

*Thomas Paine:  
Was He Really Anticlassical?*

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THERE are three angles from which we may view the life and works of Thomas Paine. The first side is that of the patriot who never lost his love for his adopted country and, with his *Common Sense* and *Crisis*, helped to found a nation. Secondly, there is the angle of the would-be reformer of a world out of joint, the gadfly who irritated Burke and Pitt with his enthusiasm for the French Revolution and embarrassed his fellow-Americans with his international indiscretions. Often inconsistent and at times unreliable, he took the whole universe as his field of activity. He might have said grandiloquently with Walt Whitman:

“Do I contradict myself?

Very well, then I contradict myself:

I am large, I contain multitudes”.

It is the “third Paine” with whom we are here concerned. Paine was a gifted journalist, a stylist who set a high standard for critics and commentators. His attitude towards the Greek and Latin classics has never been analyzed as a part of the cultural atmosphere of the eighteenth century, nor with the development of a prose that expressed new ways of thinking about old problems. His use of the ancient sources for purposes of illustration is just as clearly portrayed as it is in the orations of James Otis or in the notes of Thomas Jefferson. The significant difference was that Paine had recourse to translations, while Otis and Jefferson were at home in the original languages.

One of his biographers has remarked on the “timing” of his communications: “His rise coincided with the development

of popular journalism and the out-break of the American Revolution,—the first great political and social movement based on the theory and practice on the current support and power of the Common Man.”<sup>1</sup> When Samuel Adams declared that Paine’s *Common Sense* “popularized the principles of the Declaration”, and when John Adams praised its style as “manly and striking”, Paine egotistically agreed, and not without considerable justification: “It was the great cause of America that made me an author—The force with which it struck my mind and the dangerous condition the country appeared to be in, by courting an impossible and unnatural reconciliation with those who were determined to reduce her—made it impossible for me to be silent—and if in the course of more than seven years I have rendered her any service, I have likewise added something to the reputation of literature by freely and disinterestedly employing it in the great cause of mankind, and showing that there may be genius without prostitution.”<sup>2</sup> Another boast is similarly more downright: “I am proud to say that with a perseverance undismayed by difficulties, a disinterestedness that compelled respect, I have not only contributed to raise a new system of government . . . I have arrived at an eminence in political literature which aristocracy, with all its aids, has not been able to reach or rival.”<sup>3</sup>

Purple patches like these are absurdly flamboyant but pardonable. Such claims irritated Paine’s readers, notably Isaac D’Israeli the bibliophile and literary historian who defined our pamphleteer in his *Curiosities of Literature* as “a very vulgar but acute genius whom we may suppose destitute of all delicacy or refinement, who tells us that the Sublime and the Ridiculous are so nearly related that it is

<sup>1</sup> Albert O. Aldridge, *Man of Reason, the Life of Thomas Paine* (Philadelphia, 1959), 27.

<sup>2</sup> *The Crisis*, no. 15 (April 19, 1783), quoted in W. M. van der Weyde, *Life and Works of Thomas Paine* (N.Y., 1925), III, 246-247.

<sup>3</sup> Van der Weyde, *op. cit.*, VII, 17.

difficult to class them separately." Paine himself commented on the distinction from the point of view of a master of epigram: "Where knowledge is a duty, ignorance is a crime."<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Paine was born at Thetford in Norfolk County, England, in 1737, the son of a Quaker stay-maker of excellent character but slender resources. The boy's sensitiveness and his inferiority-complex showed themselves throughout his career and many of his associates faded away because of his compensatory defiance. He was withdrawn from school at the age of thirteen to serve an apprenticeship to his father. Between this experience and his thirty-seventh year when Franklin in 1774, with his acute diagnosis of human character, gave Paine a letter of introduction to his son-in-law Richard Bache in Philadelphia, he had been a rolling stone. Unsuccessful stretches as an excise-man and as a tobacconist, a brief service on a British man-of-war, some school-teaching and, whenever possible, attendance at scientific lectures, marked a long period of trial and error.

During his time as excise officer at Lewes he belonged to a working-man's club which met at the White Hart Inn.<sup>5</sup> The members discussed political and literary topics, and at the close of each meeting awarded a prize to the best debater. This was known as "The Headstrong Book," an old Greek Homer which the winner held until the next session. Paine was described by his associates as "The General of the Headstrong War" and was a frequent champion. At his interview with Franklin who was winding up his American agencies in London, Paine is said to have caught the fancy of "Poor Richard" by quoting the Latin proverb *Quisque suae fortunae faber*, (Every man is the artisan of his own fortunes). This same motto was used by Captain John Smith, with the same punning significance (*Faber* means

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, iv, 272 and viii, 143.

<sup>5</sup> Mary A. Best, *Thomas Paine, Prophet and Martyr of Democracy* (N.Y., 1927), 16.

*Smith*) when he assumed the guidance of the first settlers in Virginia. This epigram pleased Franklin and was used later when Paine claimed that he himself "began as the carver of his own fortune."<sup>6</sup>

However limited the adopted American was in his formal education, he did not disappoint his sponsor. After a few temporary jobs he became an editor and a journalist. He published in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* and in other periodicals general statements on democracy, the slave trade, women's rights, copyright reforms, and wrote popular science articles, presaging the great invention of his famous "pierless" iron bridge. He invoked ancient testimony against the practice of duelling. The Greeks and the Romans regarded the custom as a wrong one: they held, declared Paine, that an affair of private honor should not allow the personal element to interfere with the military spirit.<sup>7</sup> He slipped little phrases of classical origin into the text, as Poor Richard himself used to do: "The most virtuous woman is she who is least talked of"<sup>8</sup>—an adage which goes back to the Greek new comedy. There are clichés such as the comparison of Washington with Fabius. This was all preliminary practice for his attack on the larger and more dramatic issues of the day. Discussing the disgrace of Clive who was crushed by his own tyrannical acts he pictures him as, "some Heraclitus weeping for the world."<sup>9</sup>

The dialogue form was occasionally employed, as in an imaginary conversation between the ghosts of General Wolfe and General Gage, wherein the former chides the latter for his oppressive activities: "If you have any regard for the glory of the British name, and if you do not prefer

<sup>6</sup> *The Rights of Man*, part 2, ch. 5; quoted by van der Weyde, *op. cit.* I, 6 and VII, 16.

<sup>7</sup> *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, May, 1775.

<sup>8</sup> *Letter to the Female Sex*, quoted in van der Weyde, II, 91.

<sup>9</sup> *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, March, 1775.

the society of Grecian, Roman, or British heroes in the world of spirits to the company of Jeffries, Kirk, and other royal executioners, I conjure you immediately to resign your commission. Only in a commonwealth can you find every man a patriot or a hero. Aristides, Epaminondas, Pericles, Scipio, Camillus, would have been nobodies if they had lived under royal governments."<sup>10</sup>

The essentially journalistic Paine applied his classical sources sparingly and mostly from memory. Beginning in 1775 he had the ear of Congress, signing his editorials in compliance with the current fashion as *Aesop*, *Atlanticus*, *Vox Populi*, or *Humanus*. These contributions were accompanied by *New Anecdotes of Alexander the Great*, *Cupid and Hymen*, and a revised version of an earlier poem on the death of Wolfe, which portrayed Britannia mourning her universally beloved leader consoled by Mercury who reported that Wolfe had been called into the ranks of the gods. All this was light stuff but valuable apprenticeship. The writer should be credited with a new and incisive type of persuasion.

*Common Sense*, which appeared on January 10, 1776, cleared the way for all-colonial approval. It contained no reference to ancient history. Here was a popular appeal aimed to enlighten soldiers round the camp-fires and civilians at their tasks of agriculture or industry. It was a well-timed explosion and its contents offered little that was novel to those who read Otis, Dickinson, Dulany, and Jefferson's *Summary View*. Its feature was the vivid way in which the grievances were stated. The demand for a republic was stressed, defined later by the writer as *Res Publica*, "the Public Good."<sup>11</sup>

In *The Crisis* (December 23, 1776), there was more of an analytical background after the famous opening slogan,

<sup>10</sup> van der Weyde, II, 15-16, 259.

<sup>11</sup> van der Weyde, VI, 268.

“These are the times that try men’s souls.” The second number excoriated Lord Howe, “You hold out the sword of war and call it the *Ultima Ratio Regum*.”<sup>12</sup> Britain has, like Alexander, made war her sport and inflicted misery for prodigality’s sake.”<sup>13</sup> The third *Crisis* reveals his objection to a Quaker policy, which would “tie this continent to Britain like Hector to the chariot-wheels of Achilles.” The fifth number, aimed at Sir William Howe, states matters even more strongly: “The histories of Alexander and Charles of Sweden are the histories of human devils.” This tract is perhaps the most convincing one: it is a plea for freedom, comparing ancient and modern systems: “The wisdom, civil government and sense of honor of the states of Greece and Rome are frequently held up as objects of excellence and imitation—But why do we need to go back two or three thousand years for lessons and examples? Clear away the mists of antiquity!” “The Greeks and Romans were strongly possessed of the spirit of liberty but not the principle . . . they enslaved the rest of mankind, though determined not to be slaves themselves.”

The seventh installment gives us a hint of future transatlantic attempts by Paine to reform the British and French systems of statecraft: “My attachment is to all the world.” Now would be the time for nations to plan a program of peace and plenty: “The Alexanders and Caesars of antiquity have left behind them their monuments of destruction and are remembered with hatred . . . of more use was one philosopher, though a heathen, to the world than all the heathen conquerors that ever existed.” In answer to comments by the Abbé Raynal he holds that “the idea of conquering countries, like the Greeks and Romans, does not now exist, and experience has exploded the notion of going to war

<sup>12</sup> For the same Latin phrase, see van der Weyde, VII, 1 (from *The Rights of Man*, part 2, ch. 5).

<sup>13</sup> *Crisis*, no. 2.

for the sake of profit."<sup>14</sup> The thirteenth *Crisis* compares the inception of a peaceful United States in contrast to old Rome, which began "as a band of ruffians."<sup>15</sup> In any case, the Colonies should have been made independent in 1763, related to the mother country by loyalty alone,—like the Greek settlements as described in the first book of Thucydides.

Paine felt that he had played a vital part in the development of a few provinces into a world-power. "If only Athens had had the principle of *representation*, she would have surpassed her own democracies."<sup>16</sup> The last *Crisis* appeared on December 9, 1783; and there were numerous celebrations of the Peace. Paine turned poet with a ballad on "The Liberty-Tree" and a song "*Hail Great Republic.*" Despite certain complaints about his persistent *ego* and his unkempt habits, we may be grateful for his sincere belief in the promise of America and courageous activities in her behalf during a critical decade.

He had not rested content with propaganda. He turned over his royalties to the government. He enlisted in the "Flying Camp." He served at Fort Lee as a brigade-Major. He was elected secretary to the Committee on Foreign Affairs and to the clerkship of the State Assembly. In spite of various ups and downs, one must admit that he deserved the honor of election to the Philosophical Society, an honorary degree from the University of Pennsylvania, and the gift of a farm at New Rochelle, with a small honorarium from Congress. He was never popular in the usual sense of the word. Franklin's daughter Sarah Bache wrote to her father in January, 1781: "There was never a man less beloved in a place than

<sup>14</sup> van der Weyde, iv, 198 and 170. See also Mary A. Best, *op. cit.*, 202.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 239.

<sup>16</sup> This is a sweeping statement, and an incorrect one. For a study of ancient representation, see J. A. O. Larsen, *Representative Government in Greek and Roman History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1955).

Paine in this, having at times disputed with everybody. The most rational thing he could have done would have been to die the instant he finished his *Common Sense*, for he never again will have it in his power to leave the world with so much credit."<sup>17</sup> He was seldom discreet: and it must be recorded that he had to resign his foreign affairs position because he let the cat out of the bag in the matter of Silas Deane's questionable arrangements with France. He was right, however, on certain American problems. He argued that Virginia should give up her Western territory for establishing new states. How could the Old Dominion claim a right to these lands "any more than the will of Alexander could have taken it into his head to bequeath away the world?"<sup>18</sup> He stood for sound money and a chartered bank. On his return to England in 1787 he stepped into the limelight with an article, "Prospects on the Rubicon," expressing the hope that England would not embark on a costly war with France. "Democritus," he declared, "could scarcely have foregone laughing at that folly."<sup>19</sup> This was good advice; but Pitt, "a modern Julius Caesar," paid no attention to him. At this time the stay-maker's son from Thetford was on friendly terms with Burke and the Duke of Portland and after demonstrating the quality of his iron bridge to prominent individuals and scientific groups, he was on the way to a successful career as an inventor. In America he had made suggestions for a "Continental Convention" and the proceedings of the 1787 Constitutional delegates were about to be ratified. He had made also some remarks on fair taxation to meet state debts. He studied and wrote on the principles of "Agrarian Justice." But this peaceful situation turned to wrangling, primarily as a result of the taking of the Bastille

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Aldridge, *op. cit.*, 86.

<sup>18</sup> van der Weyde, iv, 93.

<sup>19</sup> "The Laughing Philosopher", contrasted with Heraclitus the "Weeping Philosopher", see van der Weyde, iv, 322.

and the radical messages from France, where "the world-child" had been adopted as a citizen and a representative from the department of Pas de Calais. The pathetic story need not be rehearsed here,—the *Rights of Man*, the *Age of Reason*, the law-suits and narrow escapes in England, and the ultimate enmity of Robespierre including a long period in the Luxembourg prison. He escaped the guillotine only because a citizen, under orders, failed to chalk mark the right door in the gaol. His rescue by James Monroe, his hostility towards Gouverneur Morris, and his final restoration to favor by the French Assembly, are familiar topics. His bravery is beyond reproach, as in the case of his vote against the execution of the king. His distorted theology did not make clear the difference between Deism and Unitarianism; and his defiant agnosticism upset many believers. It was not in order to call St. Paul a fool nor to describe the Madonna as a lineal descendant of the Ephesian Diana.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast with his successes in America, he met with disapproval in England. For example, Thomas Erskine, Paine's lawyer, quoted the passage from the satirist Lucian, where Jupiter and a countryman were chatting as they strolled together. Conversation proceeded comfortably until the latter contradicted the Ruler of the gods, who then threatened him with a thunder-bolt. "Jupiter," said the rustic, "you are always wrong when you invoke your thunder."<sup>21</sup> "In other words," remarked Erskine, "one can reason with the people of England, but cannot fight against the thunder of authority." Burke, with official England behind him, and even the Jacobin "Men of the Mountain," were all too much for the hopeful reformer.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur W. Peach, *Common Sense, the Crisis* (N.Y., 1928), 234.

<sup>21</sup> van der Weyde, I, 296. Lucian, *Zeus Gatechized*, trans. A. M. Harmon in Loeb Classical Library, II, 79.

When, however, we turn our attention again to the "Third Paine," to the self-appointed and self-educated journalist, and examine his writing, his background, and his philosophy, we find that the Thetford stay-maker's son deserves a hearing as a "*classicist malgré lui*." We ask, with John Adams, where he got that "clear, simple, and nervous style." When Gouverneur Morris, his chronic enemy, said of him: "He was ignorant even of grammar and polite usage," Morris was mistaken. For, if Paine attained any real distinction it was in the mastery of brilliant style and a native ability to state his case with clarity and force. While he was in the modern channel with DeFoe and Junius, his style was a creation of his own. It defies comparison. Like Thucydides, he witnessed the events about which he wrote, but those who compare him with Tacitus for vigor, irony, and terseness, are in error. We think of Sallust as a closer parallel.<sup>22</sup>

How was Paine able to hold his own (as he did) in competition with British and American university men or *philosophes* like Condorcet? The answer is that he was a voracious reader and debater who knew what would rouse his peers and reach his public whether they agreed or not. Also, how do we explain the frequency of classical epigrams with the absence of documented sources, at a time when many Americans recorded word for word the parallels to be found in Greek or Latin masterpieces which furnished material to the men of the constitutional convention? Why does he use so many clichés and haphazard allusions to "the Madman of Macedon," or general praise of American democracy, or approval of certain pagan men of genius? What was really responsible for his abandonment of the usual offerings in the Thetford Grammar School, with its excellent preparation for the British universities? If we examine his record up to

<sup>22</sup> Aldridge, *op. cit.*, 43ff.

the age of thirty-seven when he crossed to America, we shall find out why and how. We may let Paine himself tell his story.

Paine's resistance to Latin grammar manifested itself early in his life. As a schoolboy he "had no inclination to learn languages; but also because of the Quaker objection against the books in which the language was taught. This, however, did not prevent me from being acquainted with the subjects of all the Latin books used in the school."<sup>22</sup> It does not require much ingenuity to gather that this precocious, inquisitive, and restless lad, sitting in the same room with the reciting older boys, absorbed by second-hand osmosis much of the contents if not the forms and syntax of the older pupils' lessons. He had one ear on the teacher and the other in the land of his dreams.

We may query his statement about the Quaker viewpoint. William Penn at some length cited the pre-Socratic philosophers in order to enforce the doctrine of the Inner Light which was a basic part of the Friends' belief. George Fox, the founder of the sect, gave his blessing in 1676 to a Latin text-book, *Institutiones Pietatis, in usum Christianae Juventutis Scholasticae Latine Redditae*. Anthony Benezet, the Philadelphia schoolmaster, approved Aesop, Plutarch, and many other classical authors whom he regarded as safe. Paine might also have recollected that the William Penn Charter School offered courses in Latin with the full approval of the Meeting. Charles Thomson's copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a cherished relic in the school museum today. The disposition and temperament of our hero also indicate that he was perhaps dodging a task which in its early stages requires close and attentive study.

His positive interests were clear enough: "The natural bent of my mind was to science." In an appeal to reason and

<sup>22</sup> For passages dealing with Paine's anti-linguistic viewpoint, see van der Weyde, I, 4-6, VIII, 58-69 and 252-253; A. W. Peach, *op. cit.*, 259-264, 290-291, etc.

liberty he quotes the old Greek proverb,<sup>24</sup> "What Archimedes said of the mechanical powers may be applied to these two qualities, had we a place to stand upon, we might raise the world". He maintained that an hereditary governor is as inconsistent as an hereditary author: "I know not whether Homer or Euclid had sons; but I will venture an opinion that if they had, and had left their works unfinished, these sons could not have completed them."<sup>25</sup> The quality of Homer or Euclid speaks for itself: it could not have been accomplished by anyone but a first-class creative artist. Euclid is "a book of self-evident demonstration," independent of the author's identity. "I am not contending for the morality of Homer . . . a book of false glory . . . Aesop's moral is just, but the fable is cruel."

"Learning," he declared, "does not consist in the knowledge of languages, but in the knowledge of things to which language gives names. The Greeks were a learned people; but learning, with them, did not consist in speaking Greek any more than in a Roman's speaking Latin or a Frenchman's speaking French—From what we know of the Greeks, it does not appear that they knew or studied any language but their own—The schools of the Greeks were schools of science and philosophy, and not of languages; and it is in the knowledge of the things that science and philosophy teach, that learning consists. Almost all the scientific learning that now exists came from the Greeks, or the people that spoke the Greek language — It therefore became necessary to people of the other nations that some among them should learn the Greek language, in order that the learning of the Greeks might be known in those languages by translating the Greek books on science and philosophy into the mother-tongue of each nation." Hence the study

<sup>24</sup> Paine, *Political Writings* (Charlestown, 1824), II, 153; also van der Weyde, VI, 231.

<sup>25</sup> F. J. Gould, *Thomas Paine* (London, 1925), 93; Peach, *op. cit.*, 315, 361.

of Greek or Latin as such "was only the drudgery business of a linguist. Hence also the danger of putting the problem into the hands of specialists who force it on the schools and colleges. All honor to the great masters who are deservedly cultivated, such as Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, etc." But government should not set up a "factory of notables." The mere name of antiquity establishes nothing. Herodotus and Tacitus are important, and are judged according to their inspirational interest; but they are credited only as far as they relate things credible.<sup>26</sup>

It is clear to the reader that when Paine urges the abolition of the dead languages and makes learning consist in scientific knowledge, he leaves many blank pages in his program, and the humanities get but a short shrift. Not only does he ignore contemporary political scientists such as Locke.<sup>27</sup> To him, they represent the machinery rather than the principles of statecraft. Locke appears only once in a footnote; Montesquieu, Turgot, and others are casually and seldom mentioned. His view of the Renaissance was myopic and he did not approach the ancient masterpieces as works of beauty. He cared little for *belles-lettres* or the literary criteria of style. Horace's immortal ode, *Eheu Fugaces*, would not have stirred him as it did Benjamin Rush. We must therefore make allowances for the blind side of our Thetford prophet. Scholarly research in our modern sense was foreign to him: "Of the numerous priests or parsons of the present day,—bishops and all,—every one of these can make a sermon or translate a scrap of Latin, even though the subject has been rehearsed a thousand times before." Of what use, he declares, are such pedantic *minutiae* when we have the translation before us?

<sup>26</sup> van der Weyde, v, 229; Peach, 291.

<sup>27</sup> See Aldridge, *op. cit.*, 40. Paine did not use these authorities as background. He claimed credit for an original approach. For his opinion of some of these men, especially the French *philosophes*, see vol. 2, pp. 96-7 of the Charlestown edition of the *Political Writings*, 1824.

In characteristic fashion Paine brings his argument to a climax: "As there is nothing new to be learned from the dead languages, all the useful books being already translated, it is a waste of time to study the originals. It is only in the living languages that new knowledge is to be found. A youth will learn more of a living language in one year than a dead language in seven."<sup>28</sup> "The best Greek linguist that now exists does not understand Greek as well as a Grecian plowman, or Latin as it was spoken by a milkmaid of the Romans." Shades of Bentley and Porson!

Paine therefore can be regarded as approving the ancient tongues, as well as their subject-matter, through the medium of translations. It is the quality of the idea that matters. Homer, Aristotle, Demosthenes, and Cicero, considered as works of art, would have the same merit were they anonymous. The criterion is one of genius; and in the case of Homer, "the poet will remain, though the story be fabulous."<sup>29</sup> This is all reasonable enough: for very few persons can, or could, read Greek. But no true lover of poetry would believe that a translation of the text of the scene where Helen views the hostile host from the walls of Troy, or where Achilles is addressed by his chariot-horses, is adequate when compared with the original Homer. Jefferson, Adams, Otis, William Byrd, or James Logan, besides many of the clergy, such as the Mathers, were Hellenically at home as well as possessing a thorough acquaintance with Latin.

Our journalist's foreign language phobia was not confined to the classics. A period of ten years, spent mostly in France, should have been enough for the mastery of the Gallic tongue, both written and oral.<sup>30</sup> His speeches in the Conven-

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Rush, a Princeton honors graduate, thought likewise on this subject. See his *Essays, Literary, Moral, and Philosophical* (Philadelphia, 1806), 55.

<sup>29</sup> van der Weyde, VIII, 116-117; Peach, 290-291.

<sup>30</sup> Gould, *op. cit.*, 106, "Paine never attempted to speak more than a sentence or two in French."

tion and the Assembly had to be relayed by an interpreter, translated from his English. If Joel Barlow and Gouverneur Morris were at home in the language, why could not Paine have done likewise? With his alert wits he could soon have acquired at least a speaking acquaintance.

And yet, with all this scepticism about the ancient tradition and its application to contemporary life and thought, we find that Paine indulges in many references to Greek or Roman examples. The pagan contribution to human progress in all departments of culture was impressive. He has high praise for Solon's dictum that the most popular government was most satisfactory "when the least injury done to the meanest individual was considered as an insult to the whole Constitution."<sup>31</sup> Diogenes Laertius is noted as an authority on Persian religion.<sup>32</sup> Diodorus Siculus is welcomed as a commentator on the ancient calendars when "the moon was the first almanac."<sup>33</sup> He reports that the Thebans of Egypt<sup>34</sup> "measured the days according to the sun but not the moon." Herodotus, "who lived above 2200 years ago and is the most ancient historian whose works have reached our time," speaks of the stars as dividing the year into twelve months. All this is second-hand amateurish comment; but the ancient calendars caught the fancy of our starry reformer.

It is significant that Paine did not fail to record with admiration the famous definition by Cicero of the Law of Nature, unearthing it from Conyers Middleton's biography of the Roman orator: "The True Law . . . whoever will not obey it must first throw off the nature of man,"<sup>35</sup> "These", says Paine, "are the divine and forcible sentiments of Cicero . . . this is the fundamental, essential, and vital part of all

<sup>31</sup> Perhaps a reference to Plutarch's *Solon*, ch. 18.

<sup>32</sup> van der Weyde, ix, 42.

<sup>33</sup> Book 1, ch. 2 (Loeb Classical Library, ix, 67, trans. C. H. Oldfather).

<sup>34</sup> van der Weyde, ix, 62ff.

<sup>35</sup> van der Weyde, ix, 275ff.

true religion." It is one of the basic principles that played a part in our Colonial history. In item twenty-four of the *Theophilanthropos* tract, published at Paris in September 1796, we find "extracts from the moral thoughts of Theognis," a collection of Greek proverbs and satire which John Adams and Jefferson used in their discussion of the term *aristoi*.<sup>86</sup> With regard to a future state of the soul, we note the approval of Plato, Socrates, and Xenophon for its immortality. In the opinion of Cyrus the Great the soul becomes free from the flesh, while Christians include also the resurrection of the body.<sup>87</sup>

Paine is hortatory, realistic, rather than abstract or metaphysical. But his wide reading and his expressed admiration for Plato cause us to wonder whether he was not affected by the Theory of Ideas, when he wrote the following in his *Age of Reason*: "It may be said that man can make or draw a triangle, and therefore a triangle is a human invention. But the triangle when drawn is no other than the image of the principle: it is a delineation to the eye, and from thence to the mind, of a principle that would be otherwise imperceptible. All the properties of a triangle exist independently of the figure, and existed before any triangle was drawn or thought of by man."<sup>88</sup> Man had no more to do in the formation of those properties or principles than he had to do in making the laws by which the heavenly bodies move. The same thing applied, he held, to the principle of the lever or the wheel. The answer was "Study the structure of the universe: this is the true theology,—God's Creation!"

This excursion into philosophy is very suggestive. It is undoubtedly true that Paine read Plato in translation. It is barely possible that he was familiar with Seneca's ninetieth Epistle, which had furnished material for moralizing in hand-

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 347.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, 72.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 53-56; Peach, 256f.

books and extracts, and in discussing the inventions of early man. It might have also stemmed from the idealism of Bishop Berkeley. Thomas was a voracious if sometimes a superficial reader.

Our reformer in the field of the classics has high praise for Athenian Democracy: "What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude if only it follows the principle of representation."<sup>39</sup> He did not realize that Polybius was skeptical about pure democracies, and had raised the question whether the Attica of Pericles might not have resembled "a poorly-trimmed boat."<sup>40</sup> He found, however, "more to admire and less to condemn in that great people than in anything which history records."<sup>41</sup> Though he was mentally and physically at the farthest remove from an Oxford or a Cambridge common-room atmosphere, he suggested a large-scale international group to study past and present contributions to world-welfare. "A society for enquiring into the ancient state of the world and the state of ancient history, so far as history is connected with systems of religion ancient and modern, may be a useful and instructive institution."<sup>42</sup> This tradition must be kept in reasonable balance: "for if we travel still further into antiquity, there are a thousand authorities successively contradicting each other." Hence a respect but not an adoration of the men of old is in order. They should admire *us* rather than *we them*. "I have no notion," as he said on several occasions, "of yielding the palm of the United States to any Grecians or Romans that ever were born."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> van der Weyde, vi, 272-273.

<sup>40</sup> For the use of this figure, see R. M. Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), 177-178.

<sup>41</sup> van der Weyde, vi, 266.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, ix, 125; Gould, *op. cit.*, 170-171.

<sup>43</sup> From *The Crisis*, number 5.

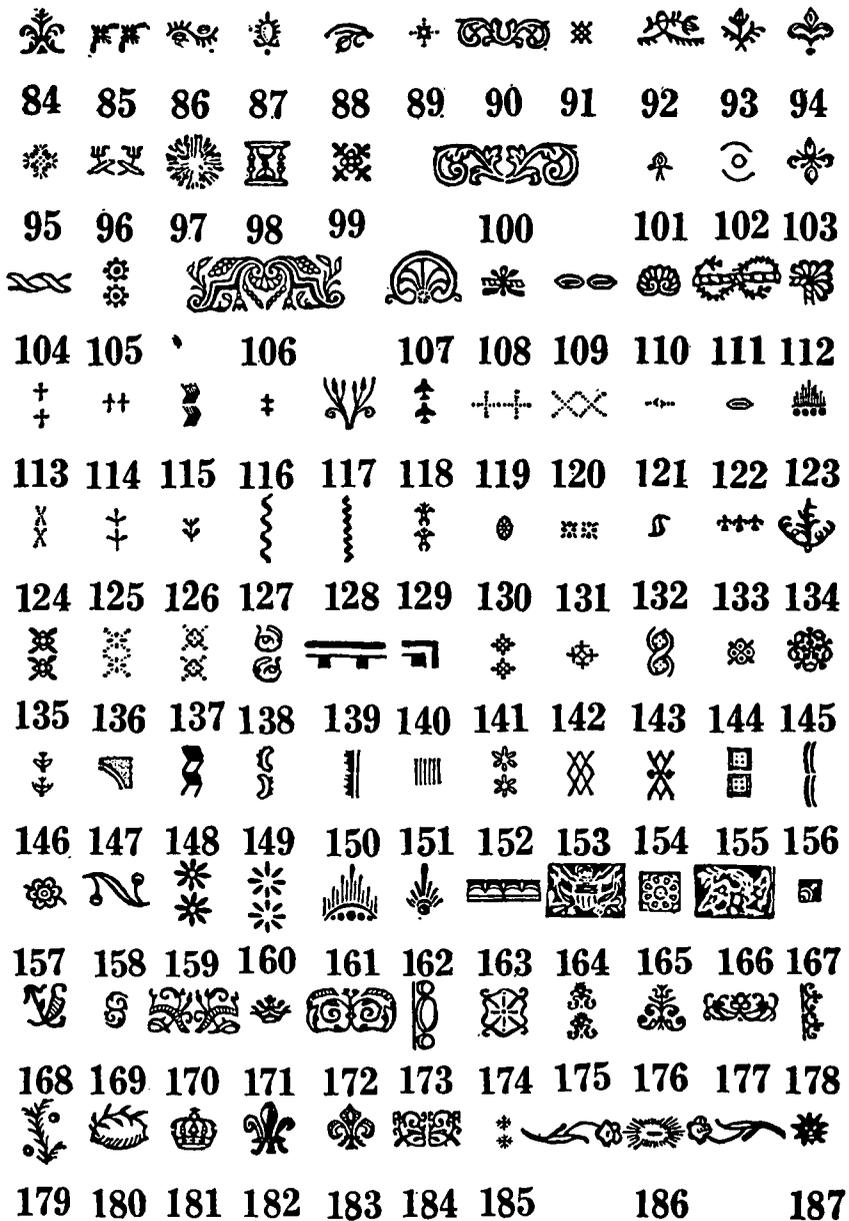


Plate 4. Printers's ornaments mainly taken from books in the Welch collection and MWA. Many of them are shown in duplicate and triplicate.

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