

The French Intellectual Presence in Early American Literature

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Abstract

The major purpose of the article is to shed light on the role played by the American men of letters of French origins in building the American independent identity. The paper undertakes the role played by both John de Crevecoeur and Philip Freneau's literary works in raising the Americans' awareness of the distinctiveness of the newly settled land as a new nation as well as in igniting the American War of Independence .

Key Words: *American identity, awareness, igniting independence war.*

الملخص بالعربية:

يعالج المقال الحضور المتميز للفكر الفرنسي في الأدب الأمريكي، و ذلك في فترة ما قبل الثورة الأمريكية. ويبين أن الفكر الفرنسي كان له أثر قوي على الأدب الأمريكي، وذلك من خلال الإنتاج الأدبي لبعض الكتاب الأمريكيين، من ذوي الأصول الفرنسية مثل : جون كريفكور و فليب فرينو، اللذين ساهما بأدبهما في خلق الروح الوطنية الأمريكية، والتي بدورها أشعلت فتيل الثورة الأمريكية.

Introduction

In recent years, scholars of American studies have taken an intense interest in questions concerning the sources of the American social and political thought . The paper undertakes an analysis of the French roots of this thought as was expressed in the American literature of the pre War of Independence era . It is no secret that the United States of America is a new nation .The first settlers of America were puritans a religious radical group who sought to reform the Anglican church from all the rituals of roman Catholicism. This group was rejected by the British authorities of the seventeenth century that is the reason why the newly settled land was the safe refuge for them .In reality, their settlement in America offered them a golden opportunity to establish their godly community which they wanted to be different from the British society left behind.

The present article is ,then, an attempt to demonstrate how the Americans' quest for an identity led them to borrow and adopt some radical ideas that all serve the American intellectual and emotional independence

from their mother country .In fact ,the primary purpose of the paper is to analyze the French intellectual presence in the American literature of the pre War of Independence era.

1- America :the Antithesis of the British Empire

Because they suffered from the British monarchical system ,the British settlers of America did not want their new nation to be governed by a monarch. This led them to adopt republicanism as a political system that secures human's natural rights and depends on the consent of the people. In fact, as originally Puritans , the people of the new nation saw their nation as a promised land and considered themselves as the chosen people on Earth .Moreover ,they were certain that their country would have a blossoming future .

John Winthrop, for instance, was quite aware that America as a newly settled land would offer golden opportunities to its settlers to build a city upon a hill. In this regard ,it needs to be emphasized that the American Revolution was fought because the new nation's elite felt that their nation is different from the British empire that is why it must be independent .In fact ,the millennial belief that America is the promised land made the founding fathers so committed to the American cause .

Interestingly, one can observe that the difference between the new nation and the British empire was one of the basic themes of the pre American War of Independence era. Interesting is the idea that this difference was highlighted either mythically or religiously. Mythically, they created myths that prove the difference between the two nations and religiously they used the millennial belief that says that God wants the new nation to be different from its mother country.

This idea was expressed even by Thomas Paine who despite his deism displayed a sense of millennialism in his Common Sense when considering the geographical distance between America and the British empire as part of the divine plan.

*Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed
England and America, is a strong and natural proof,
that the authority of the one, over the other, was*

*never the design of Heaven. The time likewise at which the continent was discovered, adds weight to the argument, and the manner in which it was peopled increases the force of it. The reformation was preceded by the discovery of America, as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years, when home should afford neither friendship nor safety*³.

Interesting is the idea that for Paine ,America represents goodness and Europe represents evil . In order to preserve its goodness, America should remain far from all that is British. In this regard ,he notes that "England is evil and America is good ,but her goodness would not persist long if she remained united to the empire"⁴ .

As a matter of fact, one can observe that, literary speaking ,the difference between the New World and the Old World was skillfully dealt with by French intellectuals . Philip Freneau and Hector St. John de Crevecoeur were among the first writers of French blood who stressed this difference in their writings .In fact , the two French intellectuals played a significant role in convincing the Americans of the necessity of supporting the American Revolution.

The great bulk of critics agreed that both tended to present the newly settled land as the antithesis of the Old World .In line with this ,it is worth mentioning that they saw the Old World as a land of violence ,injustice ,

wars, industrialization, and mercantilism while the newly settled land as a land of

peace , pastoral ,and justice .

2- Hector St. John de Crevecoeur: The Newness of the American Man

It is worth noting that among the writers who took the responsibility of creating myths in answering some important questions about the identity

of the people of the new nation was the French Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. In fact, Crevecoeur was a French American writer whose book, *Letters from an American Farmer* discussed life and society in early America. In this article, we will look closer at *Letters from an American Farmer*.

In reality, Crevecoeur was born in France in 1735 to an aristocratic family. He immigrated to the present-day Canada when he was twenty years old, and worked as a surveyor during the French and Indian War. After the war, he settled in New York and became a farmer. In the midst of the American Revolution, he decided to go home to France to see his ailing father. However, he was imprisoned as an American spy by the British as he tried to leave New York.

Seen from another perspective, Crevecoeur was considered an important thinker of his day who maintained correspondence with prominent American founding fathers like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. He returned to America in 1783, after Louis XVI appointed him a consul to New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Upon arrival, however, he found that his estate had been burned by Indians, his wife murdered, and his children kidnapped. Weeks later, he was reunited with his children in Boston, where they were under the care of an English merchant.

It is worth noting that Crevecoeur, as a French, was anxious about his children's French legal status⁵, since he had married outside France and outside the Catholic Church. Through the 1780s, he did not spare any effort to ensure that the French authorities recognized their legitimacy, so that they could inherit his father's lands in Normandy.⁶ Crevecoeur returned to France in 1790 and died in Sarcelles in 1813.

As an American man of letters, Crevecoeur sold the text of his most famous book, *Letters from an American Farmer* to a London publisher. Soon, the book became the first successful book by an American author in both America and Europe.

In reality, Crèvecoeur wanted everyone to know about America and its opportunities. He began to write essays about his newly adopted country. But when he tried to travel to Europe to find a publisher, the British thought he was a spy. They imprisoned him for four months in New York City and kept him under surveillance for another year. Finally, he went to England where his *Letters from an American Farmer* was published. Crèvecoeur left for France in 1785, never to return to his adopted country. However, it is important to note that despite his French blood, in his heart, he remained an American, and in his essays, he served as an eloquent spokesperson for American independence⁷.

It goes almost without saying that during the age of Enlightenment, people became more aware about their natural rights, and they started to be more immersed in the political discourse of their countries. In Europe, for instance, people started questioning the legitimacy of monarchy and the divine right of the king. In the new nation, many questions forced themselves on the American citizen among which one can note: What is an American? How do we define our culture and national identity? For centuries, Americans have worked to answer these questions. But the first person to try to define Americans was the writer St. Jean de Crèvecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer*.

In his *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur also treats the theme of the difference between life in Europe and the one in the new nation. In fact, for Crèvecoeur America is an asylum that secures peace and happiness to all those who have left the cruel Old World.

*In this great American asylum, the poor of Europe have by some means met together, and in consequence of various causes; to what purpose should they ask one another what countrymen they are? Alas, two thirds of them had no country. Can a wretch who wanders about, who works and starves, whose life a continual scene is of sore affliction or pinching penury*⁸

Intersecting is the idea that Crèvecoeur believes that the Europeans who came to settle in America should not remain emotionally attached to their mother country. In fact, he insists that they should consider America as their country since it offers them their livelihood.

Can that man call England or any other kingdom his country? A country that had no bread for him, whose fields procured him no harvest, who met with nothing but the frowns of the rich, the severity of the laws, with jails and punishments; who owned not a single foot of the extensive surface of this planet? No! Urged by a variety of motives, here they came. 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.⁹

Calling the Americans to detach themselves from the British empire, he adds :

*What attachment can a poor European emigrant have for a country where he had nothing? The knowledge of the language, the love of a few kindred as poor as himself, were the only cords that tied him: his country is now that which gives him land, bread, protection, and consequence.*¹⁰

Stressing the agrarian nature of the American life and the American specific dealing with land issue, Crèvecoeur focused on the American pastoral. More exactly, he aims at drawing attention to the important fact that in America, every farmer is working in his own land while in the Old World land is monopolized by one class. He notes :

He is arrived on a new continent; a modern society offers itself to its contemplation, different from what he had

hitherto seen. It is not composed as in Europe ,of great lords who posses everything and of a herd of people who have nothing¹¹

In addition to this ,Crevecoeur maintains that the American man is a new man and different from the European man left behind . He insists that the American society is a sort of a melting pot that has produced a completely new race .In this context, he adds:

*The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. . . . Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. . . . he now feels himself a man . . . Judge what an alteration there must arise in the mind and thoughts of this man; . . . his heart involuntarily swells and glows; this first swell inspires him with those new thoughts which constitute an American.*¹²

One can observe that Crevecoeur could positively interpret the variety of races in the new nation using the idea of America being a melting pot as a myth that would strengthen the distinctiveness of the new nation. What is striking in the excerpt above is that Crevecoeur could even anticipate the power of America and its leading role in the world believing that this new nation would change life all around the world . Here, it is significant to add that not only Crevecoeur's mythic view of America that anticipated its blossoming future, the providential history of the nation also told that it would be the leading nation in the globe.

In addition to Crevecoeur, the French intellectual presence is also present through the political ideas and literary writings of Philip Freneau. Perhaps, no poet is so associated with the American Revolution like Philip Freneau .In reality ,Freneau has used his pen to write against the

British .He ,in fact, could to a great extent succeed in uniting the American radical attitude against the British colonialism .

3-Philip Freneau: the Poet of the American Revolution

Like Crèvecoeur, Philip Freneau is an American of French ancestry he originates from a Huguenot background¹³ . One needs to clarify that the Huguenot is a radical French Protestant group .There is a need to draw attention to the important fact that Freneau fought as a militiaman during the American War of Independence . In 1780, he was captured and imprisoned in two British ships, where he almost died before his family could get him released.

His poem "The British Prison Ship" is a bitter condemnation of the cruelties of the British authorities , who wished "to stain the world with gore"¹⁴.This autobiographical poem and other revolutionary works, including "Eutaw Springs," "American Liberty," "A Political Litany," "A Midnight Consultation," and "George the Third's Soliloquy," brought him fame and made him deserve the title " the Poet of the American Revolution."¹⁵

As a writer and a poet, a publisher and a sailor, Philip Freneau earned his reputation as a writer through his political writing , such as his political satire "Political Litany" (1775), which is a sort of sermon calling for deliverance from the British. As the editor of *The Freeman's Journal* between 1781 and 84, he continued his journalistic work and regularly published writings of political nature. His political convictions lay with Jeffersonian democracy¹⁶. At this point, it must be stressed that Freneau ,like Jefferson, believed in an egalitarian society governed by a decentralized government.

In this respect, it is interesting to stress the idea that Freneau's life and work illustrates well how politics and art was often intertwined in the new nation during the Revolutionary era. In fact, Freneau composed poetry dealing with political issues already during his university years, in which he demonstrated his patriotism and commitment to the cause of the

American Revolution. For instance, in "The Rising Glory of America." He could certainly provide a real source of inspiration in the course of the Revolutionary events in the new nation.

In addition to this, it is worth noting that Philip Freneau was one of the outspoken critics of the British rule who bitterly denounced the British presence in the newly settled land. Perhaps, this is the reason why many agreed that he deserved the title of "the Poet of the Revolution." To George Washington, he was that "rascal Freneau"¹⁷. Living from 1752-1832, Freneau worked as a journalist, editor, and writer for *the Freeman's Journal*, Philadelphia. From 1781-1784, he showed a stiff opposition to the Federalists and their concept of American form of Government. This is the reason why he is considered as a Jeffersonian.

There is a need to draw attention to the important fact that though he was a man of politics, Freneau is best remembered for his poetry. For his part, Freneau believes that Britain symbolizes cruelty and arrogance. He writes:

This be my talk ungenerous Britons, you .
Conspire to murder those toy cannot subdue¹⁸

Moreover, Freneau mocked at the British who felt themselves superior to other nations. Sarcastically, he adds:

All nations they abhor, test,decry
But their dear race emblazon to the sky
As if the sun for Britain only shone,
And all mankind were made for her alone¹⁹

In an attempt to uncover the British cruelty to the Americans, Freneau wrote his famous autobiographical poem *the British prison ship* in which he described his suffering as a captive. Indicting the British, he considered them as invaders who should leave America. He writes:

*THE various horrors of these hulks to tell,
These Prison Ships where pain and penance dwell,
Where death in tenfold vengeance holds his reign,
And injur'd ghosts, yet unaveng'd, complain;
This be my task—ungenerous Britons, you
Conspire to murder whom you can't subdue.*²⁰

Obviously, in these verses, Freneau expresses the cruelty of the British authorities. According to him, they symbolize death and violence. Moreover, he considers them as bloodthirsty who came to spoil the peaceful life of the new nation :

*We look'd like ghosts, ere death had made us so
How could we else, where heat and hunger join'd,
Thus to debase the body and the mind,
Where cruel thirst the parching throat invades,
Dries up the man, and fits him for the shades.*²¹

Unsurprisingly, one can observe that Freneau preferred that his poem ends calling the British traitors to the human race:

*Ah! traitors, lost to every sense of shame,
Unjust supporters of a tyrant's claim;
Foes to the rights of freedom and of men,
Flush'd with the blood of thousands you have slain,
To the just doom the righteous heavens decree*²²

In stressing the idea that America, as a new nation, is the antithesis of the British empire, Philip Freneau, like Crèvecoeur, tends to celebrate the American landscape. For him, America, unlike the industrialized Britain, is more natural than any other country. At this point, it must be mentioned that when reading his poems, one can easily observe that he stresses the American pastoral as a characteristic feature of the newly settled land. In many respects, his poetry anticipates the Romanticism poetry of the early nineteenth century. In line with this, he writes :

The power, that gives with liberal hand

The blessings man enjoys, while here,
And scatters through a smiling land
bundant products of the year;
That power of nature, ever blessed,
Bestowed religion with the rest".²³ (1-6).

One can understand from the verses above that according to Freneau, God does not speak through special revelation. Instead, one must go to nature to see what it has to tell him. As an enlightenment belief, nature's religion is open to all mankind. This open knowledge is not mysterious or secret, but it is waiting for man to discover it. This is a universal revelation, something nature is telling all of human beings. About nature as a path to God, Freneau writes :

Born with ourselves, her early sway
inclines the tender mind to take
The path of right, fair virtue's way
Its own felicity to make.
This universally extends
And leads to no mysterious ends.²⁴ (7-12).

One is likely to find out from Freneau's words that one does not need a mystery, special revelation, church, or a priest to be in a contact with God. One can find true religion all around him. In fact, this idea might be a solid background for the transcendentalists' concept of "the over soul".²⁵

In line with this, it is significant to observe that Freneau's conception of nature is opposite to the puritans' point of view or their doctrine of humanity. In fact, the Puritans believe in total depravity, but Freneau believes that human beings are not depraved but are naturally good. In fact, the puritans' believe nature was a problem because all were born evil. In contrast, the people during the Enlightenment believed that mankind was born good, but society taught him to be bad.

They believed if he was brought up outside of society like Tarzan, he would be innately good. The Puritans' point of view is represented by Lord of the Flies; when sweet boys are stranded on an island, they become total savages. Freneau has the view that nature makes the human being good and evil comes from elsewhere. In line with this ,he writes :

Religion, such as nature taught,
With all divine perfection suits;
Had all mankind this system sought
Sophist would cease their vain disputes,
And from this source would nations know
And that can make their heaven below" ²⁶(13-18).

One can understand from this that Freneau is firmly convinced that man's leaving the natural system certainly leads him into sophistic arguments on systems of religion. The sophist are classified as the Puritans, Presbyterians, Congregationalist, Quakers, and all other religious factions.

In fact, because he was one of Jefferson's close friends ,Freneau's ideas about the American landscape could had a great impact on Jefferson who ,like Freneau, showed contempt to the city and dreamt of an agrarian society in which land is possessed by the one who works it .In short ,one can thus confirm that Freneau could contribute to a great extent to the strengthening of the American myth of the machine in the garden. For him, America can be an industrialized country but this never means that it will lose its pastoral. .

As a Jeffersonian republican, Freneau seems to believe that the agrarian life is the source of goodness. It is this, probably, that justifies the strong emphasis on nature in Freneau's literary works . Thus, as Leo Marx argues, " it was not simply the livelihood of the farmer but his social,

moral, and political qualities which made the yeoman the basis of Jeffersonian republicanism."²⁷

Still, during the Age of Reason, the Americans became acquainted with books written by the European Enlightenment thinkers . In this regard , it is worth noting that it is widely agreed among scholars that the American founding fathers were highly influenced by the French radical thought especially that of Jean Jack Rousseau .When writing the Declaration of Independence, they seem to have adopted Rousseau's ideas . A simple comparison between the political theory of Rousseau as put in *The Social Contract* and the one of the Declaration of Independence may allow one to observe that there are many similarities between Rousseau's political ideas and those of the founding fathers .For instance ,in *The Social Contract* Rousseau notes :

*For first of all, since each person gives himself whole and entire, the condition is equal for everyone; and since the condition is equal for everyone, no one has an interest in making it burdensome for the others.*²⁸

One can easily observe that is similar to the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..."²⁹,

Significantly even the idea that the government should take its power from the people was inspired by Rousseau. In his *The Social Contract*, he puts the idea this way :

[S]ince men cannot engender [create] new forces, but merely unite and direct existing ones, they have no other means of maintaining themselves but to form by aggregation [joining together] a sum of forces that could gain the upper hand over the resistance, so that their forces are directed by means of a single moving power [a government] and made to act in concert. This sum of forces [the

government] cannot come into being without the cooperation of many [the people] [...] Each of us places his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and as one we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.³⁰

Unsurprisingly, this quote is very similar to the following from the Declaration of Independence: "...to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed".³¹ This, in fact, can be a sufficient proof that the Americans learnt from the French radicals how they should plan the future of the independent America. In short, they depended on Rousseau's radical thought to establish a government that would secure justice and freedom to the citizens. Little wonder to note that the Americans in their rejection of the British rule used the same French ideas that would ignite the French Revolution later.

Conclusion

After studying the French presence in the American literature of the pre War of Independence era, one can confirm that in its early stage, American literature contained French thoughts and principles. In fact, Crèvecoeur and Freneau were among the famous Americans from a French origin who made the American voice heard in Europe and who displayed what one can call hyper Americanism. The article has demonstrated the role played by the French men of letters and even thinkers in shaping the American radical thought.

In essence, the conclusion that can be drawn is that in their construction of their social and political thought, the Americans had to depend on some French radical ideas that were of a great importance in helping them building their national character as a different and independent nation from the British empire. Crèvecoeur, Freneau, and even Rousseau had a great impact on the American mind. Their intellectual presence was so strong that they could make of the American political and social thought appear original and totally different from the British one.

Endnotes

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22. The transcendentalists are American philosophers, men of letters, and religious radicals who emerged in the nineteenth century. They believe that religion should not be formalized and who insist that God is not an entity but a sort of an over soul that exists everywhere in man and in nature .they strongly defended the idea that nature can be a better place for worshiping God than the church .This is the reason why they personalized nature and called for its protection.
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