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Sources and Interpretations

“A Slave” Writes Thomas Jefferson

Thomas N. Baker

IN February 1809 Thomas Jefferson, as he had done eighteen years earlier with Benjamin Banneker, gave Henri Grégoire a “very soft answer.”¹ Both men—the African American almanac maker and the French revolutionary Catholic humanitarian—wrote privately to bear witness against doubts expressed in *Notes on the State of Virginia* regarding black Africans’ intellectual capacity and to plead for enslaved Americans’ emancipation. Yet the two abolitionists came away from these exchanges with little more than bland politeness to show for their efforts. If some of this treatment reflected Jefferson’s usual decorous reserve with those who wrote unsolicited, sent him books or inventions, or begged his subscription to a publication, there was special reason to treat topics of race and slavery with kid gloves. But not always: facing a kindred, though more scattershot and uncompromising, letter in December 1808, the outgoing president and Virginia slaveholder did not bother replying, dismissing it out of hand as “a rhapsody of inconsistencies.”²

Banneker’s and Grégoire’s letters are justly famous in scholarship regarding Jefferson, and they remain central to ongoing debates over the nature and significance of his racial thinking and practice. The third letter

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¹ Thomas Jefferson to Joel Barlow, Oct. 8, 1809, in J. Jefferson Looney, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Retirement Series* (Princeton, N.J., 2004), 1: 588–90 (quotation, 1: 589).

² A Slave to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib019357>. A full transcription of this letter appears on 140–54. The comment “a rhapsody of inconsistencies,” along with the inscription “Anon. (a negro slave) Nov. 30.08 recd. Dec. 2,” appears in Jefferson’s hand on A Slave’s letter to him (*ibid.*, [12v]). Digital copies of Jefferson’s letters to Benjamin Banneker and Henri Grégoire are also available in the *Jefferson Papers* (Jefferson to Banneker, Aug. 30, 1791, *ibid.*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib005579>; Jefferson to Grégoire, Feb. 25, 1809, *ibid.*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib019810>). They are also widely reprinted. For Jefferson’s thoughts on race and slavery, see Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London, 1787), 220–40, 270–73.

is almost never discussed but arguably deserves equal time. In the corpus of Jeffersoniana, it is unique. Sent anonymously, the letter purports to come from an enslaved American, an assertion the president evidently accepted by docketing it as from “a negro slave.”³ There is no record of another letter sent by a person in bonds of chattel slavery to Jefferson during his two terms in office. Remarkable, too, are the letter’s uncommon ideological pedigree and presentation, exemplified by the disparate mix of written sources on which it draws; the range is so extraordinary as to be singular among contemporaneous African American texts, which generally assume an evangelical mode. Moreover, in the course of twenty-four pages, it advances the case for slavery’s abolition and black Americans’ equality with remarkable vigor and passion, verging on fury, the likes of which Jefferson must generally have been spared by his privileged status. Presumably, as a slaveholder he never suffered bondspeople or even freed people to address him as the author of this letter did. For all its venom, however, the letter ended with hopes that the soon-to-be ex-president would finally act to realize the promise of his youthful sentiments in favor of emancipation and human equality. He did not do so, then or later in life.⁴

Given the attention paid to Jefferson on the subjects of race and slavery, it is a real curiosity that, until now, scholars have consistently overlooked this letter, especially since it has been readily available for a decade in the Library of Congress’s American Memory digital archive. Because it was sent anonymously and is filed, misleadingly, in Jefferson’s online papers under the title of an obscure poem reproduced in its pages, its true character has gone almost wholly unrecognized.⁵

³ A Slave to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Jefferson Papers*, [12v].

⁴ For discussion of Benjamin Banneker’s and Henri Grégoire’s letters, see Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (Armonk, N.Y., 1996), 164–65; Nicholas E. Magnis, “Thomas Jefferson and Slavery: An Analysis of His Racist Thinking as Revealed by His Writings and Political Behavior,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (March 1999): 491–509, esp. 503–6; William L. Andrews, “Benjamin Banneker’s Revision of Thomas Jefferson: Conscience vs. Science in the Early American Antislavery Debate,” in *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*, ed. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould (Lexington, Ky., 2001), 218–41. See also Sean Wilentz, “Who Lincoln Was . . .,” *New Republic* online, <http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/who-Lincoln-was/>. See esp. the response by Henry Louis Gates Jr., referencing the Declaration and Grégoire’s letter, and Wilentz’s response to his critics. For black abolitionists’ evangelical orientation, see Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky, eds., *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790–1860* (New York, 2001).

⁵ After discovering the letter of A Slave while researching a project on anonymous letters sent to President Jefferson, I learned that Robert F. Haggard had mentioned it briefly in a talk titled “Assassins, Beggars, Abusers, and Informers: An Analysis of Jefferson’s Anonymous Correspondence, 1801–1809” (International Center for Jefferson Studies, Charlottesville, Va., Oct. 28, 2004). To my knowledge the letter has not otherwise been discussed publicly.

Most baffling is the question of its provenance. Short of matching the handwriting to an existing document, it seems improbable that the author behind the letter's pseudonymous signature, A Slave, will be identified; no evidence suggests that Jefferson ever cracked the case. Quite possibly the author was not a current or former slave or even an American of African descent at all, meaning that the letter might be read as a clever example of racial and status ventriloquism.⁶ White abolitionists of the age occasionally assumed the voice and character of slaves, though their presentation was usually more self-consciously sentimental than that of A Slave. If the letter employs a kind of role-playing for effect, the rendition is exceptional for the pre-1830 era. Then again, considerable internal evidence in the document supports the idea that its author was male and at least formerly a slave and that he spoke expressly for others with similar experience. At any rate the author's decisions, in this case, to send a personal letter rather than sign a petition or publish a pamphlet and to present himself as A Slave to remonstrate against slavery and on behalf of African Americans in American society offer ample room for inquiry, especially about the strategic uses of such anonymous or pseudonymous correspondence.

Beyond the issue of provenance, there is still much to be learned from the letter: about the religious, intellectual, social, and political contexts in which it operated; about how its arguments were constructed; about the hopes for change that triggered its composition; and, more speculatively, about its reception by the president. Whoever A Slave was, his letter to Jefferson deserves to be read again.

IF THE SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES that fueled the production of this letter is probably beyond our ken, the immediate spark for its composition is not. Internal evidence points strongly to William Duane's *Politics for American Farmers*, a series of essays (published first in that émigré editor's Philadelphia *Aurora* beginning in late 1806 and thereafter in pamphlet form) that sought to align American farmers and mechanics with a democratic, anti-British revolutionary republican political movement. A Slave apparently liked the cause well enough—ideas cribbed from the series crop up periodically in his letter to Jefferson. Yet when it came to Duane's claim that the United States alone among nations had “profit[ed] by this experience” to establish a more truly egalitarian society, A Slave could hardly be contained.⁷ The diatribe against American slaveholding and its attendant evils that he poured forth to

⁶ On racial ventriloquism, see David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777–1827* (Baton Rouge, La., 2006), 102–29.

⁷ William Duane, *Politics for American Farmers; Being a Series of Tracts, Exhibiting the Blessings of Free Government, as It Is Administered in the United States, Compared with the Boasted Stupendous Fabric of British Monarchy* (Washington, D.C., 1807), 14.

the president as a gloss on this airy assertion furnished an arresting introduction to the letter as a whole.

The hyperbolic republican rhetoric of this opening passage reflects the degree and quality of anger that must have driven A Slave to write the president, underscores the broad-based populism of his social vision, and confirms his willingness to broach discomfiting facts and opinions about American society. The passage also prefigures the letter's *mélange* of ideological sources and its deep engagement with the contemporary American political scene and transatlantic currents of revolution and abolition. In his initial paragraphs, A Slave refers to English Quaker Thomas Wilkinson's antislavery opinions and writings, English militant Charles Pigott's radical Enlightenment polemics, and Jefferson's own early antislavery sentiments delivered in the Declaration of Independence and *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Later he alludes to the works of French philosophe Constantin-François Chasseboeuf, Comte de Volney, and the poetry of Federalist Royall Tyler. This extraordinary miscellany suggests that the writer had access to a social library, a radical club, or the private collection of a wealthy friend or mentor, if not a literary cache of his own. Whatever the case, A Slave's abolitionist convictions were certainly not constrained by any of the usual canons of ideological consistency.⁸

Quotations in the letter from Wilkinson's *An Appeal to England* are most in tune with modern expectations about the sources of early African American antislavery activism. Clergymen and pious laypeople figured prominently among black abolitionists, and by the time of Jefferson's presidency men such as Richard Allen, Adam Carman, Daniel Coker, James Forten, Lemuel Haynes, and Absalom Jones had already developed, through pamphlets, petitions, and community action, sophisticated faith-based appeals on questions of slaveholding, the slave trade, emancipation, and black Americans' future. In this work African American abolitionists adopted an array of rhetorical styles and arguments, and they drew inspiration and succor from a range of sources and resources, including the British antislavery religious tradition of which Wilkinson was an early example. By echoing the English Quaker's condemnation of slavery's history as constituting the "darkest pages in the annals of mankind"; locating injustice, as Wilkinson did, in its tyrannical inequities and trampling of natural civil and religious rights; and regularly referencing divine displeasure, A Slave signaled his comfort and sympathy with that antislavery tradition.⁹ Whether he held

⁸ For the eclectic reading habits of other nonelite American activists, see Michael Merrill and Sean Wilentz, eds., *The Key of Liberty: The Life and Democratic Writings of William Manning, "A Laborer," 1747-1814* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 50-52; Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York, 2002), 170-72.

⁹ T[homas] Wilkinson, *An Appeal to England, on Behalf of the Abused Africans, a Poem* (London, 1789), [iii].

the verities of evangelical Christianity embraced by his pious brethren as close to his heart as they and many of their white allies did is difficult to determine.¹⁰

More curious, because it is so unexpected, is A Slave’s concurrent adaptation of radical Enlightenment texts to his needs in the letter. Pigott was an English nobleman turned political radical whose salacious *Jockey Club* (1792) first gained him international attention; three years later, Pigott brought out his *Political Dictionary*, which redefined key words in British society to ridicule the pretensions of the clerical and monarchical establishment. Several times in the letter to Jefferson, A Slave drew on the *Political Dictionary* to illustrate, by analogy, his case against slavery. Repurposing Pigott’s caustic definition of “One” as the unjust monopoly of provisions and property of the many by a monarch (“oftentimes the feeblest and worst of the whole set”) leads A Slave, for example, to chide Jefferson about Americans’ own brutal state-sanctioned exploitation of enslaved people (a racialized many): “Can any man who is not over-aw’d by a tyrant, sway’d by prejudice, in love with slavery & oppression, or who lives in himself in idleness, drunkenness & debauchery, say, that there is either, honour, honesty, humanity, piety, charity, virtue, or religion in such conduct?”¹¹

¹⁰ Thomas Wilkinson was friends with Thomas Clarkson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth. He also had ties to Philadelphia-based traveling Friend John Pemberton, with whom he toured the Scottish Highlands in 1787. Until his death in 1794, Pemberton was active in Philadelphia’s antislavery circles, and his African-born servant, James (Oronoko) Dexter, helped to establish many of the city’s African American institutions. A Slave’s familiarity with Wilkinson’s poem might possibly owe something to these connections. See Wilkinson, *Some Account of the Last Journey of John Pemberton, to the Highlands, and Other Parts of Scotland, with a Sketch of His Character* (Philadelphia, 1811); Mary Carr, *Thomas Wilkinson: A Friend of Wordsworth* (London, 1905); “The Life of James Dexter,” Independence National Historical Park, <http://www.nps.gov/inde/the-life-of-james-dexter.html/>. For black abolitionists in the early American Republic, see Winch, *Gentleman of Color*; John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753–1833* (New York, 2003); James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (New York, 2007), 132–42; “Forum: Black Founders,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 64, no. 1 (January 2007): 83–166; Manisha Sinha, “An Alternative Tradition of Radicalism: African American Abolitionists and the Metaphor of Revolution,” in *Contested Democracy: Freedom, Race, and Power in American History*, ed. Sinha and Penny Von Eschen (New York, 2007), 9–30; Richard S. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York, 2008).

¹¹ Charles Pigott, *A Political Dictionary: Explaining the True Meaning of Words* (London, 1795), 92 (“One”); A Slave to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Jefferson Papers*, [2r] (“Can any man”). On Pigott, see Jonathan Mee, “Libertines and Radicals in the 1790s: The Strange Case of Charles Pigott I,” in *Libertine Enlightenment: Sex, Liberty and Licence in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Peter Cryle and Lisa O’Connell (London, 2004), 183–203; Mee, “A bold and free-spoken man: The Strange Case of Charles Pigott,” in *Cultures of Whiggism: New Essays on English Literature and Culture in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. David Womersley (Newark, Del., 2005), 330–50. Pigott’s works were available in the United States throughout the late 1790s from radical republican

This implicit challenge to the president's libertarian self-conception, and to republican ideals generally, gained traction from quoting Jefferson's own characterization of slavery (in *Notes on the State of Virginia*) as a perverse and tyrannical institution, which by "permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, & these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the amor patriæ of the other." The challenge to national traditions of self-congratulation was clearer still when, in the face of those who denied humanity to black Africans, A Slave pointedly recalled the Declaration of Independence to its own author, with the caveat that the document's "self-evident" truths ought to pertain to "all men, (not all white men)."¹²

Abolitionists commonly cited the Declaration in this way; Forten would do so in *Letters from a Man of Colour*.¹³ Yet A Slave upped the usual ante. Apparently a keen consumer of news, he seems to have read about a recent discovery in Judge George Wythe's papers of a rough draft of Jefferson's Declaration. This manuscript was noteworthy for including a clause, ultimately excised by Congress, arraigning King George III for waging "cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life & liberty" by carrying Africans into slavery in the American colonies.¹⁴ Was

booksellers such as Ira Jones of Newfield, Conn., Daniel Isaac Eaton of Philadelphia, and Charles Holt of New London, Conn. See [Newfield, Conn.] *American Telegrapher, and Fairfield County Gazette*, Aug. 24, 1796, [4]; [Philadelphia] *Aurora General Advertiser*, May 17, 1798, [1]; [New-London, Conn.] *Bee*, Nov. 14, 1798, [4].

¹² A Slave to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Jefferson Papers*, [5r] ("permitting one half"), [2v] ("self-evident"). For the original, see Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 271.

¹³ For James Forten's reference to the Declaration, see Forten, *Letters from a Man of Colour on a Late Bill before the Senate of Pennsylvania* (Pennsylvania, 1813). Gary B. Nash notes also that an abolitionist petition from Philadelphia's black community meant for President Jefferson protested that the Declaration "expressly declares All Men to be Created equal." See Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 188-89 (quotation, 189).

¹⁴ "A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America in General Congress Assembled," [Richmond, Va.] *Enquirer*, June 20, 1806, [2-3] (quotation, [2]). For modern commentary on the document, see "Jefferson's 'original Rough draught' of the Declaration of Independence: Editorial Note (2004)," *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, <http://www.princeton.edu/~tjpapers/declaration/declaration.html>; Bruce Chadwick, *I Am Murdered: George Wythe, Thomas Jefferson, and the Killing that Shocked a New Nation* (Hoboken, N.J., 2009); Endrina Tay and Jeremy Dibbell, "Reconstructing a Lost Library: George Wythe's 'legacie' to President Thomas Jefferson," *Common-place* 10, no. 2 (January 2010), <http://www.common-place.org/vol-10/no-02/tales/>. The June 1806 murder of Wythe, who was Jefferson's law tutor at the College of William and Mary, his "most affectionate friend through life," and a confirmed abolitionist, had the unintended consequence of publicly circulating a previously unknown draft of the Declaration (ibid.). Press attention at the time revolved around whether this discovery settled the vexed and partisan question of whether Jefferson was chief author of the document or merely one among several men responsible for its composition. A Slave, by contrast, was more interested in the draft's implications for enslaved African Americans in the nation's founding.

this example of Jefferson’s own thinking not sufficient to convince the “unprejudiced mind” of the incompatibility of slavery and liberty? Why, A Slave remarked, even the “monarchies & aristocracies” so often disparaged by politicians were “states of independence in comparison of that state of bondage in which the American black-man is kept.”¹⁵

Grounding this comparison was a conviction that the republican slave system’s alienation of labor hopelessly outraged morality, poisoned human relationships, and perpetuated injustice. Echoing many of his antislavery brethren, A Slave affirmed that this situation was most painfully evident in Jefferson’s own American South, where enslaved African Americans did the bulk of the productive labor, receiving in general “nothing for it (except kicks and curses)” and the spectacle of “haughty lordling masters” living in “idleness drunkenness and debauchery” at their expense. Worse still, the American practice of human bondage (“a mere state of barbarism”) recognized neither the fundamental “physical & commercial distinctions of labour & property” nor those equally important distinctions of sex or age: even the wives and children of the “untutored savage” were said to fare better than their enslaved American counterparts.¹⁶ Plantation patriarchs (and slaveholding presidents) might thus preen themselves on fulfilling obligations to their so-called slave families, but this pretense to enlightened dominion could not—and would not—stand unchallenged. If, at this juncture, A Slave forbore improving on this line of reasoning by introducing the subject of Sally Hemings, it was probably because that maneuver savored too much of partisan Federalism.

Rather than scoring political points, A Slave seemed more interested in conveying the pain of what appears to have been personal experience or observation. Returning later in the letter to the question of patriarchal duties and protections, he lamented that “our lives are no longer safe, for our inhuman masters and over-seers, publicly say that they would as soon take away our liberty as that of a dog’s, and that they will do it, if we should happen to offend them again, even in the most trifling offence.” More troubling still, the protections due to wives “are disregarded by our cruel masters, over-seers, & even by our mistresses, & [enslaved women] are driven like cattle from their beds in the morning at early dawn, & foused into the fields almost naked, & there oblinded to labour in the heat of the scorching sun dureing the whole live long day, and many times, even in this painful moment, when eight or nine months gone in pregnancy, they are beaten down & tronden under foot in a most inhuman manner.” Such awful practices, and not the alleged sexual relations of one man, justified A Slave in

¹⁵ A Slave to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Jefferson Papers*, [2v] (“unprejudiced mind”), [3r] (“monarchies & aristocracies”).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, [3v] (“nothing for it”), [4v] (“mere state,” “untutored savage”), [5r] (“physical & commercial distinctions”).

asserting that most southern slaveholders “are a set of inhuman scoundrils, and ought to be tar’d and feather’d and tyed to the tale end of a dung cart; and horse-whipt throughout the country, from state to state, and forever after banished from human society.”¹⁷

This plantation nightmare was matched by a corresponding vision of American society divided by political partisanship, by sectarianism, by superstition, and by foreign meddling. Not merely an antislavery zealot, A Slave here revealed himself to be a thoroughgoing democrat of the modern school, outstripping even Duane in his anticlerical anti-Federalism and Anglophobia. Surely the nation would “rush on head long into the abys of vice and folly,” the letter’s author predicted, unless “this inhuman slavery” ended, and with it the “carreer” of a motley crew of crypto-monarchists—“the British emissaries and their adhearents, the Lawyers, warmly federalists, and methodist & catholick priests”—all bent on subverting the republican experiment.

Bees were never more busy about a hive than these inhuman monsters are with the people of colour, and all other ignorant classes of people, irretiating their minds against the government, and against the French nation:—persuading us to believe, that the agents of this government are influenced by France, and that the French people are all either atheists or deists, and that their Chief is a tyrant, and is striving to over through every religious system in the Old world and that he is making preperation to come to America and give laws to this country, &c. &c.¹⁸

Far from being a Bonapartist (as were some Republicans), A Slave nonetheless defended the French revolutionary tradition and refused to credit the conservative line (adopted by many abolitionists, white and black) that America’s democrats were Gallic despots in disguise.¹⁹

Sounding much like Thomas Paine and other Enlightenment radicals who kept the faith, A Slave bolstered his case to Jefferson by citing “Esqr Pigott[’s]” *Political Dictionary* for evidence that tyrants everywhere confounded truths to serve their own power; hence, the disinformation campaign of American conservatives and the “pitiful case” of epidemic deceit and division plaguing the nation. And what about Jefferson’s famous paean to yeoman farmers? Could it be, asked A Slave in mock horror, that the

¹⁷ Ibid., [9v] (“our lives”), [9v–10r] (“disregarded by our cruel masters”), [5r] (“set of inhuman scoundrils”).

¹⁸ Ibid., [6v] (“rush on”), [6v–7r] (“Bees were never more busy”).

¹⁹ For a bona fide Republican apostle of Napoleon Bonaparte, see Joseph I. Shulim, “Henry Banks: A Contemporary Napoleonic Apologist in the Old Dominion,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 58, no. 3 (July 1950): 335–45.

breasts of God’s chosen people—so-called clodhoppers—were, as Jefferson asserted in *Notes on the State of Virginia*,

the only safe deposit for genuine virtue? What, no trust nor virtue in the priest-hood? No virtue in Burr’s best blood of America? Nor in any of Jno. Adams’ Nobility? In the name of God! Thomas! what do you mean by this? Do you mean to people the heavens with clod-hoppers, the very scum of the creation? . . . How do you expect sir, to answer for these blasphemious [speeches] to this Noble race of birth, blood & extraction, who stile themselves the most noble, wise, honest, human, pious, charitable, virtuous people in ye unifers: Yea, the very elect of God, to whom he has given all things on earth, and promised everlasting joys in heaven? If this be true, what becomes of your clod-hoppers, sir, and how are you to make atonement to this noble house of birth, blood & extraction, for dooming them to hell? I’ll tell you sir, with your head; and that in a few months too, unless you speedily awake from your slumber. Your enemies are almost ready to begin the massacree, and our strength is to be made use of to complet the inhuman deed. Pause sir, pause, for justice & mercy sake pause, we must fight for, or against you.²⁰

The frightful vision of race and class warfare with which this eccentric passage concludes must inevitably have recalled to Jefferson the terrors of the Haitian Revolution and Gabriel Prosser’s abortive slave revolt in Virginia, associations reinforced by other passages in which the letter’s author vowed that “we shall never be reconciled to this government till we git . . . our freedom.”²¹ The reference to clodhoppers also solidly linked the letter to the ongoing contest for political control in Pennsylvania, perhaps suggesting that the author was particularly concerned in that event. Clodhopper was the nickname of the onetime tanner and newly elected Republican governor Simon Snyder; first bestowed disparagingly by his Federalist opponents, it was thereafter adopted as a badge of honor and pen name in the Republican press. The Snyderites, drawing their greatest support from rural voters, championed, among other democratic remedies, a populist brand of judicial reform meant to make justice in Pennsylvania “cheap, easy, and speedy for the common man.”²² They also self-consciously reveled in their plebeian character, which helps to explain the letter’s antiaristocratic

²⁰ A Slave to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Jefferson Papers*, [6r] (“Esqr Pigott[’s]”), [8r] (“pitiful case”), [8v] (“only safe deposit”), [9r] (“How do you”).

²¹ *Ibid.*, [6r].

²² M. Ruth Kelly, *The Olmsted Case: Privateers, Property, and Politics in Pennsylvania, 1778–1810* (Selinsgrove, Pa., 2005), 60–65 (quotation, 62).

animus, and Snyder himself supported slavery's abolition. For *A Slave*, claiming Jefferson's yeoman virtues for his own meant rhetorically dragging the president into the partisan fray and forcing him to choose whether to align with slaveholders, and therefore with putative American advocates of nobility and privilege (such as Aaron Burr and John Adams, whose so-called aristocratic propensities had become a radical Republican commonplace), or with liberty and the virtuous and deserving society of yeomen and mechanics—and slaves. The letter thus represents a claim on republicanism staked in the name of some of the most egalitarian elements in the revolutionary heritage.²³

The letter's treatment of American aristocrats generally and Jefferson in particular might suggest that *A Slave* believed such men had grown corrupt beyond help. Yet, in the traditions of the radical Enlightenment, Christian populism, and revolutionary nationalism alike, *A Slave* found means to summon redemption in the form of a utopian vision of unity and social love. Coupling a call to revivify the nation's heritage of 1776 with a famous passage translated from Volney's *Ruins* about humankind's essential unity being realized in a common law of nature, a common code of reason, a common throne of justice, and a common altar of union, the letter's penultimate section imagined a biblical tableau depicting "the sons and daughters of America" resting under "their vines and fruit trees" and enjoying "the fruits of their labour, and the friendship of the whole human family."²⁴ Thereafter passages from Tyler's "Love and Liberty" and Wilkinson's *Appeal to England* ornamented—and simultaneously politicized—this pastoral mise-en-scène. Unless Jefferson himself acted practically and with exemplary dispatch to right historic wrongs, *A Slave* argued, no such reconciliation could come to pass.²⁵

²³ For Pennsylvania politics, see Andrew Shankman, *Crucible of American Democracy: The Struggle to Fuse Egalitarianism and Capitalism in Jeffersonian Pennsylvania* (Lawrence, Kans., 2004), 147, 173–206. For Simon Snyder's abolitionism, see Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 325. Though Snyder and William Duane were political allies for a time, tensions between the two men and their associates erupted in 1807 into a struggle for party control. Through it all clodhopper remained a potent partisan colloquialism. See for example, the [Philadelphia] *United States' Gazette*, Apr. 22, 1805, [2]; *Kline's Carlisle [Pa.] Weekly Gazette*, Dec. 2, 1808, [4].

²⁴ *A Slave* to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Jefferson Papers*, [10v] (quotations). Coincidentally, the edition of Volney's *Ruins* *A Slave* used was Joel Barlow's 1802 English translation published in Paris. It was partially based on Jefferson's own antecedent translation of the book's first twenty chapters, which manuscript, reportedly, he subsequently requested Volney to burn. See Kenneth R. Ball, "Joel Barlow's 'Canal' and Natural Religion," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 225–39, esp. 225; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000), 341–44, 410; Barbara G. Oberg, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, N.J., 2006), 33: 341–42.

²⁵ The publication date of Royall Tyler's "Love and Liberty" is uncertain, but the poem appeared in the [Baltimore] *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 10, 1805, [2].

Earlier in the letter, A Slave had called for emancipation and reparations of yearly wages for service and labor retroactive to a very particular date: “30th Nov. ’81,” or twenty-seven years to the day before the letter was sent. The exact meaning signaled by this curious specificity is only slightly murkier than the identity of the “we” in whose name A Slave staked a claim to “our yearly wages from that very hour.” At times the “we” appears to refer to Jefferson’s own bondsmen and bondswomen, a possibility that raises the tantalizing prospect that A Slave was somehow connected to them or even once was one of them. Yet A Slave’s call for justice via emancipation and reparations was usually broader in aim and effect. In closing, for example, he appealed again for an end to “this inhuman slavery & disgrace,” inviting Jefferson to crown his presidency in its final days with a “luster” that “no diamond in the universe could out shine.” By freeing his own slaves, the president would supply what A Slave called “reparation for the insult offered them.” He would also emancipate a nation: duly inspired, “Messrs Clinton & Madison” (the incoming U.S. vice president and president) “in perticular” would naturally follow suit and use their example and moral sway to “effect a general immancipation.”²⁶ This gradualist scenario was improbable, yet there is no doubt Jefferson could have followed through with his role in the plan, had he wished to do so.²⁷

DURING JEFFERSON’S YEARS as president, there were reasons for hope on that score. Jefferson’s December 2, 1806, message to Congress had advocated

²⁶ A Slave to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Jefferson Papers*, [5v] (“30th Nov ’81”), [12r] (“this inhuman slavery,” “Messrs Clinton & Madison”), [11v] (“reparation”).

²⁷ There are several ways to interpret the significance of the twenty-seven-year time span; in light of the evidence, none of them are entirely satisfactory. Perhaps the date Nov. 30, 1781, correlates somehow to the composition of the formative missive that would become Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Perhaps A Slave’s reparation date is tied up one way or another with debates that swirled in 1781 over whether to arm, liberate, and even compensate American slaves for military service. The year 1781 was also when nineteen of Jefferson’s enslaved men and women ran away with marauding British troops, but this event, coming earlier in the year, seems beside the point. It is also possible that the date meant was actually Nov. 30, 1782, when Britain and the United States signed the preliminary agreement recognizing U.S. independence. Whatever the case, specific claims for reparations on account of enslavement were not unheard of at the time. See Lucia Stanton, *Free Some Day: The African-American Families of Monticello* (Charlottesville, Va., 2000), 52–57; Roy E. Finkenbine, “Belinda’s Petition: Reparations for Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” *WMQ* 64, no. 1 (January 2007): 95–104; Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York, 2009), 65–92. Far from moving to emancipate his slaves, Jefferson, not long after this time, took a fateful step in the opposite direction. Having agreed to fulfill Polish freedom fighter Tadeusz Kościuszko’s wishes, on his death, to use proceeds from a congressional grant to free and educate enslaved African Americans, Jefferson in 1810 satisfied some of his own creditors by borrowing forty-five hundred dollars from his friend’s funds. See Gary B. Nash and Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Friends of Liberty: Thomas*

the early prohibition of the international slave trade to the United States. The Republican-dominated Congress passed such a bill on March 1, 1807; the next day, the president signed this prohibition into law, to take effect as early as the federal Constitution would allow, on the following New Year's Day. Black Americans and other abolitionists praised the government for this benevolent act, and many thought that moves toward general emancipation would follow. Members of Philadelphia's African Episcopal Society, for instance, corresponded with like religious societies and resolved to praise God for producing this turn of events. Their disappointment at the subsequent inaction must have been as great as that of A Slave. By his own account, he had written William Duane in September 1808 to ask him to introduce the case for emancipation with Jefferson, but he received no answer; the president's eighth annual message to Congress, published on November 8, was also silent on the question of abolition. With the slim hope that the sitting Congress might still be influenced, the letter of A Slave was then delivered to Jefferson, with instructions that any direct response "such as your wisdom may hereafter dictate" should be made through the *National Intelligencer*.²⁸ None ever came.

One might expect as much from a man who, in 1805, admitted privately, "I have long since given up the expectation of any early provision for the extinguishment of slavery among us."²⁹ Jefferson clearly did not think highly of the letter, dismissing its rhapsodic "inconsistencies" and identifying its author as "a negro slave," a pejorative racialization that arguably betrayed his own assumptions about the gulf between the races and the general incapacity of black Africans to reason cogently.³⁰ More distressing still, A Slave's revolutionary democratic abolitionism went far beyond Jefferson's mature republican faith and practice and presumably outraged his sense of gentility and civility. The language of A Slave, so much the opposite of Jefferson's soft soap sent to Benjamin Banneker and Henri Grégoire, frequently approached the vernacular of the tavern or the slave quarters, and it was hard on slaveholders, who liked to think of themselves as polite, benevolent, and virtuous. Even as A Slave demanded much of the president—the

Jefferson, Tadeusz Kościuszko, and Agrippa Hull: A Tale of Three Patriots, Two Revolutions, and a Tragic Betrayal of Freedom in the New Nation (New York, 2008), 182.

²⁸ A Slave to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Jefferson Papers*, [12v] (quotation). It is unclear how this letter was delivered, but if it was sent through the mail, the prerogative of franking meant that, like all anonymous letters to the president, this one came at the nation's expense. For response to congressional actions, see Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 189–90; Winch, *Gentleman of Color*, 163–65.

²⁹ Jefferson to William A. Burwell, Jan. 28, 1805, in *Jefferson Papers*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib014284>. For Jefferson's changing attitudes toward emancipation and abolition, see Christa Dierksheide, "The great improvement and civilization of that race": Jefferson and the 'Amelioration' of Slavery, ca. 1770–1826," *Early American Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 165–97.

³⁰ A Slave to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Jefferson Papers*, [12v] (my emphasis).

prospect of political jeopardy, national economic dislocation, and personal loss of the privilege and prerogatives of service—he also targeted Jefferson and the slaveholding class for violent retribution if his demands were not met. Rather than inspiring the president to a salutary moral transformation, the letter could do little to shake his resolve to hang on against the prospective terror it forecast.

Though Jefferson could brush aside the letter, modern readers need not (and should not) be so dismissive. For all the letter writer’s intellectual inconsistency and rhetorical excesses, he was both consistent and insistent in his outrage against slaveholding as an inhuman—and unrepublican—practice. Though gaining ground since the Revolution, such ideas were still controversial in 1808, and they could be hazardous to express, even under cover of a pseudonym. Yet, cloaked in an epistolary anonymity that limited the possibility of retaliation, the posted word made it possible, in this case, for even A Slave to whisper in the president’s ear and thus to suppose (however wrongly) that he could haunt Jefferson’s conscience. After being filed away for two hundred years, the letter can at least now haunt ours.

*A Slave to Thomas Jefferson, November 30, 1808*³¹

[1r] Sir, In looking over Mr Duane's politicks for Farmers and Mecanicks, I was not a little surprised to hear him bosting of his happy country, & the pacifick measures of this government, and decrying all others as barbarous and oppressive.³² I wrote to him in Sept last and requested his friendship, & desir'd him to lay before you our exquisit torment, and the inhuman conduct of our masters; but I have not as yet receiv'd an answer hear'd any thing from him.

Our burdens are heavy & call loud for justice! call loud for mercy! I Therefore, take the liberty Sir, to address you myself upon the subject of slavery, and ask you a few questions ~~upon~~ respecting Mr. Duane's politicks. What does he mean by this? Young as our country is, in the political world, says he, it has furnish'd a world of useful experience; and that we are, thank Providence, the only nation that has yet profited by our education. If to spit in the face, cudgel in the streets, fight devils, quarrel in the law, make laws & violate them, oppress & enslave mankind, take away all the honest labours & genius of one part of the community to riot upon, and to aggrandize the rest, gamble, drink to excess, wallow in debauchery, violate the chastity of women, betray publick trust, waist the funds, deceive the people, bely other nations, enslave their citizens, & your own, aggrandize one part of the citizens at the expence of the others, nurse, educate, & exercise children in tyranny and oppression, support a knot of idle hypocritical priest & rapacious lawyers, to lounge & strut about the country, divide ye the people into superstitious hostile sectaries; then seting these poor ignorant people to quarrel in ye law one with the other, that they may fall an easy prey to their rapacity; and [1v] ma[n]y more vices of a like heighnous nature; can be said to be a world of useful experience, & a profitable education, America can vie with any nation on earth.

Yet, with all these vices staring him bold in ye face, he has the vanity to say, that we are, thank Providenc, the only nation that has yet improved by our education; & the impiety to call out to God to save his country from the afflictions of war; but above all from the example of England.

What is this mighty uproar about England? Was there ever any thing in her example, more inhuman, iredigious, or damning, than slavery? Is any

³¹ This transcription of *A Slave to Jefferson*, Nov. 30, 1808, in *Jefferson Papers*, [1r–12v], renders spelling and sentence construction as in the original unless clarity requires otherwise. *A Slave's* insertions are included without comment, as are passages struck through by him. I have omitted stray marks and other flourishes of the pen. Verse rendered in the original in two columns is, for clarity, reproduced here in a single column. Superscript text has been brought down to the line. For Jefferson's annotations to the original letter, see footnote 2.

³² Duane, *Politics for American Farmers*.

nation capable of committing a more heighnous crime in the sight of God, or more insulting to fellow-man? What said Mr Wilkinson respecting slavery in '90? why, believing, said he, that a faithful history of slavery with all its consequences, would be of all others, the darkest pages in the annals of mankin[g].³³ What said you sir, in '81? see notes on Virginia.³⁴ Well then, if as Wm asserts, Britain has got three thousand American citizens in slavery on board her ships of war: Has not America, likewise, got in slavery 2,000000 of the former citizens of Africa? If 1,000000 of the subjects of Britain are starving in her work-houses; are not 2,000000 of the citizens of America running almost naked, starved and abused in a most inhuman and brutal manner in her fields & kitchens. If Britain takes away one fifth of the labour of her subjects for taxes: Does not the tyrants of America take away the whole of the labours of 2,000000 of the most industerious citizens to riot upon?

[2r] I cannot give you a fairer picture of our unfortunate situation [&] condition sir, then in the words of Esqr Pigott. Among men, says he, you see the ninty and nine toyling to git a heap of superfluities for One; git-ting nothing for themselves all this while, but a little of the coursest of the provisions which their own labour produces; and this One too, often times the worst of the whole set; a child, a woman, a madman or a fool; looking quietly on while they see the fruits of all their labour spent or spoiled; and if one of them take a single particle of it, the others join against, and hang him for the theft.³⁵ What say you sir, to this? can you plead ignorance in these vices and follies; and in this inhuman slavery? If not, what can be your reasons (since you have been rais'd to the highest office in the government) for suffering us to be used in this brutal manner? Can any man who is not over-aw'd by a tyrant, sway'd by prejudice, in love with slavery & oppression, or who lives in himself in idleness, drunkenness & debauchery, say, that there is either, honour, honesty, humanity, piety, charity, virtue, or religion in such conduct? O! merciful God, is this humanity? is this concistant with thy holy law, and agreeable to thy divine will? “But hold my impious tongue, its only Christian Charity.” Its quite good enough for Negroes, who the sainted pilgrims³⁶ say, are only a black beast of the Manilla class, with a flat nose, thick lips, woolly head, ivory teeth; and with a face somewhat resembling the human, [2v] but clearly not a human being. To prove our human-nature, sir, and our rights as citizens of these states, we have only to appeal to the Declaration of Independence, which says, We

³³ Wilkinson, *Appeal to England*.

³⁴ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

³⁵ The reference is to Pigott, *Political Dictionary*, 92–93 (“One”). Charles Pigott’s text is itself a gloss on a passage from William Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, 7th ed. (London, 1790), 1: 105–6.

³⁶ William Duane calls Connecticut’s establishmentarian Congregationalists the “sainted pilgrims.” See Duane, *Politics for American Farmers*, 124. Most of them were his Federalist political antagonists.

hold these truths self-evident; that all men, (not all white men) are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent & unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness. What think you now sir; are we men, or are we beasts? If this is not sufficient to prove our humman-nature; our rights and our citizenship, take another section from the original draft of the same authority. In speaking of the oughtrages committed by the king of england, you say, He has waiged cruel war against humman-nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people, who never offended him, captivat-ing and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or incur miserable death in their transpotation thither: this piratical warfare, the approbum of infidal powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain, Determined to keep open a market where MAN shall be bought and sold.³⁷ This is sufficient one would suppose, to convince any unprejudiced mind; but it seem that it has not carried conviction into the flinty hearts of the sainted pilgrims in America, & I fear nothing will but the sword. Whatever may be the mode of any government, [3r] either civil or religious, says the friend of justice & mercy, if it cannot exist and prosper without affecting the peace & harmony of a neighbouring nation, is unjust: Much more must that government be unjust, which aggrandizes one half, or less, of a community, at the expence of the other. The monarchies & aristocracies which have been so often decryed by polititians, as oppressive and violent, are states of independence in comparison of that state of bondage in which the American black-man is kept.

Is this the fruits of your education Sir? is this that pacifick policy, that frugal and honest policy, which Wm says, renders equal justice to all men, and to all societies of men, which leaves no room for anger? Is this of all others the pacifick policy inculcated by religion? Say, Does the happyness & prosperity of a country concist in slavery? ~~Say~~, does piety concist in belying a neighbouring nation; and in enslaveing the citizens of another & reducing them below the character of the bruits? If this is your Christian Charity Sir, this your piety and religion, Great God pleas to come quickly in thy wrath and send thy thunder-bolts & dash these sainted monsters into dust. Again, in the midst of all these complicated horrors, Wm has the affrontry to call upon the farmers of this land, and upon all the simple honest labouring classes of people, to look at this happy country, and be proude that there is no lord or lordlings to put them from their [3v] path of industry, nor to tare from them the fruits of their honest labour and genius.³⁸

³⁷ This passage is drawn from Jefferson's so-called rough draft of the Declaration of Independence. See "Declaration by the Representatives," *Enquirer*, June 20, 1806, [2-3].

³⁸ The reference is to an argument made in Duane, *Politics for American Farmers*, 128.

In the name of God! what does Wm mean by this? Where has he spent his time? In what celler has he been shut since the year '76? Does he not know nor did he never hear, that the greatest part of all the manual labour that is done in the southern states is performed by slaves; and that they in general git nothing for it (except kicks and curses) and that their haughty lordling masters live in idleness drunkenness and debauchery, and aggrandize themselves and families at the expence of the honest labours of the unfortunate people? Can he plead ignorance in all this? If not, by what name does he call such men who have got four of five hundred slaves at their heels? whom they beat, scourge and abuse in a mot inhuman manner, and take away all their honest labour and industry to riot upon?

Again, he adds, that a nation must be opposed by some overwhelming necessity, some irresistable evil not to be avoided or guarded against, if she can be at all justified in deviating from the principles which ensure happiness—which are the causes of prosperity—which are the fundamental principles of religion. Do for mercy sake sir tell us, what this country is opposed by, which has caused her to deviate from all these principles—Is not slavery & its long train of calamities, a presumptive violation of all these principles? What can [4r] a nation do more readily to destroy happiness, prosperity and religion, than to enslave her citizens? Is it not a speices of every evil which a nation can be guilty of to destroy all these principles? Let us hear what Mr Wilkinson says. I cannot but consider says he, the accomplishment of absolute slavery as the greatest evil committed on the stage of this world. Consult upon this subject, the weighter matters of the law; by a friend to justice & mercy. Slavery is unjust says he, because it is tyrannical; it is incompatible with equity & civil rights; it is the greatest of all tyranny. ~~The monarchies & aristocracies which have been so often decried by politicians, as oppressive and violent, are states of independence in comparison of that state of bondage in which the American black man is kept.~~ Heavy taxes have been complain'd of as a burden too intolerable to be borne by the unhapy victims of an oppressive government; but the wretched peasant is left at liberty to consult his own sensation of pain & fatigue, & use his ingenuity to pay the exorbitant demands of his oppressor; mean while he can enjoy at short intervals some delightful interchanges of love & duty with his family; without being under the watchful eye of a cruel task-master. Laws to be just & equitabl, should protect the weak & ignorant, & diffuse blessings upon all with a liberal hand. Just laws give vigor and proportion to every part of the body; but slavery ag [4v] grandizes one part of the community at the expence of the other. Under its pernicious influence, the head grows to an enormous size, while the inferior members are impoverished & wither away. Like some fatal disorders, it not only destroys the beauty of the body, but its first & best principles, its sympathy and harmony. Slavery is unjust, because

it destroys the rites of women & children. It is a mere state of barbarism, in which neither the delicacy and chastity of sex, nor the debility & ignorance of little children are regarded. The situation of the female slave is more deplorable & degrading than that of the untutored savage. For litle as savages respect the rights of women & children, their women have exemption from labour, & protection from insult during those delicate & painful periods which are peculiar to their sex; & their children are instructed in all the knowledge which is by them deem either useful or ornamental. The degree of servitude to which savage women are bound, is trifling in comparison with the task of a female slave; and inasmuch as their husbands & children reap the fruits of their labour, & in some measure repay it by acquiring a superior skill in hunting & war their labour becomes rather a pleasure than a burden. But what is to mitigate the labour of the poor female slave, with the precious burden of her affections at her breast? Slavery is unjust, as [51] it destroys all the physical & commercial distinctions of labour & property. It is a mere monopoly of labour men, and all their abilities and services.

He who contributes by manual labour to the great stock of wealth, must in justice be entitled to some reward; but in vain does the wretched slave fell the forests, clear the grounds, prepare them for seed; watch & cultivate the tender plant, reap down & geather in the harvest, & bear it to the market.

Our inhuman tyrants take the whole to riot in drunkenness & debauchery upon, & to aggrandize themselves & families, and we who have bourn the heat and burden of the day, git nothing but kicks and curses, for all our labour. "With what execration should the states man be loaded, ~~says you~~, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, & these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the amor patriæ of the other. With the morals of the people, their industry also is destroy'd; for in a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him."³⁹ This sufficiently proves my assertions, and justifies me in saying, that a majority of the American agents in the southern states, are a set of inhuman scoundrils, and ought to be tar'd and feather'd and tyed to the tale end of a dung cart; and

³⁹ The passage is part of an excerpt from Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "And with what execration should the statesman be loaded, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the amor patriæ of the other . . . With the morals of the people, their industry also is destroyed. For in a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him" (*ibid.*, 271–72). With implicit reproach, the letter's author skips over Jefferson's intervening sentence, "For if a slave can have a country in this world, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labour for another: in which he must lock up the faculties of his nature, contribute as far as depends on his individual endeavours to the evanishment of the human race, or entail his own miserable condition on the endless generations proceeding from him" (*ibid.*, 271).

horse-whipt throughout the country, from state to state, and forever after banished from human society.

[5v] If slavery has become so firmly established in the country, as not to be avoided or garded against, or is such a pleasing object, as to be no longer odious and irreligious, but a source of happiness and prosperity, its high time for America to giv[e] up all pretentions to liberty & freedom, & acknowledge herself at once, a joint heir with Jno Bull.

But we have not lost all hopes; we can't yet believe, sir, that you have become so deprav'd as to be in love with slavery, or have done reflecting upon the wrath of a just God, or that his justice cannot sleep forever. Yet there appears to me something in your administration, sir, very misterious. What your reasons can be for keeping open that execrable market where MAN shall be bought and sold, which you wrote so warmly against in the year '76, and condemn'd as a mark of disgrace, of the deepist dye in the Christian king of G. Britain, I cannot conceive. Is a crime of this execrable nature any more criminal in the Christian Crown of Britain, than in the Christian Executive of America? If not, what are your reasons, sir, for suffering us since 30th Nov. '81 to be troden under foot & abused in such an inhuman & bruital manner?⁴⁰ Are not Our rites ~~not~~ as well secured to us by every law of natures God as any man's in the universe? we think so; therefore, sir we consider ourselves intitled to our yearly wages from that very hour, and no man in the govern [6r] ment (except a tyrant) can dispute our demand a single moment. And you m[a]y depend on this sir, that we shall never be reconciled to this government till we git it, & our freedom with it. I think sir, you can't do yourself & your country a greater honour, nor your unfortunate countrymen a greater piece of justice and mercy, then by freeing your slaves & paying them their yearly wages from '81 to this day. And then, if any slave-holder in America shall hereafter refuse or neglect so to do, let him or them be made an example of, and their heads be hung in gibbets for an everlasting monument: & a terror to tyrants & evil doers. O! Thomas, you have had a long nap, and spent a great number of years in ease & plenty, upon our hard earned property, while we have been in the mean time, smarting under the cow hide and sweating in the fields to raise provision to nurse tyrants to cut your throat and perpetuate our own bonds.

Why you should wish, in a free republick, to nurs, educate and exercise your children in such a tyrannical manner, I cannot conceive; since you so early saw, and confes'd the error; and must long ere this most severely have felt the effects of your folly. If not, fold your arms, and lull yourself into a slumber a little longer, and then see how the pig will eat the ~~eat~~ grapes.

It is strange, but not more so than true, says Esqr Pigott, that all nations, without exception, are [6v] subject to, and the slaves of some error or

⁴⁰ The significance of the twenty-seven-year time span is unclear. See footnote 27.

superstition which is the fundiment of unhapiness to the people. Experience, knowledge, history, in vain afford them lessons, what path to follow and what to shun. Blinded by the warring passions, and stupified by the love of sensuality they rush on head long into the abys of vice and folly, and think to extricate themselves from these pittfalls by heaping crime upon crime till they find themselves even with the rest of the world,⁴¹ that is, flat on their back, see England. And America will soon follow & fall into the same fatal pitt, if some speedy means cannot be devized to abolish this inhuman slavery, and stop the carreer of those renegadoes—I mean the British emissaries and their adhearents, the Lawyers, warmly federalists, and methodist & catholick priests, for I find to my great astonishment, that they are all bound together in one infarnal league, to subvert the constitution, and build up, upon its ruins, one simular to that of the British. Bees were never more busy about a hive than these inhuman monsters are with the people of colour, and all other ignorant classes of people, irretiating their minds against the government, and against the French nation:—persuading us to believe, that the agents of this government are influenced by France, and that the French people are all either atheists or deists, [7r] and that their Chief is a tyrant, and is striving to over through every religious systim in the Old world and that he is making preperation to come to America and give laws to this country, &c. &c.

What does all this mean? What end do these monsters in the creation ~~end~~ expect to answer by these base lies? Has not France ~~always~~ been friendly to this country ever since the revolution? Has she not been fighting these many year, in order to give a universal spread to liberty & freedom? And have not almost all the powers of the earth oppos'd her, and strove to perpetuate slavery? Yea, have not even the Americans themselves, done every thing within their power, or that their malice could suggest to disturb the peace and tranquility of France? What can all this mighty uproar be for, but to establis some selfish ends to the detriment of France? What else can they wish, but to overturn the constitution, and stick up some idle debauché for a Duke, Lord, or King, in order to perpetuate our bonds? What else can we expect from such inhuman scoundrels? These wretches have become so daringly bold, that its no uncomon thing to see them day after day cheek by jole one with the other; calling all who differ from them in polyticks damn'd rascals and wishing them in hell, &c. &c.

“The grand & steadfast enemies to the happiness of mankind are religion and government: The first is the offspring of fear; the latter, the child of depravity; and if it were not for priests & tyrants, who always play into each others hands, mankind [7v] would still have had to bless the halcyon days of a natural government and a natural religion. Its worthy of remark

⁴¹ This passage is from Pigott, *Political Dictionary*, 172.

that a standard of truth is erected by every little tyrant, in every little state and tho' truth is immutable, she is a very Proteus, deversifying and varigating her sno[w]y garb in every soil, in every clime, and in every age. What is a virtue in one country, is a crime in another—what is a truth in one, is falshood in the next—what is justice here, is injustice there, what utility here, injury there—what laudable here, culpable there,” &c.⁴²_____ In the name of God, what does this mean? how is a child to learn truth from error? “Has God the heart of a mortal, with passions ever changing? Is he like them, agitated with vengence or compassion, with wrath or repentance? According to them it would seem that God, whimsical and capricious, is angered or appeased as a man: That he loves and hates by turns; that he punishes or favours; that weak or wicked, he broods over hatred; that contradictory or perfidious, he lays snares to entrap; that he pumishes the evil he permits; that he foresees, but hinders not crimes; that like a corrupt judge, he is bribed by offerings; like an ignorant despot, he makes laws and revoks ~~or renounes~~ them, that like a savage tyrant, he grants or resumes favours without reason, and is flexible only to baseness.”⁴³

[8r] “Thus the ax and the halter, the rack and the wheel, the faggot & the crucifix, are the infallible umpires, unerring oricles; the unchangable standards of truth; the grand determiners of right and rong! Treason and Integrity, Religion and Superstition, Reason and Error, go hand in hand in the world, and the tyrant & the priest of every pitiful teritory arbitrarily decide by law, which is truth & which is error.”⁴⁴

This is just the pitiful case in Ameria, by her divisions into Republican & Federal, Tyrant and Slave, Priest-craft & Law-craft; day after day, upbraiding each other, with lying & deceiving, corruption & error, ignorance & superstition, cheating and defrauding, sedition & knavery, blasphemy & cowardice, envy & tale-bearing, &c. &c. What a world of useful experience! what a happy country! what a genteel education! what a wise & holy people! Examples trully from God; and really worth while to cross the Atlantick, to teach these holy examples to that impious French nation, which Wm says have not made any improvements in these pious examples. This being the deplorable case, where are we to look for virtue? In what nation? Among what class of people? Who can answer these imporment questions? Why, here I have them, already answer'd twenty six years past. Those who labour in the earth, says you, are the chosen people of God, if

⁴² This passage is drawn from *ibid.*, 172–73 (“World”).

⁴³ This passage is drawn from “Lessons of Times Past Repeated on the Present,” bk. 1, chap. 12, in Joel Barlow’s English translation of Volney’s *Ruins*, published in Paris in 1802. A modern reprint based on the Barlow translation is C[onstantin-]F[rançois Chasseboeuf, Comte de] Volney, *The Ruins; Or, Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires: And the Law of Nature* (1890; repr., Baltimore, 1991), 44–45.

⁴⁴ From Pigott, *Political Dictionary*, 172–73 (“World”).

ever he had a chosen people, [8v] whose breast he has made his peculiar depot for substantial and genuine virtue.

It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth.

Huzza! this is some consolation, if we are afflicted by tyrants & oppressors in this life, it seem we are not to be troubled with them after death. But hush! what madness is this? what, God made choice of clod-hoppers for his peculiar people?⁴⁵ is their breasts the only safe deposit for genuine virtue? What, no trust nor virtue in the priest-hood? No virtue in Burr's best blood of America?⁴⁶ Nor in any of Jno. Adams' Nobility? In the name of God! Thomas! what do you mean by this? Do you mean to people the heavens with clod-hoppers, the very scum of the creation? For mercy sake! what a sort of a heaven will this make? How will God look moping about in heaven with farmers & mecanicks? How must he feel to see the Devil strutting in hell with this long train of nobility, birth, blood & extraction?⁴⁷ Is it possible that God can make such a eñ choice? Have we any other authority to justify such a belief? Why, truly, what says scripture, and even the priest-hood: why that the unjust shall not see God. Huzza! good by, birth, blood, & extraction, you are ye Devils chickings. [9r] Hush! hush! Who beside the Devil could induce people to talk in this manner? How do you expect sir, to answer for these blasphemious [speechies] to this Noble race of birth, blood & extraction, who stile themselves the most noble, wise, honest, human, pious, charitable, virtuous people in ye unifers: Yea, the very elect of God, to whom he has given all things on earth, and promised everlasting joys in heaven? If this be true, what becomes of your clod-hoppers, sir, and how are you to make atonement to this noble house of birth, blood & extraction, for dooming them to hell? I'll tell you sir, with your head; and that in a few months too, unless you speedily awake from your slumber. Your enemies are almost ready to begin the massacre, and our strength is to be made use of to complet the inhuman deed. Pause sir, pause, for justice & mercy sake pause, we must fight for, or against you.

Its high time for you sir, to decide, whether or not you will any longer use us in this brutal manner, or adopt us as brethren, for, in our opinion; on this single circumstance alone, depends the future prosperity, or destruction of these states, and the safty of your own life in perticular.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the term clodhopper, see page 135.

⁴⁶ This reference is to a phrase William Eaton reported that Aaron Burr used in 1806 to identify the class of people who would rally to his alleged separatist conspiracy in the western country. William Duane uses the phrase "Burr's 'best blood'" and compares Burr's lexicon with that of Samuel Johnson, judging both to be too aristocratic for the United States. See Duane, *Politics for American Farmers*, 146 (quotation), 176.

⁴⁷ William Duane makes much of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* defining a "Gentleman" as a man of "extraction" (ibid., 175).

If ever virtue was in danger of escaping the continent of America, it is at this time, for its an insult upon human understanding to say, that there is a single spark left in the breasts of any of Burr’s best blood of America—in the priest-hood’s, [9v] or in any of Jno Adams’ Nobility, knaves or fools.

There cannot come a stranger among us from any part of the world or ~~there the the~~ continent; be him ever so virtuous, useful well inform’d; but the moment he discovers himself to be a Republican, and opposed to this inhuman slavery, he is spurn’d at, & froun’d upon by our haughty tyrannical masters & excluded from all society, and call’d all the lying damn’d rascals that their malis can invent even ye Clarks in Congress are of this No[.] & those who pass for republicans.⁴⁸ And we their poor unfortunate slaves are beaten, without intermission, and troden underfoot in a most inhuman and brutal manner. Yea, it has come to this, that our lives are no longer safe, for our inhuman masters and over-seers, publicly say that they would as soon take away our liberty as that of a dog’s, and that they will do it, if we should happen to offend them again, even in the most trifling offence. And the right of over wives, during those delicate & painful periods which are peculiar to their sex, and which the most savage nations respect, are disregarded by our cruel masters, over-seers, & even by our misterses, & are driven like cattle from their beds in the morning at early dawn, & foured into the fields almost naked, & there oblidge to labour in the heat of the scorching sun dureing the whole live long day, and many times, even in this painful moment, when eight or nine months gone in pregnancy, they are beaten down & tronden [10r] under foot in a most inhuman manner.

These are painful truths which no person can deny, who has ever lived three months among slave-holders. This being our unhappy condition, we humbly beseech you, sir, to lay our cause before the agents of this government, & request them to interpose between us & our inhuman tyrants, or other-wise, necessity will ere long oblidge us to seek our own safty, by takeing away the lives of our tyrants, & freeing ourselves at once from such inhuman monsters.

“Please to cast your eye on the heavens sir, that gives you light, and on the earth that gives you food: Since they offer the same bountie to us all; since from the power, that gives them motion, we have all received the same life, the same organs; have we not likewise all received the same right to enjoy its benefits? has it not hereby declared us all equal & free?”⁴⁹ Let me

⁴⁸ The clerks of the U.S. House of Representatives during Jefferson’s administration were John J. Beckley (1801–7) of Virginia and Patrick Magruder (1807–15) of Maryland.

⁴⁹ This passage is a paraphrase: “O men! cast your eyes on the heavens that give you light, and on the earth that gives you bread! Since they offer the same bounties to you all—since from the power that gives them motion you have all received the same life, the same organs, have you not likewise all received the same right to enjoy its benefits? Has it not hereby declared you all equal and free? What mortal shall dare to refuse to his fellow that which nature gives him?” See “General Assembly of the Nations,” bk. 1, chap. 19, in Volney, *Ruins*, 75.

once more request you sir, to lay our grievances before the sovereign [illegible] people of these states—Don't neglect it sir, unless you take delight in tyranny & oppression, or are thirsting after more blood—if you be, your appyтите may ere long git glutted. God forbid that I should have such a thoutg; or should live to see another drop of human blood unjustly spilt in America.

O! rouse up the brave sons of '76, and the children of those heros who bleed & died to free their country from foreign foes, & from bondage, [10v] that we & our children might live free from foreign, as well as domestick tyrants—Don't let their labours be lost—Don't let so much blood be spilt in vain; and so much treasure be bartered for a whistle—for Spanih folly, or for British knavery and pride. O! rouse, rouse quickly, and make your wepons, & unite your strength, & let us banish all tyrants, tyranny and oppression from North America, and let us who survived the fatal shock, “form but one society, one great family.” “And since human-nature has but one constitution, let there in future (at least in America) exist but one law; that of nature; but one code; that of reason; but one throne; that of justice; and but one alter; that of union.[^v]”⁵⁰ Then might the sons and aughters of America set under their vines and fruit trees, and enjoy the fruits of their labour, and the friendship of the whole human family.⁵¹ Then might they set down in the joy of their hearts and sing with the birds in the following beautiful lines, viz.

Love & Liberty.⁵²

1. In bri'ry dell, on thicket brown,
 On mountain high, in lowly vale,
 Or where the thistle sheds its down,
 And sweet-fern sends the passing gale,
 There hops the birds from bush to tree,
 Love fills their throats,
 Love swells their notes,
 [11r] Their song is love and Liberty.

⁵⁰ This passage continues the paraphrase (ibid.).

⁵¹ This reference is biblically inspired. See the following verses: “But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the Lord of hosts hath spoken it” (Micah 4:4); “And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon” (1 Kings 4:25); “Hearken not to Hezekiah: for thus saith the king of Assyria, Make an agreement with me by a present, and come out to me, and then eat ye every man of his own vine, and every one of his fig tree, and drink ye every one the waters of his cistern” (2 Kings 18:31).

⁵² The minor revisions made to Royall Tyler's “Love and Liberty” as published suggest that A Slave might have been quoting from memory.

2. No tyrant bird shall love direct,⁵³
 His fair he seeks in plummy throng,
 Caught by the plumage of her neck,
 Or kindred softness of her song.
 They sing and bill from bush to tree,
 Love fills their throats,
 Love swells their notes,
 Their song is love and Liberty.
3. Some airy songster feather'd shape,
 O! could my love & I assume;
 The ring Dove's glossy neck, he take,
 And I the modest turtle's plume,
 O! then we'd sport from bush to tree,
 Love fill our throats,
 Love swell our notes,
 Our song be love and Liberty.

Religion, justice and humanity apart, the slave trade, says Mr Wilkinson, is an indignity offered to human-nature, that ought to be resented by the whole world.

“Inquire around, the nations all accord,⁵⁴
 That man is nature's delegated Lord;
 To lift his lot above the beasts that die,
 [Iv] His God commission'd Justice from ye sky,
 Humanity, & mild Religion down,
 His life to govern & his end to crown.
 By these directed & by these approv'd,
 He lives a blessing, & he dies below'd:
 Earth smiles in peace beneath his righteous hands,
 And heaven for him her joyful gales expend.
 If these neglected, leave their stubborn charge,
 He raves a monster thro' ye world at large:
 Waste marks his way, his feet in blood are dy'd,
 As on he stalks, ye slave of lust & pride.
 Humanity! thou loveliest powers below,
 Thou kind consoler of ye breast of woe!
 A virgin's softest bloom thy cheeks supplies,

⁵³ This line is a reworking of “No parent bird shall love direct” (ibid.).

⁵⁴ Here begins a slight reworking of several stanzas from Wilkinson, *Appeal to England*, 24–27. This excerpt excludes sections of the poem referring to England in particular.

Gifts fill thy hands, compassion fills thine eyes.
 'Tis short with thee, if thy sweet influence reign
 In Afric's blood no more our hands we stain:
 But if the publick guardians of this land,
 Bid yet ye sail of slavery expand,
 Thy gentle form a trembling victim lies,
 Bleeds by her agents & by her seamen dies.
 O Thou! ye high & holy Lord of all,
 Who form'd for glorious ends this spacious ball;
 Peopl'd its plains with beings formed to know
 The vast extremes of happiness and woe;
 Bid human race live inocent and free,
 And rise to happiness in serving thee:
 All this in Wisdom! & in each design,
 The good thy creatures & ye glory thine!
 While musing thus my adoration spring
 To thee, thou first, best, everlasting King!—
 But when thou view'st ye labour of thy hand,
 Thus foul with lust & blood, and let'st it stand,
 My finite views in wonder lost remain
 The myst'ries of thy mercy to explain.
 Yet, be my soul resign'd! & if ye pray'r
 Of humble dust may reach thy holy ear;
 O! teach ye people of this high-favour'd land,⁵⁵
 And hold from Afric's blood their guilty hand"!

Once more let me repeat it, as no subject can be dwelt upon which borders so strong on justice & mercy as the abolition of slavery; I say, sir, you cannot do your self & country so great an honour, nor your country-men a greater kindness; nor will virtue in no act of your life shine so conspicuous as in the freedom of your slaves, & by reparation for the insult offered them for their [illegible].

[12r] Such an example, in a cause of so much magnititude to human-nature, must inevitable throw such a luster on your character that no diamond in the universe could out shine it. And I flatter myself, that such an example in a man of your character, would have such an influence on the minds of slave-holders in general in America, and in perticular upon Messrs Clinton & Madison that they would not only free their own, but would make use of all their influence to effect a general immancipation; and free their country from this inhuman slavery & disgrace.

⁵⁵ The author changes Thomas Wilkinson's original line: "Oh touch the *heart* of this high-favour'd land" (*ibid.*, 27).

“That unexhausted power they nature call,
 Which forms, produces, & provides for all:
 Did it, or did its Lord, by deed assign
 The negro’s life a sacrifice to thine?
 Was he but born to contemplate ye sky
 Yet know no joy, but toil for thee & die?
 To feel in youth a premature decay,
 And drop by drop to wear his strength away,
 Oppress’d abus’d, not live out half his days,
 That thou mayst riot, & thy villas raise.
 Say, do the sweets, the pleasures of ye board,
 Which ye poor negro’s life of toil afford,
 In heaven’s impa[r]tial scale of good & ill,
 Balance ye pains his wretched being fill?
 Couldst thou of both thy just proportion know:
 Or all ye pleasure feel, and all the woe:
 Then wouldst thou still ye self same system hold
 Of want, profusion, wretchedness & gold;
 By justice weigh’d, how must ye scale decline,
 His all ye pain, & all ye pleasure, thine!
 But are thy joys, thy pleasures all sincere?
 Tho’ hard ye heart, a smile ye face may wear;
 But such a smile’s no deeper than ye skin,
 No man is bless’d till things are well within.
 Let sympathy thy clouded soul refine,
 Religion warm thee with a fire divine;
 Virtue thy lawless appetites command,
 And sacred justice guide thy erring hand:
 So to thy bosom, peace shall find its way,
 No transient quest, but ever, ever stay.[”]

Which God of his infinite mercy grant shall ever be the prayer of sir,
 yours (then) to serve,

A Slave

[12v] NB. If you should think these observations worth your notice Sir, & are desirous to heal a fatal wound, & should think it prudent to communicate a few thoughts to console the afflicted heart & wounded body of one of the most unfortunate of all the human species, you can make such as your wisdom may hereafter dictate in the National Intelligencer and it will soon come to hand.

Your compliance sir, will revive the [expiring] hopes of two millions of the most miserable of all the human race. Never was men more inhumanly used in no Government under heaven!—than the slaves are in this country.

The foregoing hints have been on paper some days, but kept back for the birth of your message.⁵⁶ Since that has issued without taking any notice of our unhappy situation, we begin to loos all hopes of haveing our grievences address'd by the present agents of America. But before we quite despond, we conclude to wait & see the issue of Congress. We hope at least sir, that you will deign to make known our miserable condition to the agents of the sovreign people of these states, that we may shortly hear whether or not they will interpose ~~bet~~ between us and our inhuman masters, in order if possible, to mitigate our pains, ease our burthens, & heal our smarting wounds.

30th Nov. 1808.

To Thomas Jefferson President of the U. S. of America.

⁵⁶ Coauthored with James Madison, Jefferson's *Message* was published, rather than delivered in person, on Nov. 8, 1808. See [Jefferson and Madison], *Message from the President of the United States to Both Houses of Congress at the Commencement of the Second Session of the Tenth Congress* (Washington, D.C., 1808).