ANT-HILL AMERICA: METAPHOR AND METAMORPHOSIS IN CRÈVECOEUR

by

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(Under the Direction of Doug Anderson)

ABSTRACT

Both *Letters from an American Farmer* and *Sketches of Eighteenth Century America* focus on recording natural phenomena and explaining them in a way that merges scientific, philosophical, and literary practice. However, Crèvecoeur's writings are not simply natural history. The naturalistic descriptions of farm life, animals, and plants provided by the narrator, James, encode political and social commentary on the developing American continent. Images of agricultural growth represent America's political and social promise, as well as such problems as slavery and Revolutionary unrest. James makes particularly rich use of insect metamorphosis as a metaphor for both his personal plight within the narrative arc of the writings and as a figure for the two-stage development of America as, first, a colony and, later, a nation.

INDEX WORDS: Crèvecoeur, Letters from an american farmer, Sketches of eighteenth century america, American revolution, Metamorphosis, Insect metamorphosis, Ant-hill town, Agriculture, Early american literature, Early american politics, Revolutionary politics, American colonies, Slavery, Winter

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BA, University of Georgia, 2007

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2010

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May 2010

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As Pamela Regis correctly points out, the work of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur is an example of natural history writing. [1] This genre focuses on recording natural phenomena and explaining them in a way that merges scientific, philosophical, and literary practice. Both *Letters from an American Farmer* and *Sketches of Eighteenth Century America*, with their wide-ranging discussions of America's animals and plants, its geography, and the religious preferences of its inhabitants, quite obviously qualify as natural history.

However, though Crèvecoeur owes much to the natural historical tradition, he is not strictly a natural historian. Rather, he works within the genre's conventions to create complex metaphorical figures that explore the political and social development of the American continent. Two specific areas within the purview of natural history prove to be especially rich in metaphorical significance throughout both *Letters* and *Sketches*: botany/agriculture and entomology. The images of inception, growth, spreading, and development that necessarily emerge in naturalistic descriptions of the plants, animals, and insects on a farm unsurprisingly turn out to be exactly the metaphorical tools needed to describe Revolutionary America's transformation from colonial territory to independent nation. It is no coincidence, then, that James is a farmer, a man devoted to the growth and production of plant life (especially), and also animal life and even human life (farm labor depends upon children, and some of James's most

[1] See *Describing Early America: Bartram, Jefferson, Crèvecoeur, and the Rhetoric of Natural History*. Regis defines the natural history genre as "a broad area of scientific inquiry circumscribing the present-day disciplines of meteorology, geology, botany, zoology, and ethnology" (xi). She examines the scientific models that give rise to natural historical rhetoric and argues for the importance of natural history in late eighteenth century thought. She also argues that understanding Crèvecoeur's participation in the genre of natural history allows us to better appreciate the belletristic aspects of his work, which is something I hope to demonstrate persuasively in the following discussion of botany, agriculture, and metamorphosis.

rhapsodic moments focus on his own family).[2] Crèvecoeur's narrator is perfectly situated to depict American development in the metaphorical terms of agricultural growth. Everything about the farm, from the fecundity of its fields to the order of its barnyard indirectly evokes the state and cultivation of American society and government.

We cannot forget, however, that James is more than just a convenient narrative stance or a clever viewpoint from which to observe colonial development. As many critics have noted, James is a novelistic character, an individual who readers come to care about.[3] James's personal appeal becomes most acute, and most important, when Crèvecoeur's metaphorical depictions of America begin to incorporate agricultural catastrophes to account for the violence, upheaval, and uncertainty of pre-Revolutionary unrest, the Revolution itself, and then the continued struggles of national unification. In Letter XI, Bertram notes that "the science of botany is so diffusive that a proper thread is absolutely wanted to conduct the beginner," and the same is true of the "science" of political and social commentary. James's life provides the necessary "thread" that prevents *Letters* and *Sketches*, taken together, from becoming merely a tableau of scattered metaphors that appears equally as chaotic as the Revolutionary turmoil and uncertain mixture of American problems and promises that it depicts. The narrative of James's attempts to maneuver through an agricultural landscape resonant with Revolutionary politics "conduct[s]" the reader to Crèvecoeur's own political conclusions.

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[2] As an example, take this scene, in which the image of domestic production (of children, of mother's milk, of goods for clothing) thrills James: "When I contemplate my wife, by my fireside, while she either spins, knits, darns, or suckles our child, I cannot describe the various emotions of love, of gratitude, of conscious pride, which thrill in my heart and often over-flow in involuntary tears. I feel the necessity, the sweet pleasure, of acting my part, the part of an husband and father, with an attention and propriety which may entitle me to my good fortune" (Crèvecoeur 53).

[3] In his article "'Strange Order of Things!': The Journey to Chaos in *Letters from an American Farmer*," Robert P. Winston makes the claim that "Crèvecoeur's work *is*, in fact, a germinal romance and needs to be examined as such" (249). He goes on to examine how the plot of *Letters* aligns with romance archetypes by following a plot structure identified by Northrop Frye: "There are four primary narrative movements. . . . These are, first, the descent from a higher world; second, the descent to a lower world; third, the ascent from a lower world; and fourth, the ascent to a higher world" (qtd. in Winston 250).

Naturalistic descriptions of insect metamorphosis prove most revealing of Crèvecoeur's political prophecies. As Crèvecoeur's writing unfolds, winter comes to represent Revolution and we see James and his family cast as insects facing the oncoming cold of America's political unrest. In the insects' natural response to cold, which is hibernation and metamorphosis, we discover James's own plans for safely guiding his family through the period of strife. James's most detailed examination of metamorphosis, which comes in a section of *Sketches* entitled "Ant-hill Town," provides broader commentary. The ants in their various metamorphic stages emerge as figures for colonists embroiled in Revolutionary turmoil and then struggling uncertainly in the new independence that results from it. Ultimately, the ant-hill reveals the most about the possible future of American government and society.

The fundamental importance of natural history to Crèvecoeur's writing project seems to be something that the author both recognized and wished to accentuate for readers. One installment of *Letters*, Letter XI, seems intentionally designed to prime reader interest in natural historical descriptions. Admittedly, Letter XI might at first seem overshadowed by the sentimental power of the opening letters' pastoral idyll (Letters I, II, and III), the horror of slavery found in Charleston (Letter IX), James's insomniac desperation in Letter XII, and even the sheer mass of information provided in the Nantucket letters (Letters IV-VIII). However, several of its peculiarities demand attention: Letter XI features a new narrator, James seems to include it of his own volition, and it makes obvious reference to a well-known historical figure. Unlike other letters, for which we can envision the queries of James's purported correspondent, Mr. F.B., Letter XI seems unlikely to be the result of a direct question. Even considering the epistolary framework of *Letters* as an artificial contrivance, in which Crèvecoeur creates both James's responses and Mr. F.B.'s questions, this departure from the normal model merits notice.

Within Crèvecoeur's epistolary conceit, then, Letter XI is notable for the fact that James seems to include it of his own volition. Outside of that conceit, the letter is still notable for the peculiarity of having a new narrator. The letter's chief purpose, as well as its chief source of interest, is the way in which it highlights the figure of John "Bertram," a clear stand-in for the historical John Bartram, an internationally renowned botanist and natural historian. The presence of Bertram, in turn, highlights Crèvecoeur's reliance upon natural history and directs us towards the sophisticated social and political commentary latent within James's naturalistic descriptions.

Although James claims to be nothing but an unrefined, largely uneducated rustic, we can easily discern the sophisticated commentary hidden in his writing. The obvious parallels Crèvecoeur constructs between John Bertram and his narrator do much to highlight James's intellectual status. When asked a direct question about how he became interested in botany—"Pray, Mr. Bertram, when did you imbibe the first wish to cultivate the science of botany?" (194)—the "celebrated Pennsylvanian botanist" describes his career in terms that clearly parallel James's own development as correspondent and (ostensible) author. Bertram's tale begins with a sudden interest in a daisy picked up by chance while taking a rest from plowing his fields:

> one day I was very busy in holding my plough (for thee see'st that I am but a ploughman), and being weary, I ran under the shade of a tree to repose myself. I cast my eyes on a daisy; I plucked it mechanically and viewed it with more curiosity than common country farmers are wont to do. . . (194)

His wife objects, and "greatly discourage[s] [him] from prosecuting [his] new scheme" because it is not right for a "common country farmer" to "dedicate much of [his] time to studies and

labors" which do not aid the increase of his farm (195). Bertram persists, however, and soon begins to "botanize all over [his] farm" and enlarges his field of attention until he has "acquired a pretty general knowledge of every plant and tree to be found in our continent" (195)[4].

In a similar fashion, James comes to writing from working the plow. In fact, plowing becomes a metaphor for writing in a statement made by the minister urging James to undertake his correspondence with Mr. F.B.:

> Would you painfully till your stony upland and neglect the fine rich bottom which lies before your door? Had you never tried, you had never learned how to mend and make your ploughs. It will be no small pleasure to your children to tell hereafter that their father was not only one of the most industrious farmers in the country, but one of the best writers. (47)

Like Mrs. Bertram, James's wife disapproves of his new intellectual pursuits—and for the same reasons. She focuses on the incongruity between the American farmer's rustic station in life and the sophistication implied by international correspondence: "[Mr. F.B.] pitches upon thee for his correspondent, as thee calls it? Surely he means to jeer thee! I am sure he does; he cannot be in real fair earnest" (41). Later, his wife repeats her objections that intellectual labors are simply

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[4] The appearance of "Bertram" here and the possessive attitude he exhibits in reference to "our continent" serves as a challenge to the European intellectual establishment. The colonies are not only political subjects of England, but are also viewed with a certain patriarchal disdain by the established intellectual community of Europe. As an example, John Bartram's patron in England, Peter Collinson, responded to his request for a new botanical text with the following condescending advice: "I shall be so friendly to tell thee that [the price of the book] is too much to lay out. Besides, now thee has got Parkinson and Miller [two simpler botanical texts than the one Bartram requests], I would not have thee puzzle thyself with others; for they contain the ancient and modern knowledge of Botany. Remember Solomon's advice; in reading of books, there is no end" (qtd. in Regis 10). Leave the high intellectual pursuits to Europeans and stay within the bounds of your rustic American role, Collinson suggests. The narrative conceit of *Letters*, of course, challenges this condescending viewpoint by suggesting that even a man of such high education as Mr. F.B. remains less capable of describing the American continent than, James, a simple American farmer. For further discussion of Crèvecoeur's role in establishing America's intellectual place on the international scene, see Ralph Bauer's *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literature*, pg. 211-17.

not fitting for American farmers: "If thee persistest in being such a foolhardy man . . . for God's sake let 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 talk of the people" (47). Like Bertram, James persists despite his wife. Also like Bertram, James starts by examining his farm and gradually moves outward to describe almost the whole of the American colonies as they existed at the time, from Florida, the Alleghenies, and Charleston in the south to Novia Scotia in the north. In Letter XII he stretches the boundaries westward, expressing his willingness to flee "even to the Mississippi" if need be. And, of course, even without the comparison to John Bertram, James's repeated protestations of simplicity serve only to accentuate, rather than disguise, his intellect.

James's intellectualism becomes even more apparent as we read some of his "botanizing," such as this famous selection from Letter III:

> Men are like plants; the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow. We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment. (71)

Here, the underlying method of Crèvecoeur's writing emerges explicitly, as the objects of natural historical study pair up with counterparts in civic studies: plants represent men; the air and climate represent the government, religion, and the economy. The later "Landscapes" section that concludes *Sketches* further embodies this practice of encoding natural history with social and political significance. The section's very title conflates geology, a field well within the purview of natural history, with social examination of "the hypocrisy, slyness, cupidity, inhumanity, and

abuse of power" which the narrator perceives in the colonies during the Revolution. Additionally, James introduces the section as a natural historical undertaking, as the record of descent from a volcanic mountain and the "crevices, as well as a variety of new plants, which afford [him] some amusement as [he] proceeds downward" (427). Again, James is no simple "country farmer;" he is a keen and insightful commentator who uses naturalistic description as a figurative vehicle by which to convey observations on colonial politics and society.

Crèvecoeur's metaphorical use of natural historical descriptions extends beyond even the voice of James. Early in the introduction, we find agriculture's significance established through a synopsis of New World history that presents the colonies as new growth emerging from the ruins of Old World Society:

> James: I should like to know what is there to be seen so goodly and profitable that so many should wish to visit no other country [than Italy]?
>
> Minister: I do not very well know. I fancy their object is to trace the vestiges of a once-flourishing people now extinct. There they amuse themselves in viewing the ruins of temples and other buildings which have very little affinity with those of the present age and must therefore impart a knowledge which appears useless and trifling. I have often wondered that no skilful botanists or learned men should come over here[5]; methinks there would be much more real satisfaction in observing among us the humble rudiments and embryos of societies spreading everywhere, the recent foundation of our towns, and the settlements of so many

[5] This, too, is a sly challenge to the European intellectual establishment. See note 4 above.

> rural districts. I am sure that the rapidity of their growth would be more pleasing to behold than the ruins of old towers, useless aqueducts, or impending battlements. (42)

Note the unmistakably funereal language used to describe the Old World. The minister speaks of Italy as though it no longer exists. He reduces the entire society to faint and musty "vestiges" of the past, without any current life or living population. Italy/Rome's people, though "once-flourishing," are "now extinct." The images with which the minister closes the passage echo these sentiments. Again, we find nothing but the broken "vestiges" of what once was in the "ruins of old towers and useless aqueducts." And, again, we find no hope for future life. While the phallic symbolism of a tower normally represents strength and reproductive vigor (as well as cultural arrogance), a ruined "old tower" evokes only impotence. While aqueducts normally bring water and, along with it, life and fertility, "useless aqueducts" promise only continued desiccation and infertility.

Interestingly, even as the living "embryos of [American] society" present a deliberate contrast to "extinct" Old World ruins, this passage reminds us that life in the New World owes its existence to the Western European societies from which it emerges. After all, much of the political and cultural identity of the West derives from models of ancient Rome and Greece—notions of democracy, literary symbols and allusions, legal systems and language, etc. This fact is encoded in the very etymology of the word "embryo," which derives from a Greek root that is transliterated into Latin before being incorporated into the Germanic languages (OED). Therefore, even the ability to describe society in America depends upon the prior existence of Old World cultures.

Considering an embryo in scientific terms likewise highlights the importance of progenitors, especially if we extend Crèvecoeur's metaphor into the realm of animal embryonic development (which is something that the minister's ambiguous descriptions of embryos allows us to do, his mention of botanists not withstanding). As one of the earliest in the development of any complex organism, the embryonic stage, in temporal terms, is very much connected with parent organisms and the reproductive act. In some animal species, like humans, the embryo remains within the mother's body and the two are literally connected through the umbilical cord. The embryo, then, is part of the parental organism. This image resonates strongly with the situation of the early colonists, who depend for their very survival upon the infusion of capital, people, and supplies from England.[6] It also resonates, though not as strongly, with the later American colonies, which are still part of the imperial paternal body and still bound to England by the cords of governance. In James's words the colonies are "tied" and "fastened" to England, "the mother country, which is 3,000 miles [distant]" (204-5). Even in species where the embryo develops outside of the mother's body, it remains dependent upon parental nurture for a time—chickens must incubate their eggs, for instance. This, perhaps, provides a better parallel for the developing colonies, which can supply themselves with all the barest necessities but still rely upon "the mother country" for political guidance and military protection.

However, though the existence of an embryo obviously depends upon its progenitors, the true power of the embryo as an image arises from its promise of future and independent life. The embryonic stage is developmental and, by definition, temporary. The embryo cannot remain in stasis—it must develop or die. One of the Minister's images of American development—"the foundation of our towns"—reveals this connection to the past and moves towards the future by

[6] For a first-hand relation of how dependent early colonists were on money, goods, and labor from England, as well as how desperate they became when supplies were not forthcoming, see William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, pg. 120-21.

playing on the dual connotation of "foundation." In one sense, the word signifies origins, and thus harkens backwards to political and cultural roots found in the Old World. In another sense, a "foundation" is the beginning of something new and it highlights not what is behind or below, but what is ahead. The literal use of "foundation" as the starting base upon which the houses and other buildings of a town are constructed foregrounds this second, forward looking connotation. If we consider "foundation" as an initiating act, we also look to the future. The language of this passage leaves no doubt but that America will continue to develop—we see "embryos of society spreading everywhere."

In a peculiar way, the founders of a town become progenitor and embryo in one—they create a town where none existed before and then develop along with it. This self-sufficient understanding of an embryo proves particularly apt for Crèvecoeur's vision of colonial development. Even as American embryos reject the paternal nurture of Rome or England, they demand the nurture of a very particular (and eponymous) guardian—the American farmer. One way to envision "spreading" embryos is as vegetation, and the minister very quickly directs us to consider the possible developments of society in agricultural terms: "the anticipated fields of future cultivation and improvement" under the care of "a race of cultivators" (43). Colonial growth is connected to farming in a literal sense, for the west-ward spreading colony's outlying settlers all, out of necessity, raise their own food. The minister, however, means to highlight the metaphorical connection. James does the same in similar language: "some few towns excepted, [Americans] are all tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida. [Americans] are a people of cultivators . . ." (67).

Neither speaker actually uses the term "farmer," for it denotes a specific vocation linked with familiar images of rural life (the subsistence farming frontiersman mentioned above, for

instance). Instead, both men choose a synonym that more readily admits double meanings and abstractions—"cultivators." In contrast to farming, cultivating is a nebulous activity that takes place on abstract or theoretical planes—e.g., one cultivates the mind, tastes, or habits and one is cultivated. Even "tillers of the earth," rather than "tillers of the land," points towards abstraction. While "the land" denotes the physical thing upon which one stands, "the earth" can metaphorically represent the entire field of human understanding and experience. James knows that not all Americans farm, but he counts on his readers recognizing another truth in his hyperbole—all Americans, simply by virtue of being on the ground in an embryonic society, become cultivators of what that society will become.

Once again, John Bertram comes to the fore; as a man who produces cattle and crops as well as contributing the "knowledge of many new plants" to the cultural development of the colonies, he is the paragon of "cultivators." His farm, remarkable for its order and seemingly limitless ability to produce, serves as a model for the ideal development of the American colonies. We can see Bertram's metaphorical significance in his conversation with Iw—n about a small spring modified to provide controlled irrigation:

> "This," said he [Bertram], "is altogether the fruit of my own contrivance; I purchased some years ago the privilege of a small spring, about a mile and a half from hence, which at a considerable expense I have brought to this reservoir; therin I throw old lime, ashes, horse dung, etc., and twice a week I let it run, thus impregnated; I regularly spread on this ground in the fall old hay, straw, and whatever damaged fodder I have about my barn. By these means I mow, one year with another, fifty-three hundreds

> of excellent hay per acre from a soil which scarcely produced five-fingers some years before." (192)

This selection distills the minister's notions of regenerative growth from ruin and self-sufficient improvement in which lies the inherent promise of the American continent. Bertram's "contrivance" evokes the aqueducts of Italy and the "old lime, ashes, horse dung . . . old hay, straw, and whatever damaged fodder" present us with images of general age and decay. Unlike the Old World's "useless aqueducts," however, this irrigation system actually transforms ruin into fertility.

The metaphorical connection of Bertram's project to the broader growth of the American colony becomes even more obvious in Iw—n's response: "This is, sir, a miracle in husbandry; happy the country which is cultivated by a society of men whose application and taste lead them to prosecute and accomplish useful works." The language of both men unavoidably, and intentionally, suggests the steady increase of human population in the colonies. Bertram, the American farmer, "impregnate[s]" the land and reaps a bountiful harvest from "a soil which scarcely produced five-fingers some years before." Iw—n means to pun on husbandry as both the act of impregnating the land and that of impregnating a wife, and thus producing a multitude of five-fingered offspring. In contrast to the minister's depiction of Old World populations as "once flourishing [but]. . . now extinct," we find the New World to be a land that promises not only the fecund propagation of towns and farms, but also of people to fill them.

Historically, of course, a substantial percentage of colonial population growth comes not from domestic reproduction but from the immigration of poor and desperate Europeans. The minister's opening metaphor of spreading colonial development from Old World embryos

accounts for immigration, and James quickly incorporates immigration into his agricultural schema:

> In this great American asylum, the poor of Europe have by some means met together. . . . Everything has tended to regenerate them: new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are become men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants, wanting vegetative mould and refreshing showers; they withered and were mowed down by want, hunger, and war; but now, by the power of transplantation, like all other plants they have taken root and flourished! (68-69)

In this passage, both the promise of America and the political and social troubles of European countries present themselves through agricultural metaphor. European immigrants become seedlings, Americans in embryo, awaiting "transplantation" and the cultivation to "take[ ] root and flourish[ ]" into a new crop of citizens. The successful "regenerat[ion]" of incoming "plants" is due to America's ability to provide the necessary "vegetative mould and refreshing showers," which James helpfully translates from metaphorical into political terms as "new laws, new mode of living, [and] new social system." In contrast, James depicts the Old World as an agricultural nightmare peopled with unfortunate, "withered" Europeans denied nutrients by political strife and monarchial oppression before eventually being "mowed down" by the military scythes of raging Continental wars.

James's portrayal of America as an agricultural wonderland reaches its most fevered extremes in Letter III, which presents a curious re-working of Edenic myth in which America offers a second chance at a state of pre-lapsarian paradise. In the biblical account of the Fall,

humans are driven from Paradise and forced to depend upon agriculture for sustenance as punishment for original sin:

> Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception, in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.
>
> And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Genesis 3:16-19)

James's America, however, "is no place of punishment" (89). Instead, political and social circumstances contrive to make American into a land of renewal and unbridled promise, which immigrants experience as something of a second chance at Eden:

> After a foreigner from any part of Europe is arrived and become a citizen, let him devoutly listen to the voice of our great parent, which says to him, "Welcome to my shores, distressed Europeans; bless the hour in which thou didst see my verdant fields, my fair navigable rivers, and my green mountains! If thou wilt work, I have bread for thee; if thou wilt be honest, sober, and industrious, I have greater rewards to confer on thee—ease and independence. I will give thee fields to feed

> and clothe thee, a comfortable fireside to sit by and tell thy children by what means thou hast prospered, and a decent bed to repose on. I shall endow thee besides with the immunities of a freeman. If thou wilt carefully educate thy children, teach them gratitude to God and reverence to that government, that philanthropic government, which has collected here so many men and made them happy, I will also provide for thy progeny; and to every good man this ought to be the most holy, the most powerful, the most earnest wish he can possibly form, as well as the most consolatory prospect when he dies. Go thou and work and till; thou shalt prosper, provided thou be just, grateful, and industrious."

In James's revision, the punishments that descend upon Adam and Eve as they leave Eden become hopeful promises to immigrants entering America. The need to work the land is God's curse; the ability to work the land is America's promise. Instead of being cursed to subsistence on "the herb of the field" and a lifetime of toil in order to earn bread, the American immigrant finds himself blessed by those things: "If thou wilt work, I have bread for thee . . . I will give thee fields to feed and clothe thee." So completely reversed is the situation in America from post-lapsarian Eden that the burden of childbirth and increased progeny becomes a comfort, part and parcel of "the most holy, the most powerful, the most earnest wish [any man] can possibly form." Even the biblical passage's humbling meditation on human mortality—"dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return"—does not effect the newly arriving American immigrant, who, like Bertram, we can expect to coax further life out of the "dust" of "old lime, ashes, horse dung, etc." and "replenish" the entire continent.

And it is important to note that James's vision deals specifically with an American future. His revised Eden wholly depends upon a beneficent colonial government and on the very particular opportunities available only to American freeholders, who, of course, were farmers. The passage above replaces the father figure of God, who metes out punishment, with the more benevolent paternal figure of "our great parent" who offers "ease and independence." Who or what, exactly, that "great parent" is remains ambiguous. On the very short list of candidates, however, we will certainly find the American colonial government, which this passage seems to praise even more than God: "carefully educate thy children, teach them gratitude to God and reverence to that government, that philanthropic government, which has collected here so many men and made them happy." The chief action that makes government "philanthropic" seems to be the willingness to offer "ease and independence" coupled with "the immunities of a freeman." By definition, "freeman" refers to anyone who is not a slave or a serf (OED). James contrasts the welcoming attitude of the American colonial government, which makes citizens of the distressed Europeans landing on its shores, against the oppressive monarchies of Europe and Russia, which perpetuate systems of serfdom and inequality. Having read "freeman," we should immediately think of a similar word, "freeholder," or owner of property. Indeed, James uses the two interchangeably, writing that ownership of "lands confer[s] on [immigrants] the title of freemen" (69). The Edenic re-write also clearly establishes that the immigrant's path to "ease and independence" lies in the ownership of property: "I have greater rewards to confer on thee—ease and independence. I will give thee fields. . . ." Ownership of land here means only one thing: farming. Thus, we see the promise of American development not just represented through agriculture, but actually fundamentally dependent upon agriculture.

Of course, not all colonial agriculture falls into the freeholding idyll James introduces above, and the details of this passage ironically highlight the very segment of colonial agriculturalists that it ignores—those who arrive in America from Africa, not Europe, and who will never know the "immunities" of free men. For slaves, the American continent is not Eden regained, but rather the hellish world of hopeless labor until the hour of death promised in the Bible: "cursed is the ground . . . in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life . . . till thou return unto the ground." The descriptions of slavery in Charleston (Letter IX) drive home the horror and desperation of slave life:

> Day after day they [slaves] drudge on without any prospect of ever reaping for themselves; they are obliged to devote their lives, their limbs, their will, and every vital exertion to swell the wealth of masters who look not upon them with half the kindness and affection with which they consider their dogs and horses. Kindness and affection are not the portion of those who till the earth, who carry burthens, who convert the logs into useful boards. (169)

Newly minted citizens of European descent can expect to reap "ease and independence" from their labors, and even Adam and Eve receive an implicit promise of gain for theirs—"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." Slaves, however, toil "without any prospect of ever reaping for themselves." Here, James highlights the injustice, even evil, of an institution that creates suffering even beyond God's intention.

As James's description continues, slavery fully accomplishes the portion of the Edenic curse settled upon Eve—"I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception, in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children." In doing so, it nullifies the hopeful potential of America's future.

The ability to have children and provide them with an estate stands at the very core of America's promise to European immigrants: "I will also provide for thy progeny; and to every good man this ought to be the most holy, the most powerful, the most earnest wish he can possibly form." Indeed, James himself owes his position and happiness to his father's purchase and improvement of land. As promised, though, having children results only in sorrow for slaves:

> If Negroes are permitted to become fathers, this fatal indulgence only tends to increase their misery; the poor companions of their scanty pleasures are likewise the companions of their labours; and when at some critical seasons they could wish to see them relieved, with tears in their eyes they behold them perhaps doubly oppressed, obliged to bear the burden of Nature—a fatal present—as well as that of unabated tasks. How many have I seen cursing the irresistible propensity and regretting that by having tasted of those harmless joys they have become the authors of double misery to their wives. (169)

This passage's reference to taste reiterates that the slaves suffer an Edenic-like curse. Just as Adam and Eve regret eating the apple, slaves regret "having tasted of those harmless joys [of sex and parenthood]." James later reiterates this fact, noting that "[slaves'] parental fondness is *embittered* by considering that if their children live, they must live to be slaves like themselves" (169, italics added). The normal associations with reproduction are completely inverted. Children no longer represent renewal and continued life but rather become associated with death. Parenthood is a "fatal indulgence" and a child is "a fatal present." Instead of leading into a renewed and vibrant future like the embryos of the minister's opening metaphor, slave embryos suggest only a cycle of perpetual ruin.

America promises to elevate European serfs to the position of freeholders, but no such hope exists for slaves. James's description of immigration as "transplantation," especially when combined with the fact that those peasants become farmers, highlights the intimate link between American promise and development and agricultural growth. Paradoxically, however, the same metaphor that encodes hope for the future of a free and felicitous people sows the seeds of its own inevitable negation. Slaves' position working "to swell the wealth of masters" is closely analogous to what James describes as the "thoroughly wretched" (69) lot of Eastern European peasants bound to feudal estates, and is thus antithetical to the experience of freemen. While the process of transplantation proves regenerative for Europeans and produces a strong American crop in almost Edenic circumstances, transplanted Africans encounter a degenerative situation that promises only endless suffering in a system that draws further and further from any Edenic idyll. Neither Crèvecoeur nor James nor his readers can ignore the role of slave labor in American agricultural enterprise. And, once again, agriculture is representative of life beyond the farm, for slavery does not drive just the growth of crops. By virtue of slaves' role in industrial production and even the "spreading" of necessary infrastructure (buildings, roads, homes, etc.) constructed with slave labor, much of the colonies' general economic growth, as well. James's Edenic re-write and optimistic agricultural portrayal of America's future depends upon farmers willingly participating and equitably sharing in the rewards of development. Slavery, which requires undue contribution and offers punishment in place of reward, simply does not fit this model, and its very existence undermines the future promise of the American continent.[7]

[7] In recognizing the irreconcilability of slavery with the ideal promises of democratic freedom and growth that American represents Crèvecoeur articulates ideas that appear in later abolitionist arguments and even arguments from the Civil Rights era of the 1950s-60s. While Crèvecoeur's favorable depictions of northern slavery as a kind, paternalistic institution stops short of fully condemning African enslavement, the fact that he has John Bertram,

While slavery is obviously the darkest and most virulent blight on America's national growth, it is not the only threat. At times, especially in *Sketches*, descriptions of agricultural struggles encode serious political problems within the developing colonies. For example, "The Man of Sorrows," which relates the story of a rural farmer who is wrongly accused of aiding British and Indian raiding parties and brutally tortured by a group of colonial militiamen, opens with a scene of agriculture gone perversely awry:

> Could I have ever thought that a people of cultivators, who knew nothing but their ploughs and the management of their rural economies, should be found to possess, like the more ancient nations of Europe, the embryos of these propensities which now stain our society? Like a great river, the agitated waves of [which] are now devastating those shores which before they gently surrounded and fertilized, great revolutions in government necessarily lead to an alteration in the manners of the people. The rage of civil discord hath advanced among us with an astonishing rapidity. Every opinion is changed; every prejudice subverted; every ancient principle is annihilated; every mode of organization which linked us before as men and as citizens, is now altered. New ones are introduced, and who can tell whether we shall be the gainers by the exchange? You know from history the consequences of such wars. In every country it has been a field pregnant with the most poisonous weeds. . . . (342)

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whose farm represents the ideal America, free all of his slaves suggests recognition of the ultimate need to abolish slavery in both the north and the south (Crèvecoeur 196-97).

James's hopeful depictions of agriculture heavily stress the importance of order. Bertram's farm, for example, is remarkable because "every disposition of the fields, fences, and trees seemed to bear the marks of perfect order" (188). In this passage, however, agricultural order is gone. Instead of carefully controlled irrigation systems, we find a capricious river that "now devastat[es] those shores which before [it] gently surrounded and fertilized." Instead of holding embryonic potential and the promise of sprouting "five-fingers" throughout the countryside, America's political landscape becomes "a field pregnant with the most poisonous of weeds."

The cause of James's extreme and contradictory revision of his agricultural metaphor is clear: the political turmoil occasioned by the American Revolution. The "great river" that now makes agriculture impossible is explicitly analogous to "the rage of civil discord." Remember, too, that the "philanthropic [colonial] government" is chiefly responsible for creating the situation in which transplanted Europeans can flourish and seemingly regain paradise. With that government undergoing a "great revolution[ ]," social and political instability become the order of the day. Just as the colonial militia seizes the protagonist of "The Man of Sorrows" while he labors in his fields, preventing him from further work and threatening his life, the Revolution halts American development, at least periodically. Only with the return of governmental stability, whatever form it takes, can the farmer once again be sure of his crops.

Of course, agriculture depends upon seasonal cycles, and so faces the interruption and complete cessation of production every winter. Crèvecoeur recognizes this fact and imbues his naturalistic descriptions of winter with commentary on the historical context that lies behind his writings. The political turmoil of late 18th century America—growing tension with England, revolution, and the struggle to reform as a unified nation—emerges in the descriptions of what James calls "that cruel season" (57). Because no crops grow in winter, James relies on scenes of

animal husbandry, rather than botany or horticulture, to provide an agricultural metaphor for the political situation. In Letter II, for instance, the act of feeding cattle that can no longer forage for themselves because of the cold becomes political allegory:

> The law is to us precisely what I am in my barnyard, a bridle and check to prevent the strong and greedy from oppressing the timid and weak. Conscious of superiority, they always strive to encroach on their neighbours; unsatisfied with their portion, they eagerly swallow it in order to have an opportunity of taking what is given to others, except they are prevented. (57)

Here, cattle are equated to colonists by virtue of a shared position in relation to the law. If people are cattle, then the barnyard is America, and the law is that of the English crown. The scene presented here is a simplification of the American Revolution, and the struggle for more food that James mediates represents the struggle between the British and American colonials for control of laws, taxes, government, and, ultimately, possession of America itself.

The connection between winter and the Revolution is further solidified in descriptions of the season, such as the one below, that continually reference current political realities:

> If in a cold night I swiftly travel in my sledge, carried along at the rate of twelve miles an hour, many are the reflections excited by surrounding circumstances. I ask myself what sort of an agent is that which we call frost? Our minister compares it to needles, the points of which enter our pores. What is become of the heat of the summer; in what part of the world is it that the N.W. keeps these grand magazines of nitre? When I see in the morning a river over

> which I can travel, that in the evening before was liquid, I am astonished indeed. (58)

Note that aspects of winter James discusses here—uncertain "surrounding circumstances" and a nameless "agent"—easily lend themselves to political discussion. This is especially true of "agent" in a period when slow communications and travel would assure that colonials in America would negotiate with agents of the king and the British in England would negotiate with agents of the colonial governments. Both sides would also have known of the threat posed by double agents, or spies, for the other camp. Additionally, James's mention of "grand magazines of nitre" takes on political significance. Nitre, of course, is an explosive agent in gunpowder and magazines are military stores of weapons and explosives. At this point in time, the relations between the British and the colonials would themselves have been explosive, and any evocation of weaponry would have been immediately associated with that tension and the threat of armed revolt.

Even as the above passage provides broad political commentary, it begins to shift towards an individualized perspective. James's bemused powerlessness wrests our attention away from the sweeping events of history and forces us to consider the individuals affected by them. The passage begins hypothetically—"If in a cold night . . ."—and immediately renders James a passive entity. We find him "carried along," subjected to reflections that "are excited by surrounding circumstances" upon which he has no control. His only activity is to wonder about the nature and source of the winter's cold in language that further highlights uncertainty and lack of control—"I ask myself what sort of an agent is that which we call frost?" James privileges the frost with the agency he lacks and doubts his ability to understand it so far that he cannot even be sure what name to use when describing it. James's recourse to the minister's definition of frost

further highlights his own inability to understand the political winter in which he finds himself. The definition itself also presents James and at least some of his fellows in a helpless, and perilous, role, subject to "needles which enter [their] pores" under the direction of some foreign power. Finally, the closing image of this passage embodies James's bewilderment at the political landscape of revolutionary America: "When I see in the morning a river over which I can travel, that in the evening before was liquid, I am astonished indeed." As tensions between America and Britain escalate and the revolution becomes more and more certain, the boundaries of the two countries' relations constantly shift—a duty or allegiance considered sacred one day becomes meaningless the next; an act considered criminal one day becomes patriotic the next. Alternately, the sudden presence of ice where before there was only liquid can represent the newly created or solidified United States that emerges from the Revolution. Either way, this image presents James's struggle to understand political change and situate himself within it.

As James continues his description of winter, the focus becomes even more poignantly intimate. James once again recalls the metaphorical "embryos of society." In contrast to the minister's earlier discussion, however, the "embryos" here do not represent national ideas or civic institutions, but rather James and his family:

> What is become of those millions of insects which played in our summer fields and in our evening meadows; they were so puny and so delicate, the period of their existence was so short, that one cannot help wondering how they could learn, in that short space, the sublime art to hide themselves and their offspring in so perfect a manner as to baffle the rigour of the season and preserve that precious embryo of life, that small portion of ethereal heat, which if once destroyed would destroy the species. Whence

> is that irresistible propensity to sleep so common in all those who are severely attacked by the frost? (58)

The strongly emotive descriptions of the insects clearly establish sympathy with them. James openly moves from pity for their "puny" and "delicate" forms to admiration of their "sublime art" and the "perfect manner" in which they hide themselves. This powerful response makes the most sense when we consider the familiar models in which James casts these insects. He alternately depicts them in childlike terms, as "play[ing] in our summer fields and evening meadows," and as doting parents who "hide themselves and their offspring" from the approaching winter. This description is not entomological, but anthropomorphic. When, in his final, plaintive question, James asks about the "propensity to sleep so common to all those who are severely attacked by frost," we know exactly to whom he refers. James sees himself and his family in these insects, and he sees his own desire to escape the political winter of the American Revolution in their hibernation.

In the final installment of *Letters*, "Distresses of a Frontier Man" (Letter XII), James further develops the metaphor of political winter as he explicitly names the American Revolution as the "surrounding circumstances" and builds upon the imagery in the passage above. From the very opening of the letter, we find ourselves thrust into the cold. James "wish[es] for a change of place" because the idyllic house and farm he has built, both with his hands and with the pen in earlier letters, no longer match with the circumstances of his life: "The climate best adapted to my present situation and humour would be the polar regions . . . .The severity of those climates, that great gloom where melancholy dwells, would be perfectly analogous to the turn of my mind" (200). What James refers to as "the unfortunate revolution" becomes analogous, at least in his mind, to the frozen arctic or antarctic. He extends the metaphor by describing the war-torn

colonies' social and political landscape as though it were a desolate polar vista: "I can see the great and accumulated ruin yet extending itself as far as the theater of war has reached" (205). James's metaphor further present the events and causes in terms of ice, the most salient feature of the arctic and Antarctic regions: "Opinions vary, contract, or expand, like the events of the war on which they are founded. What can insignificant man do in the midst of these jarring contradictory parties . . . ?" (204). The suddenly frozen river that earlier suggests changing political boundaries and alignments becomes an ice flow comprised of separate and clashing elements as the actual onset of the Revolution renders the political situation increasingly unstable and violent.

In the face of this increasingly hostile political climate, it seems that James finally learns "Whence comes that propensity to sleep so common in all severely attacked by the frost." His plan to remove himself and his family from society inevitably begins to look like the insects' hibernation:

> Oh, could I remove my plantation to the shores of the Obi, willingly would I dwell in the hut of a Samoyed; with cheerfulness would I go and bury myself in the cavern of a Laplander. Could I but carry my family along with me, I would winter at Pello, or Tobolsk (200).

Each move suggested here parallels some insect survival strategy. An igloo, or "hut of a Samoyed," because of its snugness and rounded, oblong shape equates to the chrysalis or pupal stage of insect life, and many insects overwinter in these stages. The notion of "burying [one]self in the cavern of a Laplander" likewise references insects, for many pass their pupal or chrysalis stages underground. Finally, James's desire to "carry [his] family along with [him]"

recalls his admiration of insects and "their sublime art to hide themselves and their offspring" (60).

James cannot, of course, literally hibernate, but he certainly describes his decision to "transport" himself and his family to a Native American village in terms of hibernation:

> Thus shall we metamorphose ourselves from neat, decent, opulent planters, surrounded with every conveniency which our external labour and internal industry could give, into a still simpler people divested of everything beside hope, food, and the raiment of the woods: abandoning the large framed house to dwell under the wigwam, and the featherbed to lie on the mat or bear's skin. There shall we sleep undisturbed by frightful dreams and apprehensions; rest and peace of mind will make us the most ample amends for what we shall leave behind. I would cheerfully go even to the Mississippi to find that repose to which we have been so long strangers. My heart sometimes seems tired with beating; it wants rest like my eyelids, which feel oppressed with so many watchings. (222)

Again, the physical habitation James envisions for himself suggests an insect chrysalis—a wigwam is cylindrical and a place of refuge from the cold. The larvae of some insect species actually cover themselves with bark, which is also the covering for wigwams, as protection from predators (read: Revolutionary violence) prior to their emergence as adults. Additionally, James's earlier description of insects' seasonal dormancy as a "propensity to sleep" resonates throughout this passage. It is not just any sleep, either, but a sleep "undisturbed by frightful

dreams and apprehensions" that will have the physiological effect of drastically slowing his "tired with beating" heart. In humans, such a sleep is either preternatural (re: Sleeping Beauty) or coma-induced. In other animals, such a sleep is hibernation.

The embryonic metaphor constructed by the minister in Letter I admits no possibility of halting the continued "spreading" of American society. Either society grows or, like Italy, it becomes "extinct," leaving only infertile ruins behind. When James likens his family to insect embryos and their retreat to insect metamorphosis—"thus shall we metamorphose ourselves"—he revises the minister's opening metaphor of American embryonic growth into a more protracted, multiple-stage developmental process that more realistically aligns with historical events. In the metamorphic cycle, an insect emerges from the encasement of an egg, lives for a time as a larva, then re-encases itself in pupal form, from which it finally emerges as an adult. In both the egg and pupal stages, the insect undergoes extreme transformation, emerging as something completely different. Metamorphosis effectively allows for two gestational periods, which accounts for America's two-stage existence as, first, a colonial holding and, later, an independent nation.

The sketch "Ant-hill Town," in which James uncovers and describes an ant colony, captures America in the midst of its second, Revolution-induced developmental period:

> Here lived thousands of ants of the pismire class. But no pen can delineate the seeming confusion and affright which my bold intrusion caused among them; it was a whole republic thrown into the most imminent danger. The never-failing impulse of instinct immediately led them to provide for the preservation of their young. They appeared to be as big as small grains of wheat and seemed to have been bought up from

> the lower habitations in order to receive more immediately the prolific effects of the sun's heat and to swell their limbs into life and action. These embryos appeared to be in a different degree of animal advancement. Some seemed quite torpid and lifeless; others showed marks of feeling and pains on being suddenly seized, though by maternal claws. No sooner was the first effect of their panic over than they hurried away their young out of my sight. . . . (246)

That James once more intends his naturalistic description to provide a parallel to the American political situation is obvious. The ants represent people. James even employs many of the same agricultural/botanical metaphors we have seen before—immigrants are "transplants" seeking fertile soil to blossom and ant larvae are "grains of wheat" needing "the effects of the sun's heat" to begin germination. And, of course, we see the ants gathering up their young and fleeing danger, just as James plans to do in Letter XII. This most touching similarity between James and the ants does the most to situate this image against the historical backdrop. The political setting here is the same as that found in James's final letter; the "imminent danger" of his intrusion equates to the danger of Revolution already underway.

As the passage continues, James's increasingly elaborate personification takes on details that are ever more closely consistent with the American Revolution:

> In about five minutes, not the least vestiges were left of that numerous society, and no one could have believed that it had been replenished with so many inhabitants. In this great national dismay no one quitted the mansion or attempted to make his escape although they knew not what sort of enemy I was. The whole community bound by the ties of the

> firmest confederacy, unanimously went down, trusting, perhaps, to their works of defence or to my inability to pursue them where all appeared so dark and so intricate.

We have already seen the ant town described as a "republic," which suggests that it represents the States after they have declared independence from English rule. James reiterates this independence when he describes the ants' "*national* dismay." Further, the final lines' focus on a "whole community bound by the ties of the firmest confederacy, unanimously. . . trusting. . .to their works of defence" echoes language from the closing of the Declaration of Independence (1776) and from the later Articles of Confederation (written 1777, ratified 1781). This is the text from the Declaration of Independence:

> And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor. ("Declaration")

James's description aligns more closely with the later Articles of Confederation, though—a fact that his inclusion of "firmest confederacy" seems designed to point out:

> The said States hereby severally enter into a firm league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare, binding themselves to assist each other, against all force offered to, or attacks made upon them, or any of them, on account of religion, sovereignty, trade, or any other pretense whatever. ("Articles")

The common focus on the "firm" unity of all the states and their mutual defensive responsibilities reveals their shared lineage. Obviously, James borrows from the most famous

articulations of American community he could have known to construct his own representation of it.

Perhaps the richest aspect of this "Ant-hill Town" is not that it captures an image of the States and their citizens in the grip of Revolution, but that it contains the seeds of the future. The ultimate fate of the larvae, those "small grains of wheat" that the ants spirit away, is also the ultimate fate of America, and we get some hint of what it will be when James revisits the ants and discovers those embryos in the post-metamorphic, post-Revolutionary stage:

> A few days afterwards, I paid them a second visit, when I observed a great number of ants decorated with wings. But this gaudy attire did not appear to add any celerity to their flight; they never expanded them. Like the preposterous dress of some ladies it served only to render them more conspicuous than the rest. Upon a closer inspection, they appeared more inactive and wholly deprived of that quickness of motion for which the unwinged sort are so remarkable. Perhaps they were the matrons of the republic, never departing from that formal gravity appointed to the rank by Nature; perhaps they were young damsels embarrassed by the rule of modesty and decorum; perhaps they were young ones just hatched, not having as yet ventured to traverse the air in order to harden their limbs in the aspect of the sun

Entomologically, winged ants develop in a mature ant colony; they are newly hatched males and females who leave the home nest to start independent nests of their own. Historically, the States have reached full maturity as colonies, or at least will never colonies again. The winged adults emerging here represent both the individual states and the newly independent American citizens.

Note, though, the narrator's ambivalent, and at times even derisive, attitude towards this next stage of American life. The wings serve as symbols of new freedom—we might even think of them as military regalia of the new Continental Army or as the trappings of newly created political offices. Therefore, the narrator's characterization of them as "gaudy attire" and "preposterous dress" reveals a lack of confidence in the future of America and makes Revolutionary pretensions towards independence seem ridiculous. Of perhaps greater concern is the constitution of this new republic's citizens, who seem to lack the vivacity and energy necessary to sustain a new nation: "they appeared more inactive and wholly deprived of that quickness of motion for which the unwinged sort are so remarkable." Only in the final sentence does the passage grudgingly introduce even a delayed sense of promise for this post-Revolutionary future. The description of the ants as "matrons" and "damsels" allows for the possibility of reproduction and the replenishment of the American continent that so concerns James throughout, though not in the immediate moment—matrons are too old, damsels too young. But just the presence of both proves hopeful, for "matron" is also a synonym for "midwife" (OED) and a damsel could become a mother at any time. James's final characterization of the winged ants proves similarly loaded with latent promise. The description "young ones just hatched" allows for a delay of judgment until they mature, or "harden their limbs in the aspect of the sun."

In 1782, when *Letters* is first published, the United States is very much a young, untested, unhardened nation. Eight years remain before all thirteen states ratify the Constitution and many, many more before America becomes a world power. James's ambivalent portrayal is exactly what we should expect from a perceptive political commentator who recognizes the potential of American government and American society and understands the colonies'

metamorphosis into a nation. This final naturalistic description turns out to be simply good science; James reserves judgment and waits for time to discover America's adult form.

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