

43. "Man a Rational Creature!"

To Thomas Jefferson

Quincy, May 29, 1818

I think, with you, that it is difficult to say at what moment the Revolution began. In my opinion, it began as early as the first plantation of the country. Independence of Church and Parliament was a fixed principle of our predecessors in 1620, as it was of Samuel Adams and Christopher Gadsden in 1776; and independence of Church and Parliament was always kept in view in this part of the country, and, I believe, in most others. The hierarchy and parliamentary authority ever were dreaded and detested even by a majority of professed Episcopalians. I congratulate you upon your "canine appetite" for reading. I have been equally voracious for several years, and it has kept me alive. It is policy in me to despise and abhor the writing-table, for it is a bunch of grapes out of reach. Had I your eyes and fingers, I should scribble forever such poor stuff as I have been writing by fits and by starts for fifty or sixty years, without ever correcting or revising any thing.

. . . When we come to be cool in the future world, I think we cannot choose but smile at the gambols of ambition, avarice, pleasure, sport, and caprices here below. Perhaps we may laugh as the angels do in the French fable. At a convivial repast of a club of choice spirits, of whom Gabriel and Michael were the most illustrious, after nectar and ambrosia had set their hearts at ease, they began to converse upon the *mécanique céleste*. After discussing the Zodiac, and the constellations of the solar system, they condescended to this speck of dirt, the earth, and remarked

some of its inhabitants, the lion, the elephant, the eagle, and even the fidelity, gratitude, and adroitness of the dog. At last, one of them recollected man. What a fine countenance! What an elegant figure! What subtilty, ingenuity, versatility, agility, and, above all, a rational creature! At this, the whole board broke out into a broad ha! ha! ha! that resounded through the vault of heaven, exclaiming, "Man a rational creature! How could any rational being ever dream that man was a rational creature?"

After all, I hope to meet my wife, and friends, ancestors and posterity, sages, ancient and modern. I believe I could get over all my objections to meeting Alexander Hamilton and Tim Pick, if I could see a symptom of penitence in either. . . .