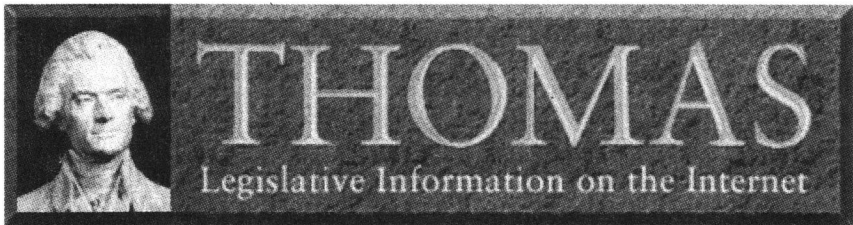


# Moderns Reading Jefferson: Ezra Pound, Aldous Huxley, and “Intellectual Populism” in our Time\*

Juan Leon



1

Let me begin by way of a recognition: Pound and Huxley are perhaps unlikely counterparts. They had little connection in life. Huxley gave up on poetry early in his career. Pound was never to write novels. Their prose styles and personalities were wholly different. Pound idealized the same Italian Fascist organization that disgusted and harassed Huxley. And yet these writers are linked in their most important concerns. Both were preoccupied by the relation of literature and information to the modern state.

As a consequence, both were extraordinary educators. Consider

Pound's various, iconoclastic guides to literature and culture, and his infamous radio broadcasts. Then there's Huxley's lifelong effort to popularize scientific information and debate. Pound and Huxley were also utopianists: We have Huxley's carefully constructed ideal society in his last novel, *Island*; Pound's imperishable, unreachable "city of Dioce," and his obsession with social credit.

Both writers looked closely and scientifically at the material forces of their world: Biology and sociology were of central interest for Huxley, economics for Pound. Finally, they were modern transcendentalists: Note Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* and *Doors of Perception* and Pound's "light from Elusis" (from *The Spirit of Romance*).

The more we recognize their differences as men and writers, the more we are struck by the modernism that links Pound and Huxley, their common responses to Modernity. Critical of the commercialization, rationalization, overspecialization, secularization and bureaucratization of their times, Pound and Huxley found in Jefferson a powerfully, if not simply, anti-modern figure. Jefferson became an indispensable part of the thought of both men.

Pound marked the depth of his devotion to Jefferson clearly in a letter to an American correspondent in 1933, describing the former President as if he were a blood relation: "T. J. is my cherished forebear (sic)" (*Letters*, 325). Pound saw himself trying to recall American minds to the vital thought and action of this revolutionary ancestor. In his essay on the Jefferson-Adams correspondence Pound would go so far as to blame the entire, disastrous course of history leading into the First World War on mankind's ignorance of Jefferson's knowledge. Jefferson was a leader whose example could guide and redeem us, but only if we paid attention.

Huxley, for his part, took very seriously Jefferson's conception of a nation of independent, virtuous, and cooperative, agrarian freeholders. Year by year modernity distanced itself from a Jeffersonian society of self-reliant individuals and small, voluntary associations. But modernity might yet come full circle, returning us to Jefferson. Despite the drawbacks of modern technology, Huxley confided to his brother Julian in 1940, the same technology, properly applied, might, paradoxically, "reproduce the conditions that made Jeffersonian democracy possible" (*Letters*, 464).

Along with this kind of devotion and aspiration both writers referred to Jefferson with caution, if not outright embarrassment. Huxley feared that Jeffersonian language must sound "touchingly quaint and ingenuous" to twentieth-century ears ("Propaganda," 24; in BNWR). Pound noted early on in "The Jefferson-Adams Letters" that Jefferson had been "abused as an incredible optimist" (*Selected Prose*, 149). Political radicals themselves, Pound and Huxley sensed that while Jefferson (or Jeffersonian thinking) had been fundamental to the establishment of modern times, the present times were wholly out of line with his principles. For Pound, modernity lacked the heroic Personality the poet attributed to the former President — excepting perhaps the case of Mussolini. Huxley was less interested in Jefferson the Personality or the individual than in the revolutionary's social plan — even if modern overpopulation and overorganization had made Jefferson's social goals almost unthinkable.

Both writers, then, invoked somewhat different, if equally out of place Jeffersons, but their interests overlapped in an area I should like to focus on today: Jefferson the champion of free inquiry and exchange, and Jefferson the critic of the mass media of his time, the newspapers.

Now, perhaps we already know well enough that Jefferson was important to the world-views of Pound and Huxley: witness Pound's notorious political tract *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*. Reed Dasenbrock, in "Jefferson and/or Adams," and Gregory Eislein, in "Jefferson in the Thirties," have carefully described both Jefferson's place in Pound's thought with regard to other U. S. "Founding Fathers" and the historical materials Pound made use of in his study of Jefferson. Other scholars have addressed the issue of Pound and Jefferson as part of their larger monographs. Huxley referred to Jefferson approvingly and often in some of his most widely read collections of essays: *Brave New World Revisited*, *Science, Liberty, and Peace*, and elsewhere. We know that Jefferson is inseparable from Huxley's later views on democracy.

Nevertheless, a reevaluation of Jefferson's meaning for moderns may be timely considering the recent celebration of the 250th anniversary of his birth, the recent appearance of an issue of the *Japanese Journal of American Studies* dedicated to Jefferson scholarship, and, most importantly, the rise of a wholly new information technology, the Internet.

## 2

One of the more striking additions to the legacy of Thomas Jefferson must be the inauguration in January, 1995 of "Thomas," the U.S. House of Representatives' gateway to the Internet. In the unembarrassed, enthusiastic words of the Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, on-line access to Congress promises the first nation-wide, participatory dialogue of the information age.

Via the Internet individuals can now review the complete texts of

bills, read summaries of committee activities, and educate themselves about Congressional workings and the law-making process. An extensive directory includes the e-mail addresses of representatives. A special area devoted to feedback, "Empowering the Citizen," promotes two-way communication. For Gingrich, the new technology promises a "dramatic expansion of an intellectual populism that Jefferson dreamed of 200 years ago." "Thomas," Gingrich continues, will by-pass the distortions and cynicism of the media; "Thomas" will give to average citizens the information that lobbyists have; "Thomas" will shift the balance of power in America "toward the citizens" (*The Daily Yomiuri*).

These are laudable goals, but, political hyperbole aside, is "Thomas" truly Jeffersonian? Let me begin to answer that question by suggesting that the Internet's "Thomas," and the claims made for it, are in some ways profoundly American. After sketching in some cultural background I will move on to Pound and Huxley's interpretations of Jefferson — especially Jefferson as media critic — in the process of returning to this present-day issue.

The Internet's "Thomas" is American, first of all, in its reliance upon a computer network, an "information highway," pioneered by the American military during the cold war years. Beyond its computer technology, it is indebted philosophically to the American Enlightenment, Protestantism, and an American ideal of participatory Democracy. "Thomas" posits an educated, rational citizen who would single-handedly read through the U. S. Constitution, peruse a document on how legislation is passed, review pending bills, and e-mail his or her judicious opinion to the appropriate congressional representative. The congressperson would, presumably, pay attention. Allowing one to make use of an alter-

native form of mass media, the Internet, to avoid using corrupt alternatives, television and the newspapers, "Thomas" is up-to-date, but also historically very American in its reliance upon and simultaneous distrust of mass media itself.

We can find a classic instance of this American cultural nexus of technology, informed citizenry, popular democracy, and ambivalence about mass media in Mark Twain's "Connecticut Yankee" (from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*). Determined to bring medieval England up to 19th century American standards of technology and democracy, Twain's quintessential American, Hank Morgan, stipulates the need for a patent office, a public school system, and then a newspaper. The newspaper, he concedes, may be full of rubbish, and Hank will always employ other — secret — means for communicating anything of importance, but, he assures us, a nation can not possibly advance without a popular press. Hank's revolutionary effort, you may recall, ends disastrously. This is in large part because the masses toward whom Hank's paper is directed have neither the will (due to their cultural conditioning) nor the power (due to their economic deprivation) to confront the feudal elite.

As Newt Gingrich's hopes for "Thomas" attest, the American ideal of complementarity between technology, media, and democracy, remains to be fully realized. It is frustrated, in Gingrich's view, by a host of villains: "lobbyists," the cynicism of media "elites," and "special interests." Indeed, many contemporary American writers themselves find that post-modern systems of information acquisition, interpretation, and distribution have little to do with democratic processes of education and decision making. We expect both too much and too little from the media, and

find only bizarre consolations for the society we do not yet have.

Let me briefly illustrate by quoting from Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, winner of the National Book Award in 1985. The narrator at this point is a secondary character, a German teacher by profession:

My mother's death had a terrible impact on me. I collapsed totally, lost my faith in God. I was inconsolable, withdrew completely into myself. Then one day by chance I saw a weather report on TV. A dynamic young man with a glowing pointer stood before a multicolored satellite photo, predicting the weather for the next five days. I sat there mesmerized by his self-assurance and skill. It was as though a message was being transmitted from the weather satellite through that young man and then to me in my canvas chair. I turned to meteorology for comfort. I read weather maps, collected books on weather, attended launchings of weather balloons. I realized weather was something I'd been looking for all of my life. It brought me a sense of peace and security I'd never experienced. Dew, frost and fog. Snow flurries. The jet stream. I believe there is a grandeur in the jet stream. I began to come out of my shell, talk to people in the street.... I made a list of goals I hoped to achieve in meteorology. I took a correspondence course, got a degree to teach the subject in buildings with a legal occupancy of less than one hundred. (55)

It is not the local or national news, but the attendant weather fore-

cast that engages this speaker. The weather alone seems to have cosmic, personal, and social significance. Weather, not pending legislation, or other information, fulfills him and motivates him to interact with and organize others. Meteorological conditions, perfectly relevant, and, because they are totally out of our hands, largely irrelevant to democratic decision making. Weather has nothing to do with government, still less self-government.

## 3

I would suggest that Pound and Huxley in their readings of Jefferson present models of information in its relation to democracy that are more complicated than Hank Morgan's—or Newt Gingrich's—energetic, optimistic conceptions. Though grounded in the same, imperfectly developed, American cultural nexus I have described above, their models move us away from the transformation of information into mere weather reports: mesmerizing, colorfully predigested data speaking of vast systems that affect our everyday lives, but over which we have no control.

For Pound, an indispensable element of the democratic information system was the nature of the individual him or her self. Democratic decision-making demanded not only information and ratiocination, but republican virtues and heroic personality of the sort possessed by Jefferson. As *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* and Pound's essay on the Jefferson-Adams correspondence make clear, Pound admired Jefferson's character as well as—perhaps more than—his political ideas. Pound felt that Jefferson, like Mussolini, was essentially an inspired revolutionary and broad-minded pragmatist, one whose set of ideas might change with the times,



but who nevertheless remained true to populist principles.

In "Canto XXXI" Pound selects those passages in Jefferson's writing that show the enlightened leader personally studying the construction of canals, the nature of U. S. flora and fauna, and the mechanics of screws. In this Canto and "Canto XXXIII" Pound underscores Jefferson's opposition to the expansion of slavery and his contempt for totalitarian rule. We find Pound quoting Jefferson at length: "there is not a crowned head in Europe whose talents or merits would entitle him to be elected a vestryman by any American parish."

Furthermore, Jefferson's sense of responsibility, republican-spiritedness, range of mental reference, and ability to get things done distinguished the politician who was also, in a certain way, an artist, uniting practical and intellectual concerns in promoting local culture by any means at hand. Thus Pound's well-known quotation, in "Canto XXI," from one of Jefferson's letters to a European friend: "Could you," wrote Mr. Jefferson, "/ Find me a gardener who can play the French horn?"<sup>1</sup>

Jefferson and Mussolini were living, revolutionary artists whose material was society itself. "The earth belongs to the living," Pound did not tire of repeating in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*. In Pound's view, artistic change nevertheless depended upon an ethical order as much as it brought a new order into being. It grew out of and revealed a "hierarchy of values," a "sense of gradations," ultimately a new cosmos.

It was this hierarchy of values that Pound felt — in a very modern fashion — had been disintegrated in the era after the deaths of Jefferson and Adams. The disintegration that would "split our mental life into bits" — to paraphrase Pound — could be seen in one of its key aspects in the work of the Encyclopaedists. In the *Encyclopaedia* human knowledge

was presented in alphabetical order, with no other relation or valuation than that inherent in the movement from A to Z. Pound could find there no effort to reconcile information with value. Thus, for Pound, true philosophy stopped with Leibniz, "the last reconciler" (*Selected Prose*, 156). The breakdown of the Aquinian universe destroyed the "hierarchy of evaluation" that was still reflected in the thought of Jefferson and Adams.

In Pound's view Jefferson was not simply a leader with a taste for the arts, he was a principled revolutionist for whom literature and culture served as both recreation and valuable, even scientific, sources of information. For Pound, literature, practiced as a kind of social science, was to take up the burden of moral investigation and understanding dropped by modern society after Leibniz. Literature could both focus imaginative attention and, most importantly, keep the language accurate, fresh, and honest, and he saw Jefferson as a sharer of this vision.

As Pound put it as early as his 1922 commentary upon *Ulysses*, Jefferson "was perhaps the last American official to have any general sense of civilization" because he understood the scientific value of serious literature. Jefferson, Pound approvingly stressed, was convinced of the necessity of a popular press, yet severely criticized the existing one. Pound drew attention in "Canto XXXI" to Jefferson's long-standing support of Thomas Paine, the chief political pamphleteer of the American revolution, and to Jefferson's contempt for the lies of the English papers. Regarding the present day, Pound concluded in his review of *Ulysses*, crucial information went undistributed: "A very limited plutocracy now gets the news" (*Literary Essays*, 408-409). Serious literature was largely ignored or suppressed. Newspapers misinformed. Thus, the life of the mind in

modern times seemed to be restricted to very small circles.

Huxley similarly noted Jefferson's understanding of the importance of, and unreliability of, the press. Huxley concurred with Jefferson in that the popular press tended to foment disagreements for their own sake and seek out the sensational. And yet the press, Huxley writes, quoting Jefferson, is a "friend of science and liberty": "Where the press is free, and every man able to read, all is safe" ("Propaganda" 28, 27; in *BNWR*). As Huxley illustrated in the fiction of *Brave New World*, this freedom and safety was endangered in modern times by technologies of mass communication and persuasion that could not have been conceived of by Huxley's 18th century predecessors. There was, on the one hand, the confused blending of information with entertainment and distraction that had come to characterize the mass media: the newspapers, the radio, and, in the latter part of his life, television. There was, on the other hand, the progressive consolidation of organs of mass communication into the hands of fewer and fewer owners, with their necessarily limited interests, and their increasingly sophisticated techniques of coercion, persuasion, and diversion.

Unlike Pound, however, Huxley did not look to heroic Jeffersonian leadership for democratic social redemption. That was unnecessary, in Huxley's view, because he shared with Jefferson a faith in the power of unhampered human rationality and innate sense of justice. The chief difficulty for popular democracy lay not in individual character, then, but in reconciling social order with personal freedom and identity, for modern societies tended to homogenize their citizens in the interest of economic and military efficiency. Individuality, Huxley affirmed, is disruptive. To recall one of the lines of hypnopaedic teaching in *Brave New World*:

"When the individual feels, the community reels" (72). On a still larger, global, scale, human rationality and sense of justice were constrained by the problems of over-population and over-organization. Against these various modern social ills Huxley recommended political, economic, and residential decentralization.

Thus Huxley's Jefferson is principally an anarchist, the Jefferson who at 81 thought that the system of government in the United States had already grown too large and ought perhaps to be rolled back a little. Huxley believed, with Jefferson, that only independent cultivators of the earth could achieve fully realized moral selves, and only they could exercise free choice in democratic decision-making<sup>2</sup>. (In *Brave New World*, we learn, "Everyone, in a word, who's anyone" is on an island (174).) Through high-tech methods of decentralization, rather than social and technological regression or heroic leadership, Huxley hoped for nothing less than a renewal of Jeffersonian self-reliance and participatory democracy. (*Science, Liberty, and Peace*, 42-43). For Huxley, the failures of participatory democracy were not due to failures of personality, but to a social organization that frustrated the necessary independence of means and of mind.

To return to our opening question: "Thomas" seems to be profoundly American, and fundamentally Jeffersonian, in its goal of using a form of mass media, whatever its inherent limitations, to provide full and ready access to the process of law making so that citizens can participate in their democracy, but the system's limitations may make the invocation of

Jefferson very misleading. If we are to take the perspectives of "modern Jeffersonians" like Pound and Huxley into account, can we say that "Thomas" is fully Jeffersonian?

The richness of data the site provides, the graphs of usage statistics, the nearly instant access to legislation and congressional debate bearing on any subject the investigator may be interested in: all can go a long way toward informing the public of governmental workings, but all are just as likely to become another "weather report" in DeLillo's sense, a bright flow of information that bears crucially upon the condition of our everyday lives, but speaks to us of a system over which we have no control. We may find ourselves exceedingly well informed, but powerless, fascinated, but passive.

From a Huxlian perspective "Thomas" is crippled. It does not address the social and economic context within which the information it provides can be interpreted or made use of. Given that much of the data available via "Thomas" was available before—it previously required simply a few phone calls or a trip to the library to find out what was going on in Congress—it may well be that the social forces promoting wide-spread voter disillusionment and apathy will in no way be changed by "Thomas." "Thomas" is silent on the matter of democratic discussion among voters themselves, does little to facilitate inter-group consideration of issues, or local political engagement. Indeed, shorn as it is of information about state legislatures or city councils, "Thomas" only increases our attention to, and dependence upon, monolithic, centralized government from afar.

In short, "Thomas" cannot, in itself, lead to the kind of informed action that Pound felt was essential to Jefferson's character and historical

importance; and "Thomas," in itself, does nothing to assure that citizens will make use of it with the civic-mindedness and breadth of perspective that Pound attributed to Jefferson. On the contrary, "Thomas" may, in a perverse way, prove only too convenient, leading to half-formulated assertions produced in the private glow of one's computer terminal. Alternatively, with regard to popular uses of information technologies, it may be that, as Andrew Ross has urged in "Hacking Away at the Counterculture," these technologies can be turned to the purposes of democracy (*Technoculture*). The Internet, certainly, has made information exchange and self-publication possible on an entirely new scale.

Perhaps, then, "Thomas" can yet become a resource for those interested in participatory democracy. It may be reconfigured. A more Jeffersonian "Thomas" would expand to include local legislative information and multi-party discussion forums — the latter already a standard part of private information services and the Internet. At the moment, however, "Thomas" may remain, ironically, nothing more than a convenience to those already interested in Washington politics, a convenience to the "special interests" and lobbyists the service was meant to bypass, or a passing stimulation for web-browsers who will check-out the weather and move on.

## NOTES

\* Text of a talk delivered before the English Literary Society of Kyoto University November 04, 1995.

<sup>1</sup> That "any means" would necessarily included the dissolution of other cultures

seems not to have bothered Pound overmuch. In this series of Cantos he approvingly contrasts Jefferson's forceful plans for the full cultural assimilation of the American Indian with the plans of those who would exploit the Indian as cheap labor rather than provide tribes with the means for independent living as farmers.

- <sup>2</sup> "More and more it seems to me clear that Jefferson was right and that democratic institutions cannot exist where there is not a wide distribution of private property in land, utilizable goods and means of production" (letter to Julian Huxley, *Letters*, 500).

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