

Gravity’s Smile: Thomas Jefferson’s Missing Volume **(Draft)**

“I declare that the Library is endless.”

- *Jose Luis Borges* “**The Library of Babel**”

Introduction:

On August 3, 1771, Thomas Jefferson replies from Monticello to Robert Skipwith’s request for a list of books. The Virginia legislator has had no difficulty arriving at his suggestions for the titles that might comprise “A Gentleman’s Library” (the title given the letter in Merrill Peterson’s Library of America collection). He has found it frankly impossible, however, to honor the limits on funding Skipwith had attempted to impose upon the endeavor: “I sat down with a design of executing your request to form a catalogue of books to the amount of about 30 lib. sterl. but could by no means satisfy myself with any partial choice I could make” (*Writings* 740). Jefferson finds that the demands of self-satisfaction utterly and abruptly defy those of financial accounting -- nor does it seem to take him long to lose sight of what would satisfy *Skipwith*. Skipwith seems to have said everything he could think of to discourage Jefferson’s feared tendency toward grander schemes, and he certainly gave no indication that he was merely proposing the down-payment on the investment of a life-time, rather than expecting this single purchase to serve him in perpetuity. Consequently, Jefferson is forced to presuppose Skipwith’s consent to a revision in his order, as he transforms the immediate occasion into a long-range project: “Thinking it therefore might be as agreeable to you I have framed such a general collection as I think you would wish and might in time find convenient to procure. Out of this you will chuse for yourself to the amount you mentioned for the present year and may hereafter as shall be convenient

proceed in completing the whole.” Clearly, Jefferson might be read as having been more generous in replying to Skipwith’s request than courtesy or circumstances required, furnishing him as he does with the means of satisfying the need behind the request well into the future, and giving Skipwith permission to tailor the plan to his own priorities.

Just as easily, though, Jefferson could be read as violating his own advice elsewhere to be in conversation: “a listener only,” by his blatant deafness to Skipwith’s humble plea to come up with a list, “suited to the capacity of a common reader who understands but little of the classiks and who has not leisure for any intricate or tedious study” (*Papers* I: 74). The list appended to the letter, by recommending many English novels and other literary works that he himself never owned (and whose inclusion he finds it necessary to rather elaborately justify) – in place of more of the works in politics, law, and natural science that he favored, Jefferson does display some capacity to adapt himself to the more conventional interests of his correspondent. Nevertheless, what, exactly, was someone “who understands but little of the classiks” going to make of Cicero’s Tusculan Questions, to cite but one example out of Jefferson’s 148 titles? Nor could Jefferson bear to abstain from foisting on his non-classicist in-law Xenophon, Epictetus, Antoninus, Livy, Tacitus, Josephus, Plutach of course, and on and on – without omitting no fewer than nine works of ancient history. In the, to Skipwith -- or indeed, one would surmise, to any “common reader” – rather daunting scope, and in some cases somewhat peculiarly comprehensive detail (Did Skipwith really require a work on “horse-hoeing husbandry”?), Jefferson’s list, quite fractional in relation to his own library, to be sure, seems unavoidably to bespeak a projection onto its recipient of the same vaulting and unceasing ambitions in learning, the same protean curiosity, and,

finally, in relation to these among other ends, the same profligacy as its compiler. For we are left with the stark fact that, in total, Jefferson's choices would have cost three or four times what Skipwith clearly stated that he had to spend for the purpose. Indeed, Jefferson's starting point, to which he immediately alludes at the outset only as that to which he has been utterly unable to confine himself – the thirty pounds (misprinted by Peterson, apparently, as 50), had originally been the outer limit of Skipwith's request of July 17: "Let them amount to about five and twenty pounds sterling, or, if you think proper, to thirty pounds," Skipwith had written, seeming to anticipate that his sagacious mentor might need some cushion. In the last line of his enclosure, Jefferson costs out the catalogue he is recommending at £107.10. Such boundaries as Skipwith had feebly attempted to set down were obviously made, from Jefferson's point of view, to be flaunted – even at the price (and not for the last time, if we are to pay Herb Sloan his due) of ignoring rule number three in his own "Decalogue of Canons for Observation in Practical Life" (*Writings* 1500) -- "*Never spend your money before you have it*" -- principles pertaining to one's own share of resources presumably applying *mutatis mutandis* to the expenditure of another's, it perhaps being an even less advisable policy to spend, even in theory, what someone else does not have. Now, in fairness, Jefferson allows that he does not expect Skipwith to acquire all the books at once. However, it seems telling that, although they may be granted some latitude in doing so according to their own schedule, no one, in Jefferson's mind, not even poor Skipwith -- he of the sadly underdeveloped appetite for "tedious study" -- is ever apparently exempted from the expectation of one day proceeding "in completing the whole."

Jefferson’s relationship to the written word is universally acknowledged to be among his most distinctive traits of character. Even among his -- by contemporary standards -- extraordinarily literate cohort of “founding guys,” and indeed preeminently among all American leaders through history, he stands out as “a man of letters.” Early in his career, before his entry into politics, Jefferson distinguished himself as an attorney in large part through the strength of the unusually liberal legal education, even by norms of his own day, that he received under the tutelage of George Wythe. By virtue of his role in writing the *Declaration of Independence*, words largely credited to Jefferson have truly become “our words” in the sense of having been adopted as America’s creed. And their majesty is found not just in their poetry but at least equally in the quantity of learning that they distilled. Although he denied relying on “any previous or particular writing” in composing his draft, Jefferson’s unparalleled achievement in that document is held indistinguishable by commentators from his exceptional capacity for, as he put it, “harmonizing the sentiments of the day,” as, in effect, by condensing into the scant two hundred words of the introduction several centuries of dissident political discourse – numbering to tens of thousands of pamphlets, not to mention shelves of more classical tomes of republican theory. Who but Jefferson has ascended to the pinnacle of national leadership largely on the strength of admiration for the effectiveness of his prose? And how would that remarkable skill have been acquired without its wielder’s exposure to the myriad models he encountered in his restless grasping after the Arnoldian talisman of “the best that has been thought and said” from throughout the ages of Western civilization? Although he authored, at most, but two real books of his own, who among our Presidents has left behind a correspondence to rival Jefferson’s 18,000 letters, in both

volume and caliber? And what life could have been more closely governed by the meticulous routine of its transcription in one of the more mundane sets of domestic ledgers after another: *Commonplace Book, Garden Book, Farm Book*, etc.? Who within American diplomatic history more skillfully deployed epistolary exchange more effectively as a tool of international strategy? And certainly no other of our chief executives could be characterized by their biographer as having patented “the textual presidency” (Ellis 193). Jefferson wanted his epitaph to record not only the texts, the manifestos he authored, but the citadel of learning he founded – and the library of which, not surprisingly, he took a personal hand in assembling (Ellis 282). Who among American legislators have become so expert in the procedures or history of the Congress that they have authored a book on the subject? Okay, there’s Robert Byrd . . .

But undoubtedly, no other American statesman is as singularly associated with a bequest of books to the common weal – by means of what was actually the sale that provided the kernel or seed from which one of the most expansive collections in the world blossomed – of course, the Library of Congress. In the American imagination, is the Jefferson Collection in the Rare Book Room of the LoC less iconic of the man than his face on the nickel, or on Mount Rushmore, or his statue in the Dome on the Tidal Basin bearing his name? Granted, Jefferson’s books as such can probably not compete with Monticello itself as a symbol or synecdoche for his achievement and legacy. But, on the other hand, what would Monticello – or Poplar Forest, for that matter, have been without the libraries which were such an essential part of their design and purpose? Indeed, if Monticello was Jefferson’s “shrine” – that shrine would be an empty tomb without the habitation of the holy trinity which time and again spirited him back there:

“my family, my farm, and my books” (To Elbridge Gerry, March 3, 1804, *Ford VIII*, 297 – 98).

In Jefferson’s library, now submerged within America’s official library of record, the perennially competing public and private dimensions of his career attain full unity at last and forevermore. This essential tool-kit for the endlessly enacted odyssey of his own self-cultivation at Monticello finally became inseparable from his self-sacrificing contribution to the new nation now headquartered on the Potomac. The symbolism of the final resting place for the corpus tied as closely as any to Jefferson’s very identity blends his personal obsessions seamlessly (at least in spirit, albeit now physically in an honored compartment) with his dream of a universal education for citizenry through the broadest possible diffusion of knowledge. This ever-expanding collection, much more than any static monument could, stands as the most perfect and lasting possible institutional embodiment of Jefferson’s encyclopedic ambition as American *philosophè par excellence*.

And we could stop there . . . But suppose there’s something about Jefferson and his books which prevents us from stopping there -- a little genie among his shelves, which whispers: “*more*,” an ever-inciting daemon for whom the 130 million volumes in now the largest library in the history of humankind, if not Borges’ “Library of Babel,” would -- it is out of the question, be *far from enough*. Have we any choice but to heed this apparition’s goading? Stop we cannot.

Jefferson, even now, as icon, in far from trivial and now familiar respects, is not unblemished. Would one more book on farming have brought his estate into solvency, and enabled him to bequeath to his biological heirs more than his name and even erase

some of the tarnishing of the same by slavery through emancipation? Hardly a fair question. So let us return to the other side of the ledger, to all the heroic deeds and donations enumerated above, to the sum of all the undoubted good to which this singular man was indispensable. Suppose we grant that Jefferson's statesmanship, his accomplishment, his legacy to American and the world, his gifts to his time and posterity in total, are bestowed as byproducts of his investment in the written word, and admit only what would seem beyond dispute: that they are all unthinkable, as much as he as an individual is unimaginable, without it. In relation to all these indisputably valid and worthy ends that it served –better speeches, better briefs, better bills, more effective memoranda, more affecting missives, more immortal (if that were not absurd) fundamental charters of human freedom, Jefferson's love of books is fully comprehensible. But, in the end, is it also fair to ask whether his love of books was proportionate to those ends? Was it conditioned by those ends, and strictly directed toward them throughout its duration? For all the purposes mentioned, Jefferson's acquisition of books would have met the test of that which he was fond of calling "the only oracle of God within us," of reason, indeed of that sense 18th Century intellectuals were quick to aver all men had in common. But can we trace within this ever-present plotline within the text of Jefferson's life the lineaments of a logic of another sort, of a sense less common? Even, perhaps, dare we say it, perhaps of a certain madness?

Insofar as he could have done none of the aforementioned things without them, Jefferson had to have his books. But are we permitted to ask: Did he really *have* to have *quite* so many? Really, to review the balance sheet of those aspects of his legacy we have tallied more exactly, we have referred to Jefferson's facility as reader and writer,

which likely stands in an integral and dependent relationship to his craving for books. But is the latter completely reducible to the demands of the former? Is there not a phenomenon of book-collecting which is separable on its own terms? Likely we will have to concede after a point that there remains a tirelessly utilitarian calculus to Jefferson’s appropriation of books, as in all things (even fiction, as witnessed by his protracted moralistic apologia in the genre in the same Skipwith letter). He loved them, above all, because of *what was in them*, on account of what, from a quite practical standpoint, they enabled him to do. Would “mastery” be hyperbolic in denoting Jefferson’s command of words? Did not the countless guises and successively substituted contexts and conditions of what really amounted to a continuous, perpetually-renewed, ever shifting experimental embrace of reality in all its facets— as architect, and botanist, and horticulturalist, as linguist, and ethnographer, and archaeologist, and anthropologist, as astronomer and geographer (cf. Kaminski’s even more comprehensive list 7), and on and on – necessitate a literally quite natural, if, it proved, insatiable hunger for the expertise recorded in manuscripts by adepts in each of the numerous fields in which Jefferson dabbled: a quest more for *techne* than *gnosis*, therefore not mysterious if nonetheless amazing.

But, no, I will maintain that there was still more to it than that. I will contend that it will not be a groundless historical speculation to speak of an inordinate desire for books in Jefferson, of a quest which outflanked the means on hand to support it, which overran the goals for which it was undertaken, whose bounty overtopped the space available to contain it, and still went further. In short, we will speak of an excess desire for books, and seek to understand it. Was there a relationship to books not finally subsumable under

their function as repositories for what they contain between their covers, but rather to their status as a blank signifier, a relationship to them as objects, although of a particular kind, and therefore a desire that would be purely acquisitive? So I will argue.

We take our subtitle from the noted fact the definitive tome in any true collector's library is, at any time, *the one not in it*.

And for starters, I think we have this on the testimony of Jefferson himself, who frankly acknowledged both the inescapable presence of the limit, and the inexorable probability of his transgression of it: "Sensible that I labour grievously under the malady of Bibliomanie, I submit to the rule of buying only at reasonable prices, as to a regimen in that disease" (TJ to Lucy Paradise, June 1, 1789, *Papers*, 15: 163). By admitting, both to himself and others, the nature of his disease, Jefferson would seem to have taken at this point the first and most vital step toward recovery from this dread addiction. But we, his heirs, will have to go further in the etiology of this, we hope, not inheritable condition. And was Jefferson's self-prescribed "regimen" adequate to affecting a cure? If not, what course did the malady take? And what, in the light of such an examination, is now the prognosis for us, Jefferson's successors? Is the menace of Jefferson's self-described illness not the idlest of threats within his fraught and complicated legacy? Since Jefferson's missing book comes due now that the epoch of the moveable type is over, the book itself having been rendered obsolete by the byte, Gutenberg's Galaxy having been swallowed by the black hole of the world wide web, is this question of bibliomania not the unpaid note within Jefferson's estate that presents the smallest danger of engulfing our own fortunes? This is what we, now his readers, must decipher.