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Posthumous America

Benjamin Hoffmann, Alan J. Singerman

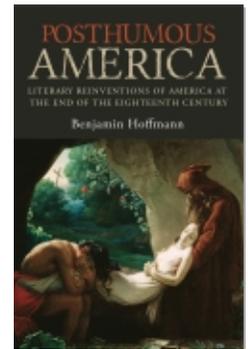
Published by Penn State University Press

Hoffmann, Benjamin and Alan J. Singerman.

Posthumous America: Literary Reinventions of America at the End of the Eighteenth Century.

Penn State University Press, 2018.

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INTRODUCTION

New World Paradoxes

. . . the United States is growing more quickly than this manuscript.

—Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, 1:470

Ephemeral America

At the turn of the eighteenth century, America resembled Heraclitus's river where no one ever swims twice.¹ Numerous travelers, novelists, and memoir writers attempted, more or less successfully, to meet a monumental challenge: to portray America in writing.² Such a project bears in itself the seeds of its own failure, for at the end of the Enlightenment, America is constantly changing, and its reality never coincides with its written image at a given moment. In the interval between its discovery by a traveler and the publication of a text on its subject, this perpetually evolving country has already assumed a form that no longer resembles what had been observed by the writer. "It is difficult to present a durable picture of such a mobile entity as the United States. It is changing at the very moment at which I am writing . . .," remarks the French Consul François Barbé-Marbois in 1782, summarizing in two sentences the difficulty America presents to a man of letters: the writing necessarily lags behind this metamorphosing entity.³ What are the causes of this constant mutation?

The boundaries of the body of literature examined in this work are set by the publication of *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain* (1784) by Saint-John de Crèvecoeur and *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* by Chateaubriand (1848). Between these two periods, the territory of the United States increased considerably. Beginning with the creation of four new states between 1791 and 1803,⁴ the colonization of the American continent was completed during the course of the nineteenth century through acquisitions and military conquests.⁵ While the shaky beginnings of the young Republic bred fear of the imminent failure of the union of

the states that composed it—owing to the danger posed by the opponents of the federalists, the concurrent ambitions of the European nations, and the resistance of the Amerindians to the expansion of the new country into the territory beyond the Appalachians—the country founded by Washington, contrary to all expectations, managed to remain united and absorb the immense space between the Atlantic and the Pacific. This expansion was greatly facilitated in 1803 by the unexpected and providential acquisition from Napoleon's France of Louisiana, which represents 22.3 percent of the current geographical area of the United States.

This considerable territorial increase was accompanied by a remarkable rise in population. The thirty-six censuses completed by England between 1761 and 1775 allow us to trace the demographic evolution of the American colonies: on the eve of independence, they comprised 2,300,000 inhabitants.⁶ The wave of immigration slowed between 1775 and the 1830s before surging even more: between 1851 and 1854, around 400,000 people arrived each year in the United States. Suffering from famine and sick of living in misery, the Germans and Irish constituted the most important contingent of new arrivals in the first half of the nineteenth century, joining their countrymen as well as the English, Dutch, Swedes, French, and Swiss who had preceded them. In 1830, the United States counted 12,900,000 inhabitants; in thirty years, its population nearly tripled, reaching 31,400,000 in 1860.⁷ At the same time, the cities grew so rapidly that in the space of one lifetime an individual could witness the birth of a city and its transformation into a metropolis connected to the outside world by regular maritime routes.⁸

The uninterrupted demographic and territorial growth of the United States was accompanied by protean changes: the forests were decimated and cities arose from the ground; despite violent resistance and brilliant victories, the Amerindians were ultimately driven from lands they had occupied forever; and innumerable Europeans followed in the footsteps of their predecessors who had fled religious persecution or misery in the course of the preceding two centuries. They came from France and Santo Domingo during the Revolutions, gathering north of Philadelphia when, like Volney, Noailles, and La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, they were not frequenting the high society of the New World after having set the tone for that of the Old World.⁹ This rapid evolution of the American society and the territory it occupied made a man of letters's head spin when, like La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, he set out to describe the country of Washington: "The United States is perhaps the one place in the whole world that is the most difficult to describe to those who have not traveled there themselves. It is a country that is growing everywhere; what is true today of its population, its establishments, its prices, its business was not true six months ago and will no longer be true six months from now. . . . The information that

at the present time, and for many years to come, a traveler can and will be able to record the most carefully will only be memories, a means of comparison with future years.”¹⁰ Describing America thus presents an initial paradox: it slips away when you try to write about it. Devoting a book to it is like attempting to seize an object that perpetually eludes you.

An Elusive New World

At the turn of the eighteenth century, there is indeed an inevitable gap between a discourse on America and the current state of this land, such that no manuscript, to paraphrase Chateaubriand, could ever keep pace with the territorial and social mutations of the United States. They are like the train that recedes into the distance and can only be pictured at the place that it no longer inhabits—or like the star that may well already be dead when its light reaches us. In this respect, any literary representation of America at a particular time may be considered *obsolete* by definition, since it arises after the disappearance of its model: a text can at best only give a prematurely anachronistic image of a country that has already metamorphosed at the moment of its publication.¹¹

This gap between reality and representation, however, is not caused by the speed of demographic and territorial change alone, for in the case of traveling French writers, the spacio-temporal distance between the two countries greatly contributes to its increase. René Rémond thus emphasizes the importance of the time factor in accounting for the divide between the reality of America and the image it has for the French public: “Information naturally lags behind the evolution of reality, and this gap is aggravated by the persistence of the images of a faraway country that are already fixed in the public imagination.”¹² Although it may vary according to the season, the force of the winds, and the skill of the captain, the average length of a transatlantic crossing is always significant in the period that concerns us here: the normal length of a simple round-trip voyage is about seventy-five days.¹³ To this period, a minimum to cross the Atlantic, one must add the time that passes before setting sail; it is normal to wait eight or ten days for the cargo to be loaded or for the winds to be favorable.¹⁴ In the final analysis, it takes eighty days, on average, to receive in France the response to a letter sent to the United States; longer, in fact, for this period does not include the letter’s travel by land. This considerable length of time is at the origin of two phenomena that take protean forms and have multiple consequences: the sedimentation of the image of America in French public opinion and its accompanying idealization.

Given that it takes a very long time to receive news from America in France, the conceptions that people may have formed of that country have

ample opportunity to spread and provoke new commentaries that fix them in the minds of the contemporaries before potentially contradictory information might lead them to contest these impressions or at least to question what they thought they knew. Upon returning to France after twenty-seven years in North America, Saint-John de Crèvecoeur discovered there a widely accepted idyllic representation of the United States that he did not hesitate to further with his personal testimony in order to profit from the popularity of America in public opinion to promote his *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain*, which were surprisingly successful throughout Europe. Likewise, after receiving numerous letters from people seeking to emigrate during his stays in Paris, Benjamin Franklin had attempted to propagate the extremely favorable opinion the French had formed of his country, widely associated with the popular but very vague concepts of liberty, tolerance, equality, and happiness. In his *Avis à ceux qui voudraient s'en aller en Amérique* (*A Word to Those Who Would Like to Go to America*; 1784), Franklin nonetheless tried to discourage the hope of making a quick fortune that the French nourished by insisting on the happy mediocrity of the lot of his fellow countrymen: if extreme poverty did not exist in his country, neither did extravagant wealth.¹⁵

Indeed, the distance between America and Europe allowed people to imagine El Dorado-like opportunities awaiting emigrants from across the Atlantic. As Rémond writes, “If America remains for the French imagination, in the first half of the 19th century, the height of the exotic, the reign of the fabulous, it doubtlessly owes it largely to its distance from the continent. It is thus predestined to be the locus of all utopias, whether political, social, or philanthropic; over there everything is possible, even the impossible.”¹⁶ A true land of milk and honey in the European imagination at the end of the eighteenth century, America undergoes an idealization that combines a variety of literary influences, among which the reminiscence of the golden age of antiquity and of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s novel *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) are the most frequently evoked. They are particularly prominent in the utopian project of the marquis de Lezay-Marnésia, a project whose exceptional importance is demonstrated by the number of people it involved and by the magnitude of its economic stakes, as well as by its repercussions in the history of France, the United States, and their interwoven images.¹⁷

In the end, the rhythm of the modifications that occur in Washington’s land, the distance that separates the two shores of the Atlantic, and the length of time necessary to bridge it explain why the French representations of America at the turn of the eighteenth century regularly combine anachronism with inaccuracy. Nonetheless, the works that are the subject of this study stand out in the French literary production devoted to America in this period in that they do not produce an obsolete but rather a posthumous representation.

What Is Posthumous America?

A child is referred to as “posthumous” when it is born after the death of its father; likewise, a literary work is posthumous when it is published after the decease of its author.¹⁸ According to this definition, posthumous America is a literary representation that focuses on a past—defunct—period of American history that the writer knew firsthand and that fills him with such nostalgia that he attempts to assuage it with a retrospective recreation whose goal is to give a literary revival to the period that preceded a break in historical continuity.¹⁹ While an obsolete representation of America no longer gives an accurate image of the country, since it has transmogrified in the lapse of time between the experience of the itinerant writer and the publication of his work, a posthumous representation revives a historical epoch that has already vanished when the author who knew it takes up his pen.

It is still incumbent upon us to distinguish between a posthumous representation and a historical approach that would attempt to describe America’s past as rigorously as possible, since unlike the historian, who has not necessarily witnessed the period he is examining and whose legitimacy rests in part on the dispassionate relationship he cultivates with the object of his study, the author of a posthumous representation of America has traveled to the other side of the Atlantic during the period that he is recreating after the fact. Moreover, while the traveling writer does not commit to tell the truth about his experience, the deontology of the historian demands veracity.

The author’s breaches of historical truth are an integral aspect of the notion of posthumous America. They are explained both by the temporal distance and the nostalgia that the writer feels at the loss of *his* America. On the one hand, the author of a posthumous representation begins to write after several years of separation from the period he is describing. His retrospective evocation is thus open to factual errors that he does not bother to rectify, because he is only interested in describing things as he remembers them, associated with sensual impressions and permeated with the psychological color it had at the time of the experience—and absent the objective framework in which the memories were born. He makes no attempt to reconstitute the truth of the period by verifying the accuracy of his own memories or by purging them of his past and present subjective views but strives instead to reproduce the image he has of his past experience at the time of writing. On the other hand, the author of a posthumous representation’s drive to write is in direct proportion to the force of his nostalgia, exacerbated by the feeling of loss he experiences in recalling a bygone period. His recollection takes the form of a retrospective idealization born of convenient additions and subtractions that allow him to illustrate the supposedly perfect felicity of a country now only inhabitable through the efforts of memory, and

that pass over the inevitable imperfections of a period that is being presented as idyllic.

The posthumous representation of America cannot, however, be reduced to an elegiac literary construction, offering an outlet to the nostalgia felt by the author. It has, of course, the *commemorative* function of preserving the memory of a period whose disappearance is mourned by the author, but it also possesses secondary functions. One of these functions is *advertising*, in which the author tries to match his posthumous representation of America not to what he discovered in the course of his travels but to what he expects to find: in the rest of our study, this will be referred to as a “doxological America.” Then there is the *analeptic* function in which the writer reinvents America not as he remembers it but as he would have liked to discover it during a period preceding his own travels. The *specular* function, finally, allows the author to evoke the situation in France through his reflections on America and to comment implicitly on the former’s political functioning. The goal of this study is to show how these different functions are combined in the texts we examine and to what extent their identification sheds light on the aesthetic and political positions taken by the authors in the course of their retrospective evocation of their travels in North America.

When all is said and done, the posthumous representation of America implies a dialectic of loss and resurrection. Of course, as Chateaubriand writes, it is “with old bones and ruins” that an author constructs his work;²⁰ that is, with all the distant memories, the buried impressions, and the images he keeps of men and women who have disappeared. However, the writer’s recognition of the disappearance of a historical epoch does not prevent him from bringing it back to life by creating a work that commemorates it. As Michael Riffaterre comments, “The *fact* of writing, in the very moment that it articulates a destruction, represents the victory of the monument over the ruins.”²¹ The America that the author knows no longer exists is reborn beneath his pen at the moment of writing. By the same token, the reader is carried back to a historical period that he knows to be long gone, but that he too brings back to life each time he reads a work by such authors.

The expression “doxological America,” used earlier, needs to be explained. It means the imaginary construction produced by the sum of the discourses—the direct and indirect testimonies—of the literary, political, historical, and philosophical works that ultimately embeds itself in the minds of the members of a community as an adequate description of America despite the numerous gaps between this construction and its referent. As Jean-Philippe Mathy observes in his study of the discourse on America produced by French intellectuals in the twentieth century, if we look closely, we can see that the human mind possesses in fact a capacity for symbolization and rationalization whose inherent

limitations and repetitious character are revealed over time: “[T]here are just so many ways of celebrating or denouncing such cultural realities as Incan sacrificial rituals, Chinese mandarinism, or American Modernity.” “Despite the innumerable individual variations in the expression of beliefs and values,” Mathy continues, “representations nevertheless form interpretive clusters around which people rally and sometimes mobilize.”²² What we call “doxological America” is simply one of these “interpretative groupings” constituted over time by the accumulation and progressive stratification of individually expressed opinions on the subject of America that are centered around recurrent argumentative positions. The definition of doxological America at the end of the eighteenth century is in fact organized around a limited number of themes, values, and historical and literary connections such that it can easily be summed up in a notion omnipresent in the literature of the period, “the Golden Age,” establishing a direct aesthetic and philosophical link with the pastoral novel and the bucolic poetry whose influence can be detected notably in the style of authors depicting the New World. Despite the force of this imaginary construction in the minds of individuals, it is nonetheless subjected to slow and progressive reconfigurations when new positions thrust themselves into the debate over the meaning of “America.” In this respect, the French Revolution had a considerable effect on the redefinition of doxological America. As eloquently witnessed by the evolution of Chateaubriand’s discourse on the United States between the first writing of the *Voyage en Amérique* and the last version of the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, it began a process of reinterpretation whose fruits can still be found at the center of contemporary French discourse on America.

A Prematurely Old New World

The three authors at the heart of this study all devote themselves to the search for lost time with America as the setting. Their ambition reveals a second paradox of the New World: it is always too old when the traveler comes ashore there. At first glance, however, their works consistently set the youthfulness of the American continent in opposition to the decrepitude of the rest of the world and, in particular, of Europe. Saint-John de Crèvecoeur makes multiple references, for example, to the radical newness of America, which he compares to a “hemisphere emerging from the depths of the water.”²³ In his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) as in the 1784 translation, *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain*, the youthfulness of America is compared to the antiquity of Greece and Italy in order to dissuade the curious from visiting the ruins of the Old World and to encourage them to look instead toward what is, in his opinion, a more instructive model: that of new America. Fifty years after Crèvecoeur,

Tocqueville sees in the United States an early image of what Europe is going to become when it too generalizes equality of social condition and concludes that it is greatly in the interest of the French to study the American example.²⁴ To look toward America is thus tantamount to getting a glimpse of what Europe is going to become, as if turning one's eyes to the west was the same thing as looking toward the future. Although it is six hours earlier in New York than in Paris, owing to the difference in time zones, a voyage across the Atlantic must have been, for a Frenchman, an exploration of the future itself.

Nonetheless, despite this regular celebration of the youth of America and of its people, the experience of a voyage on the other side of the Atlantic gave numerous travelers the opposite impression of arriving late, when the New World had already begun to lose what had aroused their dreams and hopes. Having come "too late to a world too old,"²⁵ these authors seek futilely in contemporary America, something that has apparently disappeared long ago. In many respects, these are the theses of Rousseau in the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (*Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, 1755), which produced in his readers' minds a series of preconceptions about "primitive life" whose confrontation with the reality of the American experience proved to be a source of disenchantment, as was the case for Chateaubriand, who only presents himself as a "disciple of Rousseau" in the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* in order to express his deception at the decrepitude of the American "natural state."²⁶ Disenchanted, these authors cultivate the nostalgia of an epoch in which the New World really deserved its euphoric image, an epoch that, it would appear, simultaneously began and ended with the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. As Dominique Jullien observes regarding the famous explorer: "Creator of a world, but also destroyer of a world, Columbus embodies the traveler who came before; he infuses the American experience with nostalgia forever."²⁷

The Unity of the Corpus

The concept of posthumous America facilitates a dialog between the works of Saint-John de Crèvecoeur, Claude-François-Adrien de Lezay-Marnésia, and François-René de Chateaubriand by emphasizing the similarities of their literary goals and their themes, not to speak of the obsessions that haunt them. It behooves us to determine for what personal and ideological reasons and prompted by which historical events and currents of thought these authors came to produce a posthumous representation of *their* America: the one that they had discovered in the course of their stay on the other side of the Atlantic. Of course, it would have been possible to include in this study other writers

besides the three around which it is organized. Nostalgia is in fact an experience that is inseparable from the individual discovery of America by a European, and it is the primary factor that motivates the retrospective writing of the tale of a voyage in which the author simultaneously rediscovers the memories of a historical era and of a defunct period in his existence. By paying attention to writings that are posterior to those that we have included here, it would be possible in particular to follow the evolution of the posthumous representation of America and to identify its invariant characteristics. "Evolution," for if the historical changes at the turn of the eighteenth century are exceptionally rapid and protean, they continue, of course, throughout the following decades and mark a break between the time of the writing of a work and any preceding period that is perceived as a new Golden Age for the person describing it. A continuation of this study could, for instance, bear on the Louisiana literature in the French language of the nineteenth century and on the retrospective idealization of the decades preceding the American Civil War. This literature manifests a clear break between a before and an after, given that it begins an attempt at political, cultural, and linguistic unification of the United States that is achieved at the expense of the Francophone and creole culture that the authors, in particular Alfred Mercier (1816–1894), try to preserve by means of their writings and their individual commitment.²⁸

As for the invariant characteristics that such a continuation of this study could produce, one of them would certainly be an experience of deception as a precondition for the idealization of the past. This phenomenon may be observed in particular in a text written by Tocqueville during his stay in America between 1831 and 1832 and published after his death by Alexis de Beaumont, the *Voyage au lac Oneida*. In this short travel narrative, Tocqueville alludes to the authors of the preceding generation: "I do not believe that I've ever experienced such complete disappointment as I felt when I saw these Indians. My head was filled with the memories of M. de Chateaubriand and Cooper, and I expected to see in the countenance of the American savages some natural trace of those elevated virtues born of the spirit of liberty."²⁹ Although he compares his meeting with these "vile and mean-looking Indians"³⁰ to his memories of the reading of *Atala* and *Les Natchez*, Tocqueville experiences the same disappointment as Chateaubriand; just as the latter had been disappointed in seeing Amerindians dance to violin music,³¹ Tocqueville is generally disillusioned by what he discovers in the American wilderness. The same scene plays out in an opposition between the present state of things and the preconceptions based on his reading of his predecessors that evokes an indefinite past in which the traveler would not have been confronted with a divorce between his dreams and the American reality they conceal.

Despite the obvious interest of pursuing this investigation beyond the admittedly vague limits of "the end of the eighteenth century," this study is devoted,

for several reasons, to the American writings of Crèvecoeur, Lezay-Marnésia, and Chateaubriand alone. On the one hand, the period of their travels coincides approximately with the French and American Revolutions: Crèvecoeur lived across the Atlantic during the colonial period before witnessing both the War of Independence in the United States and the French Revolution, whereas Lezay-Marnésia and Chateaubriand observed the beginnings of the momentous events in France before leaving for the New World the same year. The fact that they were contemporaries of both of these major historical upheavals makes their discourse on America all the more interesting, since they visited it at a time of profound renewal while being positioned to make extremely pertinent comparisons between what they were observing across the Atlantic and what was happening in France in the same period. The French discourse on the United States always contains an implicit meditation on the homeland of its authors, and it proves to be particularly fruitful to examine it at a crucial moment in the history of the two countries.

In addition, the narratives on travel to America written at the end of the eighteenth century bear an affinity to the nascent form of the travel guide in that they attempt to prepare the itinerary of a reader who will become a traveler and to provide him with information that will be useful for his trip but is obviously doomed to rapid obsolescence. This practical dimension—which is accompanied by a quasi-journalistic ambition since the traveler, in revealing spaces largely unknown to his readership, is attempting to record and share his newly acquired knowledge of the New World—generally accords less importance to the aesthetic qualities of the text, the effort to improve its style and turn it into a literary work. Written on the spot, in the majority of cases these texts were quickly published after their authors' return to France. Therefore, among a copious production of narratives on travel to America—the bibliographies drawn up by Echeverria and Everett and those of Bernard Fay, Frank Monaghan, and Joseph Sabin are ample evidence of its extreme abundance—it is quite unusual to discover texts whose intrinsic literary qualities make them far more than the joy of a blissful historian, delighted to browse through a document that provides him with information on a faraway period, but works whose intellectual density and elegant style could in fact pique the interest of a reader not primarily interested in their relationship with America. No one doubts that these qualities are evident and possess a particular enchantment in the *Voyage en Amérique* and the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, but it remains to be demonstrated that they are also to be found in Crèvecoeur's work, that is rarely read in French, and in Lezay-Marnésia's, whose *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* has just been republished and is still in search of a readership. In short, it is the exceptional aesthetic value of these texts belonging to a genre whose principal interest is ordinarily related to history and not literature that justified their inclusion in this study.

Finally, and above all, these three works are brought together because of the intertextual character that links them; from a methodological viewpoint, it is easy to prove the relevance of a comparison when the authors concerned are familiar with each other's works and have left proof of this familiarity in their writings. There is an explicit relationship between the works of Crèvecoeur and those of Lezay-Marnésia, since the latter, who has read *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain*, only pretends to differ from his predecessor in his own description of the United States, accusing him, not without justification, of multiple fabrications. Chateaubriand is likewise a reader of Crèvecoeur, as is evidenced both by a letter sent to Fontanes and the publication in the *Mercure de France* of an article on the *Voyage dans la Haute Pensylvanie et dans l'État de New York depuis l'année 1785 jusqu'en 1798* (*Journey in Upper Pennsylvania and the State of New York from 1785 to 1798*).³² By their complementarity, the numerous thematic convergences between these texts guarantee the unity of the corpus. Lezay-Marnésia and Chateaubriand both traveled to the United States in 1791, and the respective paths of these aristocrats—both hostile to the French Revolution—constructing projects that were equally chimerical although of a different nature (one dreamed of utopian colonies, the other of impossible conquests in isolated polar regions), crossed more than one time, leading them to reflect on identical questions after visiting the same places. Moreover, the fascination with the Native Indian culture is shared by these three authors, who describe it with the ambition of preserving through their writing a civilization that they all clearly perceived to be destined to disappear in the near future. They also have in common an attempt to stage a meeting between an imaginary America that preceded their voyage and their personal discovery of that country. This recurrent theme tends to prove that writing about travels in America is necessarily an intertextual undertaking during which the traveler compares his experience to the expectations that the reading of the works signed by his predecessors had previously aroused in him. There results a phenomenon of “circularity of representations” that consists in the repetition by different authors of a similar discourse on America whose power of persuasion increases along with its successive reconfirmations.

Limits of Posthumous Representation

The idea of posthumous representation is perpetuated after the end of the eighteenth century. Just as it would have been possible to increase its temporal extension, it would have been possible to increase the number of its objects, since America is obviously not the only country that might be represented posthumously. Of course, the inclusion of any other space than America would have eliminated the coherence of the present study, but it is possible to dream

of other studies that would be organized around the paradigm of posthumous representation and would adopt the various functions that it is capable of exercising. One might speak, for example, of the commercial representation of France in *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge (Blue-White-Red)* by Alain Mabanckou, a novel in which the hero imagines a Parisian El Dorado similar to the one that exists in Africa in a postcolonial context.³³ The *Aventures de Télémaque* by Fénelon create on their part a critical picture of France through the evocation of a voyage carried out in a mythical Greece, illustrating by this fact the specular function by which the evocation of a society distant in time and space can be a way of describing indirectly the country of the readers in the period of its publication. As for analeptic representation, this is well illustrated in the narrative of Sylvain Tesson, *L'Axe du loup (The Route of the Wolf)*, since, while walking from Siberia to India on the same path taken by escapees from the Gulag, the author accomplishes not only a voyage in space but also a journey in time in which he attempts to reproduce as closely as possible the prior experience of another in order to revive it. The concept of posthumous representation is therefore in no way linked exclusively to the American arena at the end of the eighteenth century, and just as one could use it to study a later text such as *L'Étudiant étranger (The Foreign Student, 1986)* by Philippe Labro, whose narrator recreates the memory of a stay in Virginia in the 1950s, it would be entirely conceivable to undertake the study of “posthumous France” as Ernest Hemingway reinvents it in *A Moveable Feast*. Although it is used here to characterize the work of three traveling writers bearing on the same space and the same period, the concept of posthumous representation may be applied to other territories in order to analyze works treating different periods and places. The psychological mechanisms of recollection, projection, and retrospective idealization are fully at play in the recreation of the past, whatever the place and period may be, as they are in the impression that individuals may have of foreign peoples and distant lands.

Texts from Beyond the Grave

Among the criteria previously specified to justify the linking of the works of Crèvecoeur, Lezay-Marnésia, and Chateaubriand, their exceptional aesthetic quality has been stressed. Still, the works examined in this study have more often attracted the attention of historians than literature specialists. It is true that the American writings of Chateaubriand have been studied in works that are exclusively interested in their literary dimension. This notwithstanding, the major part of the bibliography devoted to the America of Chateaubriand consists of texts produced by a history of literature whose methods and means of interrogating a text are clearly obsolete today. Did Chateaubriand go to the United

States with the intention, as he claimed, of discovering the Northwest Passage, or did he just seize this pretext to flee the revolutionary turbulence that would cost the life of several members of his family? Had he really set out, as he claims in the preface of *Atala*, to write the “epic of the man of nature” several years before his 1791 trip?³⁴ Did he really explore the south of the United States as he suggests, or did he only take a much more traditional course through the northeast of the country? What literary sources did he consult to fill in the gaps in his memory of his experience? These questions—and others even more specific: did he really meet Washington?—are repeated in a number of articles devoted to the *Voyage en Amérique* and to the American books of the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, with the result that the question of the degree of credibility that the reader can grant to Chateaubriand's works has proved to be crucial to specialists who, from the 1830s to the present day, have responded to each other to complete or refute their respective writings.³⁵ This historical approach, which ultimately concerns far more what the work tells us about the author's life than about the work itself, is foreign, indeed contrary, to the one that is adopted in this study, which analyzes the methods and functions of the fictionalization of America: its imaginary and retrospective recreation at the end of a process in which, to adopt Chateaubriand's own term, fabulation eventually “metamorphoses” into truth.³⁶

Similarly, one meets the names of Crèvecoeur and Lezay-Marnésia much less frequently in a literary study than as a passing remark in a historical work. Unlike his *Letters from an American Farmer*—widely quoted by specialists of early American studies and placed on the same level as those early masterpieces of American literature, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) by Thomas Jefferson and the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791)—the French-language writings of Crèvecoeur are too often reduced to sources of information on the United States at the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the texts published in his mother tongue have scarcely been studied for their characteristic heterogeneity—not to reduce them to catalogs of various and sundry facts about the history of the United States but to reveal their underlying structure or highlight the formal innovations that they put into practice.³⁷ This interpretation of Crèvecoeur's writings in French in which they are considered generally to be documents rather than complete works is evidenced most clearly in Françoise Plet's edition of the *Voyage dans la Haute Pensylvanie et dans l'État de New York*.³⁸ Although this edition is to be lauded for improving the availability of a work whose diffusion suffered from its comparison with *Atala* at the time of its publication, it nonetheless neglects its literary qualities by presenting it as the history of a “geography under construction”³⁹ and by excising large sections that are among the most stimulating in the book.⁴⁰

Likewise, the *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain* is a work whose heterogeneity may discourage the reader and give him or her the impression that an organized

and systematic work is still in the nascent stage. However, far from being a weakness for which we must absolve Crèvecoeur, the very multifariousness of his letters, the diversity of the subjects they treat as much as the variety of the texts (excerpts from speeches, dialogs, tales with multiple narrators, etc.) are the tools of an ambitious undertaking that consists of nothing less than an attempt to transform America into language. To “express America”—in the vast variety of its spaces and its modes of settlement, in the diversity of its inhabitants, their origins and their manner of dress—is the goal that Crèvecoeur has set for himself, and that he does not attempt to reach by means of a systematic work but through the kaleidoscopic representation of a constantly shifting reality. In his trilogy *U.S.A.*, John Dos Passos employs four distinct narrative modes in order to adopt a variety of viewpoints on multiple characters: free indirect discourse, stream of consciousness, newspaper articles, and biographies of historical figures. One hundred and fifty years before him, Crèvecoeur foreshadows his techniques by integrating into his epistolary volumes a collection of anecdotes, the French translation of authentic newspaper articles, and the imaginary biography of exemplary characters (rich and poor colonists, immigrants from various nations with their typical virtues and vices, etc.). Just like the author of *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), Crèvecoeur attempts as early as the 1780s to depict the United States by adopting a composite form.

In the end, Crèvecoeur’s reputation suffered greatly from the characteristic atomization of his works, which lend themselves to the deletion of fragments at the cost of a simplification, if not a caricature, of the whole in which they are inscribed. When he happens to be mentioned, he is regularly confused with the figure of the “American farmer” that he brought to life, while his discourse on America is often described as “idyllic” or “pastoral.” But if we look closely, his bucolic tableaux are not spared the onslaught of violence and evil, and his political thought, sometimes reduced to a partisan championing of the young Republic, includes muted concerns about the future.⁴¹ Following the pioneering writings of Bernard Chevignard, the time has come to do him justice by adopting a global reading of his work, bringing together the English and French texts instead of treating them as two separate bodies and pursuing a reading that resists the temptation to lift anthology pieces from his works without bothering to analyze those works in their entirety. There is no doubt that Crèvecoeur will emerge more eminent from this reevaluation, achieving a stature that even he did not expect (the doubts about his literary talent are a recurrent theme), that of one of the last great French writers of the eighteenth century, offering in a rich body of work an example of the hypersensitivity, utopian visions, and incitement to tolerance of the waning years of the Enlightenment.

As for the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* by the marquis de Lezay-Marnésia, they have been victim of the same jaundiced reception accorded

the *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain*. Published in 1792, immediately censored by the Girondins, they have just been republished for the first time since 1800.⁴² And if the works of Roland-Guy Bonnel have greatly deepened our knowledge of the œuvre of Lezay-Marnésia and the context of their production, many riches in the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* remain to be explored, in particular their prefiguration of the “salad-bowl theory,” their surprising anticipation of what might be called the “uchronotopian” genre (the fusion between the utopian and the uchronian genres), as well as their inherent ambivalence in the depiction of both a colonial project and a political utopia.

In many ways, the respective works of this reader and these writers resonate together. For these authors, the goal is to give the floor to voices from beyond the grave that commemorate a world that no longer exists. The same goes for the critic whose intention is to shine the spotlight on these works that have fallen into obscurity, to give them a place that literary history, necessarily selective, has refused them either by condescension or by negligence. Like these texts, that claim to bear witness to a bygone age whose last, fragile traces subsist in the memory of their author, this study proposes to exhume these buried works by correlating them with better-known opuses that are their explicit or implicit intertexts. In this manner, they will be integrated into the corpus of texts explored by the specialists of Enlightenment literature, utopia, and travel narratives, and will contribute to the field of both transatlantic and revolutionary studies, as well as to the history of the representations of America in French thought. A historical prologue is placed at the beginning of each of the following literary analyses, an indispensable prerequisite for a study bearing on works that are in constant dialog with the reality of their period. Intended to measure the influence of the social and historical context on the work of the authors and on the reception of their works, they will facilitate the appreciation of the gap between the reported facts and the posthumous representations that record them at the same time as they reinvent them.