

**CULTIVATING THE ANCIENT CLASSICAL
TRADITION IN EARLY AMERICA:
VERGIL AND J. HECTOR ST. JEAN DE CRÈVECOEUR'S
LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER**

Eric D. Lamore

First published in 1782, J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur's pseudo-autobiographical text, *Letters from an American Farmer*, captures the observations of the Pennsylvania farmer, James, in the form of his epistolary tracks written to a gentleman in England. At this time in the history of the United States, Early American writers were anxious to articulate the parameters of this nation's emerging identity, and Crèvecoeur stands as one author, among several others, who energetically participated in this dialogue. Interestingly, in the "Introductory" letter, James refers to himself as a "humble American planter" (Crèvecoeur 7),¹ and a "simple cultivator of the earth" (7). These two examples of self-deprecating rhetoric, along with what we will soon find to be the farmer's astute readings of Early America, signal a clear divide between what James articulates and how Crèvecoeur fashions his farmer-narrator. Acknowledging the fact that Crèvecoeur received a classical education while growing up in France further complicates this peculiar relationship. Understanding that Crèvecoeur was steeped in the ancient classical tradition, therefore, enables us to recognize how this author repeatedly draws on two ancient classical texts, namely Vergil's *Georgics* and, in a subordinate way, the *Aeneid*, first, to frame his vision of Early American culture, and, second, to discover how Crèvecoeur utilizes ancient classicism to critique and eventually dismantle the promising agrarian world that he initially constructs. These observations ultimately uncover a heretofore overlooked chapter on Vergilianism in Early America.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, I quote, in this essay, from Susan Manning's Oxford World's Classic edition of *Letters from American Farmer*.

As David Carlson has recently reminded readers, even though *Letters* contains “semi-autobiographical elements” (258), the literary text “remains a work of fiction, an offshoot of the eighteenth-century philosophical novel written by authors such as Samuel Johnson, Montesquieu, and Voltaire” (258). While Carlson chooses to maintain that several works by British authors impacted *Letters*, I argue that readers of *Letters* have consistently overlooked the incorporation of the ancient classical tradition in this seminal Early American literary text. Hence, in this essay, I examine specific texts from the ancient classical tradition that helped Crèvecoeur shape *Letters*, and argue that texts well outside the eighteenth-century thinkers named by Carlson above impacted the construction of *Letters*. As we will soon see, Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* does, in fact, contain a number of sophisticated and previously unexplored parallels to texts not produced in eighteenth-century America or Britain, but deriving from ancient classical sources.

Beyond the positioning of *Letters* in a larger eighteenth-century philosophical circle comprised of British and/or Continental texts, another recent reading of Crèvecoeur’s work may be found in Timothy Sweet’s *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in Early American Literature*. In this critical study, Sweet explores how agrarian literature, written in the United States, reflects different ideologies on farming practices. Sweet, moreover, provocatively maintains, as his title implies, that Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* can be read as an Early American georgic text. Sweet’s treatment of georgic assuredly does draw more attention to the genre in Early American Studies through a critique of the highly national character frequently found in Early American georgic texts. Readings that draw our attention to different agrarian ideologies in American literary texts and rely heavily on economic theory yield helpful and informative interpretations of Early American georgic texts. Sweet’s georgic project, however, virtually ignores the significance of Vergil in this Early American literary tradition. The most significant drawback in this treatment of the American georgic surfaces when this critic invests merely one and a half pages to explicating Vergil’s *Georgics*, a text which was the model for Early Americans who produced georgic texts. This clear omission leaves room, then, for examining literary texts that preceded Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* and exercised an influence on his text. As we will soon see, by going directly to Vergil, Crèvecoeur creates salient observations on Early American culture by utilizing the discourse of ancient classicism.

At first glance, however, the incorporation of the ancient classical tradition in *Letters* appears to be remote because of a declared

dismissal of most remnants of the classical tradition by another character, the Minister, who is a significant acquaintance of James. In the introductory epistle from *Letters*, for instance, James expresses hesitation in composing letters to an Englishman inquiring about America. Hoping to ease his anxiety over writing these letters, James consults his Minister. The subject of this particular exchange quickly turns from composition to foreign travel. James poses the following question to the Minister: “I should like to know what is there [in Italy] to be seen so goodly and profitable, that so many should wish to visit no other country?” (14). The Minister responds to James in the following manner:

I fancy their [the foreign travelers’] 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. (14)

The Minister, in the first of his three assessments, claims that the foreign traveler wastes her or his time viewing the “ruins of temples and other buildings” found in Italy.

As this dialogue between James and his Minister progresses, the Minister offers a more comprehensive critique of foreign travel to Italy, for as he continues:

In Italy, all the objects of contemplation, all the reveries of the traveler, must have a reference to ancient generations, and to very distant periods, clouded with the mist of ages. (14-15)

The Minister, in this second assessment, links “all the objects of contemplation” and “all the reveries of the traveler” to “ancient generations.” Here the Minister revises his prior argument to lodge a more comprehensive critique of all manifestations of ancient classicism. Rather than claiming that only the “ruins of temples and other buildings” in Italy are “useless” to the foreign traveler, this Early American figure expands his critique to include “all objects of contemplation” and “all the reveries of the [foreign] traveler” as imprecise attempts to experience a sophisticated culture. Absorption of the remnants from “ancient generations,” the Minister holds, only “clouds” the aesthetic and cultural judgment of the traveler.

The Minister, as well, extends this anti-classical argument by defining what it means to be an Early “American”:

I am sure I cannot be called a partial American when I say, that the spectacle, afforded by these [American] pleasing scenes, must be more entertaining, and more philosophical, than that which arises from beholding the musty ruins of Rome. (15)

While it is true that the Minister focuses on “the musty ruins of Rome” in this third assessment of “ancient generations,” this character holds that, to be a “real” Early American, not just a “partial” Early American, one must value the “pleasing scenes” found in her or his own country rather than the “musty ruins of Rome.” All three of the Minister’s remarks on “ancient generations” imply that extensions of the ancient classical tradition serve only as a distraction to foreign travelers who should invest their time and energy more profitably in discovering the more “pleasing scenes” found not in Rome but in America.

James does not, however, entirely agree with the Minister’s assessments. Instead, James responds to the negative evaluation of fragments from the classical world with a claim never fully committing to the Minister’s opinions: “What you say minister, *seems* very true” (14; emphasis added). As James does not entirely endorse the Minister’s opinions, one can expect to discover the influence of the ancient classical tradition in *Letters*. That is, if James had responded in a more convincingly negative manner, one would not expect to find substantial influence from the ancient classical tradition in Crèvecoeur’s literary text.

In this same introductory letter, James establishes his agency by informing the Englishman to whom he writes his letters that “they [the subsequent letters] will all be the genuine dictates of *my* mind...” (22; emphasis added). James informs the Englishman that the epistolary texts will be dictated from what arises out of his own head, not the Minister’s. Moreover, unlike the Minister who claims the ruins found in Italy have little connection to America, in a later epistle entitled, “Peculiar Customs at Nantucket,” James revisits foreign travel to Rome and Italy to reassess this particular issue. James states, “Learned travelers, returning from seeing the paintings and antiquities of Rome and Italy, still filled with the admiration and reverence they inspire, would hardly be persuaded that so contemptible a spot [in America]... could ever be an object worthy of attention” (150). Even though James laments that the foreign traveler dismisses the scenes found in America, this Early American farmer offers a different opinion from that of the Minister when he maintains that “paintings and antiquities of Rome and Italy” are pleasing aesthetic objects based on their potential to “fill” the viewer of these objects with “admiration and reverence” (150). Because James admits that the traveler is “filled with admiration and reverence” (150) from taking in the “paintings and antiquities found of Rome and Italy” (150), the farmer clearly parts ways with the clergyman. James, therefore, possesses knowledge of and appreciation for the ancient classical world. Based on James’s validation of the ancient classical tradition, one should now perhaps expect to

encounter ways in which the farmer uses the ancient classical tradition in his own account of Early America.

Indeed, the Minister's initial denouncement of "ancient generations" becomes quickly overshadowed by James's consistent usage of the works of the Roman poet, Vergil. The first of the ancient poet's works we find in *Letters* is the *Georgics*, a four-part poetic treatment on farming devoted to the construction of a stable, agrarian model for a troubled Roman society, and the second is the *Aeneid*, an epic that established the history of the Roman empire via the wanderings of the hero, Aeneas, after the fall of Troy. Albeit he places more emphasis in his text on Vergil's *Georgics*, Crèvecoeur uses both the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid* to shape his Early American georgic text.

To illustrate one way in which James draws from the ancient classical tradition, this farmer, in the first three letters, frames his Early American agrarian community by an emphasis on "industry," or physical labor, an approach that directly mirrors Vergilian georgic—physical, taxing labor will bring about success and stability, according to the Roman author, in a society recently plagued by civil wars. A more concrete usage of Vergilian georgic, however, occurs in Crèvecoeur's usage of the bee. This insect, one that James boasts, "above any other tenants of my farm, attract[s] my attention and respect" (28), functions as a metaphor in the letters that open this Early American literary text. As Vergil devotes the entire fourth book of the *Georgics* to the insect, James repeatedly draws on this insect for his own narrative purposes. In the letter entitled, "On the Situation of an American Farmer," for instance, James, following Vergil's documentation of a civil-war in a bee community in Book Four, constructs his own battle between a king-bird, a species native to America, the "New" world, and a group of bees, representatives of the "Old" or classical world. Because James kills the king-bird and serves as both assistant to and witness of a miraculous rejuvenation of bees, a scene found in the *Georgics*, this metaphoric battle can be viewed as an argument for the legitimacy of the ancient classical world in Early America. Through this battle, James chooses to side with the "Old" world instead of the "New" and subsequently may be interpreted to be extending the Battle of the Books (i.e. between the ancient and the moderns) episode which took place in Britain during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Usage of the bee may also be seen in the five letters on Nantucket where, even though James removes himself from his comfortable agrarian settings, the narrator-farmer still finds the insect and its industry to be apt illustrations of the restless industry found in this particular whaling community.

As *Letters* unfolds, moreover, so do additional connections to the

Vergilian tradition. In fact, in his construction of *Letters*, Crèvecoeur draws heavily from Vergil's *Aeneid*. The most clear parallel between these two texts can be found in the famous letter, "What is an American?" in which James articulates the values of his Early American agrarian community based on the Roman virtue of *pietas*, or devotion to one's god(s), mother/family, and country, embodied most fully by the "pious," or devout, hero Aeneas in Vergil's *Aeneid* (Shields 116). Usage of this Roman virtue may also be located in Crèvecoeur's critiques of the institution of slavery found in the colonial south and of the "half-civilized, half-savage" (52) woodsmen who have not yet committed to James's farming community. According to the farmer-narrator, in both instances, humans, either legitimizing the oppression of native Africans or choosing to inhabit physical spaces outside of the close-knit agrarian community, have erred in their respective cases based on behavior that undermines this three-tiered Roman virtue.

Furthermore, in the final letter, "Distresses of a Frontier Man," Crèvecoeur constructs the predicament of the farmer, James, in similar terms to the plight of Aeneas. This parallel illustrates a clear manifestation of the "American Aeneas,"² a figure who mirrors Vergil's hero, Aeneas, in the American literary tradition. As the invading Greeks, driven by the fierce leadership of Achilles, successfully destroy Troy in Vergil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas must flee with his family in order to establish a new Troy or Rome. In a parallel manner, Crèvecoeur, drawing on Vergil's descriptions of Aeneas's own narrative of the fall of Troy in Books I and II of the *Aeneid*, transplants the Roman, Aeneas, onto American soil in the guise of the farmer, James, as this American

² Here I am not suggesting that this phrase, the "American Aeneas," is my coinage. In fact, a number of scholars within American literary and cultural studies have already used or alluded to this term. Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, for example, use the phrase "American Aeneas" in their description of Joel Barlowe's hero in *The Vision of Columbus* but do not provide further analysis (68). This concept is also used in a discussion found in Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*. For instance, Bercovitch observes, "At several points, [Cotton] Mather hints at a similar configuration in the parallel between Aeneas and America's [John] Winthrop" (66). Bercovitch appears to want to pursue such a connection, but ultimately chooses not to investigate the embodiment of an Aeneas-like figure in American literary texts. Self-consciously blending the titles of R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* and Bercovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, John C. Shields takes this phrase as part of the title to his text, *The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self*. According to Shields, the "American Aeneas" parallel was palatable for Early Americans because of the comparable emphases on "founding a new land to the West" (xxix) and the establishment of a distinct cultural identity (xxxii). In the context of this critical investigation, I focus on the "American Aeneas" figure embodying the characteristics Shields articulates in his provocative study.

hero wishes to flee his “poor afflicted country” (216) because of the impending effects of the Revolutionary War in hopes of establishing “successive generations” (216) in a new environment. Based on the sheer number of textual parallels, then, one may even assume, with a great deal of confidence, that exposure to the classical tradition helped Crèvecoeur internalize the discourse of ancient classicism in a way that allowed him to structure key parts of *Letters*.

The need to explore this Early American writer’s usage of the ancient classical tradition becomes even more urgent when we examine Crèvecoeur’s classical education as treated, or as the case may be considered mistreated, by selected editors of *Letters*. Editors of *Letters* frequently mention that Crèvecoeur received a classical education, yet in these same treatments these editors appear hesitant, or unable, to explicate how the discourse of ancient classicism could have proved, or actually did prove, intellectually palatable and productive for the composition of *Letters*. Because the apparent restrictions editors have imposed upon themselves regarding a perceived necessity to provide historical, literary, and cultural contexts for the reader, claims found in these introductions limit their understanding of, and their capacity to inform their readers about Crèvecoeur’s strategies used in his construction of *Letters*. While I submit that both Albert E. Stone and Susan A. Manning, two of *Letters*’ twentieth-century editors, provide accessible and intellectually stimulating “Introductions” in their respective editions (especially for pedagogical purposes), these two “Introductions” lead readers astray, particularly regarding how Crèvecoeur used, or did not use, the ancient classical tradition.

In his own “Introduction” for the 1963 Penguin edition (and in the reprinted 1981 edition) of *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, Albert E. Stone makes a significant observation regarding the education of the Frenchman turned American farmer. “By no means an untutored countryman,” Stone writes, “he [Crèvecoeur] received a sound classical schooling from the Jesuits at the College du Mont, in Latin, rhetoric, mathematics, and theology” (9). Stone goes on in his analysis of *Letters* to offer yet another important point, claiming that the prose in this text “has a meaningful complexity beneath its ingenuous surface” (21). Even though these two statements, one dealing with the classical curriculum found at the educational institution and the other with sophisticated prose found in the *Letters*, can be productively linked, Stone never attempts to bridge these two points. More importantly, his inability to trace the influence of the ancient classical tradition in Crèvecoeur’s text severely restricts his discussion of one particular

section from this "Introduction." This editor reads the previously alluded to regeneration of a group of bees following their skirmish with the native king-bird found in Letter II, "On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures, of an American Farmer," as an "episode [that] echoes the Jonah myth" (21). While I have already suggested, and will later argue, that Crèvecoeur looks to Book IV of Vergil's *Georgics* to structure this restorative narrative on "American" bees, Stone, in his own interpretation, privileges the Judaeo-Christian tradition and, consequently, fails even to see a connection between his observation that Crèvecoeur received a classical education and textual episodes that pointedly suggest classical origins.

Susan Manning, in her more recent editing of the 1998 Oxford World's Classics edition of *Letters from an American Farmer*, also provides observations on the educational background of Crèvecoeur. Manning attempts, in her "Introduction," to link the educational background with evidence from the primary text. She notes that Crèvecoeur "received a good and thorough classical education with the Jesuits" (xxiv), and even maintains that "this classicism comes over in strikingly practical and innovative ways in the American Farmer's prose" (xxiv). Despite the clear opportunity to expand on these significant observations, and to assist the reader with textual evidence illustrating where and how Crèvecoeur uses the discourse of ancient classicism in his prose, Manning undercuts her own promising commentary in the next two sentences wherein she claims that "allusion is minimal" in *Letters* and that "...scarcely any poetry, for example, beyond a couple of references to [Alexander] Pope..." can be found in *Letters* (xxiv).

This assessment, or lack thereof, should, however, not sit well with readers. How may ancient classicism, if one diligently reads this introduction, prove to be evident in "innovative ways" when there is "minimal allusion" to this ancient classical tradition or any other text, besides Pope? In other words, this editor places the reader, who wishes to learn more about the primary text and its author, in a rather precarious and intellectually baffling position, especially when she or he encounters a chapter such as Letter XI, "Visit to Mr. John Bertram." In explaining his efforts to "cultivate the science of botany" (180), John Bertram, an American botanist, employs the same self-deprecating rhetoric as the farmer James. He previews his interesting observations on becoming an American botanist by first framing himself as "but a ploughman" (181). This ostensibly undermining episode is, however, immediately replaced with a discussion on how the acquisition of Latin brings about new and helpful knowledge. After Bertram acquires a text on "Latin grammar" (181), this American

farmer explains that within only “[t]hree months time,” he was able “to botanize all over my farm” and, “in a little time I became acquainted with every vegetable that grew in my neighborhood” (181).

According to this particular American farmer, the learning of Latin yields prosperity for this “ploughman.” The inclusion of these significant points in the Bertram narrative reflects a highly conscious blending of the ancient world with the American.³ Yet, if we are to believe what the editor claims in her assessment that the ancient classical tradition may have assisted Crèvecoeur in his composition of *Letters*, we are left to divine how. These perplexing claims, by this second editor, move a long way toward preventing the discovery of how ancient classicism plays a significant role in Crèvecoeur’s text.

Perhaps the strongest reason for examining Crèvecoeur’s use of the classical tradition in *Letters* is the fact that this Early American author received an education comprised of intense literary and language study. Crèvecoeur enrolled to complete his secondary education in the Jesuit Collège Royal de Bourbon that featured a curriculum that was “above all literary” (Allen and Asselineau 9). Francesco Sacchini’s 1625 *Exhortation Addressed to the Teachers of Lower Grades* provided the pedagogical backbone at the Jesuit Collège. Sacchini, in his influential *Exhortation*, stresses the importance of literature by pointing out that “darkness” and “barbarity” would emerge with the “disappearance of belles lettres” (quoted in Allen and Asselineau 6). Sacchini goes on to claim, “In short, suppress literature and you completely suppress the quality called humanity” (quoted in Allen and Asselineau 6).

The curriculum at the Collège not only stressed the study of literature, but it also included instruction in the training of the students’ memory and in learning Latin (7 and 10). The pedagogues at the Collège required the pupils to read and memorize a number of Latin texts and to construct their own poems and speeches based upon these mnemonic exercises (7), this pattern closely resembling that which obtained in the Early American Latin grammar schools. From the small number of documents available for examination, we can see

³ Additional manifestations of ancient classicism appear throughout Crèvecoeur’s *Letters*. In “Descriptions of Charles-Town; On Slavery,” James refers to the Roman Empire: “The Romans, whom we consider as our masters in civil and military policy, lived in the exercise of the most horrid oppression: they conquered to plunder and to enslave” (158). In the aforementioned chapter, “Visit to Mr. Bertram,” a Russian gentleman observes, “Your new buildings, your streets, put me in mind of those of the city of *Pompeia* [sic] where I was a few years ago” (175). These examples make it clear that alluding to the ancient classical tradition is a consistent preoccupation throughout *Letters*.

that Crèvecoeur academically excelled in this rigorous academic environment because his name is listed in a debate held at the Collège, a privilege held “only for the best students” (7-9). This pedagogy clearly influenced Crèvecoeur because, when one consults his texts, the author inserts grammatically correct Latin phrases (Allen and Asselineau 10), thereby making it clear that the author’s classical education did impact his composing process. All of these factors strongly indicate that Crèvecoeur absorbed the discourse of ancient classicism that he internalized during his time at the Jesuit Collège.

The influence of Crèvecoeur’s internalization of the classical tradition can be more fully seen when one comparatively analyzes the texts of Crèvecoeur alongside Vergil’s *Georgics* and *Aeneid*. The most obvious parallel between Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* and Vergil’s *Georgics* occurs as both authors repeat an emphasis on restless industry, the theme of georgic poetics—“labor conquers all.” In Book I of the *Georgics*, for instance, Vergil spends considerable time documenting the various effects stemming from a transition in power from the god, Saturn, to the god, Jupiter. During the reign of Saturn, Vergil declares, “...no settlers broke the fields with their plows: / it was impious then to mark off the land and divide it / with boundaries; people sought land in common, and Earth herself / gave everything more freely when no one made demands” (Vergil *Georgics* 7).

This “Golden Age,” as it is referred to, drastically changes with the reign of Jupiter. Instead of the soil spontaneously yielding crops for individuals to consume, multiple hardships ensue; Jove inserts venom into the “hissing snake,” commands the wolf to become “predator” and the sea to become more violent, and takes away honey and wine (7). The transition demands that humans be more inventive and diligent, a necessity that results in the creation of boats, nets for capturing fish, iron, the saw-blade, and the ability to navigate the sea based on help from the constellations (7). Characterizing this dramatic transformation, Vergil summarizes: “...Restless work conquered / all difficulties—work and urgent need when times were hard” (8). In other words, labor does, in fact, conquer all.

This same attitude that stresses the importance of industry may be seen repeatedly in James’s comments on Early American culture. In fact, the word “industry” is probably the most frequently recurring word within *Letters* (with “imagine” or “imagination” as close contenders for the second most popular word). Following Vergil in his *Georgics* that “...unless you pursue the weeds with a restless hoe...remove the shade from overshadowed farmland with a pruning hook...you’ll stare at someone else’s heaps of grain...” (8), James offers the same advice. In the third letter, James focuses

on the importance of hard work in America: “We [Americans] are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself” (41). James adds that through diligent, physical labor, “he [the American farmer] will be fed, instead of being idle he will have employment; and these are riches enough for such men as come over here” (56-57). Here this American farmer/narrator outlines the recipe for success in America, as did Vergil for the survival of a troubled Roman Empire that found itself plagued by civil wars and political disputes following the death of Julius Caesar. Hard, yet consistent, physical labor provides a functional blueprint for each society.

Of course this idea of agrarianism bringing about a content frame of mind does not begin in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* but can be traced as an extended poetic tradition, starting with the Greek poet, Theocritus, moving to Vergil and, then, to Crèvecoeur.

Beginning with Theocritus’s *Idyll VII*, three individuals named Eurcritus, Amyntas, and Simichidas retreat from the city to the country in order to celebrate a “harvest home.” On the way to the celebration, the festival goes run into the shepherd, Lycidas, a figure well known for his excellent piping; subsequently Simichidas challenges the newest member of the group to a singing contest. After mourning over lost loves, a characteristic redolent of the pastoral tradition, Simichidas references the reason for attending the harvest ceremony: “...but we find peace within...” (Theocritus 93). This particular *Idyll*, then, establishes an agrarian escape as a source for peace of mind.

Praise of rural life is also evident in Book II of Vergil’s *Georgics*. In contrasting urban and rural life, Vergil states, “O farmers, abounding in good fortune, should they only / come to know their luck! For them, far from battle’s din, the land / in its perfect fullness pours forth spontaneous nourishment” (36). Despite the facts that, as Vergil notes, the farmer will never “gape openmouthed at fine tortiseshells” (36) nor find his “olive oil adulterated with cinnamon” (37), two manifestations of a more cosmopolitan attitude toward taste found in the urban community, the rural inhabitant “...gathers the fruits that his boughs, that his willing acres / readily yield and gives no thought to laws hard as iron, / the Forum’s insanity, and the hall of public records” (38). Vergil, then, follows the observation of Theocritus that rural life allows one to stay clear of the problems associated with the city and to find peaceful contentment, or as Vergil puts it so well, “secura quies” (“secure peace”; Book II, l. 467).

The American farmer, James, extends this poetic tradition. In the beginning epistles, for instance, this “farmer of feelings” rhapsodizes

about his “warm imagination” (26); and, because of his privileged location on his farm, he claims that “many objects” (38) from this location provide him with the “most pleasing relief” (38). James’s residence on his farm elicits “relief” through relaxed and contemplative meditation. This peace of mind, however, is completely disrupted by the Revolutionary War. The “warm imagination” contrasts dramatically with the farmer’s “disturbed imagination” (190) and the “affrighted imaginations” (189) of his entire family after the War begins. Indeed, at this point in the narrative, James even acknowledges the rupture of the already established parallel between the agrarian lifestyle and peace of mind: “The very appetite, proceeding from labour and peace of mind, is gone” (189). Here James continues in the poetic tradition of both Theocritus and Vergil by relying on the linkage of agrarianism and peace of mind found in the ancient classical world to describe his physical and mental predicaments in Early America.

Crèvecoeur, as well, shows interest, as we have observed, in the classical world through his consistent preoccupation with bees. James celebrates the various characteristics of the insect in the letter entitled, “On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures, of an American Farmer”: “It is my bees, however, which afford me the most pleasing and extensive themes. Let me look at them when I will, their government, their industry, their quarrels, their passions, always present me with something new...” (32). Curiously, Vergil, in Book IV, attributes these same characteristics (industry, government, battles, and passions) to bees in his *Georgics*. After asking the literary patron, Maecenas, to “look with approval on this part as well,” Vergil celebrates the various attributes of the bee: “The wonder-stirring drama of a tiny state, / its great-hearted leaders and the entire species’ habits / and pursuits and swarms and battles – of these I shall tell you” (60). Based on these lines from Book IV, James even appears to lift lines from the *Georgics* in order to celebrate certain characteristics of Early American bees. Both Vergil and Crèvecoeur, as one discovers by simply comparatively reading *Letters* alongside the *Georgics*, invest textual space in examining the insects’ government-like structure, their work ethic or industry (one of the creature’s “habits”), their mannerisms, and the insects’ quarrels (internal or external). Going one step further, even though Crèvecoeur individualizes his own narrative interest in the bees (“present *me* with something new”), this classically educated American farmer rearticulates the appealing qualities that Vergil has already located in this insect. The ancient classical text, not the British, therefore, most fully informs this meditation on an American insect.

In the same epistle, James gives an extended account of a battle

between a group of bees and a native (to America) king-bird. As we have already discovered, Albert E. Stone holds that this confrontation “echoes the Jonah myth” (21), while D. H. Lawrence boldly asserts, “the industrious hive obviously refers back to Bernard de Mandeville and his *Fable of the Bees*” (quoted in Manning xxv). These observations all neglect even the possibility that the ancient classical tradition influenced Crèvecoeur, opting for the all-too-common notion that the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition influenced the production of this Early American literary text and that Mandeville’s more pessimistic moral guidebook was “obviously” the text Crèvecoeur looked to for composing this scene.

Crèvecoeur draws on Book IV of the *Georgics* to shape what may seem to be a narrative specifically about American bees and a king-bird. In this Book, Vergil advises the farmer to select an isolated space for the tending of bees. This recommendation also imparts information concerning the threats of various intrusive insects. In addition to the “bright-colored lizards,” Vergil cautions that “...the bee-eater and other birds, like the swallow...” possess the ability to catch bees and “bring them by the bill as sweet tidbits for fierce nestlings” (60). As Vergil alludes to the conflict between bird and bee, this grouping was, therefore, readily available to Crèvecoeur through his own reading of Vergil’s *Georgics*.

By incorporating salient parts from the *Georgics*, Crèvecoeur constructs his own version of an insect-bird battle and the amazing resuscitation of what appears to be a group of fallen bees. As James focuses his attention on American bees, these insects engage in battle with the native king-bird. In attacking the king-bird, the bees are successful, but, when this formation disperses, the king-bird immediately kills several bees no longer part of the collective army. Driven to retaliate because of the king-bird’s actions, James shoots the bird, taking some 171 bees from its mouth (29). After placing his beloved insects on a blanket, James witnesses a miraculous event: “I laid them all on a blanket in the sun, and to my great surprise, 54 returned to life, licked themselves clean, and joyfully went back to the hive...” (29). Arguably, without any understanding of Vergilian georgic, this particular episode within *Letters* seems all but silly, a minor textual detail with little or no real significance.

A rejuvenated group of bees, nevertheless, appears in Book IV of the *Georgics*. Here Vergil invests numerous lines to describing a specific epyllion, or short epic, concerning how the character, Aristaeus, reclaims his bees. Aristaeus first pleads to his mother, Cyrene, and then physically restrains the shape-shifting Proteus (known to answer questions accurately when restrained) for information about

his bees. As Aristaeus finally learns, particular circumstances can rejuvenate the fallen: “Four altars—for your cleansing, build them on the goddesses’ / time-old shrines, and drain the sacrificial blood from the throats / of the cattle but let their bodies stay in the leafy groves” (78). Slaying the animals produces a distinct result:

Here, a sudden omen, plain to see, almost incredible
to tell: out of the putrefying bovine guts, out
of the bellies and burst sides, bees, buzzing, swarming,
then streaming upward in huge clouds till they join in a tree-
top and hang in a great ball from a bending branch. (78)

Because of the sacrifice, the bees of Aristaeus literally return.

Crèvecoeur modifies but little this narrative of a regenerative bee community for his *Letters*. Drawing on Book IV of the *Georgics*, Crèvecoeur engages the bees and the king-bird in a representative battle between the “Old” and “New” worlds. The fact that Crèvecoeur has the American farmer, James, kill the king-bird, a native representative of America, in order to save the “American” but transplanted Roman bees is significant. Indeed, this preference for a key symbol from the ancient classical tradition via the saving and recitation of the bees provides a strong indication that Crèvecoeur draws on the ancient classical tradition in order to construct his own observations on America. Moreover, Crèvecoeur constructs this particular scene in *Letters* to argue for the necessity of a collective unit. Collective groups who work together, Crèvecoeur maintains, achieve success; when the collective unit collapses, however, so does society. Therefore, the regeneration of bees emphasizes the need for Early American citizens to exercise their own efforts in generating a productive collective unit for the purpose of survival.

In order to understand fully Crèvecoeur’s preoccupation with the ancient classical genre of georgic, it is also necessary to examine James’s observations that do not arise from his position in an agrarian community. In fact, a total of five letters focus on the Nantucket region where, instead of farm-fields, James comments upon the Nantucket Island community. Nathaniel Philbrick posits that the “Nantucket Sequence,” a name for classifying these five chapters in *Letters*, “directly challenges the optimistic vision of the book’s beginning” (415). While Philbrick does provide compelling evidence for a surfacing pessimism (e.g. the use of opium in the Nantucket community), he overlooks James’s comparisons between the agrarian and whaling communities, and chooses only to point out a similarity between clearing swamps and pursuing the great “Leviathan” (416). Equally noteworthy, James, in specific parts of the “Nantucket Sequence,” continues to rely on the key theme found in

Vergilian georgic—physical labor conquers all—to describe certain appealing aspects of the Nantucket whaling enterprise. This evidence suggests that even though the narrator, along with the reader, has shifted geographical locales, James still utilizes the genre of georgic and the metaphor of the bee found most prominently in Book IV of the *Georgics* to describe this second Early American environment.

Among his many narrative goals in the “Nantucket Sequence,” James wishes to document for the reader the “innumerable resources which the industrious have of raising themselves to a comfortable and easy situation” (84). Similar to the narrator’s repeated use of the word “industry” in the first three letters, James indicates that the virtue of industry will be a central feature in his descriptions of Nantucket. Immediately after offering this claim, the narrator establishes, in two specific places, a linkage between the agrarian community and the whaling industry. James holds that he can “point out to you exertions of the most successful industry” (84), and that “every natural object has been removed by a vigorous industry” (85) in this whaling community. The narrator even uses the physical act of plowing and the bee to articulate how the inhabitants of this region possess a diligent work ethic, one mirroring the attitude towards labor found in the agrarian community described in the first three letters. As James claims, “If these people are not famous for tracing the fragrant furrow on the plain, they plough the rougher ocean, they gather from its surface, at an immense distance and with Herculean labors, the riches it affords...” (87).

When James examines Martha’s Vineyard in Letter VI, a part of the “Nantucket Sequence,” he again uses the metaphor of the bee to describe the characteristics of the whaling community. Noting Nantucket’s penchant for “hospitality” and “simplicity of diction and manners” (124), James utilizes the familiar metaphor:

Never was a bee-hive more faithfully employed in gathering wax, bee-bread, and honey, from all the neighboring fields, than are the members of this society; every one in the town follows some particular occupation with great diligence, but without the servility of labour which I am informed prevails in Europe. (124)

It is important to note here that James mentions twice in this passage (“members of this society”; “every one in the town”) that *all* members of the community are particularly industrious.

In Book IV of the *Georgics* and Book I of the *Aeneid*, Vergil describes a group of bees in a strikingly similar way. Within the *Georgics*, Vergil, at first, establishes a clear parallel between humans and insects noting that the bees “know a fatherland,” “hold their offspring in common,” and when they are “aware of winter to come, they spend

the warm weather / hard at work” (65). The poet, then, goes on to list the various labors done by different members of the community:

For some are vigilant to gather food and by fixed
agreement keep busy in the fields, others in the confines
Of their homes put down the tears of narcissus and sticky gum...then,
suspend wax that holds fast; some lead out the grown young,
hope of the species; others press together the purest
honey and cause the cells to bulge with liquid nectar... (65)

Compacting these numerous lines into a single statement, the poet eloquently summarizes: “For all, there is a time to rest from work, for all a time to work” (66). Vergil continues his usage of the bee to emphasize physical labor in an epic simile from Book I of the *Aeneid*. As Aeneas approaches the outskirts of Dido’s Carthage, Vergil recalls his bees as he constructs an interesting comparison between “the busy Tyrians toiling” (15) and a familiar insect:

They [the Carthaginians] are like bees
In early summer over the country flowers
When the sun is warm, and the young of the hive emerge,
And they pack the molten honey, bulge the cells
With the sweet nectar, add new loads, and hurry
The drones away from the hive, and the work glows,
And the air is sweet with bergamot and clover. (15)

Vergil refers to this physical labor in the *Aeneid* as “all under ordered process” (15). Notice, in the Vergilian texts and in James’s observation, that all stress the importance of collective labor by listing the production of the same goods (wax and honey) through the same physical activities. Indeed, Crèvecoeur can be seen imparting a very similar point and message as seen in Book IV of the *Georgics* and Book I of the *Aeneid*. In this network of texts, the human and insect worlds are linked, in clear ways, to emphasize the need for labor and to maintain a particular society. The ambiguity as to what passage Crèvecoeur actually draws upon to compose his version of “American” bees emphasizes the way in which this classically educated American farmer consistently summons his knowledge of the classics to frame his own interpretation of America.

Still another indication, as we have observed, that Crèvecoeur was familiar with Vergil’s *Aeneid* can be seen in the equal emphasis placed on God (the deity from the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition), mother/family, and country in his famous identification of America found in Letter III. This declaration, one stressing the need to “educate thy children, teach them gratitude to God, and reverence to that government, that philanthropic government...” (66), stands as a rearticulation of the three-tiered Roman virtue of *pietas* applied to the American character (Shields 116). Aeneas, Vergil’s hero in the

Aeneid, embodies this virtue not only through his actions, but also by the consistent references to this hero as “pious Aeneas” throughout the twelve-books of this epic. These “pious Aeneas” designations are used in multiple sections of Vergil’s epic, hence reinforcing Aeneas’s allegiances to his god(s), his family, and his country. In the conception of “pietas,” emphasis is not placed on any one of these elements to the detriment of the others; each component of pietas may be seen as equally important.

Showing himself to be the diligent classical scholar that he obviously was, Crèvecoeur takes time to investigate how both the lifestyle of the backwoods settler and the institution of slavery detract from the three components seen in the virtue of pietas. Crèvecoeur, via James, starts his critique of the backwoods settlers through an important observation: “They [individuals residing in the backwoods] are entirely different from those that live in the plains” (51). After establishing a clear contrast between the two parties, James provides specific reasons why he views these individuals living in the backwoods as “gloomy” (51) and “unsocial” (51). In giving up the plough and the agrarian community, James asserts, these backwoodsmen develop a “new set of manners” (51). No longer does the profession of farming produce a content state of mind; indeed, “the possession of their freeholds no longer conveys to their minds the same pleasure and pride” (52). Even though James employs self-deprecating rhetoric in his claim that he “cannot easily describe” (51) these manners, the American farmer works through this self-critical posture in his ability to pinpoint the differences in this “other” society.

According to James, hunting in the woods produces unnecessary competition among the woodsmen (51). Based on this choice in lifestyle, the familial unit becomes degraded since “their wives and children live in sloth and inactivity, and, having no proper pursuits, you may judge what education the latter receive” (52). Instead of “educating thy children” in a manner similar to the American farmer, this choice in lifestyle made by the backwoodsmen prevents them from forming any satisfactory familial unit. Continuing to lodge this critique, James maintains that when the backwoodsmen go into the “unlimited freedom of the woods” and neglect tillage, they lose their rights as “citizens.” In an earlier epistle, James establishes a clear link between plowing the earth and the right to citizenship in America. “This formerly rude soil,” James claims, has “founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens” (27). Since the backwoodsmen have chosen to say, “farewell to the plough” (51), James pinpoints an unfortunate characteristic in “one of these last settlements”: “dread of government” (52).

Through the choice of giving up the plough, James argues, the backwoodsmen do not wish to pay “reverence to that government” (66), as does the American farmer, but choose to give up duty or allegiance to country, another component of the Roman virtue. Finally, as one can imagine, the antisocial disposition of the backwoodsmen does not allow any formation of a “place of worship ...” (52). Without a place to worship one’s god or means to show devotion to one’s deity, the society that the backwoodsmen have constructed does not live up to any of the principles found in the American farmer’s community. The three tenets of the Roman virtue of *pietas* herein fail to be made manifest. Crèvecoeur appears, therefore, to predict the failure of the backwoodsmen’s undertaking through his consistent referencing of the three-tiered virtue of *pietas*.

James also draws on the virtue of *pietas* as means of critique in “Description of Charles-Town; On Slavery.” Here the narrator James utilizes the virtue of *pietas* to condemn the institution of slavery found in America. Slavery complicates, according to James, familial relationships because “parental fondness is imbittered by considering, that, if their children live, they must live to be slaves like themselves; no time is allowed to exercise their pious office...” (155). Interestingly enough, in this passage, James even uses the word “pious” to document how slavery severs ties between parents and their children. A mere two pages later, James associates the Middle Passage, the horrid experience in which Africans were forced to travel from their native land to the Americas in order to be sold, as most unfortunate because the journey “force[s] [the African] from their native country...” (157). Finally, the slave forced into captivity, cannot count on religion since this “...consolatory system, so useful to the miserable, [is] never presented to them...” (157). Similar to the backwoodsmen, precise problems found in the institution of slavery, as James stresses, effectively extinguish all three components found in the Roman virtue of *pietas*.

A still more thorough preoccupation with the *Aeneid* can be seen in the final chapter of *Letters*, “Distresses of a Frontier Man.” In both the *Aeneid* and *Letters*, familial units must abandon and retreat from their respective homes because of an impending war. James describes his own upcoming journey as an epic-like venture that will include travel by land and sea, components that are found in Aeneas’s trip to found new Troy (Rome). The trip will, James hopes, “enable [new citizens] to fill it [the new country] with successive generations...” (216). The emphasis on establishing a new and prosperous country is, then, the goal in James’s venture to settle with Native Americans, thereby paralleling Aeneas’s land and sea excursion to

find the proper location for the transplanted Trojans, now becoming Romans. Retreats away from an impending war require the establishment of new homes and societies. Because of the Revolutionary War, James, accompanied by his family, must flee his beloved farm to live with a group of Native Americans. In the final pages of this chapter, Crèvecoeur constructs his own version of the “American Aeneas” by launching the farmer James on a mission that parallels that of Aeneas in Vergil’s *Aeneid*.

In Book I of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas and his followers land on the shores of Carthage, home to Queen Dido. Anxious to hear about these strangers now in her kingdom and recently infected with passion for the Trojan hero through the saliva of Cupid, Dido asks Aeneas to “Tell us, my guest...from the beginnings, all the story, / The treachery of the Greeks, the wanderings, / The perils of the seven tiresome years” (25). After relating the fall of Troy to the various listeners, Aeneas describes how Hector, a noble Trojan, pleads for Aeneas “...[t]o take flight...seek walls for them [Aeneas’s companions], and a city / To be established, a long sea-wandering over” (36). Later in Book III, Aeneas describes his reactions after departing Troy for the last time: “...I wept as I left the harbor, / The fields where Troy had been. / I was borne, an exile, / Over the deep, with son, companions, household, / And household gods” (51).

Capturing the intensity of Aeneas’ weeping over the fallen Troy, James advises the reader that his own narrative will be filled with emotion: “Never was a situation so singularly terrible as mine...as a member of an extensive society, as a citizen of an inferior division of the same society, as a husband, as a father, as a man who exquisitely feels for the miseries of others as well as for his own!” (188). Here the American farmer positions himself in roles similar to those of Aeneas in the *Aeneid*—father, husband, citizen, and human being sensitive to the pathetic or emotional. James even involves the reader when he pleads, “Have you a tear ready to shed over the approaching ruin of a once opulent and substantial family?” (190).

Following the lead of Aeneas in his confession that he is “an exile,” James declares he will prepare to “...seek a refuge from the desolation of war” (215). The trip on which Aeneas embarks, as Hector, a Trojan character whom Vergil uses to embody pietas, tells us in the *Aeneid*, will entail “a long sea wandering,” one similar to the way in which James forecasts his own journey. The American farmer makes it clear that his pilgrimage will involve “...about twenty-three miles land-carriage [and] I am enabled to perform the rest by water; and when once afloat, I care not whether it be two or three hundred miles” (207). Land and water, then, comprise the epic journeys of both

Aeneas and James in their efforts to establish “new” lands.

Even before these two individuals embark on their journeys, however, each offers obedience to a deity or deities. Seeking temporary refuge in a location near Troy, Aeneas states that in this location, “I was offering my mother [the goddess, Venus] proper homage, / And other gods, to bless the new beginnings, / I had a white bull ready as a victim / To the king of the gods” (52). While not participating in animal sacrifice or paying obeisance to multiple deities, James does state that he hopes “God [may] grant us a prosperous beginning” (210) in his trip to the Native American community. A more explicit prayer to James’s deity can be seen in the final pages of “Distresses” chapter. Here James bluntly states that he “implore[s] thy divine assistance [of the supreme deity]” (216) to allow him “to carry the young family thou hast given me,” to preserve “the companion of my bosom,” and to “bless the children of our love” (216). Crèvecoeur’s deliberate usage of the verb “carry,” of course, mirrors the physical labor enacted by Aeneas when he literally places his father, Anchises, on his back while escaping the war-torn Troy. As Aeneas commands, “Climb to my shoulders, father, / It will be no burden” (48).

James does, however, significantly revise certain parts of the *Aeneid*. As the American farmer readies himself to leave his farm, he speculates on the possibility of being permanently separated from his wife: “...my poor wife, with panting bosom and silent tears, takes leave of me, as if we were to see each other no more” (189; emphases added). While James is fortunate not to lose his wife during their epic-like trip to settle with the Native Americans, Cruesa, the wife of Aeneas, never sees the establishment of the Roman Empire, and Aeneas does in fact lose his wife. James, as we have noted above, focuses on only one God (the Judaeo-Christian deity) in his prayer before embarking on his mission. This specific revision suggests that Crèvecoeur collapses the polytheistic worldview of the Romans into a monotheistic, Judaeo-Christian worldview, thereby blending, in this case, the discourses of ancient classicism with Judaeo-Christianity in the figure of the American farmer, James. This scene, then, illustrates an example of how Crèvecoeur fuses the discourses of Judaeo-Christianity and ancient classicism in his Early American georgic text. Nevertheless, James, at the end of this letter, implores his deity that “our ancient virtues and our industry may not be totally lost” (216), thereby wishing that the virtue of hard work, as seen in the *Georgics*, and the “ancient virtue,” the three-tired virtue of pietas, as seen in the *Aeneid*, will not vanish with the retreat to another geographical space in Early America.

These clear appropriations of the ancient classical tradition

further alter our understanding of the self-assessment of James as a “simple cultivator” (7). Specifically, readers may now be prepared to understand how the cultured Frenchman turned American farmer consistently models key moments in *Letters* upon Vergil’s *Georgics* and *Aeneid*, yet, via the Minister, appears, on the surface, to be uninterested in the discourse of ancient classicism. The author’s use of Vergilianism ascertains how the rigor of Crèvecoeur’s classical training acquired from the French classical institution manifests itself in the construction of his literary texts; indeed, the consistent usage of ancient classicism, particularly of Vergil’s poetry, indicates that Crèvecoeur thoroughly internalized the literary and Latin-based curriculum found at the Collège. James articulates the importance of hard work in Early America through the rhetoric of Vergilian georgic, critiques this same period in Early America via the virtue of pietas, and actually becomes Aeneas in the final part of *Letters*, therefore fully undermining his own claim that he is only a “humble American planter” (7). To offer a more conclusive observation, Crèvecoeur shapes his “simple cultivator” as a sophisticated character and narrator, thereby making *Letters* a complex Early American georgic text, and an excellent example of the Vergilian tradition in Early America.

Eric D. Lamore

University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez
Puerto Rico

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