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REVIEW OF Jefferson's Body : A Corporeal Biography

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REVIEW OF Maurizio Valsania, *Jefferson's Body: A Corporeal Biography*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2017

Maurizio Valsania has again written a book on Jefferson. This time he approaches the subject from the viewpoint of corporeality, although much less in terms of the eighteenth-century understanding of the subject than strictly in terms of Jefferson's person and personal views. Interesting, and occasionally amusing, details come into view. Jefferson was "six feet two-and-a-half inches" tall and "straight as a gun barrel" (9), with swinging gait and constant smile. When addressed he would only nod rather than shake hands with you and speak softly with constantly folded arms. He ate little meat but thought wine was "indispensable for my health" (90).

This is a thoroughly documented and competent treatment of Jefferson's personal image of himself and of the significance of corporeality in his social thought. The second part of the book concentrates on Jefferson's "others," particularly African Americans, Native Americans, and women. Occasionally we encounter even an "other other," namely Sally Hemings, whom Jefferson, somewhat paradoxically, probably knew better than any other person. Eventually, as Valsania points out, there is no denying that Jefferson as an eighteenth-century figure is bound to remain "other" to us (195).

Indeed, the concept of otherness is not to be understood as paradigmatically discriminatory. It has to do not only with constructing one's self in dialogue with others but also with the very notion of meaning production itself. It is hard to imagine white without black, nor the concept of man without the concept of woman.

Rather than writing traditional intellectual history, Valsania clearly writes in the genre of cultural studies. Jefferson, of course, never knew about such concepts as corporeality or otherness. Occasionally this causes problems in Valsania's general analysis regarding the complex notion of Jeffersonian progress, whose end result Jefferson constantly claimed not to know, even as it related to the understanding of what is natural to all humankind.

Valsania, for example, points out Jefferson's disinclination to accept women into politics. When as President he had an opportunity to appoint a woman to a minor federal office (light house keeper) in 1807, Jefferson famously noted that such an appointment would be "an innovation for which the public is not prepared, nor am I" (175). Contrary to Valsania, however, one might read this statement about being "prepared" to indicate that, indeed, even in Jefferson's eyes, future generations might find such an innovation

natural in the course of human progress, even if he himself, here and now in the White House in 1807, did not.

Similarly, when Valsania characterizes Jefferson's understanding of "Jesus's simplicity" as a paragon of "civilization and whiteness" and relates it to an allegedly Jeffersonian notion of "white bodies having no attributes, no characteristics, no traits, except their 'natural' simplicity" (133), it is difficult to grasp his actual meaning. Perhaps Jefferson's views should not be read as timeless maxims, with the notable exception of the hopeful notion of progress, which itself called primarily for the betterment of oneself in relation to one's others.

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