Figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Ruben Darío, Mahatma Gandhi, are geniuses that belong to humanity, though they may have excelled in a particular geography and a certain time and space. They are prophets, leaders, universal patriots, immortal beings, beyond their space and ahead of their times. Their multifaceted genius allows our evaluation from many points of views though they may at times be flawed. We must not confuse genius with perfection.¹

Thomas Jefferson (born in Shadwell, Virginia in 1743) has been called the sage of Monticello, one of the most fascinating figures in history, the author of the United States of America. A renaissance man, he led a life filled with paradox that has led to a plethora of interpretations and approaches to both the positive and negative aspects of his life, work and beliefs as thoroughly detailed by Alf J. Mapp, Jr. in his volumes Thomas Jefferson: A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity² and Thomas Jefferson: Passionate Pilgrim.³ He was the mentor of the founding articles of American Democracy that have continued uninterrupted for more than 200 years proclaiming freedom of speech, freedom of religion and other basic rights.

¹ In this essay, I am basing my analysis on the information provided in the volumes The Road to Monticello, The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson by Kevin J. Hayes (Oxford University Press: 2008), The Life and selected writings of Thomas Jefferson, edited by Adrienne Koch y William Peden, New York, The Modern Library: 1998, and other documents and biographies of Thomas Jefferson, some of which are listed in the last page. In the Spanish version, I have personally translated the original texts into Spanish; text that appears in English in the indicated references quoted through this essay.
human rights. He demonstrated his exceptional vision in his practice and political philosophy in general but, especially, in a little known aspect that I wish to document here: his knowledge, involvement, defense, and promotion of the Spanish language. Thomas Jefferson possessed a multitude of talents, skills and extraordinary range, which offered almost endless ways to identify with him. As a Hispanic American and supporter of multiculturalism I can identify with Jefferson’s position on the Spanish language. I not only identify with it, I celebrate this admirable characteristic the sum relevance of which is the historic legacy of the creation of the Declaration of Independence and the fundamental principles that laid the foundation of the Constitution of the United States.

Thomas Jefferson, as a role model and statesman ahead of his time, tried to establish a posture that went against the historical antagonism between Anglo-Saxon and Hispanic cultures similar to the debates today of the “English only” movement and other more extreme positions.

Without belittling or minimizing Jefferson’s familiarity with other languages and their literary works of art, the main emphasis in this essay is to gather specific historical facts from the long and complex life of Thomas Jefferson: landowner, student, professional, thinker, inventor, diplomat, political leader, and founder of Universities, to illustrate the convincing and visionary manner in which he cultivated his fondness for Spanish, indeed a fascinating aspect of this universal hero of social and political thought, an exceptional individual. Branded a philosopher and apostle of freedom in the Age of Reason, Thomas Jefferson wrote The Declaration of Independence in 1776, where he shaped the ideas of
Locke, among others. He justified the rebellion using the transgressions of King George III against his own citizens under the unwritten constitution of Great Britain. His ideas for this groundbreaking document may have been inspired by the writings of the Spanish Jesuit Juan de Mariana (De Rege et Regis Institutione), whose book Historia of España appears in the catalog of Jefferson’s library produced by E. Millicent Sowerby. His defense of democracy, equality, the rights of people and the natural rights of mankind “to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” has set a bar for the United States although the subsequent history has not always reached it.

Although Jefferson idealized the small independent farmer, he belonged to the aristocracy of large landowners in the South, a position he held while studying for a law degree. His intellectual curiosity drew him to the philosophy of the Enlightenment and to liberal ideas. He was an exceptional literary scholar. By losing the presidential election in 1796 to Federalist John Adams, because of a Constitutional provision later repealed, Thomas Jefferson became Vice-President (1797-1801) as a runner-up. Finally he won the elections in 1800 and 1804 becoming the third president of the United States from 1801-1809. I cite Jefferson’s first inaugural address in hopes that it will be repeated and practiced by political leaders all over the world:

Equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political; peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all

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nations, — entangling alliances with none; the support of the State governments in all their rights, as the most competent administrations for our domestic concerns, and the surest bulwarks against anti-republican tendencies; the preservation of the general government in its whole constitutional vigor, as the sheet anchor of our peace at home and safety abroad…”

The highlight of Jefferson’s two terms as president was the clarification of the role of the federal government. The federal government would be responsible for the areas of defense and foreign policy, leaving states ample political autonomy; showing once again his philosophical belief for the need to limit power to safeguard freedom.

**Thomas Jefferson and the Spanish language**

Jefferson’s studies and his genius in this case show how ahead of his time he was and how he valued the Hispanic history of the United States (which began in 1513 nearly a century before the arrivals of the Pilgrims and the Mayflower). His cultivation, knowledge, interest, and promotion of the Spanish language illuminated how he recognized its cultural and geopolitical importance. Convinced of the importance of understanding languages to become familiar with

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5 Taken from the “First Inaugural Address” as it appears in *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, ed. Marril D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), pp. 492-496.
and sensitive to various national idiosyncrasies,⁶ Jefferson practiced what he preached. He learned and knew at least six languages with varied levels of fluency. A polyglot and avid reader, he read in their original versions and translations, the Greek and Latin classics (the *Odyssey*, *Iliad*, *Aeneid*), Arab classics, literature and philosophy in French and English (including Scottish and Welsh authors). His interest and familiarity with the Spanish language, although initially rudimentary, dates long before 1784, as told to John Duane in 1775 at a meeting, who in turn passed such information to John Adams: "He [Jefferson] has learned French, Italian, and Spanish and wants to learn German."⁷ This early achievement would be more consistent with his theory of the importance of early learning of languages (amongst which Jefferson lists Spanish⁸). This learning most likely took place during his college years. I agree with his biographer B.L. Rayner who argues that Jefferson learned Spanish during his studies at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, where he graduated with highest honors. This seems to be endorsed as well by what Jefferson told Joseph Delaplaine in his letter dated April 12, 1817.⁹ It is reasonable to conclude that Jefferson knew Spanish more than a decade before his famous trip to Ceres in July 1784.

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⁶ "... have long considered the filiation of languages as the best proof we can ever obtain of the filiation of nations".—To John S. Vater. V, To John S. Vater. v, 599. (M., 1812.) 4459 (*Cyclopedia*, p 474).
⁸ In general, I am of opinion, that till the age of about sixteen, we are best employed on languages: Latin, Greek, French, and Spanish. * * * I think Greek the least useful.—*To J. W. Eppes. ii, 192. (Cyclopedia. P., 1787.)*
When in Ceres, Jefferson pursued his nomination to be U.S. Ambassador in Paris. In notes he made after a dinner with Jefferson on the voyage over, John Quincy Adams recorded that Jefferson learned (again I would say perfected his knowledge of) Spanish with a copy of *Don Quixote* and a Spanish grammar book he had borrowed from Cabot. This is the entry of John Quincy Adams in his diary, "As to Spanish, it was so easy that he had learned it, with the help of a *Don Quixote* lent him by Mr. Cabot, and a grammar, in the course of a passage to Europe, on which he was but nineteen days at sea. But Mr. Jefferson tells large stories..."\(^{10}\). In fact, when Jefferson returned and thanked Cabot for the two volumes of *Don Quixote* he had borrowed from him, he writes: "I deliver to Mr. Tracy to be returned to you the copy of *Don Quixote* that you were so obliging as to lent me: for which I return you many thanks. The winds have been so propitious as to let me get through one volume only; yet this has so far done away the difficulties of the language as that I shall be able to pursue it on shore with pleasure. I have found it a very advantageous disposal of time..."\(^{11}\)

Also, it is very significant that Jefferson worked assiduously to instill, with the passion typical of his personality, his position and views on the Spanish language to his family and those within his sphere of influence. In a letter dated October 15, 1785 to J. Bannister Junior, Jefferson states that Spanish is one of the fundamental subjects useful in an American education program. In doing so,


\(^{11}\) Letter from Jefferson to Mr. Cabot, dated July 24, 1784, *Papers, 27*: 739-740.
he answered a question he had raised himself, “What are the objects of a useful American education?”

Nothing more and nothing less than the key novel of the Spanish language and of the universal literary canon, *Don Quixote*, was adopted as the basic book for learning Spanish, not only by Jefferson personally but by his daughters. So in 1783 he gave a copy for this purpose to his eldest daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph, and this was the text that another of his daughters, the youngest Mary Jefferson Eppes, used for the study of Spanish. In a letter to her aunt, Elizabeth Eppes, Jefferson wrote: “I have insisted on her reading ten pages a day in her Spanish *Don Quixote*, and getting a lesson in her Spanish grammar ... ” Her progress in learning Spanish was an issue to which Jefferson will constantly come back to in his letters to his daughter Mary. A prime example of Jefferson’s emphatic insistence that his family and friends learn Spanish, (one I have often brought up in my presentations) is in Thomas Jefferson's letter sent from Paris on August 10, 1787 to his nephew Peter Carr, in which he writes: “Spanish. Bestow great attention on this, and endeavor to acquire an accurate knowledge of it. Our future connections with Spain and Spanish America will render that language a valuable acquisition. The ancient history of that part of America, too, is written in that language. I am sending you a dictionary.” He had also advised him on the matter earlier (in a letter from Paris dated August 19, 1785), after mentioning the Baretti’s English-Spanish Dictionary and that he was

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13 Letter from Jefferson to Elizabeth Eppes, March 7, 1790.
sending a grammar and other books in Spanish: "Our Future Connection with Spain renders that the most necessary of the modern languages, after the French (is Spanish). When you become a public man, you may have occasions for it, and the circumstance of your possessing that language, may give you a preference over other candidates."\textsuperscript{16} And with renewed concern he again reminded his nephew in 1788: "Apply yourself to the study of the Spanish language with all the assiduity you can. It and the English covering nearly the whole face of America, they should be well known to every inhabitant, who means to look beyond the limits of his farm."\textsuperscript{17}

It was an issue that he felt strongly about as evidenced by this letter dated July 6, 1787 to his future son-in-law Thomas Mann Randolph, speaking generally about education: “Spanish is most important to an American. Our connection with Spain is already important and will become daily more so. Besides this the ancient part of American history is written chiefly in Spanish.”\textsuperscript{18}

In conjunction with this position, it is remarkable and worth looking at, the quantity and quality of works in Spanish that Jefferson read and collected throughout his life, as a matter of practice. While in Paris, France, Jefferson had purchased two separate editions in French and Spanish of the \textit{Aventuras de Telémaco} (Adventures of Telemachus) to continue his improvement in the knowledge of Spanish. His enthusiasm for both Spanish and its literature, as well

\textsuperscript{17} To Peter Carr. ii, 409. (\textit{Cyclopedia}, P., 1788.).
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Life}: 1998, p. 394. It is worthwhile to see the exchange of letters between Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Mann Randolph of July 6, 1787 (\textit{Papers}, 11: 558) and March 8, 1790 (\textit{Papers}, 16: 214).
as his curiosity to read the history of the early Spanish explorations in the American territory, led him to acquire while in Europe many books which would enable him to expand his knowledge of the Spanish language, traditions and literature. Among them were *Obras poéticas*, the poetic works of Don Vicente Garcia de la Huerta, a neoclassical contemporary Spanish play-writer known for the political vein of his poems and tragedies; the nine volumes of a poetry anthology *Parnaso Español* (*Spanish Parnassus*), compiled in 1768 by Juan Jose Lopez Sedano; a collection of gypsy romances by several authors that included texts by Francisco de Quevedo and Sancho de Moncada, entitled *Romances de Germanía* (*Romances of Germania*)—originally published in 1609 by Juan Hidalgo— and *Las Eróticas* (*The erotic*), lyrical poems of classical metric form by Esteban Manuel Villegas (1774 edition), which contained translations of Horace and a Spanish version of the book of Boethius *De Philosophiae consolation* (*Consolation of Philosophy*). Jefferson himself would later use it as a model for comfort to unburden himself of his sadness due to the departure of his friends, the Cosways, and above all of Maria Cosway to whom he had been attracted to and for whom he developed deep feelings. Imitating the dialogue between the Head and Heart exposed in the book of Boethius, Jefferson vented his intimate thoughts and feelings caused by his relationship with Maria Cosway: “One of the most remarkable love letters in the English language”, in Julian Boyd’s opinion.\(^{19}\)

\(^{19}\) In his edition of *Papers* 10: 453.
Also, following his interest in learning about the Hispanic-American history told by the leading writers of the times, Jefferson sought and received in the summer of 1786 from the Ambassador of the United States in Spain, William Carmichael, two key books of the "Inca" Garcilaso de la Vega: La Florida and Comentarios reales (Royal Comments), perhaps the masterpiece of this Peruvian chronicler and historian, considered the starting point of Hispanic American literature. He also got Fray Juan de Torquemada’s masterpiece, Los veinte ivn libros rituales i Monarchia Indiana, con el origen y guerras de los Indios Occidentales, de sus poblazones, descubrimientos, conquista, conversión y otras cosas maravillosas de la mesma tierra (Twenty one ritual books and Indian Monarchy, with the origin and wars from the Indians of the West, its populations, discovery, conquest, conversion and other wonderful things from this land), better known by its short title of Monarquía Indiana (Indian Monarchy) and José de Acosta’s Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias (Natural and Moral History of the Indies). All this, as he mentions to James Madison, to satisfy his intense desire to collect “the original Hispanic writers on American history.”

Interests that he also cultivated by reading works translated into English such as: Francesco Saverio Clavigero’s History of Mexico that, according to Jefferson, "deserves more respect than any other book on this subject.”

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These are not the only books in Spanish read by Jefferson as illustrated by several anecdotes through various stages of his life. For example, Captain Nathaniel Cutting recorded in his diary that he witnessed Jefferson one day, after breakfast, read his daughter Mary la *Historia de la Conquista de México* (History of the Conquest of Mexico) by Don Antonio de Solis y Rivadeneira (an enjoyable work written by commission of the King and published originally in 1684: the full name is *Historia de la conquista de México, población y progresos de la América septentrional, conocida con el nombre de Nueva España*/ History of the Conquest of Mexico, Population and Progress of North America, known as New Spain). This book includes stories of the conquerors with descriptions of the customs and rituals of the natives as well as works written in Spanish in the United States by Gaspar de Villagra (*Historia de Nuevo México*/History of New Mexico, 1610) and by Fray Gregorio Alonso de Escobedo (*Florida*, written around 1587). In his diary, Cutting bears witness and notes the tenderness with which Jefferson helped his daughter Mary, aged 11, in learning Spanish, history and geography.22

In February 1790, preparing for a trip to New York, Jefferson packs to read the book *Historia general de las Indias y conquista de México* (General History of the Indies and the Conquest of Mexico) by Francisco Lopez de Gomara, the Spanish chronicler who served as chaplain and assistant to Hernán Cortés. During this time, Jefferson’s correspondence with his daughter Mary insists that she continues studying Spanish. She replies telling her father about

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her progress in the reading of *Don Quixote* and, when finished, she tells him of her intention to start reading *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and of His Fortunes and Adversities), considered during the Inquisition to have heretical contents but also marking in Spain the beginning of the picturesque novel genre. Then, motivated by the birth of his first grandchild, Anne Cary Randolph, from Martha (his oldest daughter) and Thomas, on February 16, 1791, Jefferson wrote a letter to Mary with grandfatherly humor, saying: "I hope you pay close attention to your niece and you have begun to give her lessons on the harpsichord, in, Spanish, etc."23

In the mid 1790's, Jefferson received a gift from William Short, who obviously knew his friend’s taste: a new edition of *Don Quixote* published by the Royal Spanish Academy which was founded in 1713 and legally established in 1714 by Philip V. This fact makes me proud, first because I have the honor of belonging to the same Academy, and, second, because Jefferson’s posture relates so magnificently to the mission and goals of the North American Academy of the Spanish Language, whose Delegation in Washington, I chair and Jefferson would have supported enthusiastically today.

In addition, to feed in a sensorial manner their presence and admiration (he was one of those who postulated: "I feel, therefore I am"), Jefferson acquired during his stay in France, portraits of Columbus, Americo Vespuccio, Cortés, and Magellan. When guests visited his house at Monticello (as did the Smiths), he proudly showed them these paintings, the Library and its most valuable volumes,

including *Historia de la Nueva España escrita por Hernán Cortés* (History of New Spain written by Hernán Cortés), a book that contained a collection of his letters from Mexico in addition to other documents and notes by Francisco Antonio Lorenzama, Bishop of Mexico, as recorded by Ms. Smith in her diary.\(^{24}\)

While I cannot detail each one of the incidents that touched upon Spanish in the lives of Jefferson and his relationship with his children, grandchildren, relatives, friends and others recipients of his dialogues, courtesies, or letters, the aforementioned facts paint an adequate picture of what I set up to do in trying to document Jefferson’s relationship with Spanish in terms of his knowledge, use, appreciation, observation, and assessment within his political philosophy.

Even in retirement, as Jefferson began to think about reducing, selling, and donating his collection of books, I find in him a deep and continued interest in Spanish. Jefferson held until the end a copy of *Don Quixote* in his library for personal use, among other masterpieces. And after founding the University of Virginia, one of the achievements that he was most proud of, when building the University’s library, he ordered the purchase of, among others, Francisco Alvarez’ volume entitled *Noticia del establecimiento y población de las colonias inglesas en la America Septentrional*; with the subtitle of “religión, orden de gobierno, leyes y costumbres de sus naturales y habitantes, calidades de su clima, terreno, frutos, plantas y animales, y estado de su industria, artes, comercio y navegación” (Notice of the establishment and population of the English colonies in North America, with the subtitle of "religion, of government,

\(^{24}\) It appears on Margaret Bayard Smith, *The first Forty Years of Washington Society*, ed. Gaillard Hunt, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906, pp. 66-79.
laws and customs of the natives and inhabitants, qualities of its climate, soil, fruits, plants and animals, and state of their industry, arts, commerce, and navigation”), published in 1778.

Jefferson, the Library of Congress and its Hispanic Division

The looting and destruction of the Library of Congress and its three thousand volumes by British troops on August 1814 was a despicable and repugnant act that saddened and angered many, and especially Jefferson, the great lover of books that he was. Before this event, Jefferson had supported the Library of Congress from the executive branch, mainly when he was president, naming a person in charge (the Librarian of Congress) and persuading lawmakers to acquire Benjamin Franklin's Library, among other collections. This destruction created a sense of urgency and motivated him in his decision to sell his own library. This fact formed the basis for the new Library of Congress, an act which he considered not so much a personal honor, but a way to be part of the national heritage. Once the resolution was drafted and submitted by Robert Goldsborough on October 7, 1814 for consideration by both chambers to authorize the purchase Mr. Jefferson’s – former President of the United States – library, there were discussions and all kinds of strong objections were circulated, including the short-sighted positions and voices of those who sought to exclude from the library anything that was not totally related to the field of law, the voices breeding Anglo-ethnocentrism and those of the advocates of mono-lingualism. Charles Ingersoll, a representative from Pennsylvania, commented: "the
discussions and votes in the House of Representatives on the purchase of Jefferson’s Library betrayed the English prepossessions of some, the narrow parsimony of others and the party prejudices of nearly all.”

More specifically, some Congressmen objected to the contents of Jefferson’s Library and the fact that "a great proportion of the books are in foreign languages.”

Finally and happily, common sense prevailed, that of those who appreciated (or at least not despised) the learning and multidisciplinary training, the diversity, the cultural and linguistic wealth of the country, embodied in Jefferson’s life, library and vision. On January 30, 1815, the legislation was passed authorizing the purchase. And for a price of about $4 per volume (which was what Jefferson had proposed, though this monetary approximation for sure did not reflect the intrinsic value of the collection), approximately 6,700 volumes were shipped from Monticello. On May 8, 1815 Jefferson wrote to Samuel Harrison Smith: "Our tenth and last wagon load of books goes off today ... It is the choicest collection of books in the United States and I hope it will not be without some general effect on the literature of our country."  

The key books of literature, history and culture written in Spanish mentioned above and copies of Don Quixote in Jefferson’s library were the beginning of the Hispanic Division of the Library of Congress, led by the Historian Dr. Georgette Dorn from the North American Academy of the Spanish Language, which contains one of the most complete collections of Spanish books in the

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26 New Hampshire Sentinel, November 5, 1814.
27 Ticknor, Life, Letters and Journals, I: p.36.
world. And, by those turns in life, the headquarters of the Library of Congress, one of the most beautiful historic buildings in Washington DC, is called today accurately and with justice "The Jefferson Building." Eternal thanks from around the world to the genius who said "I cannot live without books," to which this humble admirer adds: "we cannot live without books in Spanish."

**Death and Legacy**

Thomas Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, at his home in Monticello, Virginia, on the fiftieth anniversary of the country’s Independence, whose Declaration he was instrumental in drafting. He left an epitaph which he himself composed and that, therefore, demonstrates his predilection among many achievements he obtained in his life. It is significant both for what he included and what he omitted in it. Interestingly, he did not mention his presidency, but he emphasized his major contributions in political philosophy, education and academia. In fact, his Manual of Parliamentary Procedures influenced not only the legislature of the United States but many others around the world having being translated during his lifetime into French (1814), German (1819) and Spanish in 1826.

HERE WAS BURIED

THOMAS JEFFERSON

AUTHOR OF THE DECLARATION
Jefferson’s legacy is overwhelming, infinite, and lends itself to the amazement of many discoveries as we have documented here. Although his attitudes sometimes seem to reveal that he was not entirely convinced of life after death, Jefferson lives and will live in the immortality of his genius, through his historical contribution, ideological, passionate avant garde existence. His feelings, geopolitical vision, and philosophy, among many other achievements, led him to appreciate and promulgate Spanish in many dimensions. This fact, plus all of his accomplishments and national-patriotic acclamations established him as an extraordinary example, a hero (role model), in spite of his shortcomings, for those who crave (whether Hispanic or not) to appreciate, rescue, live with the Hispanic history, culture, and language of the United States — forever present and vibrant in the country since 1513, among the many
cultures that make up the nation. He is an example also for those with wisdom and vision who envision a multilingual and multicultural model for the United States and, of course, for Spanish speakers and fifty million Hispanic Americans with a projection to reach one hundred and thirty two million by 2050, who are proud citizens of the U.S., their Hispanic culture and history. Those who try to maintain, recover, and cultivate the Spanish language as a basis for a Pan Americanism and as the second language of the United States, which Thomas Jefferson wisely conceived with his principles and visionary action.

Some of the works consulted


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