Pascal in Jamaica; or, The French Enlightenment in Translation

April G. Shelford
American University

You can never be wise unless you love reading.
Samuel Johnson

Aujourd'hui, tout le monde lit et veut lire de tout.
Journal encyclopédique (1758)

On Friday, 30 March 1770, Captain Benjamin Blake loaned Thomas Thistlewood an English translation of Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois. Thistlewood kept it for more than three months. In the interim, he occupied himself with managing his property, Breadnut Island Pen, which was located a few miles west of Savannah-la-Mar, the principal port for Jamaica's southwest corner. While Thistlewood's days centered on hiring out his slaves, they also included frequent interactions with his white neighbors, many of which involved exchanging books and periodicals. Always reading more than one book at a time, Thistlewood was also always borrowing and lending. His most frequent partner was his best friend, Samuel Hayward, whom he visited often in Savannah-la-Mar. Indeed, he returned Hayward's English translation of the letters of the famous French seventeenth-century courtesan, Ninon de l'Enclos, soon after he returned Montesquieu to Blake on 10 July. Before Thistlewood

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1 Papers of Thomas Thistlewood (hereafter TT), MONSON 31/21, 30
returned either book, however, he carefully transcribed passages from them into his commonplace book.\footnote{TT, MONSON 31/73, fols. 294-end of volume.}

Thistlewood needs no introduction to scholars of the Caribbean and the English Atlantic World. Born in England in 1721 to a tenant farmer, he received a good education for someone of a modest social background. His family destined him to animal husbandry, but wanderlust prompted him to abandon an apprenticeship in 1740 and no doubt inspired a stint with the East India Company from 1746 to 1748. His attempts to trade goods acquired through that voyage failed, however, as did his attempts to marry respectably and otherwise establish himself. With little to hold him in England, he emigrated to Jamaica in 1750. Settled in Westmoreland Parish, Thistlewood briefly worked as a surveyor and livestock keeper, then as an overseer on a sugar plantation. In 1767, he became an independent landowner. While never the equal in wealth or status of the local planters, he acquired more prosperity and greater respectability than he probably would have had he remained in England.\footnote{Biographical information drawn from Trevor Burnard, \textit{Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World} (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Douglas Hall, \textit{In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-1786} (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 1989).}

Despite being "a man of no particular distinction,"\footnote{Philip Morgan, http://history.jhu.edu/Faculty_Bio/morgan.html.} Thistlewood nevertheless commands scholarly attention because of the incomparable record of island life he left in volume after volume of journals. These detail his activities from his arrival to his death in 1786. Not surprisingly, scholars have used them largely to explore the nature of race and slavery in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean, subjects of central concern in Caribbean and Atlantic World history more generally.\footnote{A few examples of Caribbean and Atlantic World historiography: the classic studies of Richard B. Sheridan, \textit{Sugar and Slavery: An Economic

\textit{Proceedings of the Western Society for French History}
process, his biographers, Douglas Hall and Trevor Burnard, have made Thistlewood infamous for his brutal punishment and sexual exploitation of his slaves. More recently, Thistlewood's records have provided a means to investigate the Jamaican climate during the eighteenth century. But Thistlewood's manuscripts, especially his commonplace books, have never been utilized in the contexts proposed here: intellectual history, a social history of ideas, and the history of the book. Such neglect appears justified by the reputation of English and French colonists alike, well established in the eighteenth century, as "materialist and debauched, indifferent to the life of the mind, unfit for the slightest intellectual activity that did not promise immediate profit"—in short, "there is no history of ideas in the region worth speaking about." Yet more scholars, including myself, have become convinced that the region was not nearly as intellectually barren as visitors such as Charles Leslie, who

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8 Though Burnard does grapple with Thistlewood as an intellectual in his chapter "In the Scientific Manner: Thistlewood and the Practical Enlightenment in a Slavery Regime," Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire, 101-36.

9 François Regourd, "Les Antilles françaises dans la République des Lettres," Dix-huitième siècle, no. 33 (2001): 182. My translation; this is a perception the article seeks to begin rectifying for the French Caribbean.

declared in 1740 that "learning is here [in Jamaica] at the lowest Ebb," might lead us to believe. Indeed, this work on Thistlewood will figure among other episodes drawn from both English and French colonial contexts in a larger study on the Enlightenment in the Caribbean.

This article focuses on Thistlewood as a reader of the French Enlightenment—with two important caveats. First, the topic reflects more how scholars divide up eighteenth-century intellectual culture than how eighteenth-century readers might have experienced it. Thistlewood no doubt shared the common English dislike for the French kingdom as a locus of despotism and popery, and he and his neighbors had good reason to fear it as a threat to his island home's security. Yet Thistlewood does not seem to have experienced the works of French authors as distinctive simply because they were "French" (though this article will argue that they made distinctive contributions to his thought). Rather, Thistlewood's experience of Enlightenment literary culture appears seamless, a fact that found physical expression on the bookshelves where he did not segregate works by French authors. Second, while the number of French works he read was significant, works in English by British authors for British readers greatly outnumbered them. Thus, Thistlewood "read" the French Enlightenment in the contexts of distinctively English concerns as well as those of an English colonist living in a society radically different from that of his home country.

This article further assumes that Thistlewood's reading was "enlightened," that is, informed by, expressing, and participating in the "Enlightenment" as an international cultural and

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12 Thistlewood's library inventory proceeds shelf by shelf. TT, MONSON 31/81.
intellectual phenomenon. After decades of scholarly debate about the meaning, even the existence of "Enlightenment," how should we understand the term here?\textsuperscript{13} This article works from the most stripped back, yet also democratic and potentially revolutionary of definitions: the appropriation of the right to think for one's self, or, in the words of one of Thistlewood's contemporaries, the liberty of "every man in this Enlightened age . . . of making a philosophy (and . . . a religion) for himself."\textsuperscript{14} Certainly there were leading figures, but the men and women who purchased books, attended "experimental" demonstrations, and applauded theatrical productions did not require high priests of learning to usher them into the inner sanctum of knowledge, much less warn them away from what they believed their flocks were better off not knowing. This view regards the Enlightenment as an attitude and an approach, not a set of settled opinions or canonical texts, much less evidence of the progress of humanity. It thus avoids unhelpful dichotomies raised by characterizations of "the" Enlightenment as "progressive" or "repressive," and it cautions against such questions as "Was Jamaica a haven of the Enlightenment, or was it one of those outposts of empire that Bernard Bailyn has described as a 'ragged outer margin of a central world, a regressive, backward-looking diminishment of metropolitan accomplishment'?\textsuperscript{15} In Thistlewood's small corner of southwestern Jamaica, the opportunities for participation in Enlightenment culture were necessarily more limited than back in Europe—or even in Philadelphia. Hence, it was largely through books that he and his


\textsuperscript{15} Burnard, \textit{Mastery}, 115.
neighbors gained access to a cosmopolitan world of learning, literature, fashion, politics, pornography, and even just gossip. As in the metropole, reading in Thistlewood's Jamaica had an important social dimension that can only be suggested here. His journals make possible reconstructions of timetables of exchanges with his neighbors. From 1770 to 1773, for example, he exchanged publications with a total of twenty-three people; as mentioned before, the greatest number of exchanges was between Thistlewood and Hayward (fifty of Thistlewood's loans and nineteen of his borrowings out of a total of fifty-eight in each category). These figures indicate Thistlewood's reluctance to lend, though he was apparently happy to benefit from others' liberality. Of the other readers with whom he exchanged publications, twenty were men, and two were women. The exchanges themselves were quite eclectic, ranging from treatises on medicine and angling to periodicals and novels. We even find a pornographic satire of science and empire. The existence of this group helped compensate for the lack of subscription libraries and cafes that readers even in provincial European cities—or, for that matter, in Cap Français on Saint-Domingue—enjoyed. Moreover, during the eighteenth century, reading was never considered an exclusively (or even primarily) private experience. Rather, it prepared a reader to converse well.

16 When Moreau de Saint-Méry moved to Saint-Domingue from Martinique in 1775, for example, he could avail himself of the resources of the island's first reading room for a modest monthly subscription. Moreau de Saint-Méry, Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 1984), 321.

17 Samuel Johnson advised a female friend, for example, to read The Tatler, because "[t]hey are part of the books which everybody should read, because they are the sources of conversation." Robert DeMaria, Jr., Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 147. For the connection between learning and conversation in the North American colonial context, David S. Shields, "Eighteenth-Century Literary Culture," in Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, eds., A History of the Book in America, vol. 1, The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 448.
Figure 1: French Works in the Library of Thomas Thistlewood

Thistlewood generally provided enough bibliographic information to determine the editions he owned by consulting Eighteenth-Century Collections Online. When Thistlewood’s information is confirmed from Worldcat, the entry is followed by **.


Arvieux, Laurent d’. *The Travels of the Chevalier de Arvieux; in Arabia the Desart*. London 1732. In 12.**


Fénelon, François de Salignac de La Mothe-. *The Adventures of Telemachus, the son of Ulysses*. London, 1754. In 12, two volumes.

Fontenelle, Bernard Le Bovier de. *A Week’s Conversation on the Plurality of Worlds*.


In 12.


In 12, six volumes.


Thistlewood rarely documented his friends' table talk, it defies credulity that they did not discuss the books and periodicals that they had acquired at some cost and trouble and that they briskly circulated amongst themselves.

This analysis of Thistlewood as a reader of the French Enlightenment also contributes to the history of the book. It thus encounters the same methodological challenges of the field more generally. The sources, such as library inventories, that help us tally who bought what books cannot tell us their readers' opinions of them—or even whether they read them at all. For answers to those questions, we must turn to personal sources, such as letters, journals, annotations, and commonplace books, but these are so idiosyncratic that conclusions drawn from them resist generalization. For example, Thistlewood's journals provide specifics about which French books in translation Thistlewood owned, because he noted the books he purchased before coming to Jamaica in 1750, and he inventoried his own substantial library in 1777 after a hurricane badly damaged it. Figure 1 lists all the French titles that he owned based on that inventory. It presents few surprises, except perhaps for what it lacks (most prominently, novels) and the presence of several seventeenth-century classics that are more difficult to square with Thistlewood's easily identified interests. François Fénelon's Telemachus and Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole's Logique probably reflect his concern with how to educate his own son, though the attempt to connect every volume of his library to a specific motive or interest would be futile.


In contrast, I am certain that the problems of childrearing spurred Thistlewood's interest in John Locke's Some Thoughts on Education. He borrowed and commonplaced it in 1761, the year after his son's birth, and later
Thistlewood clearly shared the general enthusiasm of eighteenth-century readers for travel accounts and works by the physician Samuel Auguste Tissot, Abbé Raynal, and Voltaire. Indeed, he apparently liked the last a great deal. Yet there is no way to know what Thistlewood thought specifically about anything that Voltaire wrote, because the commonplace books, the best basis for speculation about how he interpreted and judged his reading, contain notes only on the works he borrowed.

Even a superficial examination of Thistlewood's commonplace books reveals how seriously he engaged with books; a deeper analysis will reveal more about how eighteenth-century readers read. This "how" question has bedeviled scholars for some time. Wolfgang Iser's pioneering schema of "intensive" versus "extensive" reading, with the latter superceding the former over time, has given way to more nuanced views. Robert Darnton's hilarious exploration of the reception of Rousseau's La nouvelle Héloïse, for example, amply proves that eighteenth-century readers could read a secular work just as intensively as a religious one. Because eighteenth-century readers like Thistlewood frequently sought moral strictures and not just entertainment in novels, it is difficult to correlate neatly the seriousness a reader brought to his reading with the genres he read. In an insightful and sensitive analysis of Samuel

journal entries indicate that he provided his son with books recommended by Locke. For commonplaces on Locke's Thoughts, MONSON 31/73, fols. 13-20; for journal entries, MONSON 31/22, 22 September and 26 December 1771. The greater part of MONSON 31/81 is taken up with an inventory of Thistlewood's library, though it also includes an inventory of Hayward's smaller collection.


21 Thistlewood appears to have culled both moral lessons and a conception of ideal womanhood from novels, an aspect of the gendered dimension of Thistlewood's reading that I intend to explore. Regarding reading the novel in eighteenth-century America, see Elizabeth Carroll Reilly and David D. Hall, "Customers and the Market for Books," A History of the Book in America, I: 399; on Richardson's Pamela in Britain, France, and Germany, see Reinhard
Johnson’s reading practices, Robert De Maria has identified four types of reading, ranged in a spectrum from most to least serious: "hard study," "perusal," "curious reading," and "mere reading."  

Thistlewood’s commonplace books suggest that he read intensively, extensively, curiously, casually, diligently, purposefully, pruriently—and for reasons from the mundane to the transcendent. But they also pose interpretive problems. The commonplace book has a long history in early modern Europe, and it served a variety of purposes. From the Renaissance, it was an instrument of pedagogy and moral instruction, and it provided a way for the reader to retain and retrieve what he had read and to assert control over an ever-increasing quantity of printed material. It also gave reading a moral purpose by investing it with the supreme secular virtue of the period: utility. Thistlewood’s commonplace books loosely followed the model established by John Locke and popularized by Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* (1728). In them, we find page after page of scrupulous, if sometimes redacted, transcriptions from the books and periodicals he borrowed, all accompanied by fastidious bibliographic information and descriptive subject headings in the margins. Yet, in hundreds of

Wittmann, “Was there a Reading Revolution?,” in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), 296.

22 See note 17.

23 This challenges the assertion that "[i]t was the book as object as much as the contents of the book that most impressed Thistlewood." Burnard, *Mastery*, 111.


pages, Thistlewood almost never explicitly expressed any opinion of the works from which he so laboriously copied thousands of passages. Thus, we cannot pluck out a handful of quotations and conclude, "Ah, that's what Thistlewood thought about slavery, or women, or the nature of God." Still, he returned to some themes again and again. It is useful to think about the transcriptions that cluster around a specific theme as an internal conversation, sometimes debate, between Thistlewood and the authors he read. The remainder of this paper will briefly characterize how French authors figured in two of these internal conversations—one on religion, the other on slavery—and speculate how French authors figured in them and whether their views had any special significance.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emilius*, which Thistlewood read in an Edinburgh, 1773, three-volume edition, prompted one of the few explicit judgments he made of any work he commonplaced. He singled out "The Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Curate" for special attention. As usual, he noted the page where the text that interested him began; atypically, he did not transcribe a single line from it.26 Rather, he wrote just one word in the margin where he usually assigned a subject to a transcription: "Excellent." Why did Thistlewood so unequivocally praise this chapter of *Émile*, the same one that prompted a condemnation by French Church authorities? The answer requires some discussion of Thistlewood's education and the evidence of his religious beliefs.

Thistlewood's formal schooling began in 1729 when he "went to school with dame Widow Speight to learn to read." Soon after he studied privately with Reverend Phillip Hollins and Mr. John Pearson. The latter taught him Latin and, by 1732, was instructing him in Greek. Add five weeks over Easter in 1738 to learn mathematics from Mr. John Webster, and Thistlewood's formal education—episodic, modest, but solid enough—came to a close.27 The lists of books Thistlewood

26 TT, MONSON 31/74, fol. 275.
27 TT, MONSON 31/83, fols. 2-4.
acquired before coming to Jamaica suggest that he had perhaps aspired to being "learned" in the humanist sense. Among these we find several volumes in Latin, including some from the seventeenth-century pedagogical series *Ad usum Delphini*. Works on Hebrew reinforce the impression that he had philological ambitions. A few prayer books, a couple of Bibles (one in Latin), a martyrology, and a copy of the Psalms in Hebrew and Latin signal neither excessive piety nor spiritual daring.  

Yet Thistlewood's commonplace books demonstrate a consistent concern with religious issues from nearly the first page. The context for this reading was, first, the more tolerant English religious environment (relatively speaking, at least) despite the presence of an established church. Thus, Thistlewood responded to his readings of French authors on religion in the context of much more extensive reading in English works. Nor did he need the French to encourage him to think for himself, to introduce him to anti-clericalism, or to tutor him in deism. In 1761, for example, he commonplaced several passages from an article appearing in the *Independent Whig* that advocated independent judgment over unthinking religious conformity. Later transcriptions indicate that he took very much to heart a quotation of the medieval theologian John Gerson: "To what purpose have I a conscience of my own, if the conscience of another person must be my own rule of living and dying?"

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28 TT, MONSON 31/82, fols. 2, 3, 9, 11, 13, 14, 18.


30 "A Letter to the Lord; proving that his Grace cannot be the Author of the Letter to an Eminent Prebyterian Clergyman in Switzerland; in which Letter the present State of Religion in England is Blackened and Exposed," *The independent Whig: or, a Defence of Primitive Christianity, and of Our
The infamous "Deists' Bible," Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, apparently circulated among Thistlewood's friends; his commonplace books contain several transcriptions from it, though those from the second half of the book are missing.\(^{31}\) This article has only sketched the larger context of all of Thistlewood's transcriptions on religion prior to reading *Émile*, a context that suggests that Thistlewood's "Excellent" had two meanings: that Rousseau's Savoyard curate resonated with him on a personal level; that Rousseau brought together Thistlewood's own concerns in a convincing, logically coherent, eloquent, and emotionally satisfying synthesis.

It is easy for an intellectual historian to ignore the novelistic trappings of *Émile* and focus solely on its intellectual content. Yet, as Darnton's aforementioned article on *Heloïse* has shown, while Rousseau's readers certainly learned maxims for living from his novels, they did so as much through an emotional identification with his characters' tribulations as through intellecution. Thistlewood could find much in the Savoyard's life to resonate with his own circumstances and personality. First, the curate identified himself as "a poor peasant, destined by my situation to the business of husbandry."\(^{32}\) As mentioned above, Thistlewood's family was modest and had had the same vocation in mind for him. That said, Thistlewood's abandonment of his apprenticeship indicates that he was rather less submissive than the curate, who accepted his family's subsequent decision that he become a cleric without complaint.\(^{33}\) Thistlewood might also have identified with the curate's discreet suggestion of sexual scandal. In England, he had been brought to court for impregnating a young woman; in Jamaica, he was a sexual predator. He might have found some justification for his actions in the curate's words: "we shall feel but little remorse for doing any thing to which a well-regulated natural instinct excites us,

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33. MONSON 31/83, fol. 4.
how strongly soever prohibited by reason.\textsuperscript{34}

More important, Thistlewood almost certainly and wholeheartedly identified with the curate's intellectual independence and fearlessness despite a limited education. While much in the curate's narrative recapitulates René Descartes' \textit{Discourse on Method} (1637), that in itself reminds us that the \textit{Discourse}'s persuasive power derived in no small degree from its autobiographical form.\textsuperscript{35} In following the curate's steps on the path of knowledge, Thistlewood retraced—and extended—those of his own intellectual odyssey. While all such journeys are necessarily lonely, the curate's account implied, Thistlewood was not alone in his intellectual and spiritual yearnings. In the curate's confidence in his own abilities to ferret out truth, in his rejection of the books of men for the book of the world to demonstrate God's existence and nature, Thistlewood no doubt found encouragement for abandoning the conventional piety of his youth for a non-materialistic deism. Moreover, Thistlewood could claim to have done so precisely as the curate had reached his views of natural religion: by trusting his own reason, by transcending his own limited education, and by learning to read the book of nature, whether by perusing his growing library of scientific works, cultivating the garden he was transforming into a horticultural wonder, or peering into the tropical sky with his telescope.

Finally, other commonplaces indicate that Thistlewood found the same transcendence that the curate did in contemning nature. He found the divinity revealed there as "grand," as "noble," as "dazzling," as "confounding," and he felt similarly compelled to humbly acknowledge the limits of human knowledge.\textsuperscript{36} In 1762, not long before he read \textit{Émile},

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\textsuperscript{34} Rousseau, \textit{Emilius}, 2:102. Other commonplaces suggest that Thistlewood struggled with precisely what "a well-regulated natural instinct" might authorize or might actually be salutary.


\textsuperscript{36} Rousseau, \textit{Emilius}, 138.
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Thistlewood had transcribed lengthy passages from an English translation of Pascal's *Pensées* that made precisely these points with a terrifying intensity; just a few years after reading *Émile*, he would transcribe passages that further confirmed these points from Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred* (1772).

Mercier's *Memoirs*, first published in 1771, was social criticism masquerading as science fiction. Like *Émile*, it was banned in France, and it eventually became one of the century's bestselling forbidden books. Its trappings of a plot—the wanderings of an eighteenth-century Frenchman who wakes up à la Rip Van Winkle in twenty-sixth-century Paris—do little to relieve the work's relentless didacticism. Thistlewood's transcriptions from the *Memoirs* reinforce the impression that his scientific readings and dabblings had not prompted the turn into atheistic materialism taken by the likes of Denis Diderot and Julien Offray de La Mettrie. "Adore God, love thy neighbour," Thistlewood copied from Mercier, "hearken to that conscience, that judge which continually attends thee; never stifle that secret and celestial voice; all the rest is imposture, fraud, falsehood." Combined with his earlier transcriptions of Pascal and later transcriptions from an English poem, Thistlewood's transcriptions from Mercier strongly suggest that he sought solace, even transcendence, in contemplating nature. Thistlewood apparently found fascinating the image of the soul soaring among the stars, one consistent with his astronomical interests and endowing them with an importance beyond mere curiosity. How much more delightful if, as Mercier proposed, the "noble and generous" soul might perfect itself amongst the

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37 MONSON 31/73, fols. 37-39.
39 Thistlewood's transcriptions from Mercier appear in TT, MONSON 31/74, fols. 258-65. Thistlewood read a Dublin, 1772 edition, against which I have checked his transcriptions. Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred* (Dublin 1772), 140.
40 The poem is found in TT, MONSON 31/75, fol. 59.
"revolving spheres" until, having learned to "love [God] with a more enlightened ardour," it "at last plunge[d] into the ocean of his immensity."\(^{41}\)

Did Thistlewood actually take Mercier's vision of the soul's immortality seriously?\(^{42}\) Perhaps not, though he obviously found the possibility intriguing and perhaps deeply moving. But clearly his reading on the subject of religion in French authors, while it sounded some distinctive notes, did not present Thistlewood with a radically new way of thinking about it. Rather, his reading of French and English authors—even of Emanuel Swedenborg's *Treatise concerning Heaven and Hell*, purchased in 1781—constituted many voices that, in the course of their internal conversation, urged him to think independently even if he never arrived at any settled conclusions.

Yet this discussion of religion presents us with a Thistlewood we would not expect from Trevor Burnard's and Douglas Hall's biographies of him. It is difficult reconcile the Thistlewood of the commonplace books with his biographers' depictions of a brutal, perhaps sadistic, and sexually rapacious slaveowner, which are based almost exclusively on Thistlewood's journals. To put the question more in the context of Thistlewood's reading of Rousseau, how did he make sense of the Savoyard curate's ethical theory and moral injunctions? If he agreed with the curate's notion that there was an "innate sense of justice" in the human heart, how could he persist in the savage punishment of his slaves? It is similarly difficult to assess Thistlewood's views on slavery overall. Like religion, he returned to the topic again and again; unlike religion, he never expressed any opinion as unequivocal as that he expressed of the Savoyard curate. Indeed, perhaps he never arrived at a straightforward and consistent viewpoint, though the French authors he read made very distinctive contributions to this

\(^{41}\) Mercier, *Memoirs*, 146.

\(^{42}\) Mercier's idea is strongly reminiscent of Theodor Ludwig Lau's similar ruminations in *Meditationes de Deo, Mundo, Homine* (1717), an irreligious work that circulated as a clandestine manuscript.
internal debate and even challenged his way of life.

Thistlewood's commonplace books suggest that he largely regarded his slaves and slaveholding as a problem in labor management. While unpalatable to us, that is precisely how slavery was treated in the genre of planters' manuals. Their authors—physicians, planters, and overseers—were people experienced in the Caribbean agricultural system, and they wrote for planters who sought to manage their operations more efficiently. Such literature satisfied precisely the same need of the Caribbean agriculturalist for practical information that Jethro Tull's works on agriculture did in England. Thistlewood's journals show that some of this specialized Caribbean literature circulated in manuscript form; his commonplace books document his eagerness to borrow and commonplace published works, while his library inventory indicates that he purchased them when he could. Space does not permit a detailed examination of the content of his transcriptions from this specialized literature. It should be noted, however, that all of

43 In December 1763, for example, Thistlewood transcribed into his journal lengthy excerpts from "A Manuscript Treatise on Planting, by Mr. John Pulley Edwards." Like Thistlewood, Edwards had apparently been an overseer. At some point, Thistlewood also transcribed, though not into his commonplace book or journal, a lengthy excerpt, "The Care of White Servants & Slaves," from what must have been a much longer essay by the prominent Jamaican planter Richard Beckford. Thistlewood assessed Beckford's instructions and mentioned having read Samuel Martin's Essay on Plantership, first published in Antigua in 1750, and William Belgrove and Henry Drax's A Treatise on Husbandry and Planting, published in Boston in 1755. TT, MONSON 31/86, fols. 52-64. Probably around 1765, Thistlewood transcribed several pages from "The Sugar Cane," a didactic poem by James Grainger of St. Kitts that was first published in London in 1764. Thistlewood apparently read an edition published in Spanishtown that combined an excerpt of the poem with Samuel Martin's An Essay on Plantership, TT, MONSON 31/73, fols. 173-76. Thistlewood did not transcribe any of Martin's essay because he already owned it; indeed, his journals record that he loaned his copy to Reverend Robert Atkins in August 1762. TT, MONSON 31/13, 3 August 1762. Thistlewood owned many agricultural and horticultural works, among which figured "An Essay, on the Art of Making Moscovada Sugar" by J.P. Baker, published in Jamaica in 1775, and the Antigua 1765 edition of Martin's essay.
them counseled humane treatment of slaves. He also transcribed several passages that discussed slavery purely in economic terms, indicating that he was at least intrigued by the ideas of transforming slavery into a more, if not completely, free labor regime and of compensating slaves with wages. But the Baron de Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Mercier did something altogether different from the English and Scottish authors, both metropolitan and colonial, whom Thistlewood commonplace: They denounced the institution entirely.

Some time during the mid-1760s, Thistlewood read what the translator rendered as Rousseau’s *Social Compact*. Typically, he transcribed passages treating several different subjects. Sometimes it is obvious why a particular passage drew his attention; often, it is mysterious. What interested him in Rousseau’s speculation that the Tartars would eventually subjugate Russia? Did he transcribe Rousseau’s praise of the "valour and constancy" of "those brave," insular, and liberty-loving Corsicans in the spirit of Jamaican colonists who were so jealous of their "English liberties" that they made their colonial governors miserable? Thistlewood was also always culling tips for healthy living in the tropics, as in this passage from the *Compact*: "An hot climate requires men to be temperate, if they would preserve their health. Of this the Europeans are made sensible, by seeing those who do not alter their manner of living in hot countries, daily carried off by dysenteries and indigestion." Surely, for a Jamaican slaveowner, there would be absolutely nothing metaphorical in Rousseau’s opening line:

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44 He transcribed several passages critical of New World slavery on an economic basis from John Millar’s *Observations Concerning the Distinctions of Ranks in Society* (London 1773). Under the rubric "An Excellent Proposal," he transcribed one that suggested that "small wages should be given [to slaves] as an encouragement to industry." TT, MONSON 31/74, fol. 155.

45 TT, MONSON 31/73, fol. 102.

46 Quotations are drawn from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Treatise on the Social Compact; or the Principles of Politic Law* (London, 1764); this one appears at 82-83. Thistlewood did not precisely identify the edition he was reading, but the page numbers he included suggest that this was it.

"Man is born free, and yet is universally enslaved." But Thistlewood did not transcribe that line. Rather, he copied out the last sentence of the chapter, which demolished any legal basis for slavery and concluded that no one could take seriously, much less consent to labor under the absurd proposition: "I enter into an agreement with you, altogether at your own charge, and solely for my profit, which I will observe as long as I please, and which you are to observe also, as long as I think proper [italics in original]." What did Thistlewood make of this? His subject heading in the margin, "Slavery," is utterly unhelpful.

It is worth transcribing here in its entirety Montesquieu's denunciation of African slavery, which Thistlewood transcribed into his commonplace book in 1770:

WERE I to vindicate our right to make slaves of the Negroes, these should be my arguments.

The Europeans, having extirpated the Americans, were obliged to make slaves of the Africans, for clearing such vast tracts of land.

Sugar would be too dear, if the plants which produce it were cultivated by any other than slaves.

These creatures are all over black, and with such a flat nose, that they can scarcely be pitied.

It is hardly to be believed that God, who is a wise being, should place a soul, especially a good soul, in such a black ugly body.

It is so natural to look upon colour as the criterion of human nature, that the Asiatics, among whom eunuchs are employed, always deprive the blacks of their resemblance to us by a more opprobrious distinction.

The colour of the skin may be determined by that of the hair, which, among the Egyptians (the best philosophers in the world), was of such importance, that they put to death all the red-haired men who fell into their hands.

The Negroes prefer a glass necklace to that gold which polite nations so highly value; can there be a greater proof of their wanting common-sense?

It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men; because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow, that we ourselves are not Christians.

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48 Rousseau, Treatise, 2.
49 Rousseau, Treatise, 17.
Weak minds exaggerate too much the wrong done to the Africans. For, were the case as they state it, would the European powers, who make so many needless conventions among themselves, have failed to enter into a general one, in behalf of humanity and compassion?\textsuperscript{50}

No eighteenth-century reader would have read this passage in precisely the same way as another, of course, and circumstances condition any reader's response. Let us imagine, for example, how a Parisian gentleman or gentlewoman might have encountered it; let us seat him or her in an interior as depicted in one of those exquisitely detailed eighteenth-century paintings. Our reader is cozily ensconced in an intimate and well-appointed room; perhaps s/he even stirs a teaspoon of sugar into a cup of hot chocolate or coffee. This urbane reader, comfortably distant from the reality that made his or her refreshment possible, might well delight in how Montesquieu's judicious use of the subjunctive lent the passage a delicious irony. He or she might tut-tut at another scandalous instance of religious hypocrisy. The passage might arouse outrage in a passionate soul—and a clueless literalism in a duller spirit, which is always the danger of irony (as we professors have learned).

Now let us translate the passage from one language to another, one country to another, and across the sea to a slaveholder's plain study where slavery was not an abstraction, but a savage everyday struggle. This is a world where, as Thistlewood noted in his journal, a certain Mrs. Allwood flogged "another Negro wench to death . . . This is said to be the 3rd she

\textsuperscript{50} Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, \textit{The Complete Works} (London, 1777), Chapter V: Of the Slavery of the Negroes, http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/837/71568. This is the translation that Thistlewood read.
Such a context potentially transforms Montesquieu's wit from dry to deeply corrosive, perhaps even subversive of the reader's mental universe. Yet how did Thistlewood read the passage? What message did he take away? Again, he refrained from comment. Yet his transcriptions suggest that, whether or not he considered Africans inferior to Europeans, he suspected that enslaving them was wholly a matter of might, not right. Perhaps all we can reasonably conclude is that Thistlewood was brutal, but neither thoughtless nor blind to the potential consequences of his own actions. Slave revolt was the most serious consequence—indeed, a "Fatal consequence" in the words of the fabulously wealthy planter Richard Beckford, who authored one of the manuscript treatises on planting that Thistlewood commonplaced. In 1760, Thistlewood survived the worst Jamaican slave uprising, Tackey's Revolt. As another transcription from Mercier's Memoirs suggests, he feared worse in the 1770s, many years before the Haitian Revolution. Thistlewood excerpted a section where the eighteenth-century Frenchman caught sight of a monument memorializing the slave revolt that finally brought down New World slavery. He edited out the tourist's rapturous realization that "nature has at last produced this wonderful man, this immortal man, who was to deliver a world from the most outrageous, the most inveterate and atrocious tyranny." Ultimately, Thistlewood's choices of what to omit and what to include under the heading "A Prediction" animate the passage with a slaveholder's terror:

In going from this place, I observed toward the Right, on a Magnificent Pedastal [sic], the Figure of a Negroe, his head was bare, his arm extended, his eye fierce, his attitude Noble and Commanding; round him were Spread the broken rellicks of twenty Scepters; and at his feet I read these words: To the Avenger of the New World . . . At the same instant, they poured forth the blood of all their Tyrants; French, Spanish, English, Dutch and Portuguese, all become a prey to the Sword, to fire, and to poison. The Soil of America drank with

51 TT, MONSON 31/21, 13 August 1770.  
52 Mercier, Memoirs, 171.
Avidity that blood for which it had long thirsted.53

Taken together, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Mercier challenged Thistlewood's entire way of life and the means through which he had secured prosperity and his neighbors' respect. While the conversation in Thistlewood's commonplace books between French and English authors on religion was complex, lively, and civil, that on slavery was a confrontation. Like Rousseau's curate, Mercier's New World avenger resonated personally with Thistlewood; unlike the curate, he threatened Thistlewood personally.

Whatever Thistlewood's personal reactions, we must remember that he was not the only Jamaican reader of Montesquieu. Indeed, Thistlewood as a reader of the "Enlightenment," French or otherwise, raises a central question about the social significance that Thistlewood and his friends ascribed to reading per se and whose answer cannot be attempted here. David Hall has written of a "politics of culture" in the North American English colonies, which he related to eighteenth-century writing and reading practices. "Literacy connoted cultural authority; illiteracy, cultural inferiority and exclusion"; reading made claims for "gentility" and independence from the pulpit—and, eventually, independence from Great Britain.54 Surely reading figured into a Jamaican politics of culture, but how? Did reading novels and belles-lettres in settings so far removed from their own slave society express the longings of Thistlewood and his Jamaican neighbors for gentility? Did it assert the intellectual capacity and independence of a creole people too often disdained by their metropolitan countrymen? Did it legitimate on a cultural basis the awesome power that they wielded over their slaves? And did Rousseau's outrage, Montesquieu's irony, and Mercier's vision prick their complacency and trouble their dreams?

53 TT, MONSON 31/74, fol. 260.