

The Paris Years

“IT WAS IN FRANCE, where he resided nearly seven years, and until the revolution had made some progress, that his disposition to theory, and his skepticism in religion, morals, and government, acquired full strength and vigor.”¹ Taken out of context, this statement might almost be seen, today at least, as a compliment to Jefferson; coming from a contemporary Federalist opponent in an election race, it was meant nastily, as a condemnation. But it was true. In his Paris years, intellectually, once he had settled in, Jefferson was in his element. Paris—at least its upper crust—offered a heady mix of art, literature, music, philosophy, science, invention, intrigue, and social revolution. The food was delicious, the wines even more so. The streets were not paved with gold, but the banks of the Seine were lined with booksellers’ stalls full of enticing titles in a dozen languages.

It was in Paris that Jefferson also encountered a new world of science and inventiveness. In the contemporary sense, the French word “philosophe” fitted Jefferson perfectly. In the Age of Reason, a philosophe was someone who applied his (mostly his) formidable learning and intellectual powers not just to solving abstract problems of moral philosophy or the meaning of life but to addressing the pressing issues of the day, in science, politics, the social state, and the human condition. Philosophes, people like Rousseau, Diderot, and Buffon, wrote extensively and widely. No subject could fail to be improved by a combination of pure reason and practicality. Thomas Paine, for example, author of the political pamphlet *Common Sense* and someone Jefferson admired greatly, “invented an iron bridge which promises to be cheaper by a great deal than stone, and to admit of a much greater arch.”²