American Reactions to Berkeley’s ‘Prophecy’

On 3 September 1730, the Boston Newsletter printed an anonymous letter to the editor, which related the translatio-notion to the legend of the Pilgrim Fathers stepping ashore on Plymouth Rock and thus incorporated the European tradition into an American context.

Plymouth, Massachusetts

SIR,
As there hath been discovered in this our Town a very wonderful Phenomenon, I have sent you an Account thereof for the Perusal of your curious Readers,
— Walking last Week with a Friend by a Place where they were about to dig a Cellar, we discovered a Stone, on which there seemed to be Engraven certain Letters, which when we had cleared from the Dirt, we read to our great Awe and amazement engraven very deep the en Observe,
The Eastern World en Slav'd, it's Glory ends;
and Empire rises where the Sun descends.

It seemeth to have been buried long in the Earth, but as I intend to bring it with me to Boston so soon as the Season is past, and shew it to the curious and learned Gentlemen in that Place, it seemeth unnecessary to give any further Description thereof at present.

Your assiduous friend, &c.


On 23 May 1807, the second president of the United States, John Adams, wrote a letter to Benjamin Rush about the translatio-notion and the tradition initiated by the anonymous letter to the Boston Newsletter. — The Works of John Adams, ed. by Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little Brown, 1850-56), vol. IX, pp. 599f.

[...] now I have mention’d my Brother Cranch, a gentleman of four and a half years, whose memory is better or mine, I will relate to you a conversation with him last evening. I asked him if he recollected the first line of a couplet whose second line was, “and empires rise where the sun descends.” He paused a moment and said, —
The eastern nations sink, their glory ends,
and empire rises where the sun descends.

I asked him, if Dean Berkeley was the author of them. He answered no. The tradition was, as he had heard it for sixty years, that those lines were inscribed, or rather drilled, into a rock on the shore of Monument Bay in our old eden of Plymouth, and were supposed to have been written and engraved there by some of the first emigrants from Leyden, who landed at Plymouth. However this may be, I may add my testimony to Mr. Cranch’s, that I have heard these verses for more than sixty years. I conjecture that Berkeley became connected with them, in my head, by some report that the bishop had copied them into some publication. There is nothing, in my little reading, more ancient in my memory than the observation that arts, sciences, and empire had traveled eastward; and in conversation it was always added since I was a child, that their next leap would be over the Atlantic into America. [...]
In 1725, the tavern keeper, physician, and astronomer Nathaniel Ames (1708-64) from Dedham, Mass., began to publish An Astronomical Diary, which soon became the most popular almanac in colonial New England. In the 1758 volume, Ames commented on the progress of civilization in the New World and also employed the notion of *translatio imperii* to prophesy great things for “the Future State of North America.” - *The Essays, Humor, and Poems of Nathaniel Ames*, ed. by Samuel Briggs (Cleveland: Short & Forman, 1891), pp. 285f.

Here we find a vast Stock of proper Materials for the Art and Ingenuity of Man to work upon: - Treasures of immense Worth; conceald from the poor ignorant aboriginal Natives! The Curious have observ’d that the Progress of Humanure Language (like the Sun) is from the East to the West; thus has it travelled thro’ Asia and Europe, and now is arrived at the Eastern Shore of America. As the Coelestial Light of the Gospel was directed here by the Finger of GOD, it will doubtless, finally drive the long! long! Night of Heathenish Darkness from America: - So Arts and Sciences will change the Face of Nature in their Tour from Hence over the Appalacian Mountains to the Western Ocean; and as they march thro’ the vast Desert, the Residence of Wild Beasts will be broken up, and their obscene Howl cease for ever; - Instead of which the Stones and Trees will dance together at the Music of Orpheus, - the Rocks will disclose their hidden Gems, - and the inestimable Treasures of Gold & Silver be broken up. Huge Mountains of Iron Ore are already discovered; and vast Stores are reserved for future Generations: This Metal more useful than Gold and Silver, will imploy Millions of Hands, not only to form the martial Sword, and peaceful Share, alternately; but an Infinity of Utensils improved in the Exercise of Art, and Handicraft amongst Men. Nature thro’ all her Works has stamp’d Authority on this Law, namely, “That all fit Matter shall be improved to its best Purposes.” - [...] O! Ye unborn Inhabitants of America! Should this Page escape its destin’d Conflagration at the Year’s End, and these Alphabetical Letters remain legible, - when your Eyes behold the Sun after he has rolled the Seasons round for two or three Centuries more, you will know that in Anno Domini 1758, we dream’d of your Times.

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**Analysis**

1. Investigate for each of the three texts on pp. 38f. (a) how it popularizes the notion of *translatio imperii*, (b) whether, and if so how, it refers to Berkeley’s poem (text 9), and (c) how it modifies the original concept to fit American interests.
2. Analyze the additional text by Ames above in the light of the *translatio*-tradition.
3. Translate the message of Leutze’s painting into a verbal description which pays attention to all the details.
4. Analyze the strategies which Leutze employs in his attempt at expressing the westward course of empire by means of a composite pictorial representation.
5. Compare Leutze’s painting with the advertisement for McCormick Reapers and investigate what happens when a shared cultural concept is commercialized.