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Negotiating Sobriety, Honesty, and Industry in Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*

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Abstract

The terms *sobriety, honesty, and industry* are commonly addressed in early American literature as a set of virtues which are believed to be the basic character for one to achieve success. In Crèvecoeur's **Letters from an American Farmer**, the terms are treated as the key virtues important for undergoing the process of Americanization, for the shaping of the American identity, and for pursuing an upward mobility. Modern historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have proven that the process of Americanization and upward mobility in America were not like what Crèvecoeur imagined in his letters. However, the study of the account of *sobriety, honesty, and industry* in **Letters from an American Farmer** leads to a valuable description of the thoughts and feelings of the early American society where the dominant model of their outer and inner lives was business and commerce.

Keywords: *sobriety, honesty, industry*

James Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* was published in England in 1782 and was greatly appreciated in Europe as a body of literature providing an impressive image about the American colony. The book was like a flower in a world vivid with a dream that America was a perfect society where every immigrant would become prosperous. So magical was its influence, that Theophilus Harris, a twenty-four-year-old Welshman, left Britain in 1794 together with his wife, Mary, to pursue the promise of life in America. Later in 1793, in his reflection "Thoughts on Emigration," he wrote that "everyone" in America "is comfortably employed..." (Moore 602). Historian John Hammond Moore comments that this young Welshman had fallen under the French writer's spell, Crèvecoeur (602), whose work has become a favorite in Europe and radiated direct influence on the feelings and thoughts of a prospective immigrant.

In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur does not spellbind his readers with the promise of the pleasing prospect of independence and ease, virtue and justice, happiness and opportunity. Through his character, Farmer James, Crèvecoeur also describes to his readers how the new American should move upward toward independence and ease by adopting a set of attitudes which he consistently proposes through the whole discourse in his letters: *sobriety, honesty, and industry*. Talking about the English people's new arrival, Farmer James says, "It is of very little importance how and in what manner an indigent man

arrives; for if he is but sober, honest, and industrious, he has nothing more to ask of heaven" (Crèvecoeur 89).

Letters from an American Farmer was not so much appreciated in America itself until the late nineteenth-century critics and studies on American literature found it significant in describing the typical American experience. The set of virtues (sobriety, honesty, and industry) is among the materials worth discussing since this set of virtues has been very familiarly taken in the body of American literatures after Crèvecoeur. This paper is a critical analysis of the way Crèvecoeur presents the virtues in the body of the letters. Some historical and critical insights will be provided in order to understand the tension, conflict, and contradiction that seem to underlie their presentation in the letters.

The Narrative

The terms sobriety, honesty, and industry are consistently mentioned in the letters in several different modes. In Letter II, the terms are not explicitly formulated but are foreshadowed in the description of James's situation, feelings, and pleasures as a farmer in America. The reader may sense James's sobriety and honesty when James explains several principles of the way he leads his life: in mediocrity, by avoiding luxury, drunkenness, greed and superiority. He meets his needs and gains prosperity without destroying nature. He does not kill the deer or the bears (59) for the sake of pleasure and he does not eat an egg to satisfy his gluttony. Instead, he jaunts through the woods catching the more harmless bees. As a farmer he governs his barnyard in accordance with the law of nature "to prevent the strong and greedy from oppressing the timid and weak" (57). He is aware of his superior knowledge to govern his properties and behaves like a wise man who is obliged to govern fools and the ignorant. Observing the animals' behavior in his yard, he is aware of the destructive element of nature, "I am astonished to see that nothing exists but what has its enemy; one species pursues and lives upon the other..." (55).

His industrious life is clearly seen when James narrates how he inherits three hundred and seventy-one acres of land comprising of forty-seven acres good meadow, an excellent orchard, a good house, and a barn. He is very happy and content tilling his fields by which he gains a substantial system of joy as an American farmer through possessing the freedom of action and of thoughts, rank, and power in the society. It is his bees which afford him the most extensive reflections on the attitudes in governing, in being industrious, and in showing passions (58). James's life told in Letter I is an image of the embodiment of the virtues of sobriety, honesty, and industry in one's life.

In Letter III onward, the terms sobriety, honesty, and industry are given their full context and meaning. James first of all situates the discussion of this set of virtues in the context of a settlement in America. He wishes to share the feelings and thoughts to those who have just arrived and intend to settle in America. They are the English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes; they will soon

share the "national pride." What is the pride of the Americans? He explains it in his welcoming speech, "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" (89). In James's understanding, those who come to America will settle in America and become Americans. Therefore, James introduces sobriety, honesty, and industry as the very character they must adopt in order to become an American and to lead a life of an American. In other words, this set of virtues is the identity of an American.

More specifically, James takes sobriety, honesty, and industry as a set of virtues in order for an American to move upward: from an involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor to the independence and ease (70). The plot of moving upward is described in Letter III as, "From nothing to start into being; from servant to the rank of a master; from being the slave of some despotic prince, to become a free man, invested with lands to which every municipal blessing is annexed!" (83). According to James, such a change is available for every immigrant into America. "It is here, then, that the idle may be employed, the useless become useful, and the poor become rich..." (80). However, James does not say that every one who comes to America will automatically be successful in reaching the goal of moving upward. He says, "It is not every emigrant who succeeds; no, it is only the sober, the honest, and the industrious" (84).

Does it mean that everyone who possesses sobriety, honesty, and industry will be successful? He does not say so. In his understanding, there is no absolute relation between this set of virtues and success. It is not a magic. It is not a freak fortune. The history of Andrew the Hebridean he inserted in Letter III is intended for the readers as an example to imagine the normal progressive steps of a poor man advancing from indigence to ease, from oppression to freedom. According to James, Andrew made his upward mobility not by fortune, but by the "gradual operation of sobriety, honesty, and emigration" (90).

The history of Andrew is also an important example for James to explain the process of Americanization. Andrew, whom James calls as "Honest Andrew," came to America with his wife in 1771 as a poor man from the Island of Bara. He met James who then trained him how to work with an axe. Then, he is hired by Mr. P. R., who paid him four dollars per month. As he was an honest person, industrious, and moderate, he gained a good name among friends. Therefore, he was able to purchase some plots of land and to procure a credit with Mr. A. V., who leased a hundred acres of lands to him. His success as a farmer made him a freeholder in Pennsylvania; and as consequence of this success he was naturalized and became a citizen of America.

The upward mobility is important for the process of the Americanization. James considers Andrew's Americanization as the consequence of the progress he has made. "It is in consequence of that change that he becomes an American." (83) The process begins when a settler is made acquainted "with the happy effects which constantly flow, in this country, from sobriety and industry, when united

with good land and freedom" (105). This happy effect will extinguish "all his European prejudices" and provide a settler a condition "to forget the mechanism of subordination and the servility of disposition which poverty had taught him in his country" (83). Here, we may conclude that the set of virtues sobriety, honesty, and industry is an important element in the process of settlement, upward mobility, and Americanization as consequence.

Citing the fact that he is a farmer and that he draws so many lessons from whatever he observes in his yard, and telling that Honest Andrew, too, was a farmer, is James also saying that this set of virtues is drawn from an agricultural ethic, and is therefore suitable more to those tilling the field?

"Men are like plants." James says, "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). It is true that James says that those living near the sea are more "bold and enterprising" (71), that those who inhabit the middle settlements are usually sagacious (71), and that those living in the woods are usually barbarous. However, he does not say that sobriety, honesty, and industry are the virtues generated from and belong only to certain communities. He does not say that these principles are agrarian by nature. They are of a universal ethic everybody has to adopt.

By sobriety, James means the mode of living in simplicity. Everything is in proper measurement. Adopting this attitude, one will avoid luxury and drunkenness, greed and superiority. James himself is adopting this attitude. That is why he gives preference to the country of Kennebec rather than New Garden. In New Garden, the inhabitants "reap too much, do not toil enough, and are liable to enjoy too fast the benefits of life" (147). This life-style, James says, only leads to too much "idleness and effeminacy," which is the opposite of the ideal he calls industry. By industry, James refers to a mode of life which adopts the attitude of hard work and diligence, and against all kinds of idleness. "Idleness is the most heinous sin" (156), James says in Letter VIII. He once saw that in Nantucket "an idle man would soon be pointed out as an object of compassion, for idleness is considered as another word for want and hunger" (155). For this reason, he advises the new arrivals not to be a back settler: the one choosing a living in or near the woods. According to James, living in or near the woods will only lead the new settlers to become hunters who, then, because of the dependence on the natural fecundity of the woods, do little for tillage and forget setting a good disposition for further achievement. In such mode of life, the back settlers soon shape a set of manners such as unsocial, idle, and lawless. The lawless attitude among the back-settlers in Caroline and Virginia had caused the Indian's attack in 1774.

Actually, James does not make a specific distinction whether he means that somebody is sober, honest, or industrious. He mostly treats the terms as a set of virtues. When he says that Andrew is an honest man, he also means that Andrew is industrious and sober. He also sometimes wraps the terms all together into simply one term "good." "If he is a good man, he forms schemes of future prosperity, he proposes to educate his children better than he has been educated himself; he

thinks of future modes of conduct, feels an ardour to labour he never felt before" (83). Being a good man, one is in the same time sober, industrious, and honest.

The Tension

Our question now is whether a good man will really be successful in life. Here comes a topic related to what Albert E. Stone called "the American-ness and the European-ness of our culture" (Stone 8). Stone said that Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* records within it the cultural determinants important to understand the American and European feelings and thoughts. Underlying the letters are the oppositions between the real and the ideal, the reason and the emotion, Europe and the New World. It provides the dramatic and emotional tension in to the letters. This very tension, which Crèvecoeur himself cannot resolve, made the *Letters* gain its "resurrection" in the late nineteenth century as a powerful document at once literary, freshly contemporary, and characteristically American (Stone 18). Under Marius Bewley, the tension, contrast, and conflict addressed in the letters are discovered and recognized as the common underlying issues in American experience (Stone 20). Here, we will see how a good man like Farmer James faces the treacherous situation in life that forces him to make a decision to adopt what is not ideal for him.

No matter how James gives examples of the success people have gained by the operation of sobriety, honesty, and industry, he finally faces the fact that human life is full of dread and horror. Along with his happy feeling as a successful American freeholder whose hard work and toils result in becoming the same class as the Quakers of Nantucket, James experiences an unjust situation in the southern planters near Charles Town, where the slaves are miserable under excessive labor, while "the chosen race" are enjoying "all that life affords most bewitching and pleasurable, without labour, without fatigue, hardly subjected to the trouble of wishing" (168) James experiences affliction while pondering such matters. The contrast and tension are like what he sees in the fierce beauty of hummingbirds or the mortal battle of the yellow snake and the black snake. He sees the ideal plowman who keeps the simple virtues, continues to clear and bank his swamps, but also achieves a scientific and intellectual grasp of the nature he cultivates, harvesting the world's respect and admiration. At the same time, he experiences how ambition, adversity, and war have mowed down all his works and helpless individuals by their "cruel reapers" (212) in an instant, leaving the farmer in ruins and confusion.

The fact that James locates the presence of ambiguities and contrasts only after Letter III suggests that James is actually growing in consciousness toward the fundamental ugliness of human existence and the falsity of system of values and principles. Where is honesty? Where is sobriety? Where is industry? Here we see that in *Letters from an American Farmer* are presented both the ideal virtues and the real virtues common in human experience.

James is aware that the public virtue he presumes co-exists with public murder and public poverty. Such is what is going on in the public moral system. James describes this situation as a metaphor of the king-birds that destroy the industrious insects. Despite what they have done, these birds preserve James's field from the depredation of crows (55-56). He, then, kills the bird and saves the insect. In such a situation, man reduces himself to lower orders of being, but also to betray himself. James realizes that nature takes lives to preserve lives. The vermilion dye attracts the bees but stains them, allowing him to trace them to their honey; the birds are lured to destruction by a stool pigeon casually blinded and "fastened to a long string." Shall man "get along" with what is going on? Shall he remain honest in it? Will not he become "too honest" in such a condition?

Comparing Nantucket's extreme natural deprivation to Carolina's extreme natural surplus, James believes that fecundity and fertility of the land do not corrupt man; they merely provide the occasion for his inherently corrupt nature to manifest itself. How should a man behave? The idealist will say that a man supposes to be able to handle his own corrupt nature by following the virtue of sobriety, honesty, and industry.

James also senses the presence of the law, moral, or principle which is unknowing but is constitutive in human nature; and the society and this law, or moral, or principle is operating in its own way. This awareness is revealed when he talks about the peculiar customs at Nantucket. The Quakers' simplicity and industry that make the desolate island flourish delight him. Their sobriety and industry are manifested in their ornament and adornment in their clothing, their food, their homes, their worship, and even their unaffected speech. James admires their natural gaiety and good feeling (163-164). Yet, amidst this adorable scene of happiness, James finds out in the same place a singular custom among women and a few men which he cannot account for. These women and men have adopted the Asiatic custom of taking a dose of opium every morning. It has been many years that they are deeply addicted to it and they would rather be deprived of what was necessary than foregoing their opium.

It is unacceptable that what have been tilled by hands with industry and honesty is simply destroyed by lawless conduct. Then, comes his question, "Is there, then, no superintending power who conducts the moral operations of the world, as well as the physical?" (173)

This is his judgment.

It is hard to conceive how a people always happy and healthy, in consequence of the exercise and labour they undergo, never oppressed with the vapours of idleness, yet should want the fictitious effects of opium to preserve that cheerfulness to which their temperance, their climate, their happy situation, so justly entitle them. But where is the society perfectly free from error or folly; the least imperfect is undoubtedly that where the greatest good preponderates; and agreeable to this rule, I can truly say, that I never was acquainted with a less vicious or more harmless one. (160)

Realizing that there is no perfect society, James adopts an attitude that makes it possible to get along with the situation.

The climax of his conflict occurs when he encounters a Negro slave being encaged in a miserable condition. He is filled with horror. Earlier he said, "We are machines" (98), but now he sees how "this machine" has taken power to squeeze the poor slave. His first reaction is confusion, followed by paralysis of will. "I found myself suddenly arrested by the power of affright and terror; my nerves were convulsed; I trembled; I stood motionless..." (178). Later, when he himself experiences the calamity of war and destruction, he also reacts as such, "Here I am tied, I am fastened by numerous strings..." (205). The suspense of imagined evils locks him into a fascinated terror the way victim-birds are hypnotized by blacksnakes (180, 183). Here, all his ideals vanish. What remains is just a hope "that our ancient virtues and our industry may not be totally lost" (227).

Under such terror of evil, he is found to consider taking what he previously opposed. "I will revert into a state approaching nearer to that of nature." (211) He decides to live with and like the Indians, turn to hunting, acknowledge but resist the lure of the primitive, and hope nonetheless to keep the family intact (211-214). With this, James closes his series of letters.

The Negotiation

We have seen how the discourse on sobriety, honesty, and industry in *Letters from an American Farmer* is put side by side with the discussion about evil. Deep within the life of the character, Farmer James, there are unresolved conflicts and questions which Albert E. Stone identifies as the common underlying issues in the American experience even up to the present days. We will now consider James' narrative from a critical point of view.

In what context should we judge James' conviction about the set of virtues sobriety, honesty, and industry?

Considering James Guimond's *American Photography and American Dream*, Farmer James's disposition is understandable since Crèvecoeur, the author, wrote his *Letters from an American Farmer* in the 1770s when the colonial in Europe and in America believed that America was indeed a "perfect society" in which sobriety, honesty and industry were rewarded with prosperity. They called this the American Dream. A certain genre of literature was developed to promote this idea. Its literary characteristic was recognized by the usage of many illustrations and examples (Guimond 14). Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* was one of them. He inserted within the letters the success story of Andrew the Hebridean, the Scotch, the German, the plowman John Bertram, the inhabitants in Nantucket, and others.

According to Guimond, the idea of America as a perfect society was also incultured in the society through the curriculum at schools. He notes the way Congressman Garfield spoke before an audience of students at a business college in Washington in 1869. Using an example, Garfield said that the students should not fear poverty, because

in the aristocracies of the old World, wealth and society are built up like the strata of rock...If a boy be born in the lowest stratum of life, it is almost impossible for him to rise...but in this country it is not so. The strata of our society resemble rather the ocean, where every drop...is free to mingle with all others, and may shine at last on the crest of the highest wave. This is the glory of our country (Guimond 13).

Like Crèvecoeur, Garfield contrasted America and Europe to argue that the United States was not a hierarchical society, and he used the same kind of simple metaphor to explain social mobility: for Crèvecoeur immigrants were like plants that prospered in new soil, and for Garfield the poor in America were drops in an ocean, but drops that could rise on the "highest wave."

As Albert E. Stone says, Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* was popular in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries because it gave emotional and imaginative ideas about the continent that would bring them into prosperity. In America itself, it was only after 1904, when a new edition was published, that there was an interest in Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, especially because its cultural determinant themes were seen by the New Criticism and American Studies. In the meantime, however, many Americans had constructed a conservative version of the Dream that shared many features of Crèvecoeur's. They and Crèvecoeur used success stories to prove that the American Dream was a reality.

Crèvecoeur was not the first one to write about it, though his *Letters from an American Farmer* is considered as the first piece which echoed the voice of American national consciousness. The Puritan, John Winthrop, whose *Arrabella* sermon in 1630 was much quoted, set America as a "city set upon a hill," whose inhabitants will lead lives of exceptional virtue, free from most of the tribulations and tragedies that have affected past history (Winthrop 159). Guimond says that a similar concept has appeared so often and in so many forms since Winthrop's sermon that it can be considered a salient feature of America's corporate culture. The corporate culture was "the dream" that lived among the people. Included in it are sobriety, honesty, industry as a means to approach the dream.

The second question we need to ask is whether James's scenario of the Americanization reflects of what really happened in America. Sociologist like Robert E. Park and immigration historians like Frank Thistlewaite, Rudolph J. Vecoli, and Herbert G. Gutman discovered long ago that the process of becoming American in eighteenth century worked differently from what Crèvecoeur imagined. They suggested that the immigrants to the America were first of all sojourners who moved from one job to another hoping to make good money and then go back their own country for their farms and families (Gerstle 536-538). Many immigrants did not want to become Americans.

Citing Herbert Gutman's "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America," Gerstle says that the eighteenth-century America was actually a harsh land of the capitalists. The immigrants did not melt into the same pot and, together

with the ethnic groups, raise a new race of American. Instead, they raised their own orders as small businessmen, manufacturers, professionals, journalists, urban bosses, and gangsters to make capitalism work for them. Citing Gutman again, Gerstle states that the Americanization meant surrender to a capitalist order. This will bring us to our third question: How is the set of virtues sobriety, honesty, and industry negotiated in the world ordered by capitalism?

What is essential in the capitalist world is the idea of a duty of the individual toward the increase of capital. Max Weber said that in such a world, moral attitudes are never pure. Weber commented on Franklin's ethos that they are coloured with utilitarianism. In Franklin's "honesty is useful, because it assures credit; so are punctuality, industry, frugality, and that is the reason they are virtues" (Weber 51).

In his recent publication of *Born Loser: A History of Failure in America* discussing the history of failures in America, Scott A. Sandage finds out that public virtues such as sobriety, honesty, and industry have been put under harsh scrutiny, resembling the lament of Job about the paradox in the breakdown of the honest and good man. Quoting Chauncey W. Moore, Sandage exposes this paradox, "An honest, upright industrious & economical man conducts [business] for 40 years & at the end of that period is obliged to allow a protest on a check of 32 dollars" (Sandage 15). The vicissitude of capitalism was so complicated that moral maxims never seemed to fit to the human practice. Sandage portrays vividly how people were in panic in dealing with the law of commerce when economic depression and bankruptcy began to sweep nineteenth-century America in 1837. He puts Franklinesque proverbs that blamed failure on laziness, drunkenness, greed, ignorance, extravagance, and other failures into the most paradoxical image. "But what to do when the market ejected 'an honest, upright industrious & economical man'?" he repeats Moore's words. "The vicissitudes of capitalism is such that honest dealings and hard work could earn failure" (Sandage 15).

We also see that the same tension happened with Farmer James. He experiences the paradox between what is ideal and real. He grew in consciousness that beside everything that was good, there was also what was bad. He learnt from experience the fundamental ugliness of human existence and the deceptiveness of the system of values and principles. He saw nature take a life to preserve another life. In such a situation, he takes "self preservation" as the standard in his making decision.

Sandage calls James's-like attitude as a "getting along" attitude. In his historical research of nineteenth-century American experiences of failure, he shows that in the world where everybody enlivens a dynamic mode "to go ahead," one cannot just be "too honest to get along." To be too honest descends into unfitness for the business in which he is engaged. Many people would adopt what James also did, "to be getting along." Quoting Hunt, Sandage says, "By getting along you mean that you are advancing in your worldly interests, that you are increasing in prosperity, gaining riches" (Sandage 81). Such was the attitude in the world ruled under the spirit of commerce and capitalism.

At the end of this essay, we may conclude that Crèvecoeur considers the set of virtues sobriety, honesty, and industry as an important element in the process of settlement, upward mobility, and Americanization. His idea about the process of Americanization may not be proven true. What is important to consider is Crèvecoeur's presentation of the tension between what is ideal and what is real. Our study of this tension has led us to see that Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* seems to be written in a time when people embraced business as the dominant model for their outer and inner lives. His work contains the underlying early American ideology that to be a man means to achieve identity, that striving upward is its method, and failure and success are its outcomes.

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