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## Ink, Imagination and Algorithm: Returning to *Common Sense*

Lyne Hervey-Passée

When Thomas Paine is commemorated, he is most often remembered in a fixed place and time, and as the author of *Common Sense*. With this 47-page pamphlet, written in plain language, Paine helped shift the opinion of most of the inhabitants of the Thirteen Colonies, contributing to the emergence of a new political entity: “the free and independent states of America,” as he famously wrote.<sup>1</sup> This gesture of remembrance is not false. But it is incomplete and raises a few central questions. What does it mean to commemorate a text that was written not to be preserved, but to be activated? How do we recall a voice whose power lies precisely in its circulation, its instability, its capacity to pass from body to body, rather than in its fixation as an object or an authorial figure? And more broadly, what kind of political thinking do we produce when we freeze such texts into monuments, instead of allowing them to continue operating as devices of collective reasoning?

Paine was monumentalized, for instance, in the exhibition “One Life: Thomas Paine, The Radical Founding Father,” held at the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., from August to November 2009. As the museum stated on its website at the time, “The One Life Gallery within the museum is devoted to the exploration of the life of one individual.” The framing was explicit: one life, one trajectory, one figure to be understood, enclosed, and presented. Paine’s pamphlets appeared behind glass, carefully displayed, protected and isolated from touch.

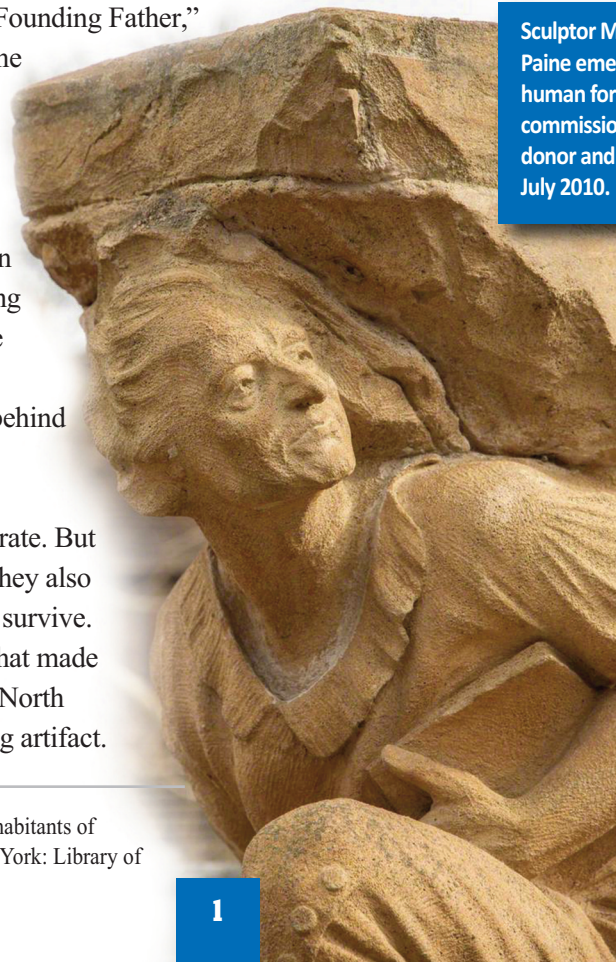
This is, of course, how museums operate. But vitrines do more than preserve objects: they also decide how those objects are allowed to survive. Under glass, *Common Sense*—the text that made Paine famous far beyond the borders of North America—is transformed into a founding artifact.

<sup>1</sup> Eric Foner, “Common Sense Addressed to the Inhabitants of America,” *Thomas Paine Complete Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 54.

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PhD candidate in research-creation. Her dissertation is titled: “Counter-Hegemonic Discourse and Visual Writing in the Texts of Thomas Paine.” At the intersection of research-creation and the study of pamphleteering forms, her work focuses on Paine’s voice, his political poetics, and the ways in which his texts circulate and resonate within contemporary art, particularly through oral, visual, and sonic forms.

Sculptor Marcus Cornish portrayed Paine emerging from stone to take human form. The sculpture was commissioned by an anonymous donor and unveiled in Lewes, UK in July 2010.

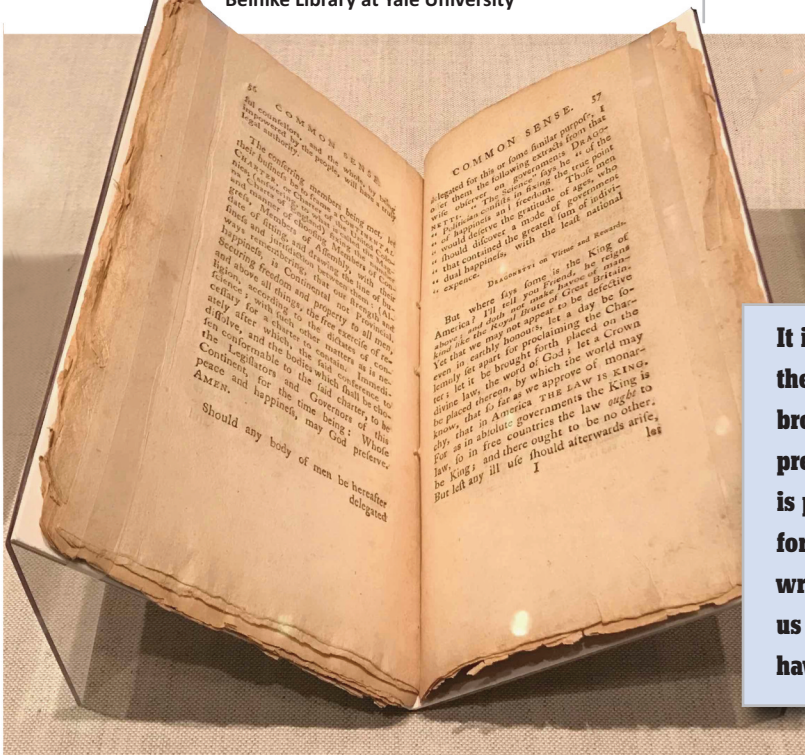


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It becomes a relic of political clarity, a text that would have “spoken for itself” once and for all, in 1776. The pamphlet no longer circulates; it rests. It no longer acts; it testifies.

Still, *Common Sense* was never meant to settle. Paine wrote a text designed to move. He chose plain, easily accessible language not out of stylistic modesty, but because such a language could travel. *Common Sense* was meant to be passed from hand to hand, read aloud in taverns, discussed in public, repeated without losing its force.

Paine under glass. This *Common Sense* sits in the Beinike Library at Yale University



*Common Sense* is a practice: a practice of reading, of speaking, and of reasoning together. Its effectiveness does not lie only in what it says, but in what it asks the reader to do. This is where my own practice of “research-creation” (in French-speaking universities) or “research by practice” meets Paine’s gesture. As Louis-Claude Paquin defines it, research-creation includes “all research processes and approaches that promote creation and aim to produce new aesthetic, theoretical, methodological, epistemological or technical knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

*Common Sense* is precisely such a process because it is not simply a text we inherit. It is an active demand placed on those who read it. Some are unable to read Paine—not because they lack intelligence, but because

Paine requires a very particular disposition of mind: a willingness to suspend habit, to enter a scene, and to allow one’s own reasoning to be put to work.

## THE VISCERAL PAIN

This is where my reflection begins. Not with Paine as an author, but with the phenomenology of his reader. *Common Sense* demands participation. It does not instruct the reader from above; it places them inside a scene and asks them to feel their way through.

This is where imagination enters the political field, not as fantasy, but as a mode of access. Paine knows that distance dulls judgment—that injustice, when it happens elsewhere, remains abstract. So, *Common Sense* begins by attacking geographical and emotional detachment. Imagination is not an escape from reality; it is the very means by which reality becomes intolerable. As Paine writes:

**It is the good fortune of many to live distant from the scene of sorrow; the evil is not sufficiently brought to *their* doors to make *them* feel the precariousness with which all American property is possessed. But let our imaginations transport us for a few moments to Boston; that seat of wretchedness will teach us wisdom, and instruct us for ever to renounce a power in whom we can have no trust.<sup>3</sup>**

What Paine does here is crucial. He does not argue first. He transports by displacing the reader. He performs a forced relocation of perception. Boston is not introduced as information, but as an experiential threshold. And then the scene tightens:

**The inhabitants of that unfortunate city, who but a few months ago were in ease and affluence, have now no other alternative than to stay and starve, or turn and beg.<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> Louis-Claude Paquin, “Méthodologie de la recherche-création,” 2017. [https://lcpaquin.com/MethoRC\\_notes\\_de\\_cours.pdf](https://lcpaquin.com/MethoRC_notes_de_cours.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Foner, *Collected Writings*, 26

<sup>4</sup> Foner, *Collected Writings*, 26



The William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan holds 58 editions of *Common Sense*. Why so many? The collection reflects the edits, additions, translations, typographical changes, and imitations that this breathtakingly popular pamphlet underwent over the years.

The choice is not ideological; it is physiological. Stay and starve. Leave and beg. No neutral position remains. Paine continues:

**Endangered by the fire of their friends if they continue within the city, and plundered by the soldiery if they leave it.<sup>5</sup>**

Here, imagination does not merely visualize; it activates something closer to what we might now call interoception—an awareness of the body’s internal signals.<sup>6</sup> The reader is not asked to sympathize from afar, but to feel the pressure of domination in the body. Hunger. Fear. Exposure. Constraint. The political becomes visceral. This is also why reading *Common Sense* defies neutrality. What matters is that the reader accepts the experience Paine constructs. The text works only if the reader consents to be affected. In this sense, *Common Sense* is not written to be interpreted, but to be acted upon. Execution here should be understood literally. The text has a performative force and sets in motion a sequence of operations. First, it destabilizes distance. Then it saturates perception. Only then does reasoning unfold. Logic, for instance, as we’ve seen with this quote about Boston, follows sensation, not the other way around.

This is why *Common Sense* travels so well across contexts, voices, and centuries. Through interoception, *Common Sense* allows us to connect to the inhabitants of any unfortunate city or territory. This brings us to a

crucial shift: Paine’s voice is never entirely his own. Although *Common Sense* bears his name, the text constantly dissolves the figure of the author. The “I” retreats. The voice opens. The reader is repeatedly addressed as a thinking agent, not as a follower. Paine writes in such a way that his words always seem on the verge of being spoken by someone else. This is why the pamphlet circulated orally; why it moved through taverns, assemblies, and private homes; why it was read aloud by people who did not consider themselves intellectuals. The text does not require mastery; it bestows it.

In this sense, Paine can be understood as a proto-system rather than a sovereign author.<sup>7</sup> By calling Paine a “proto-system,” I mean that he goes beyond merely expressing ideas; he constructs a technical and cognitive arrangement that enables others to think and act politically. *Common Sense* works less as a finished argument than as an interface: it does not transmit knowledge from author to reader, it produces political competence in the act of reading itself.

In Bernard Stiegler’s terms, quoted by French philosopher Anne Alombert, such a text functions as a technical milieu rather than a message.<sup>8</sup> Writing is not neutral; it exteriorizes memory, judgment, and imagination, shaping how individuals and collectives come to think. *Common Sense* operates precisely at this level: it distributes cognition, externalizes judgment, and transforms reading into a collective

<sup>5</sup> Foner, *Collected Writings*, 26

<sup>6</sup> Franck Luerweg, “Sentir son corps de l’intérieur,” *Cerveau & Psycho*, 2022/9 N° 147, (2022), 74-78. CAIRN.INFO. [stm.cairn.info/magazine-cerveau-et-psycho-2022-9-page-74?lang=fr](http://stm.cairn.info/magazine-cerveau-et-psycho-2022-9-page-74?lang=fr)

<sup>7</sup> Sovereign authorship defines a deep understanding of who the author’s audience is.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Alombert, *Penser avec Bernard Stiegler* (Paris, PUF, 2025) 220, 222.

operation. The reader is not positioned as an interpreter of meaning, but as an agent activated by a device that organizes attention, imagination, and decision. The voice of *Common Sense* is therefore not singular but distributed. What speaks is not a man, but a system of intelligibility set in motion. The reader is not positioned as an interpreter of meaning, but as an agent activated by a device that organizes attention, imagination, and decision.

Seen from this angle, *Common Sense* anticipates something uncannily contemporary; a mode of writing that separates intention from effect; a text whose power lies not in what the author meant, but in what the text enables others to do. This is precisely where the connection with contemporary reflections on algorithmic writing begins to appear. Not because Paine was a machine, of course, but because he understood something essential. Authorship can be strategically diluted in order to amplify impact.

*Common Sense* is a text that does not settle but circulates; that does not preach from above but activates readers from within; that does not command assent but invites participation. We have come to understand Paine not simply as an author who speaks, but as an operator who sets inference in motion. This insight may be deepened by connecting it to a theoretical framework that, at first glance, might seem far from Paine's world: the contemporary debate on authorship in the age of artificial intelligence.

Expanding this meditation on *Common Sense* with German scholar Hannes Bajohr's article "Writing at a Distance: Notes on Authorship and Artificial Intelligence" may seem unconventional, yet it illuminates an essential structure in *Common Sense*: Paine indeed writes as a proto-system, not as a sovereign subject.<sup>8</sup>

According to Bajohr, the advent of large language models (Chat GPT, for instance) challenges long-standing assumptions about what writing is, and who or what can be said to "author" a text. As these models become increasingly capable of producing writing that is, in some cases, indistinguishable from human-written text, the very notion of where writing comes from and who wrote it comes into question. The boundary between human and machine agents producing text becomes blurred, and with it, the traditional author's function becomes unstable. For Bajohr, this crisis is not simply about machines "being authors." Instead, it opens a space where authorship itself is distributed, where a text can no longer be neatly mapped onto a single individual's intention. He proposes the idea of distributed authorship, a concept

that recognizes a network of actors (human and non-human) participating in text production, while acknowledging that this network both extends and challenges classical concepts of authorship. As Paine wrote in the introduction of *Common Sense*:



A museum visitor ponders a document under glass.

**Who the Author of this Publication is, is wholly unnecessary to the Public, as the Object for Attention is the *Doctrine* itself, not the *Man*.**<sup>9</sup>

This vehicle of thought as a distributed authorship helps us see *Common Sense* not merely as the product of one revolutionary subject, but as a system of effects,

operations, and activations that exceed the author's intention. Paine's pamphlet refutes the romantic ideal of the solitary genius. Its life has never resided in the person of Paine, but in the circulation of effects it triggers. It is easier, in this light, to see Paine not as a singular voice but as a proto-system: a text designed to distribute agency rather than concentrate it.

<sup>8</sup> Hannes Bajohr, "Writing at a Distance: Notes on Authorship and Artificial Intelligence." *German Studies Review* 47.2 (2024), 315-337. In political theory, a sovereign subject describes an anti-government person or group who share common beliefs.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bayard, *Demain est écrit* (Minuit, Paradoxe, Paris 2005).

Bajohr’s paper introduces another concept useful here: causal authorship, which measures the distance between agent and text. In the context of writing with artificial agents, this distance can be vast: the human programmer, the model’s training data, and the user’s prompt all contribute to the final output. Yet even in that highly mediated context, authorship is not eliminated but decentered: shared among multiple influences. Similarly, *Common Sense* was designed to be read, heard, performed, repeated, simplified, and recomposed.

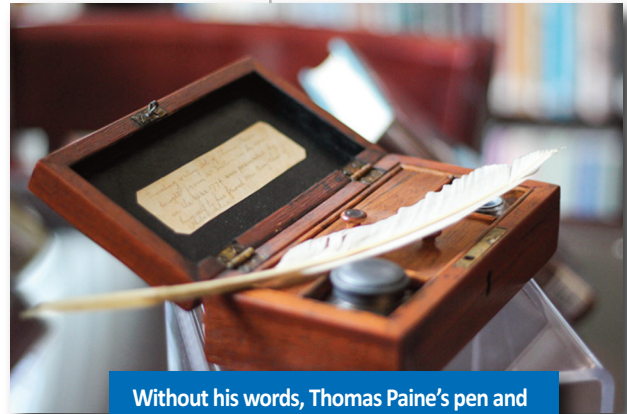
Paine’s role was not to author meaning as an intention sealed behind his signature, but to construct a textual environment where meaning could be generated by the reader. The result: *Common Sense* became something like an early analog of a distributed text whose influence and effect did not remain within the limits of its original publication, but propagated through countless acts of reading, rewriting, speaking, and quoting.

In the future imagined by Bajohr and already emerging in everyday acts of reading, the first question might be not “Who wrote this?” but “What does this text do to me, to us?” In this light, Paine’s pamphlet becomes less a singular expression and more a textual apparatus: an early form of distributed authorship before computers, algorithms, or language models existed. To frame it differently: rather than writing a pamphlet that would be “owned” by him as an author, Paine wrote a generative device—a piece of writing whose power did not reside within its origin but in its capacity to generate action, judgment, and collective reasoning across a population.

If Paine’s voice was never meant to be fixed, why should we exhibit him as if it were? The challenge of a future-oriented exhibition is not to preserve Paine, but to let him continue. Yet this future is not merely hypothetical. Following French Literature Professor Pierre Bayard’s reflections in *Demain est Écrit*, where the future is understood as operating retroactively on the present, such a future may already have taken place.

Imagine a gallery where *Common Sense* is not displayed behind glass, but performed, circulated, and interacted with. Where visitors are invited not to observe, but to participate by reading, responding, debating, and improvising the text in real time. In such a configuration, Paine is no longer a relic. He becomes a living interface, a proto-system of distributed thought. Visitors act as co-producers of the experience; the text’s energy circulates, echoes, and multiplies. Each reading becomes a node in a network of cognition, a point where political imagination is exercised and extended.

As Bayard suggests, the future can function as an interpretative operator, reorganizing the meaning of past events. Paine survives not as an icon, but as an active, distributed force still capable of moving, still capable of performing revolution.



Without his words, Thomas Paine’s pen and ink set is simply a silent artifact of his genius. From the collection of Paine artifacts at Iona University.

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