the next morning. If there was anyone else in the room besides the sleepy bartender, legend has utterly lost him.

13 Jack Jouett put down his drink and crossed the floor to the window. He lifted the curtain. On the other side of the village square, fifty yards distant, he heard harnesses clinking, spurs, the rattle of swords, the unmistakable rub and thump of horses. There was a quarter moon blanketed off and on by clouds that night. Through the Cuckoo’s shutters he could see only indistinct figures and shadows; then a candle came down the steps of the courthouse and plumed caps sprang into silhouette. If he had waited another ten minutes, Jack Jouett could have seen redcoated foot soldiers coming uphill at a quick march, bayonets flashing, to join the green-jacketed mounted British dragoons. And in their midst, holding the candle over a map on his saddle, he would have seen their leader Colonel Banastre Tarleton himself. Tarleton! —in London, Sir Joshua Reynolds had painted his famous full-length portrait, a beautiful baby-faced English dandy in skintight trousers, with a girl’s red lips and blond spit curls turned delicately up in place of sideburns. But in Virginia he was known simply as “the Butcher.” Earlier in the year his troops had left five heads in a Williamsburg farmhouse, severed crudely from the bodies and lined up neatly along the mantel, as if on display. In another house his men had stabbed a pregnant housewife in the belly and smeared the bloody words “No More Rebels” on her homespun sheets. Just a few weeks before this same Tarleton had ordered his cavalry to charge full speed, swords swinging, into a huddled group of American soldiers who had just surrendered — this was known in Virginia as giving “Tarleton’s quarter.”

14 Jack Jouett never saw him. He was on his horse and thundering through the backwoods before the first foot soldiers ever reached the courthouse, thundering down backwoods and paths and alleys he had ridden all his life, night and day, sober and drunk, man and boy. Because whiskey or not, he was still clearheaded enough to guess that a troop of British cavalry mounted and armed at midnight was planning no harmless bivouac but was heading north toward Charlottesville, where the Governor of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson, slept unaware in his house on a hill. Jack Jouett rode till his horse’s heart nearly burst — down black tunnels of overarched catalpa and pine, parallel to the highway but far inland, gaining a mile an hour over Tarleton’s emerald-coated dragoons. By the time he pounded into the city limits of Charlottesville, the sun was rising behind him and his face was whipped bloody with cuts from branches and tree limbs. He paused long enough to hammer at doors along Locust Street, rousing some of his militia cohorts, then he kicked his horse again, and started up to Monticello.

15 What followed next has never been settled. Jefferson’s enemies said that once the Governor was awakened by Jack Jouett and saw the squadrons of British soldiers in the distance, hysterical panic seized him — he shouted for his slaves, his best horse, he
gathered an armful of silver and jewels and dashed away, helter-skelter, over the next ridge, called Carter’s Mountain, in full retreat from Tarleton’s dragoons. As soon as he was hidden from the green-coats, his enemies added, he promptly fell off his horse and broke his arm, so he had to stay in the woods for six weeks, until the Virginia legislature met to impeach him for cowardice. His friends, of course, had another version. In their telling of it, Jefferson stayed calmly at his house till he was certain all his official papers were safely hidden away in his cellar, and then he quite reasonably rode out of Banastre Tarleton’s path. But the disgraceful accusation of cowardice in the face of the British army would follow him the rest of his life. It would hardly endear the British to him. (By the kind of accident that makes one think that history really is the Muse of Coincidence, in Paris Jefferson would learn that his lover’s best friend was the mistress of that same terrifying Banastre Tarleton).

A third reason for Jefferson’s hostility to Great Britain is partly personal, partly general. Perhaps the single most influential sentence written in the last three hundred years occurs at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness...” (Jefferson Peterson 19). Less well-known is the fact that much of this ringing and immortal declaration of political truths is a sustained personal attack on that same George III that Jefferson was to meet in London, a personal attack on the King as representative tyrant, or more precisely as representative parent.

Consider Jefferson’s Choice of Language

Jefferson’s mother died in March 1776. In early June 1776, barely two months later, as a delegate to the Continental Congress he resisted a vote to declare American independence from England because, he said, certain States had not yet matured sufficiently for “falling from the parent stem” (Malone 1948, 204). In early July, when the vote was finally taken, it was still only a few months after the death of his mother, and his language shows him reverberating with unmistakable anger at that last unforgivable parental desertion. “Falling from the parent stem” is, after all, strange phraseology for a political revolution. When his mother died, Jefferson had suffered several weeks of debilitating headaches and diarrhea, classic psychosomatic illnesses. Break with a parent, willingly or not, in estrangement or love, and prepare for a deep, melancholy sense of un mendable loss. If you read the Declaration of Independence in this context, in its first drafts, you will find it a family document.

You will find it a family document, for example, in the opening paragraph of American “grievances” against George III — Jefferson apparently wrote this passage with extraordinary speed on the first sheet of paper that came to hand: “The king has sent over not only soldiers of our common blood, but Scotch & foreign mercenaries to destroy us, invade us and deluge us in blood. This is too much to be borne even by relations. Enough then be it to say, we are now done with them.” Then a few lines later: “unfeeling brethren!... we might have been a great and happy people together.” And at the bottom of the same page, with many scratchings over and revisions, this “we acquiesce in the necessity which pronounces our everlasting adieu.” And finally crossed out and substituted, the exact phrase from Tristram Shandy that Jefferson would write six years
later beside his wife’s deathbed “the necessity which denounces our eternal separation” (Jefferson Boyd 420-21).

This, then, is the personal, the familial dimension of Jefferson’s attack on England and George III, a quarrel between parents and children, modulating into a quarrel between brethren. The larger political context is seen when we recall that in a long passage ultimately deleted from the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson denounces George III for his part in supporting the American slave trade: “He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating them and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither” (Jefferson Peterson 22). Jefferson’s phrasing, of course — “human nature,” “life and liberty” — springs from the terms of a central debate in eighteenth-century thought, the issue of human liberty raised here in its most extreme and troubling form as slavery.

Now, Jefferson was an early critic of slavery in his home State of Virginia. He helped introduce a bill in the Virginia legislature giving owners the right to emancipate their slaves, and in one memorable instance he defended a slave in court with the revolutionary doctrine that “we are all born free” (Malone 1948, 122). We can trace his youthful opposition partly to his idea of “natural law” —a vast Enlightenment topic— and partly to the idea that has come to be known in American history as the “Saxon myth.” Its main idea can be quickly summarized. To the American Revolutionaries for whom Jefferson spoke in the Declaration of Independence, rebellion against the mother country was justified not only because of political disagreements, but also because contemporary England, the England that now ruled them, had fallen away from its Anglo-Saxon heritage of personal liberty and become a sink of modern corruption. For the American Revolutionaries, England in peace and war had lost its way: its population was declining, its political ministers were tyrannical, its people had become luxurious, drunken, and immoral.

These were charges that Americans like Jefferson found in the literature of the Mother Country itself—in works, for example, like James Burgh’s Britain’s Remembrancer: Or, the Danger Not Over (1746), which thundered against “our degenerate times and corrupt nation,” especially the “idleness, gluttony, drunkenness, lewdness” of our people (Bailyn 86). John Brown’s well-known Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times (1757), another attack on British “luxury and effeminacy,” was widely read in America (Bailyn 87). The demonic figure of Robert Walpole was repeatedly invoked as a sign of political corruption. And Americans who travelled to England in the middle years of the eighteenth century tended to confirm these criticisms with reports of scenes of Hogarthian squalor and disorder. One of the signers of Jefferson’s Declaration, a Marylander named Charles Carroll, lived in England twelve years and returned home at last because he was convinced that the British nation was in its last stages of moral and political decay (Bailyn 91-92).

What had been lost in this modern decay, the Americans thought, was the proud spirit of liberty that had flourished in England before the Norman Conquest. The old Saxon tribes—these were ideas that Jefferson drew from his study of English law, from Tacitus, and from certain radical English writings like Lord Kames’s Historical Law Tracts (1758), John Trenchard’s Cato’s Letters (1721), and Algernon Sydney’s Discourses concerning Government (1698; 1763; 1773)—the old Saxon tribes had introduced into England the institution of an elective kingship: they had an annual assembly of tribal chiefs that was the forerunner of
Parliament; they established the right of trial by jury and all the other elements of common law.

23 The Saxon world was thus prefeudal. It resembled, in fact, nothing so much as Jefferson's idyllic, idealized world of the American yeoman farmer, with its Personal liberty and agrarian virtue. Others agreed. Voltaire had observed in his *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), that the Americans in Pennsylvania, living in perfect freedom and harmony, had actually brought about the "golden age" of myth (Bailyn 84). "The sum of English glory," Jefferson writes prophetically in his book *Notes on Virginia*, "is fast descending to the horizon. Her philosophy has crossed the Channel, her freedom the Atlantic, and herself seems passing to that awful dissolution, whose issue is not given human foresight to scan" (Jefferson Peterson 191). When Jefferson proposed a design for the official seal of the new United States of America, he included on it the faces of the children of Israel and also the portraits of two Anglo-Saxon warrior chieftains, Hengist and Horsa (Beitzinger 98).

24 Let me end this list of reasons for Jefferson's hostility to England with a Personal speculation. In his visits to both England and France, Jefferson was greatly disturbed by the extremes of wealth and poverty he saw and by the haughty self-importance of European aristocrats. By contrast, he considered himself a complete democrat in practice as well as theory. After he was elected President in 1800 he made a point of dispensing with anything that looked like regal or aristocratic manners. The British ambassador to the United States at the time of his election was a notably pompous gentleman named Anthony Merry. When he went to the White House to pay his first call on the new president, Merry of course dressed himself in full diplomatic regalia, including medals and sword. He was met at the door, however, by Jefferson wearing "slippers down at the heels, and slovenly pantaloons and vest." Merry took this as a deliberate insult, though it was in fact Jefferson's usual costume for receiving visitors. A more calculated insult may have come later in that same week when Ambassador and Mrs. Merry dined at the White House with a large party of other diplomats and, in view of their rank and seniority, clearly expected to be led into dinner first. But Jefferson instead walked past Mrs. Merry, offered his arm to Dolley Madison, his Vice-President's wife, and told His Britannic Majesty's representative to take whatever seat at the table he could find, because in America they did everything "pell mell" (Stanton 650). The British poet Thomas Moore, perhaps stimulated by the Merrys'outrage, was later to return the insult with a series of gross poems about Jefferson's supposed liaison with one of his slaves.

**Eternal Ties**

25 Against all these causes of hostility to England, personal and political, we need to set down as counterbalance the causes of his eternal ties. I have already mentioned some of the physical causes — the beauty of English gardens, for which Jefferson had a special weakness, the excellence of the English in the mechanical arts, the impressiveness to Jefferson's eye of English Palladian architecture. It is well known that when Jefferson lived in Paris he liked to sit in a chair in the Jardin des Tuileries —then a private garden, for which you had to purchase a ticket of admission— and study the Hôtel de Salm as it was being constructed across the river on the Left Bank (we know it now as the Palais de la Légion d'Honneur). From it he took the idea of adding a dome to his house at Monticello. Less wellknown is the fact that the original stimulus for the whole design of the house was the Earl of Burlington's suburban villa at Chiswick, which Jefferson knew.
from his English books on Palladio and Inigo Jones and which he saw in reality on his tour of England in 1786.

26 There are deep personal ties between Jefferson and England as well. To begin with the most obvious, Jefferson attended the little college of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia — whose central building, incidentally, was designed by Sir Christopher Wren. There in Williamsburg, on the very edge of the great American wilderness, he followed a traditional English curriculum, such as he might have studied in the Mother Country itself. His principal teacher was a Scotsman named William Small, a man of considerable talent and learning, who introduced Jefferson not only to modern English ideas in mathematics and science, but also to the chief English authors and teachers he himself had admired at Edinburgh University, especially Adam Smith and Francis Hutcheson. And he introduced Jefferson to more than authors and ideas. He literally introduced him first to a local Virginia lawyer and scholar named George Wythe, who was to become Jefferson's law professor, and then to the English governor of the colony of Virginia, Francis Fauquier. Wythe was to lead his young student through virtually the same syllabus he would have studied at one of the Inns of Court in London — Sir Edward Coke's *Institutes of the Laws of England* (1628-41), which Jefferson at first disliked but afterward came to value, in part for its information about the Saxon common law, in part by contrast with Blackstone, whom Jefferson saw as a champion of Parliamentary supremacy and thus an enemy to America.

27 Sir Francis Fauquier in his turn introduced Jefferson not so much to English books as to English conversation. Indeed, he seems to have served Jefferson in much the same way Gilbert Walmsey served the young Samuel Johnson — as a model gentleman and intellectual. Fauquier had sound classical learning, a strong modern interest in science, and an urbanity of manners that made him by far the most popular and successful of all the English governors in Virginia. Years later Jefferson would say that in the dinners he enjoyed at the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg with Small, Wythe, and Fauquier he "heard more good sense, more rational and philosophic conversations" than at any other time in his life (Malone 1948, 73). To put the matter another way, although he was born and reared in the New World, and although he repeatedly praised France in contrast to England, Jefferson was intellectually English through and through. One of the paintings he commissioned for himself in London a year or so after his trip in 1786 was a set of portraits of his three personal heroes, the "three greatest men who ever lived" (Malone 1951, 211) Bacon, Newton, and Locke.

28 This is a thoroughly Enlightenment choice of heroes — Bacon and Newton for their empirical science and their materialism, Locke for his theories of balanced government and personal liberty. Jefferson very likely made the acquaintance of all three authors when he was a student of William Small, in Christopher Wren's college library; he clung to them as intellectual heroes for the rest of his life. We may add — and the observation leads us to the last and strongest of all Jefferson's ties to England — that his three heroes are not men of action, but men of words, writers.

29 Several years ago, I proposed to the chairman of my Department in the University of California that I might give a course in Thomas Jefferson and the Enlightenment. He looked at me gravely, shook his head, and said: "No, Thomas Jefferson wouldn't do, Jefferson was not really a man of letters." But the truth is, by any standard whatsoever, Jefferson is a great man of letters. He spoke French well, but with a pronounced Scots accent, thanks to his first teacher, another Scot named Douglas Maury, he read and wrote...
Latin, and he read Greek easily, especially Homeric Greek. But his deepest affinity is for English, which, my Chairman’s opinion notwithstanding, he wrote beautifully and whose literature he knew profoundly.

30 All his life Jefferson kept by his side a handwritten volume known to scholars now as his Literary Commonplace Book. Certain of its entries surprise most students—the numerous quotations in Greek, the admiration for Alexander Pope’s friend Lord Bolingbroke (explained, perhaps, by Bolingbroke’s progressive, deistic politics), the early taste for David Hume’s History of England (1763-78). But the greatest surprise may be the depth of Jefferson’s engagement with the English literature of his own mid-eighteenth-century generation and the generation before him. He knew Shakespeare well, of course, and quotes him often. He valued Milton not simply for his revolutionary politics, but also for his mastery of blank verse, which (characteristically) Jefferson praised in terms essentially political (Jefferson Peterson 618). Pope, however, he had studied so thoroughly that in his Commonplace Book he even noted variants from Warburton’s edition as compared with earlier editions. In his correspondence he urges young friends to form their literary style on Pope; he thought so highly of Pope’s translation of the Iliad (1715-20) that he could quote passages from it well into his eighties. He told a friend that along with Shakespeare, Pope “gave him the perfection of imagination and judgment, both displaying more knowledge of the human heart—the true province of poetry—than he could elsewhere find” (Jefferson Wilson 178).

31 Along with Pope he placed two near contemporaries, James Thomson and Edward Young, author of Night Thoughts (1742-45). It was Young, in fact, that Jefferson quoted romantically to the lovely Maria Cosway in Paris later in that same interesting year of 1786. Maria Cosway was the wife of the celebrated English society painter Richard Cosway, a gifted, charming Anglo-Italian woman with whom Jefferson fell briefly, passionately in love in Paris. Indeed, he not only quoted Young to his lover, he included long passages from him in a little-known essay he wrote at this time called “Thoughts on English Prosody” (Jefferson Peterson 593-622). From one point of view this essay may be taken as yet another attempt on Jefferson’s part to wrest away true English culture from England’s present degradation. He proposes a revision of Samuel Johnson’s theory of prosody, “substituting accent” for what Johnson called “quantity,” and by implication showing that an American gentleman, untutored at Oxford or Cambridge, might nonetheless claim to understand the essential nature of the English language as well as he understands the true nature of English liberty. (We may add parenthetically that one of Jefferson’s lifelong enthusiasms is for the study of the ancient Anglo-Saxon language itself).

32 From another point of view the essay on prosody demonstrates that, although he admired and quoted Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope, his own personal taste is ultimately for what is now often called the poetry of sensibility, the mid-century wave of verse that rolled out from Great Britain and washed over both Europe and America in a tide of Romantic and Sentimental tears. The most important poets in Jefferson’s study of English prosody turn out to be, in numbers and in enthusiasm, Gray, Collins, Shenstone, and Akenside. As a group, and in the selections Jefferson quotes, we see the central tenets of pre-Romanticism, especially the emphasis on feeling and the beauties of nature. Moreover, Jefferson’s deep personal response to this new English—not American, not French, but English—way of writing and feeling has its prose parallel in his love of the works of (of all people) Laurence Sterne.
A surprising but not unique connection. When Jefferson left the wilderness of western Virginia in the year 1760 to enter the College of William and Mary, the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* had just been published and Sterne’s meteoric rise of international fame had begun. It is certain that Jefferson knew his works well. His letters contain numerous allusions to Sterne; we know that he owned the *Sermons* and the *Sentimental Journey* as well as *Tristram Shandy*, and it seems clear that he not only read, but re-read these works. A passage quoted in the *Commonplace Book*, for example, belongs to a poignant moment in Jefferson’s life. In 1782, as his wife Martha lay dying at Monticello, she copied into a slip of paper the first part of a paragraph from *Tristram Shandy*—“Time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity life follows my pen. The days and hours of it are flying over our heads like clouds of a windy day never to return more. Every thing presses on—”. Jefferson then took up the piece of paper and completed the passage in his own hand: “And every time I kiss thy hand to bid adieu, every absence which follows it, are preludes to that eternal separation which we are shortly to make!” (Brodie 208).

Later, less sublimely, in courting Maria Cosway Jefferson will allude in a letter to the interesting and not entirely decent episode of Slawkenbergius and the giant nose at Strasbourg (Brodie 298). The eternal tie, then, to England, in peace and war, resides in nothing less than the great inherited language that Jefferson first mastered as a student, and beyond it, in the powerful achievements of its literature in the mid-century. If Jefferson is a typical figure of the Enlightenment in his philosophic and political views, he is perhaps less typical in his response to the Romantic movement as it begins to find its earliest utterances in the poetry of sensibility and the novel of sentimentality. Another of his documents of courtship, so to speak, to Maria Cosway is a dialogue between the Head and the Heart in which the Heart apparently vanquishes the tyranny of reason by means of its profounder appeal to the emotions. Jefferson never showed more clearly his essential and characteristic mixture of English and American culture at midcentury.

**One More Scene, Then**

In April 1782 Jefferson was visited at Monticello by a French traveller, the Marquis de Chastellux, then on a tour of the New World. The Frenchman found his host courteous but reserved, accomplished but formal — rather English, in fact. And then, as Chastellux recalled in a memoir of his travels, after dinner one evening, conversing over a bowl of punch, someone happened to mention the poetry of Ossian. “It was a spark of electricity,” Chastellux wrote, “which passed rapidly from one to the other” (Brodie 205). Some years earlier, Jefferson declared, he had actually written to the brother of the “translator” of Ossian in London, to ask if he could purchase from him a copy of the original manuscripts. Money would be no object (Jefferson Peterson 746). The two men began to quote from memory passages of that “sublime” poet which they particularly treasured. Jefferson confessed that he thought Ossian perhaps “the greatest poet that had ever existed” (Brodie 205); Chastellux did not disagree. Jefferson sent for a copy of the book from his library. A second bowl of punch was ordered. There on a mountaintop in Virginia, surrounded by a green sea of forest and wilderness, they sat up till late into the night, reciting and savoring that strange (and as we now know) entirely fraudulent bard of the English past.
Ossian appealed to Jefferson, as he did to so many others in the late eighteenth century, in part because of his passionate and flowing rhetoric, but in greater part surely because he recalled to Jefferson and Jefferson’s compatriots the Saxon myth, the golden age of heroism and liberty that had been England’s greatest achievement before the present age of corruption began. George III may have turned his vast and portly Hanoverian back on Jefferson as an act of deliberate insult, but it is safe to say that so far as England went, in peace and war, Jefferson’s eye was fixed on something more sublime.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited


