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Echoes of Laocoön's Warning in Letters from an American Farmer

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Echoes of Laocoön's Warning in *Letters from an American Farmer*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English
American Literature

by

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Abstract

A dramatic shift in tone in the final letter of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* reveals Farmer James' conflicting attitudes about an independent America. When the letters are juxtaposed with a Western myth of origin such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, it becomes clear that Crèvecoeur is forcing his narrating persona to repeat a pattern of civilization – destruction, renewal – on which all of Western civilization is based. The sudden pessimism that erupts in the penultimate “Distresses of a Frontier Man” is symptomatic of James' anxiety about the American Revolution and the resulting disruption in his bucolic way of life.

Crèvecoeur, Colonial Literature, Autobiography, Virgil, Classics, Comparative Literature

Introduction

Some readers interpret J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur *Letters from an American Farmer* as a ringing endorsement of European colonies that “embellish [America’s] extended shore” (Crèvecoeur 66). Others read it as a social critique of America by an author who spoils the letter-writing project of his ingenuous persona, Farmer James, by suggesting, according to Grantland S. Rice, “the histories” of Western civilizations “reflect...the ideology of a fallen Europe” (Rice 98). Both readings, however, encounter narrative incongruities that make a consistent interpretation nearly impossible. James E. Bishop challenges the popular consensus among scholars that the letters should be read as “continuous narrative” and instead suggests that they might be “considered individually” (363). Bishop neatly summarizes these dueling schools of thought on Crèvecoeur by explain that, “The first group [of critics] reads the letters as following a model of declining optimism and increasing disillusionment; as James becomes increasingly frustrated with the country’s march to war, the tone of the letters becomes increasingly bleak” (363). This type of reading, however, is undermined by “what Norman Grabo calls ‘curiously wrong notes,’” pockets of gloom along a narrative arc of optimistic effulgence (363). The second school of thought “emphasizes the divide between Crèvecoeur the literary artist and the foolishly naïve Farmer James, thus highlighting Crèvecoeur’s own growing frustration and disillusionment with the burgeoning American nation” (363).

We might, instead of taking up one of these disparate positions, particularize Grantland Rice’s reference to the way Crèvecoeur, like the Abbé Raynal, borrows epic patterns from epics like Virgil’s *Aeneid*, “national histories,” as Rice calls them, that “naturalized the forces of exploitation and tyranny by their logic of dramatizing only events of violence and domination and excluding the harmonious, peaceful, and egalitarian aspects of civilization” (98). Book 2 of

the *Aeneid*, in its re-telling of the fall of Troy, mirrors the self-critical purpose of James' first and final letters to Mr. F.B. In the first letter, James wonders aloud about the possibility of corresponding to Mr. F.B., speculating over Mr. F.B.'s invitation to correspond in much the same way that the Trojans speculate over the mysterious wooden horse. Similarly, just as Aeneas describes the disaster that immediately follows the horse's admission into Troy Book 2, James, in his final letter to Mr. F.B., describes the imminent destruction of his farm. Whether the destruction of his farm is the direct result of his correspondence with Mr. F.B. in the same way that Troy's destruction is the direct result of allowing the wooden horse to pass through the city gates is a parallel we will not argue here. If we separate James' social observations from his narrated experience, a more concrete parallel reveals itself: James' decision to open his homeland to the inquisitive foreign eyes of Mr. F.B. precipitates the demise of his pastoral fantasy in the same way that Priam's decision to open his city to the Trojan horse precipitates the demise of Troy.

By grafting Crèvecoeur's text onto Book 2 of the *Aeneid*, we can transcend the arguments that try to figure James as either "the living, breathing, talking representative of the type that the book is trying to define – "the American," as Pamela Regis asserts (128), or as a mourner, as Bryce Traister imagines him, who perches of the precipice of the American Revolution lamenting the impending "cataclysm" that will tear down the hierarchy peculiar to "*British-America*" (482). Through the letters' structural similarities to the *Aeneid*, James emerges, by the time he informs F.B. of his desire to abandon his farm, as one of the "western pilgrims" he describes in Letter III, "who are carrying along with them the great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the East; [who] will finished the great circle"

(70). *Letters*, by bringing us to the moment right before James' actual journey to the frontier, prepares us for a narrative of displacement not unlike the displacement of the surviving Trojans.

Supposing the Crèvecoeur drew consciously from Virgil's epic is not, after all, such a daring leap of the imagination. Crèvecoeur was born in France outside of Caen in 1735 and schooled in the city's Jesuit College, where he inevitably studied Latin and Greek and developed a familiarity with classic texts, including the *Aeneid* (Sanborn 259-60). When Richard Waswo writes, that "the founding legend of Western civilization – the descent from Troy – in its literary retellings from Virgil...shaped the actual behavior of European and Americans in their subsequent contacts..." (541), he describes the phenomenon of early childhood narrative imprinting that ensured that authors such as Crèvecoeur would incorporate elements of that narrative into their own later work, drawing heavily, even if unconsciously, from the earlier texts. Richard Gummere explains further that early America contained a disproportionately large number of university-educated men. Before 1701, a third of the men who came to America held degrees from English universities. Because of this, colonial pedagogues developed grammar school curricular to prepare students with a reading and writing knowledge of ancient Latin and Greek for university entrance examinations (226). Though Crèvecoeur was not university educated, he had been prepared for such an education and wrote for colonial and European readers who would most certainly have been alert to classical allusions.

By reading Crèvecoeur's *Letters* in light of their classical influences and associations, we can lay the groundwork for a new reading, one that questions whether Crèvecoeur intended a panegyric to an *independent* America and not, instead, a panegyric to *colonial* America, lapsing into elegy by the time his narrator James realizes that the Revolution will destroy the British-America he so adores. In his final letter, "Distresses of a Frontier Man," James explains how he

will reconstitute his freehold-farmer identity amidst the natives populating frontier America. Like Aeneas and his band of refugees, James will transport his culture to a new place, performing what Richard Waswo explains as a quintessentially Western phenomenon. “We Westerners,” writes Waswo, “are migratory and peripheral; we have not produced civilization, we have been civilized” (548).

Letters, in the same way that Book 2 of the *Aeneid* laments the plight of the Trojan refugees that survive the Greek attack, laments the rift that opens between James and British-America. Part of what makes James a prototypical American, the paragon of colonial landowners, is his link to a European culture that paves the way for American success. However, as Waswo notes, part of what forms that Western identity is its transience; James can only live up to his Western identity – his cultural heritage – by breaking with that identity. It is this paradoxical nature of Western civilization that Crèvecoeur concerns himself with in the creation of a narrator like James whose anticipated relocation in the face of the impending destruction of his home recalls Aeneas’ flight from Troy down to the very way in which James’ home will be destroyed. James explains that he can anticipate a fiery demise to his domestic life simply by observing what has happened to other settlements, which “from Lake Champlain, almost all [have] been conflagrated one after another” (202).

I. Echoes of Laocoön in the Wife's Warning to Farmer James

On the brink of the American Revolution, Farmer James, the yeoman narrator of Crèvecoeur's *Letters*, takes up the implement he will wield in the burgeoning conflict between the colonies and their imperial progenitor – his pen. With his decision to enter into a correspondence with F.B., James opens his private life up to public discourse, making himself, as his wife warns in the earlier letter, “the subject of public talk” (48). James' entry into an intellectual discourse concerning the identity of Americans and the nature, more generally, of America, marks a departure from his occupation as a farmer and signals a transformation not only of his own identity but of the identities of all those freehold farmer who constitute “the very best class of men” in America (71). The American Revolution, as James comes to understand in the apocalyptic final letter, “Distresses of a Frontier Man,” represents a moment of dramatic social upheaval, one that will throw the privileged position he occupies in colonial America into jeopardy. James' small step outside the bounds of social status – out of the role he occupies in colonial America – microcosmically parallels the transformation that he and all other freeholders will undergo during the Revolution; they will lose their social status amidst the Revolution's social upheaval.

This loss of identity is precisely the sort of consequence that James' wife warns her husband of when he is trying to decide whether or not to reply to F.B.'s query. After the minister gives James' epistolary project his unequivocal endorsement, James' wife offers the final word of advice. Though she concedes that James can write to F.B. if he is dead-set on doing so, she insists that

it be kept a profound secret among us; if it were once known
abroad that thee writest to a great and rich man over at London,

there would be no end of the talk of people: some would vow that thee art going to turn an author; others would pretend to foresee some great alterations in the welfare of thy family; some would say this; some would say that... Weigh this matter well before thee beginnest, James; consider that a great deal of thy time and of thy reputation is at stake as I may say. Wert thee to write as well as friend Edmund, whose speeches I often see in our papers, it would be the very selfsame thing; thee would'st be equally accused of idleness and vain notions not befitting thy condition (48).

In warning James that some of his neighbors “would say this; some would say that,” James’ wife intimates that indulging his intellectual curiosity to explore “vain notions not befitting [his] condition,” and, by spending the time he should allot to tilling his fields to scribbling letters to a far-removed Englishman, he will be stepping off of his farm and entering a realm of ethereal intellectual discourse.

Foremost on the mind of James’ wife is her husband’s loss of identity. Given the social distance dividing her husband from “a great European man who hath lived abundance of time in that big house called Cambridge... who has never in his life done a single day’s work, no, not even felled a tree” (40), James’ wife realizes that her husband must necessarily change his habits to satisfy F.B.’s request for information about America. Therefore, in her warning, James’ wife emphasizes that James will be acting out of character, in other words, not like the freehold farmer that he is, by writing to F.B. Indeed, she asks James, why would a man “who knows most of our famous lawyers and cunning folks; who hath conversed with very many king’s men, governors, and counselors... pitch[] upon thee for his correspondent, as thee calls it?” (40-41).

To James' wife, F.B.'s motives, because they are unclear or, more alarmingly, unsound, cannot be taken at face value. "Surely he means to jeer thee!" she exclaims, and adds, "I am sure he does; he cannot be in a real fair earnest. James, thee must read this letter over again, paragraph by paragraph, and warily observe whether thee canst perceive some words of jesting, something that hath more than one meaning..." (41). She shifts from a critique of F.B.'s motives to a more direct questioning of her husband's perceptive faculties, telling him, "I think on it, husband, I wish thee would'st let me see his letter; though I am but a woman, as thee mayest say, yet I understand the import of words in good measure" (41), understands perhaps, as he insistence to verify the letter's meaning implies, even better than her husband.

In critiquing James' desire to transcend his social status, his wife transcends her own social status. Anna Carew-Miller partly attributes the inevitable loss of James' farm in "Distresses of a Frontier Man" to the way in which his wife undermines his patriarchal authority in the earlier letter by insinuating that she may be better able to disentangle F.B.'s erudite letter than her husband. "Her assertion of authority outside housewifely duties," writes Carew-Miller, "threatens [James'] position in the democratic partnership" (249). James' wife inverts the domestic hierarchy by critiquing her husband's perceptive faculties, thereby instigating the very loss of social identity that she so warns against. The freehold status that James holds at the beginning of his correspondence with F.B. is characterized by a conspicuously dependent independence. The freeholder in America, that is, derives this independence from his connection to the mother country so that, under the distant protection and guidance of a powerful empire, the individual freeholder is free to worry only about augmenting his individual wealth and his personal property. "The true American freeholders, the most respectable set of people in this part of the world," she, owe "their happy independence, the great share of freedom they possess,

the good regulation of their families” to their role in “extending the trade and dominion of [the] mother country” (Crèvecoeur 79).

After his wife’s initial critique, he turns his attention to the minister’s initial encouragement, saying, “What you say, minister, seems very true; do go on; I always love to hear you talk” (42). For a man who insists that his wonder takes precedence over his vanity, James betrays his vulnerability to flattery. Predisposed to correspond with F.B., James is mesmerized by the minister’s assertion “that the mind of a good and enlightened Englishman would be more improved in remarking throughout these provinces the causes which render so many people happy” (42).

Encoded within the minister’s first words of rhetorical encouragement lies yet another example of the hierarchy that James, as a freeholder, is part of. The minister insinuates that by providing F.B. with natural and social information about America, James will be fulfilling his role as a “dependent” freeholder in “extending the trade and dominion of [the] mother country” (79). In that sense, James will remain squarely within the bounds of his freehold status by corresponding to F.B. However, James is a farmer and writing letters is an occupation, his wife reminds him, “not befitting thy condition” (48). James loses his identity not through the fact of his relationship to F.B., but through the way he defers to F.B. as a man of learning with whom he has no business relating to.

In the same way that James acts outside of his farmer identity, “Laocoön,” writes Rebekah M. Smith, “is not acting in his priestly capacity. His warning to the Trojans...is spoken in a context and in language that evokes an image of Old Roman civic virtue” (514-15). In both form and content, Laocoön’s warning to his countrymen in Book 2 of Virgil’s *Aeneid* mirrors the warning James’ wife offers her husband in the face of F.B.’s request for edification. Both

F.B.'s letter and the Trojan horse require that their recipients 'open' themselves up in some way. James would have to open himself to "public talk," to frequent visits from the colonel, and "strange surmises" (48) by his neighbors. The Trojans would have to literally open their city gates to receive the horse and thereby give away the advantage of their well-guarded ramparts. Why would the Trojans open the city walls and leave Troy's citizens vulnerable to a potential Greek incursion? They open the gates because, like James, they have a predilection to believe that the Greeks have retreated and that the decade-long war is finally over. Aeneas explains the Trojan inclination to believe Sinon's story about the Greek retreat when he and his countrymen come upon the deserted Greek camp:

We though they had gone away
And running before the wind made for Mycenae.
So the whole land of Troy was shed of the load
Of its long agony. The gates flew open
And oh! What joy it was to wander where
The camp had been and find the whole place empty
And the shore quire deserted! (Virgil 28)

Just as James is primed to reply to F.B., Aeneas and the Trojans are primed for a resolution to the war. They are inclined to believe Sinon's story of Greek retreat just as James is reader to assent to his minister when he tells James, "Your mind is what we called at Yale college a *tabula rasa*, where spontaneous and strong impressions are delineated with facility...Had you received by half the education of F.B., you had been a worthy correspondent indeed" (46). Faced with this kind of endorsement of his intellectual prowess, James will be hard-pressed to resist a dialogue with a Cambridge man.

However, that which F.B. requires, namely, a chronicle of American experience, “must,” according to James, “Flow from a very limited power of mind” (39). Though James evinces nothing of the simple mindedness he professes, his wife resist the allure of intellectual language to drive at the central questions: “Though I am but a woman, as thee mayest say, yet I understand the purport of words in good measure” (41). She maintains, in short, that she is not easily misled (like her husband) by high-minded language; she is capable of divining the underlying ironic tone of F.B.’s letter and foreseeing the consequences of James’ acquiescence. In that sense, her skepticism borrows, in forms as well as content, from that of Laocoön’s speech in Book 2 of the *Aeneid*. Of that speech, John Lynch writes: it is

Vigorous, decisive, spontaneous; in its deliberate artlessness it is reminiscent of early Republican Rome...Laocoön himself is very much an old Republican figure, a paradigm of virtue and commitment...So also Laocoön’s energetic, blunt, and inelegant style of speaking is reminiscent of the oratory of Cato – that vigorous speaker whose Gold Rule was *rem tene, verba sequentur* [grasp the thought and the words will follow] (171).

In addition to the bluntness with which she states her mistrust of F.B.’s motives, James’ wife shares also in Laocoön’s characteristic fidelity. Where Laocoön is a “paradigm of virtue and commitment” to his Trojan countrymen, James’ wife is a reliable and prudent partner to her husband. As James himself admits, “I never do anything without consulting her” (40). Like Laocoön’s loyalty to Troy, she is the loyal companion who has a stake in James’ course of action. Unlike the minister, she is no impartial ‘consul’, but one who is tied to James and, therefore, to F.B.

James' wife's speculations about F.B.'s intentions recall, then, the scene on the Trojan shore. The Greek horse, like the Englishman's correspondence, materializes one fine afternoon and must be reckoned with. And just as James is 'conquered' through the minister's persuasive efforts, so are the Trojans "conquered," laments Aeneas, "by [Sinon's] tricks and the tears / He could summon at will, whom neither Diomede / Nor Larissaeon Achilles, nor ten tears / Of warfare nor a thousand ships could conquer" (Virgil 34).

James' consternation, like that of the Trojans, represents an effort to understand an enigmatic foreign object. Where the Trojans speculate over Sinon's peace offering, James speculates over the words in F.B.'s letter, "paragraph by paragraph" (41) as his wife says, breaking the whole into its component parts. Just as James' wife urges her husband to be on guard against F.B.'s "jesting," Laocoön protests against the admittance of the horse into Troy in this famous admonition:

Laocoön thrust

In a heat of passion down from the citadel

And from far off cried 'My unhappy countrymen

What height of folly is this? Do you really think

Any gift from the Greeks is guileless? Have you learnt

Nothing from knowing Ulysses? Either Greeks

Have hidden some men inside this wooden monster

Or in itself it is a foul contrivance

For overthrowing our walls...

or there is some other trick in it.

Whatever it be; I am nothing but apprehensive

Of the motives of Greeks, even as the givers of gifts!' (29)

It is worth transcribing Laocoön's entire protest because it reveals an important parallel with the protests of James' wife. There's no telling what the horse might be. Is it a "vessel" for depositing warriors in the city or itself a siege weapon? Laocoön is not prepared to answer (though he is prepared to ask) these questions, but he argues that his countrymen are not prepared to either, at least not definitively.

Naturally, then, since the fate of Troy hangs in the balance, Laocoön urges his compatriots to bar the horse's entry just as James' wife urges her husband not to write back to, and thereby make himself receptive to more correspondence from, F.B. "I had rather," she says, already with a twinge of nostalgia, "remain as we are" (49). Both Laocoön and the wife in *Letters* warn against their audiences unnecessarily exposing themselves to dangers. They make their cases against Sinon and James' minister respectively, each of whom employ high-minded rhetoric and flattery to persuade their audiences to accept their offers and encouragements.

"Legend eventually evolved for Sinon," writes J.W. Jones in an analysis that answers its titular question, "Who is Sinon?" by relating the Greek perjurer to a more famous equivocator: "A genealogy which made him a first cousin of [Ulysses]...[Sinon] is a man of words who succeeds by clever verbal fabrication" (122). Similarly, F.B. is "a man of learning and taste" (Crèvecoeur 41), a strictly academic personage who deals in the "corrupt ideology of European writing" (Rice 100). By advocating to James a correspondence with F.B., the minister plays the same role as Sinon, who must convince the Trojans to unwittingly open their gates to his countrymen. Though the minister and Sinon work exclusively within the narrow confines of language, their audiences are unfamiliar with the rhetorical devices they employ and are, therefore, less able to parse their specious arguments, for, according to John Lynch, even though

“Sinon’s speech is over-artful and too elegant – an example of art that calls attention to itself,” the Trojans are unable to recognize how Sinon hams up his despair because they are “totally unfamiliar with Greek *loci*” (Lynch 176). The minister, in fact praise James’ ignorance, citing it as the chief virtue of his perspective. “Your mind,” he lauds the farmer, “is what we called at Yale college a *tabula rasa*, where spontaneous and strong impressions are delineated with facility” (46). What is most striking about this comment, aside from the Latin, which carries the faintest of allusive echoes of the Roman world, is that the minister actually praises James’ impressionable mind. For in addition to making him a good recorder of the American scene, it also makes him susceptible to F.B.’s rhetoric; the Englishman can stencil whatever he wants onto our poor farmer’s consciousness.

The Trojans are likewise unacquainted with the features of Greek rhetoric, and it is because of this dearth of knowledge that they are so receptive to what Virgil’s audience would have almost certainly recognized as a speech that was too contrived and, therefore, perfidious (Lynch 176). He cries to invoke *pathos*, and he cites his desertion as the necessary motivation for honesty, establishing his *ethos* on a fabricated tale of his escape from being made a human sacrifice. To soften the battle-hardened Trojans, Sinon presents himself in “eager surrender” and immediately laments his ostensibly pitiable fate:

Alas, alas, is there coign of earth or sea
Anywhere, Anywhere, that I could hide in?
I am stretched to the utmost on the rack of misery --
What is there left me? – I have no place whatsoever
Among the Greeks, and the Trojans pursue my blood
With bitter animus! (Virigil 30)

Though in hindsight Aeneas introduces Sinon's words as "proof / Of the whole pattern of Greek perfidy," he admits that the pathetic deserter's story "chastened our mood and checked our urge to violence... / And what he aimed to accomplish by this essay / Of trusting to surrender" (30). The aim of the "essay" is to clear a path to the heart of Troy and Sino pulls out every trick in the rhetorical canon to achieve this end. "in general," observes John Lynch, "Sinon secures his emphasis by careful and artful positioning of words, not by jolting his audience as Laocön has done. In contrast to the directness of Laocön's speech, Sinon's sentences are filled with subtleties, qualifications, nuances and circumlocutions" (173). One such qualification is that Sinon is an outcast. While retained as a page to Palamedes, he says, "I, too, enjoyed my due of respect and dignity," but it is because of "Ulysses in his jealousy" that Sinon is cast out of the Greek camp (Virgil 30). Aeneas can taste the bitter irony of these words because he now knows that Sinon was actually acting as an agent of Ulysses, playing just one part in a larger deception. Sinon qualifies his plea to the Trojans by telling them of his fall from grace, and thereby ensures not only that the members of his audience stay their swords, but that they believe he is more like them in considering the Greeks capable of all manner of "wicked / And cunning art" (30).

The minister ultimately succeeds in persuading James because he appeals to James' inclination to begin a correspondence with F.B. just as Sinon appeals to the Trojan inclination to put a decisive (and pleasant) end to the war. The Trojans *want* to believe that the horse is a peace offering, a white flag left in the wake of a hasty Mycenaean retreat. James' wife fails to dissuade her husband from writing because she, like Laocoön, bluntly presents a truth that goes against James' own desires – that F.B., the foreigner, the manipulator of words, cannot be trusted to steward James' burgeoning intellect through the process of writing about America.

Conversely, the minister's rhetoric ignores the central question and instead aims its barbs at James' self-conscious disavowal of compositional talent. "Had you received but half the education of Mr. F.B.," the minister says, "[y]ou had been a worthy correspondent indeed" (46). This is precisely the sort of "education" James will receive through the osmotic contact with such a well-educated personage as F.B. It is also the sort of education that James' wife fears most because it is completely incongruous with James' occupation, domestic life, and social standing. Her specific concern, that writing letters to a Cambridge scholar does not jive with tilling a field, interestingly finds a sympathetic voice in Cato's misgivings about Greek orators who "had so bewitched all the youth of the city that they seemed to have abandoned all their other pleasure and pursuits and to have run made after philosophy" (Plutarch 145). Cato's xenophobia proves an especially relevant parallel here because it mirrors – and elaborates – on Laocoön's cultural mistrust of the Greeks. Where Laocoön merely pits his plain language against Sinon's refined rhetoric, Cato identifies the source of his mistrust; the Greeks, he reasons, manipulate language and thereby lead impressionable minds away from their civic duties. Both Cato and James' wife are wary of a philosophical intrusion into the practical spheres of industry and economy. Like Cato, James' wife cautions her husband against opening his mind to a discourse with F.B. This correspondence, she suggests, will mark a point of no return since, once James begins sending and receiving letters to F.B., he sets himself apart from his immediate agrarian community, a fact that, in "Distresses of a Frontier Man," strains his relationship with that community.

II. A European Source for James' Misgivings about Independent America

James begins his correspondence, innocuously enough, with a natural history of America that is meant to figure the different 'kinds' of Americans in their peculiar geographical and social spaces. "In Letter II," writes Pamela Regis, "James narrates a personal history that he shares with a great many other immigrants and that is essentially without connection to civil history" (128). James does in fact *attempt* to divorce his American narrative from its European influences. Describing the "difficulty...in the manner of viewing so extensive a scene" (67) as the configuration of American settlements, he settles on antonymic contrasts to illustrate America's peculiarities. He explains, "[The American landscape] is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything and of a herd of people who have nothing" (67). However, though James initially tries to distance himself from the European hierarchies that stymied the individual growth of its crowded, oppressed citizens, he does not wander very far away from the New World's civilizing origins. Not three pages later, James admits that Americans will make their new continent into a robust, egalitarian civilization precisely because they carry "with them the great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the East; they will finished the great circle" (7). As James moves around the colonies, travelling from Nantucket to the Carolinas, he increasingly adopts a conception of his countrymen that reflects their European origins until the virtues of that conception unravel in "Distresses of a Frontier Man." "The darkness of [Distresses of a Frontier Man]," writes Regis, "is the shadow of change passing over the static conception of the American sanctioned by the method and rhetoric of natural history" (13).

James', through his correspondence, recognizes his link to the European civilization that spawns America but realizes as well that he has more of a stake in his immediate American

surrounding despite his dialogue with Mr. F.B. By the final letter, James conceives of America not as the perfect synthesis of European culture, but an adulterated hodge-podge of its basest exploitative elements. In “Distresses of a Frontier Man” he writes, “As a member of a large society which extends to many parts of the world, my connexion with it is too distant to be as strong as that which binds me to the inferior division in the midst of which I live” (203). Faced with a Revolution that will threaten his place in colonial America’s social structure, James discovers in his neighbors a tendency towards atomism that he insisted in his third letter was a social ill endemic of European countries, ameliorated instantly when the European emigrant arrives in America. The “metamorphosis” that James describes as extinguishing “all [the European’s] prejudices...the mechanism of subordination” (83) is an illusion dispelled by the Revolution, in which, he writes of his “inferior division,” “ find that any kind of opposition to its now prevailing sentiments immediately begets hatred; how easily do men pass from loving to hating and cursing one another?” (203).

In that sense, James’ critique of independent America is really a critique of the exploitative social forces that spawned America. Christine Holbo explains the link that James identifies between America and Europe in his “attempt to ground social order in natural order faces two challenges: the study of nature exceeds man’s capacity and if there *is* a rule to American nature, it is one of violence and atomism” (49). James ignores these facts until they show up at his doorstep and force him to the frontier. “Distresses of a Frontier Man” represents the moment of his disillusionment with an America free from British rule and, therefore, presided over by his factional neighbors. In the act of writing about his domestic environment, James discovers that that environment bears no relation to his preconceptions of it. That is, ingrained in its social fabric is the latent possibility of civil strife. The moment, returning to the

parallel between Virgil and Crèvecoeur, when the Greeks spill from the horse's belly is the *Aeneid*'s analogue to "Distresses of a Frontier Man."

James' growing awareness of America's latent propensity to violence, atomism, and, ultimately, anarchy, coalesces in Letter X when he watches two snakes wrestle and writhe in a death match that, for D.H. Lawrence, is conspicuously violent. "[Crèvecoeur] forgets," writes Lawrence of this passage, "the sweet-and-pureness of Nature, and is, for the time, a sheer ophiolater, and his chapter is as handsome a piece of ophiolatry, perhaps, as that coiled Aztec rattlesnake carved in stone" (34). The violence in this scene, instead of serving to chronicle nature's equanimity and sensible (if brutal) logic, has more in common with the "natural histories" of European civilizations, which, according to Grantland Rice, "naturalized the forces of exploitation and tyranny by their logic of dramatizing only events of violence and domination and excluding the harmonious, peaceful, and egalitarian aspects of civilization" (98). The moment in the *Aeneid* when Laocoön is defeated by Sinon's spurious plea and is subsequently consumed by Minerva's serpents offers a parallel to the snake battle and provides further evidence, through its structural and linguistic similarities to the scene in *Letters*, that the violence Rice identifies in European "natural histories" creeps into James' narrative. James describes

two great snakes [...] fastened together by means of the writhings
which lashed them to each other, and stretched at their full length,
[...] convulsed with strong undulations, rapidly following each
other. Their eyes seemed on fire and ready to start out of their
heads (185).

The corresponding passage in the *Aeneid*, as narrated by Aeneas, reads:

Two serpents were to be seen swimming across

From Tenedos breasting the calm sea waters
In ring upon vast ring swirling together
Towards the shore.
Their blood-red hooded heads
And necks went towering above the waves,
The rest of their length went thrashing through the water
Squirring colossal coils, churning the sea... Their bloodshot eyes
ablaze..." (34)

The similarities between Crèvecoeur's and Virgil's serpent scenes reveal that James' natural history has, by Letter X, been undermined by the violent foundation of European epics on which colonial America has been built. Though James seeks to differentiate Americans from their European progenitors, he moves closer towards conflating the two as he strays back down a narrative path that begins in the ancient world. "An humble American planter, a simple cultivator of the earth" (37), can unwittingly retread the same ground worn down by a succession of the military marches of fallen European empires. Crèvecoeur, however, *is* aware, painfully so, of the historical context surrounding his American narrative, a fact that he makes clear by addressing the narrative to the Abbè Raynal, whose "history of the New World up until the American Revolution," writes Grantland Rice, "follows the same trajectory as his history of the Roman Empire" (98).

According to Rice, Crèvecoeur pattern his contemporary history of America on the Abbè Raynal's own civic history of the New World. Such a narrative trajectory takes for granted, among other considerations, a single portentous fact – if America's history mirrors that of Rome's, then an inevitable decline has already been written as the final act of the America saga.

Rome's genesis began in the ashes of Troy; the fact that "The seed of Hector, for three hundred years / Shall reign and reign..." (Virgil 14) is taken for granted by Jupiter as a "promise" made by the fates (7). The promise of Rome's rise as the "master-race" that will "swallow" the Libyan empire (3) carries, in hindsight, the implicit whiff of decay and, just as Troy's demise gives way to Rome, so too does Rome's decline pave the way for a younger relative. Americans, as James writes, "will finish the great circle," but that circle represents a cycle of civic destruction and reconstitution. This inexorable cycle becomes clear to James in "Distresses of a Frontier Man," but, as Norman Grabo observes, even in his fancied exile on the frontier fringes of civilized America, James imagines that he will make 'going native' a more palatable experience by introducing aspects of European civilization (171), such as "that great, that primary worship which is the foundation of all others" and "every necessary implement" (Crèvecoeur 224) for cultivating a farm and maintaining a household.

We can see, then, that even before James and his family actually abandon their farm to escape a "dreadful enemy" (201), James has already conceived of a new existence on the frontier. Almost in spite of its avowed aim to differentiate Americans from Europeans, James' narrative has doubled-back to the narrative of destruction played out in European epics such as the *Aeneid*. As Grabo observes, "the book's subtle organization hints at eternally renewed disaster" (172). Even James' plan to infiltrate the native communities by building "a wigwam [...] in order to avoid being though singular or giving occasion for any railleries" (219) recalls the manner in which Sinon insinuates himself into the Trojan stronghold, earning their trust by disavowing his Greek identity. By carrying his own European-derived identity with him in his exile, James will draw a larger circle, one that encompasses the natives and, therefore, will

inevitably lead to their demise. James' America is one that is already ruined, fallen precisely because it is derived from fallen cultures.

Troy is an important starting point for Richard Waswo because "to fix on [it]...was to impose an origin that was always already destroyed, and hence required a narrative of displacement, exile, and reconstruction" (546). As the letters progress, James moves closer to this inevitable destruction, one made more palpable by James' initial decision to include a European perspective in his conception of America. If James excludes F.B. – well, if James excludes F.B., we have nothing save the initial ruminating letter and then it's back to the farm for the simple minded agrarian – there is perhaps a chance that his narrative America experience does not culminate in a destruction/displacement similar to the destruction of Troy and the displacement of its refugees because, without the letters, there's no catalyst to set the cycle into motion. However, James is a European descendent and owes his mostly placid experience in America to the hard work of his father who "left behind him the name of a good man" so that he had to "but tread his paths to be happy and a good man like him" (53). "Far from celebrating self-invention," concludes Nancy Ruttenburg from this passage, "The *Letters* insist that the legitimate renewal of self in America requires a scrupulous 'tracing' of a (narrative) line already established by father, fatherland, or Nature" (278).

That the classical world's corpse is reanimated by America's ascendance is a concept best explained by what Gregory Afinogenov calls *translatio*, the eighteenth-century idea that America owed its "complex classical inheritance" to a civilization originally established in ancient Greece and Rome that was moving steadily westward (583). Waswo alights on this pattern of steady migration but adds to it a more fatalistic wrinkle. Western civilization must move steadily westward because it is engaged in a perpetual process of destruction and renewal.

“The story” of the *Aeneid* and Aeneas’ migration to Latium “is therefore structure as a journey, the search for a predestined and permanent home” (546). However, since this home already exists, the inevitable destruction, like the inevitable founding, will be repeated (546).

Home, therefore, for Westerners, can never be “permanent” in the sense Waswo means it. It will always be one steppingstone among others, some larger and more tenable than others. He concludes his critique of Western expansion by explaining, “We Westerners...are migratory and peripheral; we have not produced civilization, we have been civilized” (546). Western emigrants, then, carry with them the pieces left from their shattered civilizations and set out with the single aim of rebuilding their old home in a new place. James says as much when he writes to F.B., “I wish for a change of place” (546). James wishes merely for a change of place and will carry the elements of his culture that are necessary for civilized living. In her book examining American successes and failures, Martha Banta sums up the peculiarly American compulsion for reinvention:

Gertrude Stein suggests that for Americans to stay in the running for success they need time for a series of constant transformations...But in those plummy days before the murmurous drone of success was shattered by the cacophony of rebellion, Crèvecoeur’s eighteenth-century persona thought it unlikely that a man could attain success today and fail tomorrow. All ends and beginnings would be the same. (169)

Letters, according to Christine Holbo, more nearly approximates the pattern of destruction/renewal in the *Aeneid* – in which the principle hero, Aeneas, is promised a new home from the beginning of his journey – that it does an “axiomatic [...] model of decline” (20).

Holbo supposes that James' wife, through her skepticism and warning, "betrays Crèvecoeur the author" (20), and thereby presupposes the disaster in "Distresses of a Frontier Man." By alluding to "the factory of brimstone at 'Suvius and the town of Pompeii underground'" (Crèvecoeur 40), James' wife not only presupposes the link between American towns and Pompeii made by the interloped Russian correspondent of Letter XI (189), but also evinces a prescience that could only, as Holbo argues, stem from Crèvecoeur's conscious awareness of narrative structure. She writes, "The model through which [*Letters*] was most likely conceived and understood in the eighteenth century [was] the model of sensibility and associative imagination" (20). The notion of a "creative imagination...implied," moreover, "the possibility of empirical chaos, individual autonomy and isolation, and social disorder" (23). These are, in fact, the very problems that James will grapple with in "Distresses of a Frontier Man"; faced with the prospect of abandoning his farm and his place within what was, before the Revolution, a relatively equitable social order, he must rely on an autonomous 'self,' capable of surviving beyond the pale of civilization.

James does not dwell on the loss of his farm quite as long as we might suppose he would. Manifesting a surfeit of the American characteristics of ingenuity and pragmatism, James mourns his loss of identity and place for a scant ten pages, and then springs to action at the prompting of his long-absent wife who re-emerges from the obscurity to which James had banished her in Letters III through XI. Finding James in a state of lugubrious paralysis, his wife "rouses [him] out of these dreadful meditations and soothes [him] by all the reasoning she is mistress of" (210). Though James does not derive any immediate satisfaction from these promptings, fearing that his "apprehensions" will "subvert" his wife's "reason," he soon outlines a plan of action: "I will revert into a state nearer to that of nature," he writes, "unencumbered

either with voluminous laws or contradictory codes...” (211). Freed from civilization, James will strike out and, like those colonist who first set foot on the American continent distill an independent existence from the wild vegetation of the frontier. Finally deprived of his farm, James re-enacts the master narrative that Waswo identifies as the blueprint for all Western migrations. In both allowing F.B. ‘into’ his farm and in his ultimate resolve to seek out a new home, James is akin to Aeneas. That is, he moves in the same direction and as a result of the same catalyst as Aeneas and, therefore, perpetuates Waswo’s pattern.

“The experience of founding new settlements,” writes Stanley Burnstein, “Attracted the colonists to legends such as that of the Argonauts and works like the *Aeneid*” (33). In that sense, James’ avowed relocation takes its cue from Aeneas’ relocation. The myth of the American republic “subverts” the myths of Greece and Rome, which, in light of America’s rise, become anachronistic and unnecessary, since America represents the living manifestation – the reincarnation – of the ancient world (39). “Indeed,” Burnstein concludes, “the classics with their cosmopolitan character and roots in the hopelessly corrupt old world have no place in the idealistic visions of men like J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur...who saw the United States as a new and unique development in world history” (40). Burnstein, however, belies this latter point with the former; Crèvecoeur, even by posing America as the ‘re-modeled’ ancient world, nonetheless links the burgeoning civilization with the decrepit civilizations of antiquity and, therefore, with all the negative characteristics that lead to the demise of those decrepit civilizations.

James’ last word before “Distresses of a Frontier Man” deal with the snake battle, which we have linked with Laocoön’s suffocation in the coils of Minerva’s serpents. In the intervening Letter XI, a Russian correspondent, acting at James’ behest, visits the farm of the famous

Pennsylvania botanist, John Bertram. During the transcribed conversation about Bertram's studies, his domestic existence, and the relation of America to the Old World (all issues, we are wise to remind ourselves, that James addresses throughout the narrative and are here summarized in this microcosmic conversation), the Russian intimates that Bertram's town bears an eerie verisimilitude to Pompeii. He says, "Your buildings, your streets, put me in mind of those of the city of Pompeii, where I was a few years ago [...] now how distant; neither builder nor proprietors remain; nothing is known!" (189). The Russian's observation is the first mention of Pompeii since the discussion in Letter I when James' wife alludes to F.B.'s visits to the newly excavated ancient town. Though James does not consciously link the snake battle with Laocoön's death, the fact that James' final words before "Distresses of a Frontier Man" mirror the instance of violence that precedes the Greek horse's admission into Troy reveals the existence of violent European origins for James' letters.

Throughout James' descriptions of his own farm, Anna Carew-Miller observes that a sense of "uneasiness reverberates beneath the seemingly idyllic scenes" (248). The pervading "uneasiness" rises to the surface when the victorious snake perceives "its enemy incapable of further resistance" (186) and slithers out of the water and out of James' purview. The first person to notice that something is not quite right beneath the bucolic surface of James' America is his wife, who, inclined to uncover the uneasiness that lurks beneath the furrows in James' farm, alludes to Mt. Vesuvius when she warns James of trusting Mr. F.B.'s correspondence. Her allusion foreshadows the impending social upheaval in the final letter. The snake battle and the Russian's subsequent letter are, then, those first hints at a seething violence in the American landscape, which owes its existence more to transposed European civilization than James cares

to initially admit, violence that James inadvertently brings to light through his correspondence with F.B.

The Russian correspondent characterizes Mr. Bertram, in the anomalous Letter XI in which James is wholly absent, as a “simple man” to whom “America is indebted for several useful discoveries and the knowledge of many plants” (187). Their discussion, however, takes place under the supervision of a family heirloom, a coat-of-arms, which links Bertram, and all the “discoveries” he makes on behalf of America, to Europe. When the Russian inquires about the anachronistic ornament, Bertram explains, “Thee must know that my father was a Frenchman; he brought this piece of painting over with him; I keep it as a piece of family furniture, and as a memorial of his removal hither” (191). Not only does the coat-of-arms link Bertram to a European ancestry, it “memorializes” his father’s immigration to America in the same way, we might speculate, that Virgil’s poem memorializes Rome’s Trojan lineage by chronicling Aeneas’ “removal” to the Tiber. Compare Bertram’s ancestral awareness with James’ earlier assertion to F.B.: “My father left behind him the name of a good man; I have but to tread his paths to be happy and a good man like him” (53). Both Bertram and James share first generation standing in America but they share something else as well; they have each engaged in disciplines that transcend the original boundaries of their farms. It would seem, then, that as America matures from rustic settlements to a cosmopolitan, republican confederation of commercially active colonies, its residents begin to gaze backwards to the Old World and draw from it a blueprint for progress.

Just as James confers with F.B., Bertram sends his findings to be verified by his own European intellectual overseer, Queen Ulrica of Sweden (193). Do these European connections portend the same thing, namely that America’s demise is already assured through its European

derivation? Just as James' wife had her misgivings about a correspondence with F.B., Bertram acts as his own critic when he responds to the Russian's praise of America, "Thou knowest not as yet the whole extent of thy happiness: the foundation of thy civil polity must lead thee in a few years to a degree of population and power which Europe little thinks of!" (193). Ironically, Europeans have built that "foundation"; James and Bertram each inherit legacies from European immigrant parents. Bertram calibrates the Russian's historical focus with the following reply:

Long before this happens...we shall rest beneath the turf; it is vain for mortals to be presumptuous in their conjectures; our country is, no doubt, the cradle of an extensive future population; the old world is growing weary of its inhabitants; they must come here to flee from the tyranny of the great. But doth not thee imagine that the great will, in the course of years, come over here also; for it is the misfortune of all societies everywhere to hear of great men, great rulers, and of great tyrants. (193)

It is worth transcribing the entire response here so that we can see the parallels between Bertram's idea of immigration, the idea of *translatio* as explained by Afinogenov, and Waswo's concept of narrative history as originating with the epic migrations of classical heroes like Aeneas. For every Andrew the Hebridean who seeks his unobtrusive good fortune in America, there will be other men who carry with them ambitions of tyranny.

Since James' father had already set down a European foundation, the structural integrity of that foundation was questionable from the moment he broke ground. If we elide nearly a thousand years of Roman dominion, Troy's demise portends Rome's demise because if Troy is never destroyed, Rome can never be established and can never, therefore, fall. Norman Grabo

reminds us that the Western model for civilization must follow this destruction/renewal pattern, presumably, *ad infinitum* (171).

Bertram's reaffirmation of this predetermined pattern brings us back to James' farm and into the discussion between his domestic partner and his spiritual guide. If his wife is justified in her estimation of the value of a correspondence with F.B., then James' minister is leading him astray by insisting that James exchange letters with the Englishman. To correspond with F.B., James must make a sacrifice: he must carry on his correspondence in secret, "as if it was some heinous crime" (48).

A similarly "heinous crime" mars the reception of the Trojan horse in Book 2 of the *Aeneid* – Laocoön and his progeny are sacrificed on the shores of Ilium. Laocoön's death is compounded by the fact that it is based on false information crafted by Sinon. In her examination of the theme of sacrifice pervading Book 2, Rebekah Smith writes,

But a close look at precisely how the theme of sacrifice runs through the passage will show that Virgil shaped the Sinon-Laocoön episode to be a story of the systemic perversion of religious sacrifice – a perversion, furthermore, that turns at every stage on the perversion of human knowledge. (503)

In a sense, the minister "perverts" James' "human knowledge" by encouraging him to correspond to F.B. James' wife reacts to this encouragement by attempting to dissuade her husband from the inevitable – James will begin his dialogue with F.B. because he is under the illusion that he is an American and that an American "is a new man, who acts upon new principles" (7). In reality, James' European ancestry has already adulterated his "human

knowledge” by infusing it with the inevitable decline/reconstitution narrative. The minister just gives James an extra push beyond the boundaries of his farm.

James has cultivated a sense of independence and autonomy on his farm, even though that farm is a derivative of his relationship with “father [and] fatherland” (Ruttenburg 278). “Why should I not find myself happy,” says James, “where my father was before?” (52). In fact, James’ placid existence is never as stable as he initially believes. He immediately qualifies the former rhetorical question with an answer that might presuppose an objection an “enlightened European” (51) such as F.B. would raise: “He left me no good books, it is true; he gave me no other education than the art of reading and writing” (52). James’ father, therefore, left his son no means by which he could prepare himself to communicate with F.B. If James owes his American identity to the property he inherits from his father, how can he possibly engage with F.B. beyond the boundaries of that identity, that is, beyond the boundaries of his domestic sphere of influence? Only on the farm can James be autonomous, but that autonomy is immediately called into question when he receives F.B.’s request. James loses his farm not because he writes back to F.B. but because he receives F.B.’s request and must subsequently think in terms of an external audience, an outsider whose incursion into James’ homestead will jeopardize his place in an America readying itself for revolution.

A myth of origin exists for Laocoön in which, deduces S.V. Tracy, his death occurs *coincidentally* to the discovery of the Trojan horse rather than causally (453), a distinction that draws Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* closer to Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In this origin story, Laocoön has intercourse with his wife in Neptune’s sanctuary, Neptune, being the god for whom Laocoön carries out his priestly duties (451-52). Tracy cites Servius’ commentary on the *Aeneid* 2.201, which refers to a “learned story” in which Laocoön, as a priest of Neptune chosen by lot, “died

for acts which had nothing to do with Minerva and the horse, but rather with Neptune and with Laocoön's, or his wife's, sexual appetites" (453). In Tracy's estimation, Laocoön's domestic allegiances come into conflict with his professional, i.e. public, obligations. Though Laocoön correctly appraises the horse's purpose and origin, he is an illegitimate spokesperson because he has transgressed his priestly office and, therefore, no longer has a public voice among the Trojans. Just as James steps out of his character as the "simple farmer," Laocoön steps out of his priestly robes and, in so doing, loses his standing with the Trojans. Rebekah Smith puts a different spin on the illegitimacy of Laocoön's protest. She writes that Laocoön "is not acting in his priestly capacity. His warning to the Trojans [...] is spoke in the context and in language that evokes an image of Old Roman civic virtue" (514-15). Smith's point, that Laocoön has no right to speak out in the manner he does, finds support with Tracy's examination of Laocoön's origin story. The 'house' of Laocoön meets its doom when faced with an inimical, external force that exposes its structural defects.

James' authority is called into question when his wife deprecates his capacity for cross-Atlantic communication just as Laocoön's legitimacy as Neptune's priest is called into question by his relationship with his wife. Anna Carew-Miller, focusing on the patterns of domestic behavior in *Letters*, writes that James' wife's "assertion of authority outside her housewifely duties threatens his position in the domestic partnership" (248). That James' wife makes his position so precarious is a direct result of F.B.'s letter of inquiry, meaning that if F.B. never writes to James, there is no opportunity, no forum for James' wife to ask her husband, "Would'st not thee be ashamed to write unto a man who has never in his life done a single day's work?" (40). F.B., in fact, *does* work, just not within a field that James has any business bothering with. James faces a loss of identity at the end of the narrative because that identity, never of the

independent and autonomous sort that he describes it as in the second letter, is challenged by Mr. F.B.'s correspondence.

James' loss represents the realize dangers of acculturation that Cato so feared would infect the Roman youths when the Greek orators arrive in the city, namely that, rather than emulate Cincinnatus' "feats of arms," they would instead emulate Greek philosophers' "feats of oratory" (Plutarch 145). Crèvecoeur's *Letters*, in both its narrative parallels to Book 2 of the *Aeneid* and its initial emphasis on the disparity between James and his English pen pal, illustrate the dangers that Cato and that a Colonel Barrie, speaking of the excavation of Pompeii, warned American political correspondent Josiah Quincy against. "Let them get abroad, and you are ruined," he tells Quincy. "They will infuse a taste for buildings and sculpture, and when people get a taste for fine arts, they are ruined!" (Reinbold 116). Though James never steps off of the American continent, his mind wanders over the intellectual topography of F.B.'s Europe, settling within view of a smoldering Vesuvius, dormant, to be sure, but ever threatening the tenuous placement of the multifarious manifestations of Western culture.

III. Dissolution of James' American Ideal with the Advent of Revolution

Crèvecoeur most likely drew heavily on Enlightenment texts such as Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Idea of the Sublime and the Beautiful* and the Abbé Raynal's *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies* (Holbo 28). It is in Burke's piece that we find a source for James' discontent in the final letter, and especially the sense of "loss" and longing for a British-America made defunct by the Revolution that plagues his impending displacement. Burke writes,

But if you listen to the complaints of a forsaken lover, you observe, that he insists largely on the pleasures which he enjoyed, or hoped to enjoy, and on the perfection of the object of his desires; it is the *loss* which is always uppermost in his mind. (37)

"Distresses of a Frontier Man" shows a dramatic shift from James' former ebullience to his concluding despondency. James has lost those "pleasures which he [...] hoped to enjoy": American life has failed to meet the standards he set for it as the "great American asylum" (Crèvecoeur 68) because, ironically, it becomes a place that he must seek asylum from. The loss, then, occurs strictly in the associative, creative imagination supplied to us by Burke by way of Holbo. Just as he mistakes the minister's praise as substantial proof that he should engage with F.B., James mistakes the novelty of the British-controlled colonies, a novelty primarily evinced in America's geographical distance from the forces that brought it into existence, for proof of its essential difference from Europe. America, as conceived of and incubated in James' imagination, cannot be so radically different from Europe because James' imagination is itself a product of Europe.

A link between the growth of the imagination and the spread of commerce in the eighteenth century was evident in the way that commerce allowed for an easy exchange of customs and cultures, a phenomenon that provokes thought during the 18th century (Holbo 25). Commerce, however, as we have seen from Grantland Rice, figures prominently in the European mode of writing, which effects trade between the transmitter of ideas (manufacturer) and the receiver of those ideas (merchant followed closely, and at a premium, by general public). By invoking Burke's idea of imaginative loss, James fails to "disassociate [himself] from the corrupt ideology of European writing" (Rice 100).

Instead of crafting a natural history of the American colonies, James brokers a deal (in the manner of Rice's concept of commercial writing), which could be called inequitable at best. In exchange for his epistolary labors, James gives up his farm, the very property that lends him so much of his self-styled American identity. From Crèvecoeur, and for James in the earlier letters, owning property changes the Europeans into an American, and it is this metamorphosis that signals what Chester E. Eisinger calls the "intertwining of the freehold concept and democratic ideology" (47). James' land ownership qualifies his place in the world. He explains to F.B. in his second letter that he considered selling his farm, "[b]ut," he says, as he reconsidered the loss of his inheritance, "when I came to consider myself as divested of my farm, I then found the world so wide, and every place so full, that I began to fear lest there would be no room for me" (52). In James' terms, the farm, is his place; it is inextricably tied to his identity. With the imminent loss of his farm in the final letter, James exchanges the privileged distinction of the freehold farmer for the ignominy of the frontiersman in the third letter:

Thus are our first steps trodden...by the most vicious of people;
and thus the path is opened for the arrival of a second and better

class, the true American freeholders, the most respectable set of people in this part of the world: respectable for their industry, their happy independence, the great share of freedom they possess, the good regulation of their families, and for extending the trade and the dominion of our mother country. (79)

This final point, that the freeholders labor to augment the domain of the “mother country,” breaks from all of his aforesaid assertions. The freeholder is paradoxically independent and tributary, offering his labors to England but at the same time fancying himself, as James does, self-reliant. Before his correspondence with F.B., James could remain implicitly independent, taking England’s maternal autonomy for granted, but once he begins explaining himself – and explaining himself in F.B.’s terms – James qualifies his independence to a European audience and invites that audience’s critical response.

James fears the American Revolution because of what it will cost him – his social position. In Crèvecoeur’s short, moralistic story, “The American Belisarius,” included in *Sketches of Eighteenth Century America* at the end of the same Penguin volume that contains the *Letters*, James’ largely implicit fear of the social upheaval that the Revolution represents is front and center in the plight of S.K., a second generation freeholder, “the son of a Dutch father and English mother” (408), or, in other words, a character of hybridized European origins similar to the colonial characters in *Letters*. Most interesting about this story is Crèvecoeur’s overt allusion to a classical personage, Belisarius, the sixth-century Byzantine general who played an instrumental role in the campaigns of Justinian before the emperor, much to the consternation of the ancient sources, put out the faithful general’s eyes and forced him to beg at the gates of Constantinople (Barker). The title makes Crèvecoeur’s purpose clear: the Revolution, far from

righting a perceived British injustice, actually gives free reign to the tyranny of Americans who have long coveted their neighbors' prosperity and presents an opportunity for them to invert a hierarchy, the hierarchy from which both S.K. and Farmer James benefit, for their personal gain. In a passage that clearly explains this fear of the hierarchical disruption of the Revolution, Crèvecoeur asks of his audience on behalf of successful men such as S.K., "Why permit the radiance of so many heavenly attributes to be eclipsed by men who impiously affix to their new, fictitious zeal the sacred name of liberty, on purpose to blind the unwary, whilst [...] they worship no deity but self-interest, and to that idol sacrilegiously sacrifice so many virtues?" (415). This lament for the fallen S.K., a pious man of industry, virtue, and prosperity, can be best explained by a sentiment D.H. Lawrence borrows from De Tocqueville in *Apocalypse*, that the "condition of modern democracies is a condition of perpetual bullying," and that only by assuming his place in the hierarchy," can man be truly fulfilled and complacent (Lawrence 194-95).

For Crèvecoeur, the Revolution will overturn the hierarchy, and it is the loss of the privilege that James derives from this hierarchy that most troubles him. Jeff Osborne explains that such a hierarchy as James' "connects human beings by dividing them from one another, at least in so far as they possess different trajectories and different roles. The cohesiveness," he continues, "that exists among them must [...] spring from their accepting these roles and respecting their propriety" (531). For James and S.K., the American Revolution means that their social predominance will no longer be taken for granted because the old social order, i.e. the British social order, from which derived their predominance no longer exists in America. Though this loss leads to the destruction and death of Crèvecoeur's American Belisarius, James

manages to move on and, mirroring the phoenix-like Westerner of Richard Waswo's essay, finds a new place for himself on the frontier where he will reconstruct his old way of life.

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