



## Notes on the State of Virginia: Thomas Jefferson's Unintentional Self-Portrait

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*Notes on the State of  
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GISELA TAUBER

THOMAS JEFFERSON'S ONLY BOOK, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, has long been considered one of his most important works. Historian William Peden, one of the most scholarly editors of Jefferson's works, has written that in it the author "discusses in detail most of his major intellectual, social, political, scientific, and ethical beliefs"; it "reveals more clearly than any of his writings except his letters the flexibility of Jefferson's mind"; and it is "probably the most important scientific and political book written by an American before 1785."<sup>1</sup> Other writers have noted its poetic qualities. Even the choice of the term "notes" in the title seems not just an indifferent use of the word, indicating as it usually does a collection of not necessarily well integrated observations and reports; for Jefferson was really a musician, whose life was accompanied at each step by music. Thus "notes" for him were also an expression of music, which he heard half consciously as the background for everything he wrote. This fact may explain perhaps the lyricism of many of his remarks about the state whose native son he was.

The discrepancy between the book's importance and its lack of popularity may be owing, at least in part, to Jefferson's ambivalence about it. In a 1787 "Advertisement" or brief preface to the work,

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1954; rpt. New York: Norton, 1972), p. xi. Hereafter cited by page number in the text.

Jefferson appears to disparage it: "The subjects are all treated imperfectly; some scarcely touched on." (p. 2) Yet this seems a strange attitude for him to have taken toward a book that so deeply engaged his interest for so long, from 1780 onward, and which he never really completed; he added notes up to the end of his life. Perhaps he sensed that he revealed too much of himself in these *Notes*, that they are in fact a kind of unintentional self-portrait. As he reveals in a later letter, he knew that writing—a writer's style—was a result of early experiences, and in that sense a form of self-revelation.

The gap between the stated purpose of the *Notes*—they were penned in response to a questionnaire from the French government requesting mostly statistical information—and their poetic, at times impassioned lyricism suggest that Jefferson invested a great deal of personal emotion in their writing. Receiving the questions seems to have hit him like a thunderbolt. Thinking about them was almost like being reborn as a writer and thinker. Answering them apparently helped to relieve him of some kind of inner turmoil. As he did so, he was able to begin clarifying not just the questions asked by Marbois, but some of those in his own mind, perhaps questions he was not even entirely aware of asking.

Jefferson appears to have had some awareness of this process. In a contemporaneous letter he mentions the Frenchman who requested the data, François Marbois, and remarks: "I am presently busily employed for M. Marbois without his knowing it, and have to acknowledge to him the mysterious obligation of making me much better acquainted with my own country than I ever was before."<sup>2</sup> Jefferson knew that he was writing more than a mere statistical survey. In fact, as Peden comments, Jefferson took the arrival of the Marbois queries as "a good occasion" to study his own extensive memoranda and to enlarge and "arrange them for [his] own use as well as that of the inquiring Frenchman." (p. xiii)

On the very same day that Jefferson confirmed the receipt of Marbois' questionnaire, his fifth child, a daughter, was born. She was an usually large child, possibly the result of pregnancy diabetes.

<sup>2</sup> Julian P. Boyd et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1950–), vol. 4, p. 168.

Jefferson had purchased large quantities of sugar probably as a dietary supplement for the pregnant mother. Martha Jefferson, a petite and delicately built woman who had suffered greatly from each previous normal pregnancy, was literally torn apart by this last large child. It was a miracle that she did not die during the birth, and it might have been a mercy if she had.

As if this family trouble were not enough, Jefferson was at the time in the final months of his position as wartime Governor of an embattled, invaded Virginia. No one knew whether the American Revolution would succeed. The French wanted information because their fortunes were increasingly wrapped up in those of the Americans, and it was in Governor Jefferson's patriotic interest to make America sound good. He resented the theories of the French naturalist Buffon, alluded to in the *Notes*, who thought that all North American people, plants, and animals were steadily degenerating. These theories in all probability struck a personal chord in Jefferson, for he could scarcely bear to watch the deterioration of his wife's health. Her increasing weakness reminded him of earlier signs of "degeneration" in his own family; he had several siblings who were of slightly subnormal intellect and one imbecile sister who had accidentally drowned. He probably also feared, as siblings of abnormal children often do, that he too could degenerate—or that his children might inherit the defective genes of his family. This apprehension may have fueled his patriotic rebuttal of Buffon; his commentary goes to almost absurd lengths to refute him, at one point even describing in detail the large size of the North American moose as if to prove that bigger is better and stronger.

At the time he wrote the "Notes" Jefferson was in some ways at the nadir of his life; yet when he received Marbois' request for information, he suddenly became optimistic and elated, indeed almost manic. His despair over his own life and depression about his wife's condition metamorphosed into unusually high spirits. [Blake's observation that "excess of sorrow laughs" seems apt here.] It is possible that the Marbois inquiry presented him with an opportunity to vent some of his repressed feelings, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Altogether this period was a very critical time in Jefferson's life. It would be natural for any husband, especially in those times before

effective contraceptives were widely available, to feel responsible and guilty for his wife's agony and slow death as a result of multiple pregnancies and confinements. In the *Notes* Jefferson dwells on the American Indian's apparent ability to prevent pregnancy or to induce abortion, noting that the Indians had few children because the male wanted his wife with him during battles. Because of the inconvenience of having babies along at such times, Indians apparently used contraceptives. Jefferson, on the other hand, had done nothing to prevent his wife from conceiving.

As one reads the *Notes*, one can discern Jefferson's intense personal identification with the state of Virginia and with the people and places he is describing. As the state he was born in, the "womb" of his early life, Virginia had a unique position in his mental life from its beginning. The name "Virginia"—a reference to the "Virgin Queen" Elizabeth—also probably suggested to the boy Thomas the holiness of his mother, or simply the mother-figure. One deep source of Jefferson's conflict was his "desecration" of this mother—of the state of Virginia, or his wife, of a mother torn apart by her repeated pregnancies. Jefferson's plan for the state of Virginia in his *Notes* suggests his urgent desire to restore to health and beauty his mother the state of Virginia, and doubtless by analogy his sickly, soon-to-die wife and child, and the other children he had lost.

As he writes, his feeling of his own power rises: he begins the *Notes* with the "genesis" of Virginia, like God on the first day of creation forming the "mother country." For the most part his chapters actually follow the order of the biblical creation or bear a striking similarity to the order in which God created the world. The first chapter, for example, is called "Boundaries of Virginia." Like the spirit of God moving over the face of the water in Genesis, Jefferson begins with the land he is going to shape, which "lacks form and void," and he gives it a shape—"boundaries." Next, he separates the dry land from the waters—rivers, seaports, and cascades. As God says "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit," Jefferson then discusses "Productions mineral, vegetable, and animal." As God on the fourth day creates the stars—"lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and for . . . seasons . . .," Jefferson, in the same vein, discusses climate—what is regulated by and reflected in the movements of

the stars, as the sun's heat controls the seasons, and the changing moon affects the tides. God in Genesis then places birds, fishes, animals, and men on earth; and Jefferson too considers in sequence the inhabitants in his chapter on population. He then surveys the history of American civilization, discussing military forces, aborigines, counties and towns, constitutions, laws, colleges, buildings, roads, and other aspects of human culture.

Incidentally, Jefferson's order, starting from the most basic items in creations—waters, plants, etc.—differed significantly from that proposed by Marbois, who wanted him to start with the most up-to-date information on Virginia's politics, culture, and navigations of its rivers. But Jefferson defends his land against Buffon's accusations, in effect, by becoming God and re-creating it. He infuses the entire work with his deepest personal emotions, apparently exploiting Marbois' questions to resolve his own conflicts. Thus he creates a book unique in character and form.

To say the least, Jefferson wrote the *Notes* under very emotionally charged conditions. His ailing wife lay in the room adjacent to the room in which he wrote, and he could look up from his desk and see her head. Doubtless she must have been in great pain or discomfort in those days without antibiotics or painkillers, when medical palliatives such as the taking of blood, applying of leeches, and so on were often worse than the diseases they were meant to cure. Jefferson was acutely divided between joy at their infant's survival and despair at his wife's declining health—and his own feeling of responsibility for it.

There is a strong hint of Jefferson's projection of his feelings about his wife's condition in his description of the Ohio River in the state of Virginia, a waterway he had never laid eyes on: "The Ohio is the most beautiful river on earth. Its current gentle, waters clear, and bosom smooth and unbroken by rocks and rapids, a single instance only excepted." (p. 10) This passage sounds as though its author is thinking of a woman's body, perhaps his wife's, and how lovely this body was before being torn by the contortions of a difficult birth.

The theme is continued in the query entitled "Mountains," one of the most emotionally charged and poetic sections of the entire work. As Peden says, Jefferson rises here "to heights of impassioned

lyricism.” To the terse query requesting “A notice of its mountains,” Jefferson returns a moving, passionately worded description of the impact of the rivers on the mountain ranges:

The passage of the Patowmac through the Blue Ridge is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature. You stand on a very high point of land. On your right comes up the Shenandoah, having ranged along the foot of the mountain an hundred miles to seek a vent. On your left approaches the Patowmac, in quest of a passage also. In the moment of their junction they rush together against the mountain, rend it asunder, and pass off to the sea . . . The mountains were formed first . . . the rivers began to flow afterwards . . . in this place particularly they have been dammed up by the Blue ridge of mountains, and have formed an ocean. . . . Continuing to rise they have at length broken over at this spot, and have torn the mountain down from its summit to its base. (p. 19)

The whole description here seems to have been inspired by Jefferson’s thoughts of his wife in labor and her body being torn apart in the effort to deliver a large child. Identifying with her in the experience of her pain while he wrote was possibly a way of punishing himself for having impregnated her, his vicarious suffering atoning for his terrible guilt.

The rest of the passage seems to have been written as if from the point of view of the infant emerging into the calm of the world after the buffeting and storms of birth:

The distant finishing which nature has given to the picture is of a very different character. . . . It is as placid and delightful, as that is wild and tremendous. For the mountain being cloven asunder, she presents to your eyes, through the cleft, a small catch of smooth blue horizon . . . inviting you, as it were, from the riot and tumult roaring around, to pass through the breach and participate of the calm below. (p.19)

After the pressures and pushes of being expelled from the body through contractions, this is an almost anatomically exact description of an infant passing through the “cleft” at the end of the birth process; after the “breach,” the child can then participate in the “calm below.”

Throughout his descriptions of nature in Virginia Jefferson seems to be trying to re-create an endless cycle of emotions, images of things being torn apart and then mildness and sweet calm as a result of some great “geological” convulsion. A good example is his description of the Natural Bridge, which, as Jefferson notes, the French

had not asked him to describe. But calling it “the most sublime of Nature’s works,” he asserts that it “must not be pretermitted.” The description is a continuation of his vacillations between the extremes of violence and sweet calm: “It is on the ascent of a hill, which seems to have been cloven through its length by some great convulsion. . . .” Again the description seems to have an anatomical component:

Though the sides of this bridge are provided in some parts with a parapet of fixed rocks, yet few men have resolution to walk to them and look over into the abyss. You involuntarily fall on your hands and feet, creep to the parapet and peep over it.

The image of himself on his hands and feet, “creeping” to peep down to a vast space below, is striking: does Jefferson imagine himself as a baby inching out of the mother into the vast spaces of the world? Certainly the experience provides an anxiety like the trauma of birth: “Looking down from this height about a minute, gave me a violent head ach [sic].” But, as always, the torment and torture and fear yield to stirring descriptions of beauty and lovely calm:

This painful sensation is relieved by a short, but pleasing view of the Blue ridge along the fissure downwards . . . ; descending then to the valley below, the sensation becomes delightful in the extreme. It is impossible for the emotions, arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they are here; so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing, as it were, up to heaven, the rapture of the Spectator is really indescribable. (pp. 24–25)

Once again identified with the woman torn apart and with the baby being born, Jefferson tried to resolve the conflict. He suffers with his wife and so punishes himself for impregnating her and making her suffer; but becomes the baby on the journey of being born, experiencing the torment and ecstasies of birth. In the end, the emergence of the baby justifies the suffering.

That Jefferson seems to have projected his distraught response to his wife’s ill health onto nature is in keeping with his observed patterns of reaction to the loss of a beloved female. It was characteristic of him to give no direct verbal expression to his grief over the loss of a loved woman, but instead to reveal his grief through extreme

physical symptoms—in the case of his mother's death, a severe migraine; in the case of his wife's, a faint that lasted so long that his relatives feared for his life.

In the autumn of 1765 Jefferson's sister Jane Randolph died of an unknown ailment. There is nothing about her in Jefferson's letter at the time. But he was far from indifferent to her death. Six months later he started the *Garden Book*, which appears to have been a memorial for his sister in the same way that the *Notes* seem to be a memorial for his wife and the *Declaration* a memorial for his mother. The botanist who edited the *Garden Book*, E. M. Bettes, wrote in his introduction:

In the autumn of 1765 he lost his favorite sister, Jane. They had often roamed together over the fields and hills of Shadwell, observing and gathering the spring flowers. So this spring of 1766 was a poignant one for Jefferson as he recorded the blooming and disappearing of the flowers in his garden and the fields about him.<sup>3</sup>

Five years later, in 1771, Jefferson made plans for a shrine to his sister in his *Garden Book*. But even after these five years he was unable to express his sorrow in the most direct way—that is, in English; he wrote her epitaph in Latin. Writing about deep sorrows in a foreign language can be a way of avoiding the strong emotions stirred up by the mother tongue.

Ah. Joanna, puellarum optima  
 A aevi virentis fore praerepta  
 Sit tibi terra laevis  
 Longe, longeque valeta.<sup>4</sup>

Jefferson's mother died on 31 March 1776, and so terse are his direct recorded allusions to her death that some historians have actually concluded that she was unimportant to him and had very little influence on his life. He mentions her death only twice, both times very briefly and with no emotion. In his *Account Book* he writes,

<sup>3</sup> Edwin M. Bettes, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, 1766–1824, with Relevant Extracts from His Other Writings* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1944), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah N. Randolph, *Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871), p. 39.

“March 31. My mother died about eight o'clock this morning, in the 57th year of her age.”<sup>5</sup> In a letter to his uncle, his mother's brother, dated ca. June 1776—three months after her death—Jefferson writes two long, chatty paragraphs about a business matter and about his wish that his uncle “had chosen a residence among us.” Only at the beginning of the third paragraph does he drop the bad news—with, incidentally, no emotional preparation for his mother's brother: “The death of my mother you have probably not heard of. This happened on the last day of March after an illness of not more than an hour. We suppose it to have been apoplectic.” Then he drops the subject entirely. His next sentence is: “Be pleased to tender my affectionate wishes to Mrs. Randolph and my unknown cousins, of whom some I suppose must have nearly attained years of maturity.” Yet the final two sentences of the letter, which refer to the turbulent state of politics between America and Britain, might be taken as a covert reference to his sadness about separating from his mother:

I hope no dissentions between the bodies politic of which we happen to be members will ever interfere with the ties of relation. Tho' most heartily engaged in the quarrel on my part from a sense of the most unprovoked injuries, I retain the same affection for individuals which nature or knowledge of their merit calls for.<sup>6</sup>

On the thirteenth of June, not quite two and a half months after his mother's death, Jefferson was asked to write the *Declaration of Independence*. In an earlier paper I have discussed how he indirectly reveals his grief at his mother's loss in the Preamble to the *Declaration*, where he writes, “When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another. . . .” In the first draft of the *Declaration* he had written of acquiescing “in the necessity which denounces our eternal adieu.” “Adieu” sounding perhaps too personal or too intimate, in the final version he changed the phrase to “eternal separation.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>6</sup> Boyd, vol. 1, pp. 409–10.

<sup>7</sup> Gisela Tauber, “Reconstruction in Psychoanalytic Biography: Understanding Thomas Jefferson,” *Journal of Psychohistory* 7:2 (Fall 1979): 204.

Jefferson's wife Martha died on 6 September 1782. For an indeterminate but lengthy time after that he was, as I have mentioned, in a faint so deep that his relatives feared for his life. His overt reaction to her death was, like his reaction to his mother's and his sister's deaths, silence; and his fainting might be understood as an identification with his dead wife, and an attempt to cope with the grief stirred up by her death. This type of reaction was described by Freud in "Dostoevsky and Parricide," where Freud theorizes that young Dostoevsky's epilepsy was at least in part an emotional reaction to his father's death and to his own need for self-punishment for wanting his father's death — which he achieves through epileptic fits that leave him temporarily senseless and have the unconscious meaning, "Now I am like my father; I am dead like him."<sup>8</sup>

By the eleventh of September, five days after his wife's death, Jefferson had emerged from his faint and was able to write. What he wrote in his *Garden Book* was the following:

W. Hornsby's method of preserving birds.

Make a small incision between the legs of the birds; take out the entrails & eyes, wipe the inside & with a quill force passage through the throat into the body that the ingredients may find a way into the stomach & so pass off through the mouth. Fill the birds with a composition of 2/3 common salt & 1/3 nitre pounded in a mortar with two tablespoonsfuls of black or Indian pepper to a pound. Hang it up by its legs 8 or 10. weeks, & if the bird be small it will be sufficiently preserved in that time. If it be large, the process is the same, but greater attention will be necessary. The seasons also should be attended to in procuring them, as the plumage is much finer at one time of the year than another.<sup>9</sup>

This was the only entry for the month of September; there is only one other entry for the entire year.

It is not at all surprising that a man preoccupied with the loss of his wife, the wish to preserve not just her memory but her body, would become preoccupied with taxidermy, especially the taxidermy of a small bird who "had flown" — had died. What is perhaps surprising is the degree of violence in the passage — the incision between

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Dostoevsky and Parricide," *Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), vol. 21, pp. 173–96.

<sup>9</sup> *Garden Book*, p. 95.

the bird's legs, in the sexual part, the pulling out of the entrails, the need to "force" a passage through the throat: all this suggests the memory of the violence of childbirth, the passage in his wife that was too small to be forced and therefore had to be torn, and the violence of the sexual act that caused her pregnancy. What one senses in the passage is a tremendous aggression, an anger and rage that might only be accounted for by his frustration at her having abandoned him by dying. But Jefferson could not express this aggression directly—a personality characteristic typical, incidentally, of migraine sufferers, who often have violent fantasies of harming family members who have frustrated them, by smashing their heads.

In a letter of 12 October 1813 to John Adams, Jefferson comments on his own habitual silence upon the death of a loved one. Responding to Adams' distressed mention of the death of his only daughter, Jefferson writes, "On the subject of [your daughter] I am silent. I know the depth of affliction it has caused. . . . I have ever found time and silence the only medicine, and these but assuage, they never can suppress, the deep-drawn sigh which recollection forever brings up, until recollection and life are extinguished together."<sup>10</sup>



To return to the political ideas cherished by Jefferson and to which he alludes in his epitaph—political liberty, equality for all, religious freedom, and education:

In the *Notes* Jefferson devotes a long section to the Virginia Constitution. Essentially this document had a Lockean inspiration, but Jefferson felt that Locke had not gone far enough in saying that liberty is an individual right that must be protected. Substituting "the pursuit of happiness" for Locke's right of "property," Jefferson attempted to extend the concept of rights for all mankind all over the globe for all times, not just property holders. This step could aim toward building what Jefferson called an "aristocracy of virtue and talent," that is, an aristocracy not defined by nor restricted to

<sup>10</sup> Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1959; rpt. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 386.

those with inherited wealth or titles. [Jefferson is always inadvertently revealing that he himself would not at all mind coming to the forefront as such an aristocrat; for he had been raised with a family of children, the Randolphs, whose considerable inherited wealth and social position contrasted sharply with the Jeffersons' possession of only their virtue and talent.]

In the *Notes*, during an impassioned diatribe against the people of Virginia considering the election of a dictator, Jefferson sounds like a stern but well-meaning father lecturing and trying to protect his wayward offspring—who, he feels, have really let him down. He begins by recounting that in December 1776 someone in the House of Delegates proposed the creation of a dictator “invested with every power legislative, executive and judicial, civil and military, of life and of death. . . .” (p. 126) Jefferson’s reaction to this threat is intensely emotional:

One who entered into this contest from a pure love of liberty, and a sense of injured rights, who determined to make every sacrifice, and to meet every danger, for the establishment of those rights on a firm basis, who did not mean to expend his blood and substance for the wretched purpose of changing this master for that, but to place the powers of governing him in a plurality of hands of his own choice, so that the corrupt will of no one man might in future oppress him, must stand confounded and dismayed when he is told, that a considerable portion of that plurality had meditated the surrender of them into a single hand, and in lieu of a limited monarch, to deliver him over to a despotic one! How must he find his efforts and sacrifices abused and baffled, if he may still by a single vote be laid prostrate at the feet of one man! (pp. 126–27)

Actually, Jefferson could not resist making iconoclastic remarks that set him apart from others whenever he discussed politically charged issues. For example, on the question of how much power governments should have in regulating religion, he argues in the *Notes* that

. . . our rulers can have authority over such natural rights only as we have submitted to them. The rights of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit. We are answerable for them to our God. The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg. (p. 159)

This last inflammatory remark came back to haunt Jefferson in his political career. Possibly he saw himself as a sort of heroic “collector of injustices,” one who was “holier than thou.”

His wish to be the most faithful defender of democracy or the most passionate advocate of religious freedom is echoed in his assertions that North American plants, animals, and people are not just equal to but better than their European counterparts. Rebuking Buffon’s idea that “Nature” is less nurturing in North America than in Europe, Jefferson waxes lyrical: “The truth is, that a Pigmy and a Patagonian, a Mouse and a Mammoth, derive their dimensions from the same nutritive juices.” (p. 47) In North America Mother Nature is kind to all her children; she dispenses her “nutritive juices” with great generosity. Jefferson tells Buffon that “I have seen a hog [in America] weigh 1050 lb after the blood, bowels, and hair had been taken from him. Before he was killed an attempt was made to weigh him with a pair of steel-yards, graduated to 1200 lb., but he weighed more.” (p. 57)

Apparently not satisfied that he has proved his point with this Brobdingnagian hog, Jefferson also quotes writers who assert that the American moose is “as high as a tall horse,” and “about the bigness of a middle sized ox.” Even the European weasel fails to hold a candle to the North American one, “as may be seen by comparing its dimensions as reported by Mons. D’Aubenton and Kalm.” The *pièce de resistance* is the “bones of the Mammoth which have been found in America.” They are “as large as those found in the old world. It may be asked, why I insert the Mammoth, as if it still existed? I ask in return, why should I omit it, as if it did not exist?” (p. 53)

This comical – because childlike – need to brag about the superiority of North American animals reveals once more Jefferson’s preoccupation with Buffon’s degeneration theory, which apparently had touched him so personally. His concerns about his wife and her deteriorating health, and about the infant Lucy Elizabeth, who was also not destined to live long, intensified his unhappy memories of a childhood among highly unequal brothers and sisters, who, he felt, were really “degenerate” members of the Jefferson clan, and who might be harbingers of his own feared decline.

Finally, certain legislative changes that Jefferson wanted to enact during his lifetime, particularly regarding religion and slavery, receive a full discussion in the *Notes*, revealing his own ambivalence.

The questionnaire sent by Marbois must have stirred up Jefferson's unresolved uncertainties, doubts, and conflicts, and have prompted him to continue asking questions: it may even have generated some questions he had not been aware of.

Query XVII, for example, asks about the "different religions received into that state." Jefferson does not really answer this question—indeed, it would be too simple to list the religions represented in Virginia. Instead, he gives a historical account of religious settlement in Virginia that swells into an argument for religious toleration. Perhaps what the iconoclastic Jefferson really wanted most was to create his own private religion—or at least his own definition of religion. He begins by recounting the strife between the dominant Anglican church, which was "flushed with complete victory over the religious of all other persuasions" and which maltreated "their Presbyterian brethren" and "the poor Quakers." (p. 157)

The word "brethren" suggests that once again Jefferson is struggling with his conflict about equality, particularly the non-existent equality of his siblings, his wish to be better than any of them, and the guilt he feels about this, which has already given rise to a noble but ultimately defensive assertion that "all men are created equal."

*New York City*