

10 American Reactions to Berkeley's 'Prophecy'

1 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.

5 SIR,
As there hath been discovered in this our Town a very wonderful Phenomena, 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,
10 we read to our great Astonishment engraven very deep the ensuing Lines,
The Eastern World enslav'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 Distemper is past, and shew it to the curious and learned Gentlemen in that Place, it seemeth
15 unnecessary to give any further Description thereof at Present.
Your assured friend, &c.

On 4 July 1771, Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to Charles Wilson Peale, in which he used Berkeley's prophecy
to confirm his belief in America's future. – *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. XVIII, *January 1 through*
December 31, 1771, ed. by William B. Willcox (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 163.

20 The Arts have
always travelled
Westward, and
there is no doubt of
their flourishing
25 hereafter on our side
the Atlantic, as the
number of wealthy
Inhabitants shall
increase, who may
30 be able and willing
suitably to reward
them, since from
several Instances it
appears that our
35 People are not
deficient in Genius.



A nineteenth-century advertisement for McCormick Reapers

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.

40 [...] now I have mentioned my brother Cranch, a gentleman of four-score, whose memory is better than
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 empire rises where the sun descends." He paused a moment and
said, –
45 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 these lines were inscribed, or rather drilled, into a rock on the shore of Monument
Bay in our old colony of Plymouth, and were supposed to have been written and engraved there by some
50 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 travelled westward; and in conversation it was always added since I was a child, that their
next leap would be over the Atlantic into America. [...]



Emanuel Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, mural study, United States Capitol, 1861

Vocabulary

7 perusal (n.): (formal) the careful study of a text - **9 to engrave** (v.): to cut (words, pictures, etc.) on wood, stone, or metal - **10 ensuing** (adj.): following - **13 seemeth** (v.): old form of 'seems' - **14 distemper** (n.): archaic for disturbance or disorder - **14 to shew** (v.): old form of 'to show' - **36 deficient** (adj.): not containing or having enough of s.th. - **40 score** (n.): (often in combination) a group of 20 - **42 couplet** (n.): two lines of poetry, one following the other, that are of equal length and end in the same sound - **49 testimony** (n.): a formal statement that s.th. is true - **50 to conjecture** (v.): to form (an opinion) from incomplete or uncertain information - **54 leap** (n.): a big jump

Explanations

1 *translatio imperii*: see p. 37 - **2 Pilgrim Fathers**: the group of English settlers who arrived on the *Mayflower* at Plymouth, Mass., in 1620 - **2 Plymouth Rock**: Upon their arrival at the

coast of Massachusetts, the 'Pilgrim Fathers' did not, as legend has it, step ashore at the granite boulder of Plymouth Rock, which is now carefully protected from the tourists who in former days chipped away pieces of this rock as souvenirs. - **17 Benjamin Franklin**: see text 14 - **17 Charles Wilson Peale**: (1741-1827) a leading American portrait painter and the founder of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts - **37 John Adams**: see text 2, l. 119 - **37 Benjamin Rush**: (1745-1813): a Philadelphia physician, the surgeon-general of the Continental Army, and a member of the Continental Congress - **46 Dean Berkeley**: see text 9 - **47 Monument Bay** (n.): that part of the Massachusetts coast where Plymouth Rock can be found - **49 Leyden**: the city in the Netherlands to which a small group of English separatists had fled in 1608. When the *Mayflower* set out for America, 35 of its 102 passengers were 'Saints' from Leyden, and they prevailed over the others, called the 'Strangers,' and remained the moving force behind the emigration.

Background Reading

- 1 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; conceal'd from the poor ignorant aboriginal Natives! The Curious have observ'd that the Progress of Humane Literature (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 Appalachian 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.

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.