

The Jefferson-Adams Correspondence

By Ezra Pound

From:

The North American Review, Vol. 244, No. 2 (Winter, 1937/1938), pp. 314-324

Published by the University of North Iowa

The Jefferson-Adams Correspondence

EZRA POUND

BETWEEN 1760 and 1826 two civilized men lived and to a considerable extent reigned in America. They did not feel themselves isolated phenomena. They were not by any means shrunk into a clique or dependent on mutual admiration, or on clique estimation. They both wrote an excellent prose which has not, so far as I know, been surpassed in our fatherland, though Henry James had a style of his own, narrative, which was fit for a different purpose.

The correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, following their reconciliation, is a landmark of American culture. It should be for literate Americans both a shrine and a monument. The fact that it is not, that these letters are not part of the regular curricula in American colleges, that the works of both founders are so difficult to obtain, is a damning commentary on American historians and educators. Nothing surpasses the Jefferson-Adams correspondence as evidence of what civilization was in early America. Jefferson and Adams were *civilized* men as well as patriots. Their culture, and that of men like them, was the link between the minds of the old and new worlds; a study of their exchange of ideas illumines both.

For the purpose of this essay I shall define a civilized man as one who can give a serious answer to a serious question — that is *not* understatement — and whose circle of mental reference is not limited to mere acquisition of profit. The degree of his civilization will depend both on the depth of his thought and on the spread of his curiosity. He may have made absolutely no special study

of anything outside his profession, but his thoughts on that profession will have been such that his thought about anything else will not be completely inane.

In over a century and a half the United States have at no time contained a more civilized "world" than that comprised by the men to whom Adams and Jefferson wrote and from whom they received private correspondence. A history of American literature that omits, as so many do, the letters of the founders, and memoirs or diaries of John Quincy Adams and Martin VanBuren is merely nonsense. Without any special competence in matters pertaining to Benjamin Franklin I should nevertheless hazard the opinion that his public writing will be found slithery and perhaps cheap in comparison. He had no integrity of the word. Or at least there were occasions when it deserted him.

Our national culture can perhaps be better defined from the Jefferson letters than from any other three sources, and mainly to its advantage. I do not think that they have ever been analyzed very clearly in themselves, and I am not sure that anyone has tried very coherently to relate them to anything else. Such a treatment might here seem indicated, but I do not wish, by giving a résumé of the correspondence, to keep anyone who might profit by it from going directly to the letters themselves. Let them serve rather as axes of reference to related ideas, for a yardstick to be applied to other cultural values. Let this essay have no point in the sense that it would *prove* anything about the Jefferson-Adams correspondence. It is rather an attempt to show how it might serve as a point of departure, a workable dynamo, for a revalorization of our cultural heritage. The paragraphs that follow are notes toward such a study. They follow no pattern except possibly that of spokes radiating from the hub of a wheel.

These are suggested lines of thought, which do not begin to exhaust the rich possibilities of the subject. They begin in the European culture from which that of the founders was drawn.

Let me begin with an anthropologist's dissociation of two systems of thought which have functioned in Europe, without which dissociation one can not "place" the French encyclopedists, who were the immediate intellectual precursors of Jefferson. Without such an approach one can not "come to Jefferson" save as an isolated phenomenon sprung, versatile and voluble, out of chaos, a phenomenon without origins or cause.

A state of mind or intelligence which we will call Mediterranean, a distinct modus of order, "arose" perhaps more out of Sparta than Athens. It developed a system of graduations, an hierarchy of values, among which, above all others, was the concept of *order*. As a mental and intellectual filing system this Mediterranean state of mind certainly did not fall with Romulus Augustulus in 476.

You must not confuse this "state of mind" with, say, the "spirit of the Roman Empire," which Propertius debunked in his scathingly satirical elegies. I have found it helpful and clarifying to adopt the word *paideuma*, a term resurrected from the Greek by the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius to denote "mental formation and inherited habits of thought" as opposed to a statal *weltanschauung*.

The earliest part of the Mediterranean *paideuma* we know hardly more than as from palimpsest. We begin to find it solidly in Constantine after 300, and we can trace it on through Justinian. Later we see it in Charlemagne and Gratian. It inheres in St. Ambrose and Duns Scotus. Say that it lasted down to the time of Leo X, and that its clearest formulation was in such a phrase as Dante's

"*in una parte piu e meno altrove.*" I had better translate this detached phrase by explaining that I take it to mean a *sense of gradations* — thing neither perfect nor utterly wrong, but arranged in a cosmos, an order, stratified, having relations one with another.

The implications of this Dantian concept are extensive. They include about everything that made the Middle Ages great. This sense of relative order is symbolized in the great cathedrals and in the scholastic dialectic. Because to the minds built of this stuff the Word was necessarily holy. I will take that statement out of any possible jargon and translate it for the present emergency: Words, an exact terminology, are an effective means of communication, an efficient *modus operandi*, *only* when they retain meanings. Such a confusion of terminology as infects the language of ideas today would have been impossible in the *paideuma* that produced Dante.

And this *paideuma*, this Mediterranean order, fell before or coincident with the onslaught of brute disorder and taboo — not what we call the Dark Ages but the darker age of the Teutonic mentality, that grossness of uncult thought which came into European civilization simultaneously with manifestations called "Renaissance" and "Reformation," which in our time have been much muddled and confused by loose talk about Puritanism.

For the moment all I wish to do is to dissociate a graduated concept of, say, good and evil from a gross, unrefined *paideuma*. The former concept was created by a series of men following one another, not neglecting original examination of fact, but on the other hand, not thinking, each one in turn, that the moon and sea were first discovered by himself.

At the time of the Renaissance certain things were "forbidden" specifically on parchment. They were for-

bidden to Hebrews. The Bible emerged and broke the Church Fathers, who had for centuries quoted the Bible. All sense of fine assay seemed slowly to dim and decline throughout Europe. There were exceptions: men like Lorenzo Valla extended, in one sense, the propaganda for *the right word*, but at the same time the cult of terminology lost its grip on general life.

There can be no doubt that the Renaissance was born of wide-awake curiosity, and that from Italy in the Quattrocento, straight down through Bayle and Voltaire, the *live* men were actuated by a new urge toward veracity.

There can be little doubt, I think, that the Church, as bureaucracy and as vested interest, was the worst enemy of "faith," of "Christianity," of mental order. And yet even that does not tell the whole story. What then is the key? Can we not say that the mental integrity of the encyclopedists dwindled into bare intellect by dropping that *ethical* simplicity which makes the canonists, *any* canonist, so much more "modern," so much more scientific, than any eighteenth century intellectual?

All that I wish to accomplish by these fragmentary analyses is to set up, as a background for Jefferson's thinking, two poles of reference: one, a graduated system in which all actions were relatively good or evil according to almost millimetric measurement, but in the absolute; two, a system in which everything was good or bad without any such graduation, but as taboo, though the system itself was continually modified in action by contingencies.

When this system emerged from low life into high life, when it took over vast stretches of already acquired knowledge, it produced the encyclopedists. Things were so or not so. You had *Candide*, you had writers of maxims, you had "analysis," and you evolved into the *Declaration Of The Rights Of Man*, which attained a fineness so near

to that of the canonists that no one, so far as I know, has thought much of comparing them.

The Aquinian universe with its grades of divine intelligence and goodness present in graduated degree throughout the universe, gave the thinker a standard for mensuration. What was lost in the succeeding centuries, or what at least went out of the limelight, may have been belief in God, but was certainly in any case the *habit* of thinking of things in general as set in an orderly universe. The laws of material science presuppose uniformity throughout the cosmos, but they do not offer an hierarchy of evaluation anything like the Aquinian one with respect to coherence. To replace this system of order the encyclopedists offered nothing more than an *alphabetical* arrangement. They went over the Aquinian universe with a set of measuring tools, but produced no structure of thought in compensation.

Jefferson, in his range of knowledge and empirical curiosity, was the heir of the encyclopedists, but he was Aquinian in his tendency to fit everything observable into an orderly system. He had the totalitarian view, seeing forces not in isolation but as interactive. When the elder Adams had the puritanical stubbornness to stand up against popular clamor and question Jefferson's omniscience it cost him four years in the Executive Mansion.

So much for the antecedents. Consider the ideas expressed in Jefferson's letters to Adams in the light of the distinctions I have made, and the continuity and causality of history will be apparent. Now let us look at the history which Jefferson's ideas helped to make.

It is only in our time that anyone has, with any shadow of right, questioned the presuppositions on which the United States are founded. If we are off that base, why are we off it?

Jefferson's America was a civilized country because its chief men were social. It is only in our squalid day that the chief American powers have been anti-social.

Has any public man in our lifetime dared say without a sneer, or without fear of ridicule, that Liberty is the right to do *ce qui ne nuit pas aux autres*, that which harms no one else? That was a definition of civic and social concept actually practiced. Such liberty, at least by program, was guaranteed the American citizen, but no other was offered him. Jefferson and Adams were responsible; they felt their responsibility. And their equals felt it. The oath of allegiance implies this responsibility, but, unfortunately it is not printed in red letters, and its meaning usually passes in an unheeded phrase.

One of the main implications to be gathered from the letters is that they stand for a life not split into bits. They tell of a kind of life that had wholeness and mental order. Their sanity and civilization, their varied culture and omnivorous curiosity stem from the encyclopedists, but they are not accompanied by the thinning, the impoverishment of mental life, which lack of structural order was to produce in a few decades.

Neither of those two men would have thought of literature as something having nothing to do with life, the nation, the organization of government. Of course, no first-rate author ever did think of any of his books in this manner. If he was a lyricist, if he was crushed under a system, he was speaking of every man's life in its depth; if he was Trollope or Flaubert he was thinking of history without the defects of generic books by historians which miss the pith and point of the story.

The pith and point of Jefferson's story is in a letter to Crawford, written in 1816: ". . . and if the national bills issued be bottomed (as is indispensable) on pledges

of specific taxes for their redemption within certain and moderate epochs, and be of *proper denomination* for circulation, no interest on them would be necessary or just, because they would answer to every one of the purposes of the metallic money withdrawn and replaced by them." No other excerpt from the correspondence could better illustrate the clarity and depth of Jefferson's thought than that. Will the reader think me eccentric if I say that those eight lines should be cut in brass and nailed to the door of Monticello?

Ce qui ne nuit pas aux autres . . . Jefferson realized that "liberty" would be a mockery without financial liberty. ". . . no interest on them would be necessary . . ." Jefferson fought Hamilton's bank act to the last ditch; he knew that a currency unburdened by usury was essential for a real democracy. This was a part of Jefferson's totalitarian view; it proves his link with the Mediterranean mind. In totalitarian writings before Voltaire one does not find a blind spot for money. The Church fathers think down to detail; Duns Scotus has no cloudy obsession on this point. There is a great deal of Latin on intrinsic and extrinsic value of money. It links Jefferson with the three great novelists: Flaubert, Trollope, and, toward the last, Henry James got through to money. Marx, not working on a total problem, but on a special problem, which, one would have thought, of necessity would have concentrated his attention on money, merely went blind at the crucial point.

Flaubert and Jefferson have much in common in their concepts of life as a *whole*. Flaubert's working theory of *l'histoire morale contemporaine* arose from a perception of paucity, a perception of the paucity of perception registered in historians, the shallowness of their analysis of motivation, their inadequate measurements of causality.

Stendhal, Michelet, Flaubert, and the Goncourts differ as individuals, but they were all of them on the same trail: they wanted to set down an intelligible record of life in which things happened. The mere statement that so and so made a war, or that so and so reformed or extended an empire, is much too much in the vague. The whole gist of Flaubert was a fight against maxims, against abstractions, a fight back toward a human and total conception. Jefferson, on the future of American democracy, exhibits an identical total view.

The idea, put about I know not why by I know not whom, that Jefferson was a wafy and imprecise rhetorician disappears in a thorough perusal of his letters. One could quote examples from his discussions of a wide variety of cultural and practical subjects, but his economic thinking has the most contemporaneity. *Ce qui ne nuit pas aux autres* . . . : on September 11, 1813, Jefferson wrote from Poplar Forest, "By comparing the first and last of these articles (this paragraph follows a table of figures) we see that if the United States were in possession of the circulating medium, as they ought to be, they could redeem what they could borrow from that, dollar for dollar, and in ten annual installments; whereas the usurpation of that fund by bank paper, obliging them to borrow elsewhere at seven and one half per cent, two dollars are required to reimburse one." Apparently it may take a seventy billion dollar depression, not just a thirty-five billion dollar one, to make Americans reread their Jefferson.

The idea that you can tax idle money dates back through a number of centuries. These questions have intrigued the best human minds, Hume, Berkeley, a whole line of Catholic writers, and a whole congeries of late Latin writers. You can not write or understand any

history, and you can not write or understand any serious history of contemporary customs in such a form as the Goncourt and Flaubert novels, if you persist in staving off all inquiry into the most vital phenomena; that is, into the nature and source of the "carrier," of the agent and implement of transference. A total culture such as that of Adams and Jefferson did not evade such investigation. And the histories of literature which pass over their treatment of economic problems are merely a shell and a sham.

Adams was anti-clerical (at least I suppose one would call it that) yet he wanted safeguards and precautions, whereby he attained unpopularity. They were both of them heritors of encyclopedism, but they inherited that *forma mentis* in an active state where definition of terms and ideas had not been lost. I mean, liberty was still the right to do *anything* that harmed no one else.

They both had a wide circle of reference, of knowledge, of ideas, with the acid test for hokum, and no economic inhibitions. The growth of economic inhibition in the domain of thought is a nineteenth century phenomenon to a degree that I believe inhered in no other country.

Adams and Jefferson existed in a full world. They were not English provincials, though grounded in the European cultural heritage. It was their fresh Americanism which liberated them from the sterility which followed the encyclopedists. Their letters abound in consciousness of Europe, and the truly appalling suburbanism that set in after the Civil War, our relapse into cerebral tutelage, did not afflict Adams and Jefferson. Not only were they level and contemporary with the best minds of Europe, but they entered into the making of that mind itself. Chateaubriand did not come to Philadelphia to lecture; he came to learn.

If these random notes need lead to any lesson, the lesson is against raw ideology, which Napoleon, Adams, and Jefferson were all up against, and to which, as Adams remarked, Napoleon had in those days just given a name. If you want certain results, you must, as scientists, examine a great many phenomena. If you won't admit what you are driving at, even to yourself, you remain in penumbra. Jefferson was never in penumbra. And in 1813 he wrote to Adams, "You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other."