

A PERSONAL RESPONSE:

**A Paper about Writing a Paper
to, from, and about Thomas Jefferson--
“Monticello as Metaphor”**

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Thomas Jefferson: Personality, Character and Public Life
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PREWRITING

Monticello, July 28, 2006

DEAR SIRS AND MADAMS,--

I trust you have come to the end of your third week together in good health and good spirits, and on these two I would like to address you.

As I have conveyed by post to my future son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., and which you no doubt know yourselves, exercise is necessary to good health, and walking is best—not less than two hours a day, regardless of weather. (Amble to Salem for a change of scene; in spite of its location, it gets barely a drizzle.) I hope you have advantaged yourselves of Boston’s gardens and commons for your daily regimen. In and of themselves they are quite adequate for the citizens of the Commonwealth, though they do wilt in comparison to the bounty of blossom and ample bloom in Old Dominion, where every gentle breeze draws fresh fragrance from the dewy earth of morn.

As for your good spirits, of these I have already heard, as they are the talk and toast of every tavern in the North End; Mr. Adams--I thank him for this courtesy—keeps me apprised to the fullest. But I dare not repeat such tales here, lest your reputations suffer as the braggarts' do. (By the way, a little wine instead of ale, I say: *Laissez les bons temps rouler, comme on dit en Louisiane et, a Paris, salut et bon appetit!*) But, beware of the inns in Cambridge, which seek to distract you from your studious purpose; they are known to recruit for their town's own college—it is called Harvard--which, though also a good school, does not light a candle of knowledge compared to your own Boston, with its professors all erudite in classical learning, virtuous in moral example, and providing of many fine handouts. Virtue, of course, be its own reward and more, as Mr. George Wythe's students at William and Mary—my *alma mater*, you know--can tell you.

But on to a more serious purpose for writing you, Dear Sirs and Madams, as one of you has written to me and will now receive my utmost and undivided attention--Your most affectionate and most obedient and most studious and most organized and most cosmopolitan and most sober--and most humble--servant, and so Adieu.

Boston, July 21, 2006

MR. THOMAS JEFFERSON, DEAR SIR,--

I am writing to you from Boston University, where I am one of thirty teachers participating in an NEH Summer Institute, from July 9-August 4, 2006. It is called Thomas Jefferson: Personality, Character, and Public Life, and it is, you will be glad to know, one of the most interesting and challenging learning experiences I have had. I

remember the excitement of our first day in class, the topic of which was your own character, based in part on Joseph Ellis' biography of you, called American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson. With Dr. Peter Gibbon, our Institute Director, taking notes on the board, we were brainstorming aspects and characteristics of your appearance, first, and then your personality. (I hope I'm not making you blush.) The list in my own notes and in my own shaky hand (because I was nervous) grew long. The language of the list was concrete, it was abstract; it was pedestrian, it was poetic. "Languid aristocrat," "diffident," "gentlemanly," "sensitive," "idealistic," "shaper of legacy," "sentimental"--these were the words and phrases which washed over me like infatuation and reminded me of my decades-old crush on you, Mr. President. (You must think I'm shameless.) But on that first day I heard one particular word applied to you, a word which piqued my curiosity and has held my interest more than any other, even those romantic sounding ones.

"Compartmentalized," Sir—the word was compartmentalized--and I heard comments on what it might have meant for you to have been compartmentalized. Various students said that you were ordered, as well as orderly, that compartmentalization was a way for you to organize yourself and your complex lifestyle. It enabled you to classify and categorize, to label. Further, students said that you were quiet, soft-spoken, shy. You kept to yourself, you kept things to yourself, you kept things from yourself. It was a way to keep your private life from your public life, and to protect it, as well as your family. You know, it does sound like you had secrets. But, not to worry, Mr. Jefferson, I am no James Callender.

You will no doubt approve of the fact that Dr. Gibbon assigned us teachers a paper or curriculum project to do, so I, stuck on the idea of compartmentalization, decided to do some research to see where it would take me. In short, I did find evidence and examples of compartmentalization in your own house, Monticello. (You must be thrilled to hear it.) What follows is the information I have so far and, if you don't mind, I'll just ask you a few questions along the way. Feel free to comment in the margins or to underline. Use a ruler, if it will make you feel more comfortable. Just so you know the scope of things, I have sixty-three 4"x6" notes on white, lined index cards. At this point, they are divided into ten stacks, according to topic or sub-topic, which I have written in the upper left-hand corner on the red line. On the red line in the upper right-hand corner, is the last name of the source I used. In addition, I have included the page number(s) where I found the information on the particular card. (I am scared of plagiarism!)

Are you ready, Sir? Then, let's begin.

ROUGH DRAFT

The working title of my paper is Monticello as Metaphor. I am toying with possible subtitles, as those seem to make a paper sound more impressive. What do you think about Monticello as Metaphor: The Octagon and the Womb? Or, do you prefer the more periodic approach: From Octagon to Womb—Monticello as Metaphor? Both are catchy.

Then, for the introduction, I was thinking about a well-chosen quotation; appeal to authority is very important. I can't decide between a Howard Adams quotation, which is

short and lyrical, or a Jack McLaughlin one, which is longer and more general, but also more thoughtful, as it is the premise of his book, Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder. Adams states that Monticello is “the quintessential example of the autobiographical house” (2). McLaughlin pronounces: “[T]hose who construct their own shelter replicate themselves, at their deepest and most significant level, in their houses. They are what they build” (vii). I can go either way with the introductory quotation, Mr. President—you decide. Of course, I will also be giving certain pertinent facts in the introduction as well: that you began clearing the land for Monticello in 1768 when you were twenty-five, and building it in 1769, and again in 1809. I will relate the changing of the name Hermitage—you know, Andrew Jackson used that one later on—to Monticello, which is Italian for “Little Mountain.” I think you made the right decision on the name, by the way; the word Monticello is more melodic and sounds real sweet. Finally, in the introduction I will also say something about the purposes of Monticello: as shelter, as a haven for relatives, and as hospitality for visitors, according to Dumas Malone (163). You probably know that Malone went on for six volumes (and more) about you, so this little paper of mine should be a snap.

In the next paragraph, I will talk about the property of Monticello and its setting. Such pertinent information will include the following:

You inherited sizable lands in Albemarle County in 1764 from your father Peter. (Stein 13)

From the vantage point of Monticello, the Blue Ridge Mountains were to the west, Charlottesville was directly below, and red-clay farmlands were to the east. (Thomas Jefferson Foundation xxi)

According to McLaughlin, view took priority over common sense in building on the mountain; there were dense forests and steep inclines, making hauling materials difficult (34).

Joseph Ellis and Richard Bernstein, as well as other biographers, relate the reaction of Francois Jean, Marquis de Chastellux, who visited Monticello on your thirty-ninth birthday and supposed that you ““from [your] youth . . . had placed [your] mind, as [you] had done [your] house, on an elevated situation, from which [you] might contemplate the universe.”” (Ellis 82 and Bernstein 50) Mr.

Jefferson, do you think it will be a problem that I named Joe Ellis before Richard Bernstein? I could really use your advice on this; you know how touchy historians can be.

Now, here is where I get closer to the crux of my paper—Monticello as Metaphor. Notice how succinct Daniel Jordan is: You were “[yourself] the mountaintop” of Monticello. Or James Cox—that you were looking down on everyone else. (Oops, sorry about that.) Or Joseph Ellis (again), that you “wanted to be able to look out over the world and [you] wanted to be up and away.” Up and away, Mr. J.!—now that’s kind of cute, isn’t it? Of your use of octagon-shaped windows and sides, Ellis applies neatly, “a man of many facets, a man who has many sides.” (Burns)

Before I get knee-deep into metaphor, I should probably say more about the building of Monticello:

- Initial construction to prepare for Martha
- 1790s, when you returned from five years in Europe—doubled size, added dome (What’s up with that dome anyway?) (Burstein 24)

- imaginative, unpredictable design
- shows your knowledge of ancient, Renaissance, and contemporary architecture (Stein 14)
- eighteenth-century style typical of eighteenth-century philosophy
- expresses beauty
- brings system to nature
- sought “universal intelligibility” in your surroundings
- classic style
- symmetry and order (simplicity)
- human spirit reached “great heights”
- BUT comfort over nobility AND incorporated other cultures (Burstein 21)
- taste marked by “elegant restraint”
- beauty and usefulness equally important (Nichols 178)

I think the bullets are a good idea; they seem to be fashionable these days. The second aspect of building Monticello regards you as an employer, Mr. Jefferson: picky, picky, picky!--supervising each detail personally. Indeed, when you were out of town, Sir, construction often stopped so as to avoid error. And, as your own knowledge and skills increased, you became even more demanding; in particular, you learned more about the monuments of European Palladianism and the architectural styles of Paris. By the time of rebuilding Monticello, Mr. Jefferson, you were seeking out the top craftsmen and artisans (McLaughlin 92 and 93) and no doubt supervising them, too. By all accounts,

there was only one defect to the “Little Mountain,” and that was NO RUNNING STREAM.

Now, I am knee-deep in it—in metaphor—and I am classifying the metaphors in terms of what they mean: to see, not to see, to order, to organize, to play, and to build (Monticello itself and America both). Here are the salient points, though without sufficient elaboration, since I don’t want to give away everything now. It’s very important to keep the reader wanting more.

Andrew Burstein, in The Inner Optimist: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist, associates Monticello with your sense of self, Mr. President. Monticello is a practical, well-ordered dream world, where you could think, collect, experiment, and write letters. Put another way, Monticello is “the mirror of [your] inner life.” But your world is not wholly internal; Monticello is meant to support your “dual ideal of intellectual enjoyment and amiable society.” You wished to pursue your literary and philosophical interests there, and you wanted to share them with others: conversation, music, chess, and, after your Paris years, fine dining (9, 12, 29).

TO SEE or NOT TO SEE:

In a stunning article in The Virginia Quarterly Review (1998), Robert A. Ferguson discusses sight as a metaphor of the Enlightenment and also epistemologically as a mode of knowing. From Monticello, Mr. President, you could see as far as possible in every direction. There were windows everywhere: the seemingly benign notions of seeing and being seen take on a somewhat sinister surveillance, though, when we realize that the master watches over the overseer, who in turn supervises the field hands. The house servants, too, are supervised; they are seen much and in turn, no doubt, themselves

see much. The notion of sight also relates to “spectacle,” in which a co-dependent and triangular relationship emerges among slavery, guests, and debt. Slaves are a plantation necessity given the number of guests at Monticello, especially after your presidency. These guests inadvertently add to the other plantation debts but also serve to connect the inner and the outer Jeffersons, creating a unity which, if not challenges, at least takes exception to the compartmentalized portrayal introduced earlier.

“Seeing” has a counterweight in “not seeing” in Bernstein’s book, although his intent at that point is to portray Monticello as a refuge for you. Although you lived on a working plantation that depended on the institution of slavery, Mr. Jefferson, it was built in such a way that you literally saw it as little as possible. For example, the slope of the mountain prevented you from seeing the reality of slavery on your own Mulberry Row. You yourself did not supervise the farming; the overseers did. Inside the house, dumbwaiters allowed food to be brought into the dining room with little interruption. And wine dumbwaiters on each side of the fireplace allowed wine to be delivered in similar anonymous fashion. Finally, the house workers themselves, many of whom were Hemingses, were light complected. (110)

Seeing and being seen in relation to Monticello is important to McLaughlin’s book. Only you had access to your personal quarters, and the three inside doors to your suite were locked at all times. You used only the door from the entrance hall. Guests had to be escorted in! (20) When you wanted lath-house extensions to your greenhouse—for plant nurseries, as protection for ferns and shade-loving plants—you were, in effect, building privacy screens for your own rooms. Without them, anyone walking by could

see right into your bed! MR. PRESIDENT?! Incidentally, you did not use the greenhouse extensions except for storing a few plants and, one, as an aviary. (324)

Moreover, says McLaughlin, your comfort necessitated privacy; indeed, you were obsessed with it, and that obsession found expression in the simple louvered shutter. You had collected Venetian blinds for more than thirty years and placed them on nearly all of your windows. The blinds were functional, utilitarian, and symbolic. You could control light and air without being seen; you could reveal only what you wanted to, but could observe all. As your fame grew and Monticello became, in effect, like a hotel, you needed to control privacy even more. Eventually, you built a retreat at Poplar Forest where you could disappear from time to time. (327) We understand that, Mr. President, we really do; the Institute visited there last week, and we thought it was lovely—simply lovely.

Well, Mr. President, I think that by now you must be getting the general idea. The other categories of metaphor—ordering, organizing, playing, building—follow. I must say, the information is interesting. For example, “conveniences” or “contrivances” include alcove beds, indoor privies, copying press, cannonball clock, weathervane, surveying equipment, and glass doors that open and close in tandem (McLaughlin 251). You made your library into “a self-contained cosmos, a Monticellian microsystem” (McLaughlin 23). I like that phrase! Books were so important that you could not live without them—everyone says that. You collected data and assembled it; you made it rational and meaningful—all of these were some of your ways of “structuring and ordering [your] personal universe.” Indeed, McLaughlin states outright that your need for order was “compulsive” (22 and 23). In related fashion, Bernstein and Kirn say that

you did want to order the world, but with words--“to order American history and politics through [your] words . . . to shape our intellectual, political, and philosophical worlds” (49). You should know, by the way, that McLaughlin thinks you were obsessed, in addition to order, with organization, because of that turntable clothes closet you had, but in truth, I think such organization is good. Clothes make the man! My own closet is organized--by type of garment, color-coordinated light to dark, and all on store-bought hangars—no wire hangers, President Dearest. And play, Dear President, you are credited with play! McLaughlin posits: “It may seem incongruous for a compulsive personality such as Jefferson to engage in construction as creative play, but it is precisely the obsessive person who requires the spontaneity of play as a counterweight to psychological necessity” (373-74). Finally, your supporters and critics alike see Monticello as a metaphor for building America (for example, Gregory Freidan in Burns). Merrill Peterson concurs: Monticello was never finished, just as our country is never “finished.” That’s right, isn’t it, Mr. Jefferson: we are still forming our “more perfect” union, as we are still forming our more perfect homes, and our more perfect selves.

NOTES FOR REVISION

I know I went on a little long, Mr. President, and I’m not really done yet (either), but I hope you will favor me with a reply. I know you prefer not to address personal issues, and I don’t blame you. I used to think that you didn’t address personal issues because you had something to hide, or because you were just not that self-aware. (A few

of my GT students are like that, but they are in the eighth grade.) But I've changed my mind. I think the fact that you are silent about so many personal issues, and the fact that you do not answer personal questions, tell us just how self-aware you really were.

Genius must be a terrible curse sometimes, as blessings often are; and greatness must be even more so, as you bear the curses and blessings of an entire nation over not just one generation but all of them. No wonder you have so many compartments for your selves. But don't have too many; you don't want people to talk. Even more, remember your own sound advice regarding moderation and temperance.

I watch a Saturday night television show on the USA channel, called Monk. It's about a middle-aged detective named Adrian Monk who suffers—willingly and gladly, in my opinion—from what is called OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder. With all due respect, Mr. President, that compartmentalization in the extreme is really just an eighteenth-century way of saying that you, Dear Sir, might have had this OCD and that you could have benefited from a serotonin adjustment. But don't you worry about it, it's okay—my husband doesn't call me Mrs. Monk for nothing. And besides, do you remember that crush I had on you? Well, I don't give up my crushes easily. I'm what they call a stalker.

NOTE: Also use, from the Institute Book of Readings, "The Semi-Transparent Shadows," especially the Freud quotation on page 30:

Biographers frequently select the hero as the object of study because for personal reasons of their own emotional life, they have a special affection for him from the very outset. They then devote themselves to a work of idealization, which strives to enroll the

great man among their infantile models, and to relive through him, as it were, their infantile conceptions of the father. For the sake of this wish they wipe out the individual features in his physiognomy, they rub out the traces of his life's struggle with inner and outer resistances, and do not tolerate in him anything savoring of human weakness or imperfection; they then give us a cold, strange, ideal form instead of a man to whom we could feel distantly related. It is to be regretted that they do this, for they thereby sacrifice the truth to an illusion, and for the sake of their infantile phantasies they let slip the opportunity to penetrate into the most attractive secrets of human nature.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

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