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Posthumous America

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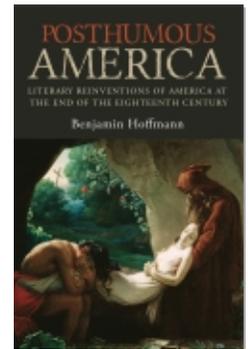
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LEZAY-MARNÉSIA AND NOSTALGIA FOR THE AMERICAN GOLDEN AGE

If a few French families, with sufficient personal fortunes, were to settle around Fort Pitt, they would discover in this country the charming banks of the Loire and the Seine, but even more favored by nature and with the peace and happiness that have abandoned them.

—Lezay-Marnésia, *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*

Prologue: Lezay-Marnésia or Wolmar in America

CRÈVECŒUR: A PARADOXICAL DOUBLE

The allusions to Crèvecoeur in the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* reveal the inherent contradictions in the literary project of Claude-François-Adrien de Lezay-Marnésia (1735–1800). Placed at the head of this collection of letters, the “Editor’s Foreword” launches an all-out attack against the men of letters who, before Lezay-Marnésia, had ventured to describe North America: “It seems as if they have been in league to deceive us. The ones, extravagant enthusiasts or biased authors, have taken, to paint all of America, the colors that Milton used to paint heaven on earth, presenting its inhabitants like so many perfect Spartans. The others, as unjust as they are excessive, have tried to make us believe that this enormous continent, disavowed by nature, was condemned to an eternal infancy and did not have the strength to produce anything but weak, cowardly, and degenerate animals.”¹ The second group of writers includes without a doubt Buffon and Cornelius de Pauw. In several works, Buffon had indeed speculated that the cold and humidity of the climate in America explained the inferior size, weight, vigor, and variety of the American animal species in relation to the European species, as well as the progressive degeneration of the species that originated in Europe and were transported to America. This theory had been espoused and radicalized by

Cornelius de Pauw in his *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains ou mémoires intéressants pour servir à l'histoire de l'espèce humaine* (*Philosophical Research on the Americans or Interesting Memoirs on the History of the Human Race*, 1768), a work that emphasizes in particular the progressive depopulation of “savage” societies.²

Alternatively, it is indeed the author of the *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain* who is the target of the criticism of “extravagant enthusiasts.”³ In his *Recherches historiques et politiques sur les États-Unis* (*Historical and Political Research on the United States*, 1788), Mazzei had already reproached Crèvecoeur for giving his readers chimerical ideas about the United States and had attracted thereby the fury of Brissot.⁴ According to the editor, the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* is the first work to blow up the old dichotomy between the panegyrists and the denigrators of America, substituting a discourse that, finally, would tell the full, entire truth about the New World. Nonetheless, one of the main goals of this chapter is to show that, far from having a personal monopoly on truth, Lezay-Marnésia belonged, despite himself, to the first school of authors castigated by the editor in his name: he was not the victorious opponent of Crèvecoeur but his reticent double.

If the editor was content to make an implicit allusion to Crèvecoeur, Lezay-Marnésia makes a frontal attack in the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*: “It is common to catch fish that weigh from fifty to sixty pounds, but not eighty to a hundred and even more, as M. de Crèvecoeur says. Those who have given credence to the exaggerations of this writer have been completely deceived. Like those painters who, not being capable of capturing the beauty of Helen, represented her as rich and heavily made up, M. de Crèvecoeur, not knowing how to render nature how it appears in reality—sublime, magnificent, and often enchanting—made gigantic pictures of it; that was easier.”⁵ The reference to Crèvecoeur plays a catalyzing role by revealing a fundamental contradiction in Lezay-Marnésia’s work. While it is in the name of rigorous accuracy that Crèvecoeur’s ichthyologic approximations are criticized,⁶ Lezay-Marnésia is far from producing a completely objective description of the region of Ohio where he wanted to emigrate: he depicts it as he imagined it before traveling there and not as he discovered it to be. If Crèvecoeur did in fact exaggerate the fertility of this region of Ohio in a letter of which we will soon speak again, at least he had no personal interest in seeing emigrants move there. On the contrary, by drawing a picture of this region every bit as idyllic as Crèvecoeur’s, Lezay-Marnésia was seeking to entice his addressees to join him there as quickly as possible. No matter how much the author of the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* tried to distance himself from his predecessor, posterity has reserved for them the same condemnation, as in the case of Volney, who reproached them for exhibiting a “banal rhetorical talent” whose consequences were disastrous for those who put their faith in the idyllic depiction of the future state of Ohio.⁷

If Crèvecoeur appears as a paradoxical double for Lezay-Marnésia, the admiration that the latter professes for Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a thread that not only winds through the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* but runs throughout his whole work. It is to the influence of the citizen of Geneva on Lezay-Marnésia, as well as to the circumstances of the latter's emigration to America, that the following prologue is devoted.

AT THE SCHOOL OF ROUSSEAU

The admiration that Lezay-Marnésia had for Jean-Jacques Rousseau is abundantly clear in the *Essai sur la nature champêtre* (*Essay on Rural Nature*),⁸ as in “Les Lampes” (1788), a text written in honor of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Buffon.⁹ It likewise shines through in *Le Bonheur dans les campagnes* (*Happiness in the Countryside*, 1785), an essay that begins with a declaration—“I saw the ills of the countryside, and I sought remedies”¹⁰—that rephrases the famous proclamation at the beginning of the preface of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*: “I saw the customs of my time, and I published these letters.”¹¹ Formed at the school of Rousseau, the thought, sensitivity, and imagination of Lezay-Marnésia were brutally confronted with the rigors of life in America when he went into exile on the banks of the Ohio River at the beginning of the French Revolution. Why did this aristocrat decide to emigrate when he was part of the representatives of the nobility who rallied to the Third Estate at the Estates General on June 25, 1789? Why did he choose the untamed lands of the Northwest Territory to establish a colony instead of acquiring property in one of the states that was already an integral part of the American Union—an option that was chosen, moreover, by a large number of his countrymen?¹² Before traveling with Lezay-Marnésia to these dangerous lands, let us retrace the path that led this aristocrat from his native Franche-Comté to the solitudes of the American Northwest.

THE PEN AND THE SWORD

Lezay-Marnésia joined the king's army at the age of twelve with the rank of lieutenant. He served for twenty-two years, rising through the ranks of the military hierarchy. Ensign at twenty and captain at twenty-four, he was forced to leave the service in 1769 with the rank of brigadier (sergeant) after expressing his hostility to the military reforms of Choiseul that widened the social base for the recruitment of officers, whereas Lezay-Marnésia saw in military careers a privilege reserved for the nobility. This first part of his life could have given him experience in bravery and fear and helped him to develop organizational qualities that, during his venture in the New World, would have been of great

use to him. Unfortunately, “the marquis is a soldier who never went to war; his physical courage was never put to the test,” as Moreau-Zanelli observes.¹³

In 1766, Lezay-Marnésia wrote *L'Heureuse Famille* (*The Happy Family*), a tale considered “quite insipid” by Grimm,¹⁴ in which he adopted a moralizing tone to sing the benefits of country life. The following year, he was admitted into the Royal Society of Belles-Lettres of Nancy, where his first speech announced one of the major themes of his work to come: the study of “rural man.”¹⁵ In 1769, he moved into his château de Moutonne with his wife, Marie-Claudine de Nettancourt-Vaubécourt. Among the table companions were the chevalier de Boufflers (to whom Lezay-Marnésia would address the first of the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*) and Saint-Lambert, a close friend of Crèvecoeur—but also Palissot, Cerutti, Chamfort, Dupaty, and Voltaire, whose Ferney property was close to the marquis’s estate. This prestigious circle of friends was completed, from the end of the 1770s, by Louis de Fontanes, who was going to become a close friend of Chateaubriand’s at the dawn of the Revolution, before the two men found themselves together in exile in London in 1798.

In 1784, Lezay-Marnésia published a *Plan de lecture pour une jeune dame* (*Reading Program for a Young Lady*), which exhibits the breadth of his erudition. Although he denies women the right to scientific instruction, he nonetheless recommends that they acquire a vast culture through historical works and the reading of the illustrious authors of the past. He shows himself to be eclectic, practicing poetry and mineralogy.¹⁶ Lezay-Marnésia contributed likewise to Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, for which he wrote alone the article “Masturbation” (Masturbation) and, in collaboration with Jaucourt and Montlover, the article “Voleur” (Thief). He is also the author of *Le Bonheur dans les campagnes* (*Happiness in the Countryside*), published in 1785. This work is particularly important, regarding the thought of the author, for it announces the plans that he later attempted to bring to fruition in America and thus requires a closer look.

LEZAY-MARNÉSIA AND RURAL HAPPINESS

“This little treatise of around three hundred pages contains virtually all of the moral ideas that crystallize around the myth of the good feudal lord, the good farmer, and the idyllic countryside,” remarks Moreau-Zanelli.¹⁷ Following the example of Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Lezay-Marnésia encourages noblemen to return to the countryside. The questioning of the attractions of urban life, as opposed to the supposed purity of country life, is a theme that Rousseau popularizes in *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), a novel in which the corrupting influence of Paris on the upright Saint-Preux is described. An elegiac tone permeates this work, in which Lezay-Marnésia foretells the development of an “emulation” in the practice of charity among the nobles, the priests, and

the most affluent inhabitants.¹⁸ In describing the practice of philanthropy by the local elites as a means of regenerating country life, Lezay-Marnésia ties into a current of thought dating back to the last third of the eighteenth century, for which charity is no longer viewed as a simple social practice and comes to embody a “vast plan of renewal of customs, social relations, and laws.”¹⁹ As Bonnel has demonstrated, Lezay-Marnésia considered charity as the source of a sentimental bond between the aristocrats and their vassals, whose institution was capable of repelling the looming specter of unrest he foresaw scarcely four years before the Revolution.²⁰

The paternalism that Lezay-Marnésia advocates in this text is inspired by the functioning of Clarens in *Julie*. Sent by Saint-Preux to Milord Edouard, Letter 10 of the fourth part describes the creation of affective bonds between Madame de Wolmar and her estate staff. Although Rousseau emphasizes the compassion exhibited by the latter toward her workers and servants, it is nonetheless clear that the status of “children”²¹ that she attributes to them establishes a radical inequality between her and them that is entirely incompatible, as critics have not failed to point out, with the political thought developed elsewhere by Rousseau, and particularly in the *Contrat social*.²² Despite his reformist ambitions—Lezay-Marnésia abolished the *corvée* and *mortmain* on his lands²³ and demanded, with other noblemen, equality of taxation between the classes—it is precisely the principle of inequality between men that he will never agree to call into question. In his *Pensées littéraires, morales et religieuses*, published in 1800, the observation of a disparity between levels of intelligence appears to him to demonstrate the necessity of an autocratic government: “[Men] have less need of bread than they need to be led; and the worst government by one person or by a small number is better for them than independence. This truth demonstrates that the idea of pure Democracy is nothing but a chimerical abstraction, impossible to attain.”²⁴ Reformist but convinced that the nobility had a dominant political role to play, indignant at the selfishness of the elite but hostile to democracy, this is the man who was preparing to plunge into the Revolution.

LEZAY-MARNÉSIA IN REVOLUTION

In 1789, Lezay-Marnésia was elected to represent the nobility of the bailiwick of Aval, and he sat beside the Chevalier de Boufflers at the Estates General. He placed in this gathering his hope for the return of the “feudal aristocracy” that preceded the absolute monarchy.²⁵ A reader of Montesquieu and subscribing to his arguments in favor of the establishment of intermediate bodies between the king and the people, Lezay-Marnésia favored the organization of provincial states, as well as the development of the political role of the nobility, which he considered to be a link between the people and the monarch.²⁶

Despite an initial enthusiasm for the reformist character of the Revolution that led him to join the group of forty-seven deputies of the Second Estate who rallied to the Third Estate on June 25, 1789, Lezay-Marnésia was soon devastated by the abolition of privileges on the night of August 4 and shocked by the decree of November 2, 1789, transferring the ownership of the church's property to the nation. The violent rhythm of changes, which went far beyond the simple reforms he and the Monarchists were advocating at the Constituent Assembly, soon turned him into a ferocious adversary of the Revolution. The following excerpt from a letter sent from Paris on November 9, 1789, and addressed to his wife, presents exile in America as the last chance of the nobility: "How, especially, when one has the misfortune of having been noble, can one become accustomed to being nothing but a fallen being who is constantly insulted and debased? I confess that I do not possess this shameful courage. It seems to me that one must reject this kind of 'courage' and rather seek a homeland where he is certain to find rest, safety, and the security that can only be found today in one country, in New England, where good laws and customs make men truly free and as happy as they can be on earth."²⁷

The praise Lezay-Marnésia lavishes on New England betrays the inconsistency of his political thought. Indignant at the abolition of privileges and the disappearance of the nobility, he nonetheless chooses to settle in a region where the equality of social classes reigns. This paradox reveals his view of the political and geographical spaces of the United States: he considered them to be a clean slate on which he could establish the utopia of his choice. According to him, the greatest virtue of the American nation consisted in authorizing the creation of settlements whose political form was, however, distinct from his own. The praise of liberty is thus purely rhetorical in the marquis's mouth: liberty is only praiseworthy, in his view, to the extent that it allows him to invent a society in which a patriarchal system will set the parameters and whose members will only be equal if they do not belong to the working class. Similarly, the trans-Appalachian geographical space appeared to him as empty as the American government seemed accommodating: he believed it was a territory where the state of nature still reigned and where disciples of Rousseau were, consequently, the best people to play colonist. Created in 1789, the Scioto Company offered him the opportunity to bring his project to fruition in the region of the Ohio River.

THE SCIOTO COMPANY

The Scioto Company was founded in Paris on August 3, 1789. Bringing together an American poet, Joel Barlow; a Scottish engineer, William Playfair; and six Frenchmen,²⁸ its goal was to buy from the American Congress an area of around three million acres of land located between the Ohio and Scioto Rivers,

over which the Ohio Company—an American business whose interests were represented by Joel Barlow in Europe—held the sole preemptive rights. The documents in question were, however, presented as titles of property and marketed as such by the Parisian partners beginning in autumn 1789. The intention of the Scioto Company was to use the funds invested by its clients to buy the lands from the American Congress and to convert its preemption rights into legal property titles. While the buyers only received at first worthless pieces of paper, the company intended, eventually, to give them ownership of the land that they thought they had purchased. The success of this commercial operation thus rested on two essential elements: the constitution of sufficient capital for the Scioto Company to transfer to the Ohio Company the funds necessary to purchase from Congress the lands that were up for sale²⁹ and the broad circulation of favorable testimony from the first emigrants to America, who, by expressing their satisfaction with their situation in letters addressed to their close acquaintances, would encourage them to buy land in their turn.

In order to stimulate the sale of land that it was offering for six tournois pounds an acre, the Scioto Company disseminated in the autumn of 1789 two advertisements that described an idyllic alternative to France: the *Prospectus for the Colony on the Ohio and Scioto Rivers in America* and the *Description of the Soil and the Productivity of this Portion of the United States, Situated Between Pennsylvania, the Ohio and Scioto Rivers, and Lake Erie*.³⁰ Written no doubt by William Playfair, the *Prospectus* proved to be fallacious on two main points. On the one hand, the author failed to mention that the lands being sold were inhabited by Amerindian tribes whose hostility toward the settlers would soon become evident.³¹ On the other hand, he jumped the gun when he claimed that the colony was located at the heart of a territory that had been cleared and was already settled: it was as if he considered the optimistic predictions of Crèvecoeur on the future prosperity of the region of the Ohio River to have already been fulfilled.

Published in 1787, an excerpt of the *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain* completed the documentation presented by the Scioto Company to its potential clients. Although it has been impossible to locate the exact passage that was distributed in 1789 by the company, there is every reason to believe that it was a fragment of “L’Esquisse du Fleuve Ohyo et du Pays de Kentucky” (“Sketch of the Ohio River and of the Kentucky Region”) in which Crèvecoeur describes the area where the lands put up for sale by the Scioto Company are located.³² Quoted in this text, General Richard Butler promises rapid prosperity for the future colonists of the Scioto and declares that they will be able to enjoy the pleasures of fishing and hunting during the long periods of leisure left to them by the farming of a marvelously fertile land.³³ Written two years before the creation of the Scioto Company, Crèvecoeur’s text could not have been intended to serve its interests. On the contrary, it is the *Prospectus* and the *Description* that

imitate the bombast of the “Esquisse” and, as the latter does, pass off the hope for future prosperity as the promise of a guaranteed fortune for anyone who would just go to the trouble of crossing the Atlantic.³⁴ Lezay-Marnésia, along with five hundred of his countrymen—aristocrats and commoners, was taken in by these promises.

THE SOCIETY OF THE TWENTY-FOUR

At the beginning of 1790, Lezay-Marnésia was working on the creation of an association of landowners known as the “Société des Vingt-Quatre” (Society of the Twenty-Four). The goal of this organization was to “found a city and colony on the banks of the Ohio . . . under the sovereignty and laws of the United States.”³⁵ The twenty-four partners agreed to purchase one thousand acres each from the Scioto Company, contiguous properties that would form the basis for a community where their city would be built.³⁶ As Albert, the youngest son of Lezay-Marnésia, remarks: “[His associates] left to my father *the mission of the dove leaving the ark*, which was to go in search of land, and the glory that would accrue to the founder if his endeavor was crowned with success.”³⁷

The biblical metaphor employed by Albert de Lezay-Marnésia reveals the religious character of the undertaking of his father at the time of the Revolution—which is indirectly compared to the flood sent to men to punish them for their depravity. In the biblical narrative, Noah is elected to survive and continue his lineage owing to his moral integrity and respect for the Creator. Likewise, Lezay-Marnésia based on purity the selection of people who would be saved from the revolutionary “flood”: “[W]e will not be indulgent in our choices,”³⁸ he warns in a letter to his wife. This religious dimension of Lezay-Marnésia’s project becomes explicit by his intention to create a bishopric on the Scioto lands at a time when the revolutionaries were attacking the prerogatives of the clergy.³⁹ Lezay-Marnésia was following in the tracks of the puritans who gained the Promised Land of the New World in the seventeenth century, leading a people unified by its moral values and religious beliefs to a territory where it would strive to keep them intact.⁴⁰

To carry out this program, the Society of the Twenty-Four held nine meetings between January 24 and February 10, 1790, during which the members tended to the most minute details of the organization of the future city. Elitist principles were adopted by the partners in the determination of the conditions of membership in their community: “No persons can be admitted into the society and the city unless they have been introduced by a partner and approved by a plurality of the members—with the exception of relatives of those members.”⁴¹ Lezay-Marnésia and his partners intended to control the social composition of their city, as well as the political convictions of its inhabitants.⁴²

In addition, they were determined to keep for themselves the real power, to the detriment of the mass of the colonists. The social segregation that they intended to maintain was expressed in geographical terms, since the Twenty-Four foresaw the construction of two cities. The first, named Gallipolis, would provide homes for the workers and would have farming as its primary vocation. Its exact location was established as early as the end of 1789: it would be built on the west bank of the Ohio. The second, the one that the Twenty-Four were resolved to build for themselves and their families, did not yet have a definitive location at the time of these meetings; it was agreed that the landowners would make that determination when they had arrived at their lands. In the mind of Lezay-Marnésia, this second city was to include the essential administrative and religious edifices of the future colony: the church, the courthouse, and a hospital would be built there; there would even be a university where the French language would be taught, as well as a Philosophical Society on the model of those that existed in France at that time. The distribution of the various institutions between the two cities and the ascendancy of the second over the first had not, however, been discussed and agreed to by the applicants to the venture: it was a foregone conclusion for Lezay-Marnésia, while it is probable that the “other emigrants were not informed of his projects, and that they would have been aghast if they had learned of it,” surmises Moreau-Zanelli.⁴³

SCIOTOPHOBES AND SCIOTOPHILES

The activities of the Society of the Twenty-Four provoked an intense controversy in France as it began its Revolution. The *Chronique de Paris* published an article by Anacharsis Cloots that mocks with a biting irony the “delicate ladies who condemn themselves to this exile as if in the grips of a burning fever” and warns them that it “will be too late to listen to reason when their tresses have become a trophy for the savages who swoop in and take off the pericranium of the peaceful workers.”⁴⁴ A few days later, Camille Desmoulins goes even further in an article in *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, in which he promises, with a black humor worthy of the marquis de Sade, an unenviable fate for the wife of Monsieur Duval d’Eprémésnil after the taking of her husband’s scalp: “I see her amid the forests with nobody to turn to for help—using her noble muscles to carve out a refuge in a tree trunk, remembering halcyon days with Monsieur Thilorier, the boudoir of her youth, her allowance of 20,000 livres and the sweet nothings of Monsieur de Cluny’s ministry. Her own servants will abandon her . . . and around her Monsieur d’Eprémésnil’s widow will see only orangutans fighting each other for her third wedding night.”⁴⁵

Described as libertines, dupes, and reactionaries, the aristocrats leaving for the Scioto were also compared to the slave traders of the West Indies. Before

embarking, the purchasers of land in America recruited workers whom they had sign contracts similar to those of indentured servants in use by English landowners at the time of colonial America, and that were still in force in the western United States. In exchange for their passage to the New World, their upkeep, and a few acres of land at the end of their commitment, the workers sold their labor for four to five years. Likened to slavery by the French patriots, this practice was denounced in pamphlets circulated at the beginning of the Revolution.⁴⁶ At the time of Lezay-Marnésia's stay in America (1790–92), slavery still existed in the French colonies (the first abolition was not voted until 1792), as well as in eight American states, including New York. A French emigrant in the revolutionary period, the Marquise de La Tour du Pin, had slaves at her service; her *Mémoires* describe the members of her “black household.”⁴⁷ The “Northwest Ordinance” of 1787, however, had prohibited slavery in the Northwest Territory, to which the region of the Ohio River belonged. Even if Lezay-Marnésia had anticipated the patriarchal and slave plans of Balzac's *Vautrin*, it would have been impossible for him to implement them, since the Ohio River marked the frontier between the free and the slave states.

FACT-PROOF UTOPIA

Despite the violent anti-Scioto campaign in the press of the period, Lezay-Marnésia was determined more than ever to reach the United States, and it was in the spring of 1790, from Le Havre, where he embarked on May 26, that he wrote to his friend Duval d'Eprémesnil to direct him to follow his example: “You should prefer the township in America that is calling you to this disastrous land of Europe that is only good any more to serve as an example to the world by uniting in itself everything that is the most debasing in shame and everything that is the most deadly in calamity.”⁴⁸ After a grueling crossing, Lezay-Marnésia visited Philadelphia and New York, where he met the most influential personalities of the Republic: he was received by Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison, and General Washington himself. “What he was experiencing for a month corresponded in every respect to the idyllic image he had formed of the New World: the simplicity of Washington, the farmer soldier, the Cincinnatus, and his peers, all the signs of the greatest prosperity and liberty in an enlightened republic were confirmed in the course of this voyage,” observes Moreau-Zanelli.⁴⁹ The following adventures of Lezay-Marnésia proved, however, to be less pleasant. He reached Virginia, then the city of Pittsburgh. From there, he wished to travel to the lands that he had purchased in the Scioto region, but he had to stop at Marietta (in present-day Ohio): the Amerindian tribes, rulers of the region, prevented him from going any farther.

The terror that the natives aroused in the settlers reached its height when a community north of Marietta, Big Bottom, was attacked on the night of January 2,

1791, by the Wyandots and Delawares, tribes that had heretofore been considered peaceful: only four people survived a massacre that killed fourteen, with three missing. At the beginning of the month of May 1791, a large contingent of troops led by General Saint Clair set off. Its goal was to put an end to the marauding of the Amerindians in the region: they were launching murderous raids against the convoys of pioneers heading for Cincinnati and targeting recently established settlements in Kentucky. But at the Battle of the Wabash, the army of Saint Clair was crushed by a coalition of Amerindian tribes.⁵⁰ By an irony of fate, while he was praising the tranquility of the banks of the Scioto in the text of Crèvecoeur quoted previously, Richard Butler was among the American victims at Wabash.⁵¹

Like the other members of the Society of the Twenty-Four, Lezay-Marnésia did not know if he would ever be able to take possession of his lands: located at the center of the military operations, they were more inaccessible than ever during the winter of 1790. He attempted to recuperate his losses from the Scioto Company, but no member of the Twenty-Four ever received the slightest compensation. Nonetheless, the marquis would soon form new illusions.

Followed by his son and several servants, he went to Pittsburgh, where he acquired four hundred acres of land in Pennsylvania. With the letters of his name, he created an anagram and baptized his new propriety “Azile.” In his *Souvenirs*, Albert de Lezay-Marnésia asserts that his father could have stayed there to observe from a distance the evolution of the political situation in his homeland.⁵² But the marquis soon grew tired of the pleasures of bucolic life and began to regret the good French society that he had deserted to come to the United States. After having just barely escaped prison, where his debts would have led him if his son had not succeeded in obtaining a providential loan, Lezay-Marnésia embarked in Philadelphia. Two years after his departure for the United States, he found himself back in France, in May 1792, dejected and ruined.

THE RETURN AND THE RUIN

“We had left France in order to escape the disasters revolution threatened to bring upon the country; we returned at the very moment that revolution made good upon its darkest promises,” writes Adrien de Lezay-Marnésia, summarizing thus the paradox of his emigration.⁵³ It is the very day of the invasion of the Tuileries, June 20, 1792, that he returned to Paris with his father. In September 1792, the two men obtained the passport that permitted them to leave the capital. Before leaving, however, Lezay-Marnésia gave to Prault the manuscript of his *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*: they would be printed in 1792 but immediately banned.

In a letter from 1800, Lezay-Marnésia alludes to the responsibility of the Girondins in the censuring of his work, without specifying the exact reasons

for their opposition.⁵⁴ At first glance, it may seem surprising that the Girondins would be opposed to the publication of a text advocating emigration to America insofar as, in the same period, Brissot saw on the borders of the United States a territory where French domination could be exercised. Brissot had sent Edmond-Charles Genêt across the Atlantic with orders to raise troops and provoke war with Spain and the United Kingdom in Louisiana, Florida, and Canada. The dream of the Girondins was to create “sister republics that shared ‘political and commercial interests’ with France and the U.S.”⁵⁵ Genêt proved, however, incapable of achieving these goals after having failed either to obtain the support of the United States or to raise the necessary funds.⁵⁶

Just like Lezay-Marnésia, the Girondins considered the territory beyond the Appalachians to be a vague geopolitical space where they could contest the domination not only of other European powers but also of the Americans and the Amerindian tribes. Nonetheless, the similarities between Brissot’s “sister republics” and the community planned by Lezay-Marnésia prove to be superficial when subjected to a more thorough examination. Lezay-Marnésia designed a plan that, unlike Brissot’s, implies no economic or political collaboration between the American colony and mainland France. On the contrary, the cities he dreams of are supposed to unite opponents of the Revolution who would choose to abandon France to its turmoil. Moreover, despite his interest in the creation of French colonies in the west of the United States, Brissot is careful to distinguish his plans from those of the clients of the Scioto Company, whom he describes as aristocrats eager to implant in America the social hierarchies of the Old Regime and maintain there the privileges that the Revolution had just taken away from them.⁵⁷ If he criticizes the reactionary program he ascribes to the noblemen leaving for the Northwest Territory, Brissot does not question the legitimacy of the project initiated by the Scioto Company, in which certain historians think he may have been personally involved.⁵⁸ The creation of a French colony in America would be, he said, useful to both France and the United States, since it would allow them to intensify commerce between the two countries. Rather than aristocrats nostalgic for the Old Regime, however, it is the neediest of the French that should, in his opinion, be transported to the other side of the Atlantic.⁵⁹ These divergences, as well as the hostility expressed toward the revolutionary movement in the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*, explain the ban Lezay-Marnésia’s book suffered under the Girondin government. They reappeared, nonetheless, in 1800, bringing together three letters written by the marquis at the time of his stay in the United States.

Once they had arrived in Saint-Julien at the end of 1792, the marquis and his son rested from their travels there until the enforcement of the “law of suspects” on September 17 of the same year gave them new cause for alarm. Noble and an emigrant, Lezay-Marnésia was arrested in March 1794 before being released in

October of the same year thanks to a certificate of civic spirit submitted in his favor by the commune of Saint-Julien and the revolutionary committee of Orgelet. But the coup d'état of 18 Fructidor Year V (September 4, 1797) and the new wave of repression against the royalists and emigrants that followed interrupted this moment of respite in the ordeals of his life by forcing him to leave France. Necker sheltered him in Switzerland, in his castle at Coppet. The marquis's exile there wore on: struck from the list of expatriates by the Jura department, he was not granted the same exemption in the Haute-Saône, where he still owned land. Having finally received the authorization to return to France, he settled in Besançon, where he began a final work, *L'Action des principes de la religion et de la véritable philosophie*. Less than a year after his return, on December 9, 1800, he passed away, his formerly considerable fortune reduced to debts and the Saint-Julien castle.

A SCATTERED CORPUS

Before leaving this biographical prologue to begin the study of the American letters of Lezay-Marnésia, it is necessary to present the corpus studied in this chapter. The *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* is composed of three letters. The editor presents them as samples of a much broader correspondence: "The author of these letters put in our keeping a manuscript that contains a large number of them. We are presenting only three of them to gauge if they are to the taste of the public."⁶⁰ Lezay-Marnésia declares elsewhere that he wrote in America a vast corpus of letters that the "revolutionary events"⁶¹ had destroyed for the most part. Nonetheless, the number of texts he still possessed were sufficient to contemplate the publication of a second, augmented edition, if the public were to give a favorable reception to the first one. This enlarged version never saw the light of day, Lezay-Marnésia having passed away the year of the republication of the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* in 1800.

Along with the aforementioned three letters, four additional texts that appeared in the *Nouveau prospectus*⁶² and the *Reading Program for a Young Lady* will be examined. In October 1790, a month before the writing of the first of the *Letters*, Lezay-Marnésia wrote three missives that foreshadow the idyllic representation of the New World that is found in the volume. Excerpts have survived thanks to the Scioto Company, which placed them at the end of the *Nouveau prospectus*, self-published in December 1790. Following a "Notice" given to potential purchasers of lands in Ohio, the three excerpts of letters written by Lezay-Marnésia provide a resounding confirmation of the most optimistic and deceptive statements of the Scioto Company.

If the texts published in the *Nouveau prospectus* precede the *Letters*, the one that Lezay-Marnésia adds to the second edition of the *Reading Program* serves as

an epilogue. Published for the first time in 1784, the *Plan de lecture* was republished by Louis in Paris in 1800 with some texts that were not in the original edition. Among these new texts is a “Letter to Monsieur Audrain, Merchant in Pittsburg,”⁶³ which provides further commentary on the marquis’s American adventure and completes the three texts that form the volume of the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*. Since Lezay-Marnésia’s missives in the *Nouveau prospectus*, those of the 1792 volume, and the letter published in the *Plan de lecture* all reflect the same period and treat the same experience, they must be studied as a coherent ensemble despite their appearance in three different sources.

Of the three texts circulated in the *Nouveau prospectus*, only the first bears a date (October 12, 1790). The two others can only have been written a few days later at most, the *Nouveau prospectus* being published in December 1790—and it took considerable time for Lezay-Marnésia’s letters to travel from the East Coast of the United States to the French capital. Written on November 15, 1790; November 2, 1791; and December 15, 1791, respectively, the three texts included in the *Letters* constitute a diary that accompanied the various stages of the marquis’s journey (Marietta, Pittsburg, Philadelphia), a veritable rout that inexorably brings the traveler back to his point of departure: like Ulysses, Lezay-Marnésia returns home, but while constantly looking back toward the west, the territory of his unfulfilled dreams. Addressed to M. Audrain, the last letter, written after Lezay-Marnésia’s return to France in 1792, was published for the first time in 1800.

Thanks to the geopolitical indecisiveness of the trans-Appalachian space at the end of the eighteenth century, and to the poor reliability of the knowledge about it in Europe,⁶⁴ Lezay-Marnésia imagined a Golden Age in the Ohio region and seemed to expect other French emigrants to the United States to join him there. This second chapter is devoted to the fictional construction of a posthumous America in his American letters,⁶⁵ the literary models that it appropriates, the political principles on which it is founded, and the effect that it has on revolutionary France, as well as to the tenuous boundary in these texts between lies to others and to himself, and between visionary enthusiasm and madness.

The American Letters of Lezay-Marnésia or the Persistence of Utopia

“THE PROMISED LAND IS THE ONE WE ARE GOING TO INHABIT”

Refutations of the First Prospectus

The posthumous construction of America is begun by Lezay-Marnésia in the winter of 1790 with three short texts published in the *Nouveau prospectus*. Circulated in 1790 by the Scioto Company, the goal of the *Nouveau prospectus* was to reassure candidates for exile who were becoming privy to alarming testimony

from their predecessors in the United States. The letters written by the latter contained warnings and complaints that contradicted the idyllic perspectives that the Scioto Company had been dangling before the public since the autumn of 1789. These publicly expressed grievances were all the more inimical to the interests of the company as its leaders knew the importance of the first reports sent back from America: they alone could encourage new departures and foster sales without which, we remember, it could not convert into titles of property the rights of preemption that they held on the Scioto lands.⁶⁶ Among those sounding the alarm, the most eloquent is certainly the author of the *Lettre écrite par un Français émigrant sur les terres de la Compagnie du Scioto à son ami à Paris* (*Letter Written by a Frenchman Immigrating to the Lands of the Scioto Company to his Friend in Paris*).⁶⁷

Fiercely determined to discourage potential clients of the Scioto Company, he relates the hardships he had suffered on the *Recovery*, a ship stocked for fifty people that had carried eighty-six passengers to the New World, and which, taking on water everywhere, eventually sank. Having arrived in New York on a second ship that had saved in extremis the *Recovery*'s passengers, the author declares that the Scioto Company had deceived their clients on a number of accounts and, in particular, on the location of the lands they had sold them. The *Prospectus* claims that the territory in question is located "approximately in the center of the United States," in a "commercial area" endowed with "all the conveniences one could hope for," such that in a short time the "capital of the American government" would undoubtedly be established there.⁶⁸

The author of the *Lettre* presents, however, a quite different map:

To the west of the Scioto, you have to go 160 miles, to the confluence of the Miami and Ohio Rivers, before you come to a colony that is under way. To the east of the Scioto you have to go 220 miles and to the confluence of the Muskingum and the Ohio before finding another colony. . . . In the 380 miles between them, and immediately behind each fort, there are vast forests that extend to the Great Lakes, filled with implacable savages who constantly harass the Americans and destroy pitilessly all the parties they come across. What a charming neighborhood! You must admit that one could not be less *isolated*.⁶⁹

Throughout the twenty-eight pages of his letter, the author contradicts point by point the claims of the *Prospectus*. While it asserts that the settlers will be able to exploit quickly a fertile land, the Scioto emigrant replies that the hostility of the "savages" will seriously compromise the fulfillment of such a fine prospect.⁷⁰ While the company claims that the Mississippi will permit the exportation of the colony's products, our emigrant answers that such a promise could only be

kept if they went to war with Spain, which controlled New Orleans.⁷¹ A victim of too many disappointments, the author of this letter eventually made an irrevocable decision: he chose to sacrifice his investment in the property in the Northwest Territory and return to France. This negative publicity was disastrous for the Scioto Company, which attempted to respond by publishing the *Nouveau prospectus*.

To achieve its purposes, the company first resorted to an effort to undermine the credibility of its detractors. The author of the *Nouveau prospectus* attributes to partisan motives, personal interest, and jealousy the criticism to which the company has been subjected.⁷² He also relies on several authorities who confirm the truthfulness of the first *Prospectus*. On the one hand, he twice cites Crèvecoeur, who has praised the quality of the soil and the mildness of the climate in the region of the Ohio River.⁷³ On the other hand, he offers testimony from emigrants who, contrary to the author of the *Lettre*, confirm the rebirth of the Golden Age west of the Appalachians. Among these testimonies, the most eloquent comes from Lezay-Marnésia.

Exaggerations and Lies

Five excerpts from letters are included at the end of the *Nouveau prospectus*. Three of them were written by Lezay-Marnésia, the two others by a certain M. Baillet and by Dom Didier—the Benedictine chosen by the Society of the Twenty-Four to lead the spiritual life of the future community.⁷⁴ The fact that the company only found three people of the hundreds of French who had already gone to America to confirm its claims should have raised questions for the readers of the *Nouveau prospectus*. Moreover, these letters lack the basic information necessary to avoid suspicion: the first does not name the addressee, while the fifth is undated.⁷⁵ Among these letters, those of Lezay-Marnésia combine exaggeratedly optimistic predictions with blatantly false declarations in order to offer a representation of a posthumous America that serves as an advertisement, since the marquis is striving to attract new emigrants to his undertaking.

It is true that in the first of his epistles, Lezay-Marnésia pledges to tell the truth on his soul and conscience.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the paragraph following this commitment turns out to be a prospective text and not a faithful description of the Scioto region:

The lands sold to Frenchmen by the agents of the Scioto Company are *the richest of all those that are under the dominion of the United States*. The neighboring lands, whose clearing only began three years ago, are proof that they are so fertile that you could hardly find any comparable land anywhere else on earth. Cultivated by Frenchmen who are far more active, work far harder, and are much better farmers than the Americans, who have not yet

progressed very far in the art of agriculture or in the other arts, they will yield much more than the fields of their neighbors.⁷⁷

When he wrote this letter, Lezay-Marnésia had not yet reached Marietta, where he would not arrive until the end of October 1790. His expectations regarding the fertility of the land in the Scioto region were consequently simple speculations that just repeat the promises of the Scioto Company that he had heard in Paris. Although it has no objective foundation, the marquis's confidence also shines through this passage: "We will have accomplished all the hard work, and all the difficulties will have been mitigated for those who follow us. They will discover in us brothers who are well settled in attractive, clean, and comfortable houses with abundant and good provisions and very happy to share everything with them."⁷⁸ Lezay-Marnésia projects himself into a future in which new emigrants will already have joined his settlement: in a temporal leap betraying his characteristic impatience, as well as his lack of interest in the practical problems of building a city that he was busy legislating before setting the first stone, the colonization of the Scioto was presented to the readers of the *Nouveau prospectus* as an enterprise already completed. By depicting a future where the entire task will have been completed, Lezay-Marnésia gave a prematurely retrospective portrayal of the conquering of the difficulties he had not yet met and of the comparatively easier situation of the new arrivals that, at the time of writing, was likewise hypothetical. He also contributes to an illusion of certainty concerning the prospects of the colony by using the future tense in the ensuing lines of his text as well: while the marquis's readers may have interpreted it as a simple future describing a possible event with a high probability, the tense is loaded here with a predictive value insofar as the circumstances necessary for its realization were still far from being in place. In October 1790, no Frenchman was as comfortably settled in Ohio as the marquis foresaw, and still less blessed with abundant provisions. In other words, Lezay-Marnésia wrote a prophetic text whose fulfillment depended on circumstances that were not yet in existence—but this was not how it was perceived by its readers, who interpreted it as a genuine promise, which became the basis of numerous departures for the United States.⁷⁹

Invitation to the Promised Land

The two excerpts from his correspondence reproduced in the *Nouveau prospectus* not only confirm the predictions of the Scioto Company but blatantly lie about the current situation of the French emigrants in the Northwest Territory. In a letter addressed to his lawyer, Lezay-Marnésia abandons himself to his typical enthusiasm: "It is certain that the lands that they sold me are in the most fertile place of the two worlds, in the mildest temperature, in the most healthy climate,

and that each acre of land produces at least forty to sixty bushels of grain and that the sales are so hardy that corn and wheat fetch on the average six pounds a bushel."⁸⁰ Of course, Lezay-Marnésia could no more justify such assurances in this moment than he could before his departure from France, since at the time he wrote these lines, he hadn't yet even seen the lands occasioning the use of so many superlatives and was never to set eyes on them.

The last letter is even more optimistic than the preceding ones. While the first one feigns objectivity by informing the potential emigrants that indigo could not be grown on the banks of the Ohio, contrary to what the *Prospectus* had announced, the third, very brief, resorts to a biblical image to describe the Scioto lands: "All the testimonies concur, all the accounts agree, and all assure us that the land we are going to live on is the Promised Land."⁸¹ The image alone summarizes, without Lezay-Marnésia being able to foresee it at the time of writing, the whole American adventure: like Moses, the marquis wanted to lead a threatened people to a place where it could live under its own law and customs; and just as the patriarch, who embraced from Mount Nebo the Promised Land upon which he never set foot, Lezay-Marnésia was not able to go beyond Marietta and never saw the Scioto for which he had undertaken such a long journey.

In the organization of these various epistolary excerpts, the author of the *Nouveau prospectus* exhibits a fine mastery of advertising rhetoric: he is careful to place at the end the text most likely to convince readers to head for the "Promised Land." It still remains to be explained why Lezay-Marnésia was willing to collaborate with the "public relations" campaign undertaken by the Scioto Company. Why did he support this company that had sold to him and others worthless documents?

At the time he was writing these letters, Lezay-Marnésia still believed in his plans for a colony, given that his access to his propriety had not yet been blocked by winter, the war with the Amerindians, and the defeat of Saint Clair at the Battle of the Wabash.⁸² Consequently, it was contrary to his interests to mitigate the enthusiasm for exile in France when only people making this choice could give his colony a chance for success. As the author of the *Letter Written by a Frenchman Immigrating to the Lands of the Scioto Company* remarks, the reinforcement of new emigrants was essential to the security of those who had preceded them in America: "It is clear that our security depends on the large number of recruits we will have, that you must expect to see a proliferation of illusions in Paris and the whole kingdom."⁸³ Despite his efforts to denounce the fabrications of the Scioto Company, the author of this pamphlet confesses that he too is prone to wishing for the arrival of countrymen: "I feel that I am weak and calculating like the other men; I am sometimes surprised to find myself wishing for the company to succeed in attracting many of my countrymen to the Scioto—provided that they are not among my acquaintances!"⁸⁴

This self-centered desire was shared by Lezay-Marnésia, who had sacrificed a considerable fortune to acquire 22,100 acres of land from the Scioto Company, and who was risking his life by preceding the other members of the Society of Twenty-Four into the Northwest Territory. As it turns out, the letters published in the *Nouveau prospectus* played precisely the role intended by its author, provoking a new wave of emigration on the strength of the promises it contained: “The following June, Vandenbemden, one of the colonists who had arrived on board the last ship, was in Philadelphia. He reported to Duer the arrival of a new boat, the *Pennsylvanie*, with around one hundred and twenty people who had ‘left France confidently owing to a letter written by the marquis de Marnésia and sent from the Scioto; he depicted this region as a garden of delights.’”⁸⁵

By means of the letters inserted at the end of the *Nouveau prospectus*, Lezay-Marnésia directly influenced the departure of additional Frenchmen for a “garden of delights” that they were going to find bristling with thorns. His missives confirmed the existence of a doxological America for a readership already fascinated by the American mirage, playing therefore a direct role in reality through the description of an imaginary land. Following these three epistolary fragments, the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* continued the posthumous representation of America begun in the winter of 1790 by Lezay-Marnésia, a representation that, instead of honoring his commitment to speak only the “truth” concerning a country directly observed by the author, made it correspond systematically to the expectations preceding his voyage.

TAMING THE SAVAGERY

The Error of Christopher Columbus

In an article devoted to the concept of “America” in European political thought, Levine describes the fabulous bestiary assembled in the writings of Christopher Columbus:⁸⁶ “He claimed to discover cannibals, Cyclops, Amazons, Sirens, dog-faced peoples, people with no hair, and people with tails. These bizarre claims were suggested to him by centuries of fanciful tales passed on through medieval times by supposedly reliable authorities. Essentially, Columbus already knew what he would find, and he found what he thought he would. This self-fulfilling discovery began a pattern of preformed opinions dictating what is supposedly found in America.”⁸⁷

The famous error of Christopher Columbus, who was convinced until his last breath that he had discovered a new passage to India, had much deeper consequences than the creation of the term “Indians” to designate, improperly, the first inhabitants of the American continent.⁸⁸ For Christopher Columbus did not discover America as a true New World that he had perceived in its individuality without casting upon it the slightest preconception. On the contrary,

the certainty he had that he was setting foot on Asia inclined him to transfer to America all of the images that were circulating in European thought about the Far East and to seek in this space what he believed had, perforce, to be there: “He thus identifies the agouti rat as the Pharaoh’s rat seen by [Marco Polo] among the Tartars, laments the fact that he doesn’t recognize certain kinds of trees, searches desperately for parrots and imagines he has found aloe where it cannot exist because this plant and these animals are proof that he has reached the goal he had set for himself,” observes Guyot about the famous explorer.⁸⁹ The original error of Christopher Columbus is more than a historical detail: it is a missed opportunity for the human mind to conceive of something as utterly new. Since its entrance into the European consciousness, America has remained a space into which the traveler has transferred images he believes true before he has actually been there. After the first discovery of Christopher Columbus and the prodigious rash of texts it gave rise to, each journey completed by his successors was accompanied by an effort to verify the truthfulness of a discourse biased from the outset and by an approach that consisted in comparing it to their empirical experience, with the result that the American continent remained to be rediscovered beneath this ocean of words.

Much like Christopher Columbus, Lezay-Marnésia knew before arriving what he was going to discover in an improperly named “New World.” However, the preconceptions he brought with him were different from those of his predecessors of the sixteenth century: it was no longer half-mythical creatures that he was prepared to find but good, welcoming savages, reassuringly noble, consistent with the new expectations created by Montaigne and reinforced by Lahontan and Rousseau.⁹⁰ The transfer and confirmation of the French ideas about the Amerindians play a political role in his work, since its goal was to encourage those who were disappointed by the French Revolution to emigrate by enticing them with the image of a world in which their rule of law would be accepted by the natives. This political objective is at the center of the redefinition of posthumous America in the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*, unlike the *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain*. Crèvecoeur reinvents a past that he lived through personally, following the historical breaks that the American and French Revolutions represented. In the work of Lezay-Marnésia, on the contrary, the posthumous representation of America consists less in recreating a past period of American history than in reproducing and confirming the discourse that the author considered to be true before arriving there. This is the advertising function of posthumous America announced in the introduction, that is, the attempt to promote the existence of a doxological America whose falseness is already apparent for the author at the very moment at which he is working on its construction.⁹¹ Here, Lezay-Marnésia strives to recreate an ideal that has nonetheless disappeared at the time of his writing: driven by nostalgia,

he seeks to reinvent the period preceding the evaporation of his own illusions. The author of *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* puts the advertising function into effect from the first letter of the volume, written during his stay in Marietta.

A Threatening Context

At the end of October 1790, Lezay-Marnésia and his travel companions stopped at Marietta, a settlement founded two years earlier in the Northwest Territory, and which had only five hundred inhabitants. Accompanied by the comte de Barth, he awaited there the clearing of the lands acquired by the Society of Twenty-Four, 160 miles downstream on the Ohio River and located at the mouth of the Scioto—the very lands whose fertility he praised in the *Nouveau prospectus* without ever having seen them. The wait was long, for the Amerindian tribes in the region prevented them from leaving Marietta. In his *Souvenirs (My Memories)*, Albert de Lezay-Marnésia describes the difficult living conditions of the inhabitants of the little city and summarizes the situation of their guests: “[We were] reduced to live, so to speak, the same life as these savages amid the sparse population of Americans, true savages themselves who, with no life or resources elsewhere, had pushed forward into these regions like lost sentinels of civilization who were seeking to make a life in this wilderness.”⁹²

On November 5, 1790, General Putnam returned to Marietta.⁹³ During the same period as the first of the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*, an exchange of letters began between him, Lezay-Marnésia, and the comte de Barth. In a letter of November 9, Putnam invites them to travel to their lands in order to determine the exact place where they wanted to build their colony—which they refused to do. On November 15, Putnam urged them again to join this expedition. He tried to “explain to these pioneer apprentices, devoid of any common sense, and who have just refused once again his offer of an expedition to the Scioto, that before building the slightest structure and mobilizing workers that are so rare in the region, they first have to choose the site of their settlement.”⁹⁴ Despite these commonsense arguments, Lezay-Marnésia continued to oppose the trip: “The marquis had never expected to have to be on the front lines, physically exposed to the rigors of an expedition in the wilderness or to an Indian attack.”⁹⁵ His fear of the Amerindian tribes was the cause of his resistance to Putnam’s proposals. It tormented him at the precise period in which he wrote the first of the *Letters*, since this one was dated November 15, 1790, the very day when the general pressed him a second time to go to the mouth of the Scioto.⁹⁶ However, far from sharing with his readers the worries caused by the Amerindians, Lezay-Marnésia instead relates, in the introductory letter of the volume, a peaceful visit by a little group of Huron warriors and their queen.

Portrait of the Savage as a Colonial Subject

Addressed to the chevalier de Boufflers, this letter begins with an ironic denunciation of the living conditions in Marietta. At first glance, it seems that the program announced by the editor's note—to tell the truth and nothing but—was being rigorously followed:

Living in the finest house of Marietta, surrounded by generals, majors, and colonels, and by a distinguished throng of knights of the Order of Cincinnati, *that is to say*, living in a shack as humble as the humblest cottages of Europe, and having for neighbors titled plowmen who drive their own plows, cultivate their fields quite poorly, are dressed in a shabby woolen blanket six days of the week, and blow their noses in their fingers—something that even our peasants in France do not do—I had an unexpected visit, just as I was sitting down to dinner, from the queen of the Hurons, accompanied by her daughter, two ladies of the court, and a nobleman, apparently her head equerry. (47; emphasis added)

The “that is to say” in this sentence plays the role of an unveiling. This adverbial expression reveals the reality hidden beneath the gilding of the discourse and implicates the linguistic abuses by the revelation of the misery he is struggling to cover up. Nevertheless, what begins as a witty work whose Voltairian irony promises a vigorous attack against the Scioto Company soon takes a different turn. Lezay-Marnésia describes the table manners of his Amerindian guests, judging them superior to those of the Americans, which is a way of suggesting that the countrymen of Washington were more savage than the “savages” themselves: the condescendence of Lezay-Marnésia toward the Americans is one of the unifying themes of his three letters. Throughout the meal, the Hurons exhibit a remarkable talent to adapt. While the custom of being served by people who are standing and not eating is foreign to them, they adopt it with no difficulty (48). Scarcely sketched out, the cultural differences separating Lezay-Marnésia and the Hurons are canceled out by the goodwill the latter demonstrate in conforming to the habits of their host. Implicitly, their pliancy regarding French customs indicates their ability to obey the property owners who will reign over the future colony of the Scioto: far from embodying an inflexible otherness, the Amerindians will easily become colonized subjects. In other words, this deceptively innocent depiction of the table manners of his guests indicates the feasibility of the colonial project of the marquis—as it demonstrates at the same time the universality of French norms. Although he is a guest of America, he presents himself as the host of the Amerindians, that is, as someone whose law is being applied in his own residence, and it is precisely toward the extension of his zone of authority that Lezay-Marnésia is working,

he who has come to the Northwest Territory to take possession of the 22,100 acres of land bought in Paris.

The following paragraph pursues this attempt to culturally assimilate the Hurons by comparing them to the table companions the marquis used to entertain at Saint-Julien: “You have noticed, Monsieur le chevalier, that there is no company that is not more pleasant after dinner than before.” The Amerindians are no exception: “By the end of the meal we were well acquainted and almost on intimate terms” (48). Lezay-Marnésia behaves toward his “savage” guests as he did in France with his vassals: he calls them “my good Indians,” with a condescendence tinged with paternalism that recalls the principles enunciated in *Le Bonheur dans les campagnes*.⁹⁷ Generous lord, philanthropic aristocrat, he gives them modest offerings that delight them: “They were impressed by my grandness when I presented small tokens of knives, ribbons, mirrors, and needles. Quite rightly, they seemed very grateful. They took hold of my hands, shook them affectionately, and held them up to their hearts with great feeling” (48). This scene depicts the Hurons as being in debt to the marquis, from whom they accept gifts without offering him the slightest one in return, contrary to the customs of the Amerindians for whom an act of generosity required a response of proportionate value.⁹⁸ By refusing to mention the reciprocity of gifts during this true account, a reciprocity that would have established a relationship of equals between the participants, Lezay-Marnésia describes an asymmetrical exchange in which the person who exhibits generosity asserts his power over those who receive the presents. Implicitly, Lezay-Marnésia presents himself as the lord of this court for the simple reason that he is French, and it is only composed of “savages.” He thus in no way espouses the perspective of the aristocratic Europeans who recognized in the Amerindians a reflection of their own social condition. Liebersohn devotes a study to the nobles of France and Germany who observed “a peculiar affinity between the destiny of warrior elites from two worlds.”⁹⁹ For the aristocrats from Europe shared with the Amerindians not only a comparable disdain for agricultural work and an identical devotion to the warrior functions within their social organization but also considered themselves to be victims of the growing greed in democratic societies and the custodians of threatened age-old traditions, such that, in the end, they projected onto the Amerindians the anguish they felt regarding their own situation at the end of the eighteenth century. This identification was foreign to Lezay-Marnésia: in his eyes, his superiority to the Hurons derived implicitly from the privileges of birth—the very privileges whose abolition he had been horrified to observe on the night of August 4, 1789—and it did not even occur to him that it could be the result of an arbitrary social convention, not even in the far-off Ohio wilderness. Instead of describing this scene as it, in fact, occurred—the account given by his son is far more plausible than his—Lezay-Marnésia rewrote it, giving himself

the dominant place that he wished to occupy. The writing of the *Letters* thus allowed him to correct an experience that did not go as he wished, providing the means to establish the victory of the imaginary over the real by substituting for a disappointing experience a representation organized to confer on the author a superiority in accordance with his fantasies.

However, the personal role played by the letter is coupled with a political function. In the course of a single paragraph, the Hurons made considerable progress in the mastery of French customs: while they were just beginning to learn table manners, suddenly they were reproducing the expressions and gestures with which the marquis's countrymen would have received his gifts in Franche-Comté. Not content with being inoffensive, Lezay-Marnésia's guests are ideal colonial subjects: they behave in the manner the master expects of them, but without speaking his language, which would elevate them to a position of equality from which they could contest his authority.

The Negation of Alterity

The remainder of the letter reduces ever further the cultural distance between the marquis and his guests. Lezay-Marnésia describes the unusual gallantries that he showers on the queen of the Hurons:

Sitting next to young Paulée (the name of the royal princess), I attempted, with my gestures, to communicate sweet nothings—truly the saddest way to express gallantry is to do so by interpreter—which the good-natured princess did not dismiss. She clearly understood the message in my gaze, which boldly praised her charms. I understood just as well her response, which came in the form of an endearing smile. Emboldened, I took her hand and squeezed it softly in mine. She gently squeezed mine in return. Encouraged further, I kissed Paulée. (49)

This seduction scene is all the more improbable in that it borrows from French gallantry its subtle progression—from the gaze to the hand and from the hand to the kiss—and unites participants who have in common neither age, nor culture, nor even language. In the course of the text, the queen of the Hurons herself becomes a fictional character, Lezay-Marnésia comparing her to the heroine invented by the chevalier de Boufflers, *Aline, reine de Golconde* (*Aline, Queen of Golconde*) (47).¹⁰⁰ As in the “Avis de l'éditeur” (45–46), the concept of truth is at the heart of this passage: the very real individual that Lezay-Marnésia met corresponds to the fictitious creature of Boufflers. This correspondence is, however, made clearer by the marquis, who declares that the queen of the Hurons resembles the queen of Golconde “not when she was on the throne but when she was the young Aline, still rich with her jar of milk and her innocence” (49).¹⁰¹

This distinction between two periods in the life of Aline is more significant than it may seem at first, for Boufflers's tale describes the loss of innocence of a charming peasant girl who has numerous amorous adventures and, in the end, becomes the sovereign of the imaginary kingdom of Golconde. Paradoxically, the queen of the Hurons resembles the first Aline, the one who has not yet ascended the throne but who shares with her both youth and purity. Through this comparison, Lezay-Marnésia's guest is inscribed in a literary lineage that includes, among others, Charlotte of Molière's *Dom Juan* (1665) and Fanchette of Beaumarchais's *Mariage de Figaro* (1784). An inexperienced young lady vulnerable to the first seducer who comes along, she loses, under the pen of the marquis, the disturbing strangeness that we later discern in the *Souvenirs* of his son. In short, she is presented as an *ingénue*, a feminine double for the fanciful Huron that Voltaire depicts in his philosophical tale in 1767. The parallel with Voltaire's *L'Ingénu* appears all the more intentional in Lezay-Marnésia's text as, if we are to believe his son, it was not the Hurons but the Chickasaws who paid them a visit in Marietta in November 1790. The author of the *Letters* lied about the identity of his guests' tribe in order to draw them more easily into the realm of fiction and to assimilate them into what he knew of America before arriving there, instead of presenting new images, no doubt more threatening, in the collection of representations he was sharing with his readership.

Portrait of the Amerindian as a Frenchwoman

The physical description of Paulée is a continuation of the attempt to fictionalize the guests of the marquis. It resorts to the canons of French aesthetics and contributes to her assimilation into Lezay-Marnésia's culture of reference: "Her hair is long, free-flowing, and a beautiful black color. Her figure is what you would expect, resembling one of Diane's nymphs. Her legs and charming feet are encased in attractive buckskin boots that reveal their pretty shape" (49). With the exception of the reference to the "buckskin boots," this prosopography could be that of any European woman and does not focus on any specifically Amerindian characteristics in Paulée. Comparing her with one of Diane's nymphs is a cliché of encomiastic poetry that allows the marquis to include a reference to classical culture in this blason of an Amerindian body. Evoking the skin color of his guest, Lezay-Marnésia associates it with oriental exoticism by means of a comparison: "Her skin is swarthy, almost olive, rather like Algerians, Tunisians, or even the Spanish" (49). Far from emphasizing her otherness by her color, Paulée is, on the contrary, made immediately familiar to the French reader, who is invited to imagine her as a Spanish woman. Even her outfit proves to be strangely European: she wears "a little black hat with a large colored ribbon" and "a blouse made of very fine silk." In addition, "a thin silver cross" (50) indicates that she has converted to Catholicism: if the Catholic Church was being violently attacked

in this same period in France, at least it still had faithful members in America thanks to the long, hard work of the missionaries. Conversely, the description of the young Amerindian given by Albert de Lezay-Marnésia includes details that would have been much more difficult for his father to relate to French culture: “Her pierced earlobes fell in long fleshy rings on her shoulders, which is a general practice among the Indians; the remainder of the ear was trimmed all around with small silver rings.”¹⁰²

The queen of the Hurons loses progressively any cultural specificity in the *Letters*: she is the living confirmation of the image of the Amerindians circulated beforehand in the French imagination. This movement consisting in the description of the unknown through a filter employed in advance by the traveler reaches its peak in the reference to the theater: “If the French theater still exists . . . , do the actresses who play young Indian princesses a great favor by telling them how Paulée is dressed. Alzire, the lover of Manco-Capac, as well as that of the hero of *The Tragedy of the Illinois*, should not cover themselves with feathers like parrots; they should rather adopt Paulée’s attire, which is so comely and would, I believe, be a sensation on stage” (50).

Already observed in the preceding chapter, the phenomenon of circularity in the representation of America is repeated here once again. The queen becomes the paradoxical model of a supposedly authentic representation that is, in fact, a reproduction of the imaginary America as it existed in France at the end of the eighteenth century, a model, moreover, that is supposed to rectify the idea that French playwrights have of young Amerindian women. What Saint-John de Crèvecoeur accomplishes in his *Lettres* through translation—that is, a confirmation of the ideas of his readership whose truth was guaranteed by his long experience across the Atlantic—Lezay-Marnésia does in his turn by passing off the copy of a preconceived idea as the representation of a scene from life. Of course, Paulée would not be out of place in the *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain*, where one could imagine her amid the natives in the “Anecdote of a Wild Dog,” a text that Lezay-Marnésia indeed praises (70).¹⁰³ Nonetheless, the portrayal of America by Lezay-Marnésia is fundamentally different from Crèvecoeur’s depiction on one essential point: they are based on very different models.

Painting the Doxological America

As the aforementioned study of the *Voyage dans la Haute Pensylvanie et dans l’Etat de New York* demonstrates, Crèvecoeur relied on memories preceding by far the moment of writing in order to produce the posthumous representation of a lost America. On the contrary, Lezay-Marnésia wrote at the very time of his experience in America letters whose first publication followed immediately his return to France in 1792: the gap between the experience, the writing of the narrative, and the publication was thus minimal, with the notable exception

of the “Lettre à M. Audrain,” to which we shall return. Still, Lezay-Marnésia insisted on pairing the discourse he produced in his *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* with doxological America, this collective representation that he had taken, mistakenly, for a faithful description of reality before traveling himself to the country across the Atlantic. The first of the *Letters* finishes with this declaration: “Pleasures, arts, and good taste are not to be found in North America, and especially at the frontiers of the United States. I believe that they will never come here if you do not bring them yourself; but there is tranquility, liberty, and peace here, so I would lack nothing if I had with me my family and one or two friends like you” (51).

Sent in the middle of the Revolution to an aristocrat, this letter boasts deliberately of the tranquility of America, where at least no one risks the guillotine for being a *ci-devant* (former aristocrat). However, a study of the circumstances in which this text was produced revealed that there was absolutely no liberty of movement in Marietta—which one could not leave without the risk of being killed and scalped—and that neither peace nor tranquility reigned, since the hostility between the colonists and the natives was matched in the city by the conflicts between Lezay-Marnésia and his American and French associates. The marquis thus describes the hierarchical and paternalistic relations that he hoped to have with the Amerindians when he was in Paris, and not those that he had, in fact, observed between the settlers and the first inhabitants of North America. Compared to those of Crèvecoeur, his letters construct a new type of posthumous America: a literary representation of America expressing the implicit regret that it did not conform to the imaginary version pervasive in France. This regret was, however, dispelled by means of writing, which reproduced the imagined space rather than consenting to see it invalidated by reality. In giving substance to the hopes of a readership inclined to see in the New World a place where one could escape the turmoil of the old one, the posthumous America of Lezay-Marnésia was ultimately given a political function: it tended to prove that it was possible to recreate in the western United States a France that had ceased to exist.

The Politics of Posthumous America

The function of the intertextual relationship established by Lezay-Marnésia between the first of the *Letters* and *Aline, reine de Golconde* is not simply to portray Paulée as an ingénue incapable of resisting the advances of a seducer and, a fortiori, the colonizing designs of the marquis’s countrymen. Boufflers’s tale describes the reunion of the two principal protagonists in the imaginary kingdom of Golconde. Having become queen, Aline recreates in the gardens of her oriental palace the French countryside where she met the knight during her already distant youth. Led to her, the latter exclaims: “How surprised I was when, having arrived at the edge of the woods, I found myself in a place that

resembled perfectly the one where I had, long ago, met for the first time Aline and found love! It was the same prairie, the same hills, the same plain, the same village, the same stream, the same plank, the same path; all that was missing was a milkmaid, whom I soon saw appear in the same clothes as Aline and with the same pot of milk.¹⁰⁴

The repetition of the adjective “same” emphasizes the complete similarity between the knight’s memory of the place where he met Aline and the artificial spectacle that he has before his eyes: the image of a France belonging to the past reappears in an identical form in a foreign space. Lezay-Marnésia attempted to effect a similar translation in the Northwest Territory, his goal being to recreate there the ideal France that first monarchical absolutism, then the revolutionary movement had prevented from being reborn in metropolitan France. This France that conformed to his desires is the one that he prays for in *Le Bonheur dans les campagnes*, a country where the aristocracy would again play a prominent political role, that of an essential intermediary between the king and the people, and would see its social function enhanced with new prestige by giving rise to an economic and moral regeneration outside the major cities. Just like the imaginary, faraway India, the land west of the Appalachians was a space sufficiently foreign to his countrymen that their fantasies could be freely transposed there. As Desan remarks, “[The] Ohio River Valley held all the moral and expansive possibilities of that moment most idealized by Rousseau: the moment when humanity emerged, still uncorrupted, from the state of nature into the first flush of society.”¹⁰⁵ By describing America as his contemporaries imagined it, by depicting the Amerindians in the guise of good savages eager to embrace colonization, Lezay-Marnésia attempted to attract his countrymen to cross the Atlantic and help him rebuild there a France that had not only disappeared, but had never truly existed in the first place. Although it had a therapeutic function for the author who was reinventing the country that had disappointed his expectations, the posthumous representation of America was not only turned toward the past; it also served as an imaginary experiment with a possible future for his homeland.

THE NOSTALGIA FOR BETHLEHEM

The Pennsylvanian Model

In a study devoted to texts written by Voltaire, Raynal, and Diderot about colonial America, Ansart emphasizes the role played by Pennsylvania in the arguments for new liberties presented by these authors: “Pennsylvania thus provided the *philosophes* with a rare example illustrating the practical applicability in a contemporary society of a central tenet of their political credo. In their eyes it demonstrated the falsity of an objection all too often presented to them by their opponents: that religious and civil liberties would be destructive of social order

and harmony and lead to chaos. Quite the opposite, the *philosophes* could argue, just consider the peace and prosperity of Pennsylvania!”¹⁰⁶

Serving as a de facto argument in the debate on tolerance and equality, Pennsylvania allowed these authors to demonstrate that it was possible to apply their theses without toppling the social structure. In his turn, Lezay-Marnésia used the example of Pennsylvania when he described the Moravians of Bethlehem at the beginning of the second of the *Letters*. By its simple existence, the society that they created demonstrated that his own utopian plans were all the more feasible, since they had, in fact, already been put into practice.

However, the evocation of Bethlehem is the result of a retrospective reconstruction and is not a description that was contemporary with the author’s stay in this city. Like Crèvecoeur, who reimagined colonial America following the War of Independence, Lezay-Marnésia reconstituted the memory of this community after the failure of his ambitions in the Northwest Territory. In Bethlehem, he pretends to discover a model for a society that might possibly come to be, while he was, in fact, speaking of the space on which he was projecting his dashed dreams for a settlement that was already a failure when he took up the pen. The depiction of this city is at the heart of what posthumous America is for Lezay-Marnésia, namely a reinvention of America that, at the same time that it revives a mythical past, is presented as the model for future utopian projects.

An Intact Colonial Project

Written on November 2, 1791, the second of the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* was addressed to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, although Lezay-Marnésia admits that he had never met him (86). To what end does Lezay-Marnésia appeal to the author of *Paul et Virginie* (1787)? In 1778, Saint-Pierre had conceived the idea of a settlement under the auspices of France that he wished to establish to the west of the English colonies. This refuge was to take in destitute Frenchmen who would receive land to cultivate. To present the guidelines for this project, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre wrote a memorandum to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Charles Gravier de Vergennes, that produced, however, no results.¹⁰⁷ A decade later, in 1789, Saint-Pierre was again involved in a similar enterprise: Carré suggests that the comte d’Antraigues and Duval d’Éprémèsnil sought to persuade him to help them found a colony in the United States.¹⁰⁸ Lezay-Marnésia was thus not the first person to see in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre a precursor and a possible supporter of colonial enterprises across the Atlantic when he addresses the famous man of letters in these terms: “Gather together, Sir, the debris of Europe, which no longer exists, enrich America with it, the America that does not yet exist and perhaps never will if this great opportunity escapes” (64).

At the time of the sending of this letter, nearly a year had passed since the meal shared by Lezay-Marnésia and his Huron guests in Marietta. In the

meantime, Arthur Saint Clair had been defeated at the Battle of the Wabash, and the marquis had taken refuge at Fort Pitt. Just as the first missive began with a brief disclosure of the real living conditions of the French emigrants at Marietta, this one begins with a direct attack on the Scioto Company: “[T]his company, which proposed the creation of a new state within the United States composed of the most energetic, experienced Frenchmen, tempered in the midst of the storm and rich through their industriousness, their sciences, their arts, their fortitude, their courage, and their sociability; this company, after having conceived such a grandiose and beautiful idea, did not display the slightest ability to put it into practice” (53).

The tone has changed considerably since the letters published in the *Nouveau prospectus*, in which Lezay-Marnésia declared: “As regards the Scioto Company, the only thing I have had to defend myself against is the excessive benefits it has accorded me; I have only had to struggle with its lavishness” (131). For the first time, Lezay-Marnésia called into question the Scioto Company. However, while the company may have been guilty in his eyes of not keeping its commitments, he does not accuse it of not mentioning the presence of hostile Amerindians in the area, nor of having ardently promoted a colonial project that could appear, after the numerous setbacks he had just suffered, absolutely insane to him. Far from showing any real acrimony against the Scioto Company, Lezay-Marnésia exhibited despite himself a great deal of consideration for it, since the essential part of the paragraph quoted previously was devoted to praise for the plan it had conceived and commercialized, although it was not successful. It is this plan that remained intact in his eyes and that the rest of the letter strives to validate by moving it from the Northwest Territory to the eastern borders of Pennsylvania. While the letters of the *Nouveau prospectus* and the first of the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* deliberately hid the truth of the American expedition from the reader in order to convince him to emigrate also, beginning with the second letter of the volume, Lezay-Marnésia tried to persuade his audience, as well as himself, that it was still possible to make his colonial project a reality. As the corpus of his American letters developed, lying to others was gradually replaced by lying to himself and voluntary fantasizing by autosuggestion: the posthumous representation of America was endowed with an advertising function at the same time as it became an imaginary refuge for the author in which he pretended to believe in the future fulfillment of his vanished dreams.

Renaissance of the Golden Age

While Lezay-Marnésia began by recognizing the wrongs for which he was responsible, very quickly, in a gradual slippage that revealed his obsessiveness, he returned to his visions of utopian cities: “Never has such a favorable

opportunity presented itself to the virtuous genius who has the courage and the will to gather together men capable of great resolution and place them in the wilderness of the New World to lead peaceful, pure lives in the comfort of a patriarchal community, in the charms of a fraternal existence” (54). Lezay-Marnésia found in the society created by the Moravians of Bethlehem the proof that it is possible to lead to an isolated place individuals committed to “adoring God and practicing the virtues taught, ordered, and rewarded by religion, even in this life” (54). During his trip from New York to Marietta, he had made a stop in this little community that, he tells us, is located “near the Pennsylvania border” (54). This detail is erroneous, because Bethlehem is located equidistant from the northern and southern limits of this state, to the west of New York and Philadelphia. It permitted Lezay-Marnésia, however, to emphasize the isolation of this community, characteristic of the utopian space, while mentioning the name “Pennsylvania,” which gave rise to positive associations in the mind of the French reader.

In 1734, Voltaire’s *Lettres philosophiques* had contributed to the constitution of the gilded legend of William Penn and its dissemination throughout French culture. After painting an ironic portrait of the enthusiast he was in his youth, the fourth letter reserves for him this splendid praise: “William Penn might well have boasted that he brought back the Golden Age of which so much is spoken and which in fact never really existed save in Pennsylvania.”¹⁰⁹ Voltaire never misses an opportunity to cite the Quakers as models in his following works. The *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations* (*Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*, 1756), the *Traité sur la tolérance* (*Treatise on Tolerance*, 1763), and the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) all express a keen admiration for the numerous qualities exhibited by the descendants of William Penn: virtue, simplicity, dedication to social equality, and above all, religious tolerance. Like Voltaire, Lezay-Marnésia asserts in the second of the *Letters* that the Golden Age has survived in Pennsylvania, adding that it even has an exact address: the town of Bethlehem.

Founded in 1740, the Moravian community of Bethlehem was given an autarkic organization that made it appear as a utopian city. In the article “Moraves ou frères unis” (“Moravians or United Brothers”) in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, Joachim Faiguet de Villeneuve (1703–1781) describes with great admiration the way of life of the members of this little society: “Never has equality been so complete as among the Moravians; if the property is held in common between the brothers, esteem and consideration are no less so. . . . Their gentle and innocent life attracts converts and generally earns them the respect of everyone who judges things without prejudice.” Bethlehem had already hosted famous guests from France: La Fayette had stayed there in 1777 long enough to recover from a wound received in the Battle of Brandywine, and the marquis de Chastellux had stopped there at the beginning of the 1780s. In

his travel narrative, Chastellux describes Bethlehem as an austere society: “As for policing or discipline, there is something monastic about it, since it recommends celibacy, without imposing it, and separates the men from the women.”¹¹⁰ Contrary to the Quakers, whose unflattering portrait in his work will provoke the anger of Brissot, the Moravian community receives from him neither criticism nor any particular praise: Chastellux even confesses, twice, that he has had trouble satisfying his curiosity on the origin, opinions, and the manners of this society.¹¹¹ He is interested both in the separation of the unmarried members of the two sexes and in the matrimonial customs of the Moravians, in which he sees an explication for the weak demographic growth of their colony.¹¹²

For his part, Lezay-Marnésia expresses a far greater enthusiasm for this community that he describes as a “kingdom of peace, wisdom, and tranquil happiness” (54). In his sales pitch, which consists of proving the viability and, even more, the urgency of the creation of a colony of French emigrants in the New World, the Moravians have a prominent place. Their example shows that it is possible for Europeans to emigrate to America and to prosper there, since they left the swamps of Germany for the mountains of Pennsylvania, where they succeeded in creating a flourishing community. It likewise proves the viability of the patriarchal ideas of Lezay-Marnésia as guidelines for an entire society. Finally, Bethlehem attests to the existence of a Golden Age to be found in America, since Lezay-Marnésia resuscitates the memory of this ideal era when he describes the city’s water mills: “The constant noise, which has the variety and modulations of these varied sources, is one of the characteristic colors of this tableau, which is not restricted to our sight; but who could put it to use, this invisible color? Homer, Tasso, Virgil, you, Sir” (57).

What the authors grouped together by Lezay-Marnésia have in common is that they each contributed to the development of an imaginary Golden Age in Western culture. In Book 18 of the *Iliad*, Homer evokes the marriage of the nymph Thetis and the mortal Peleus, characteristic of this mythical period in which men and gods were intermingled. Virgile develops the notion of the Golden Age in the fourth eclogue of *The Bucolics* as well as in book II of *The Georgics*, before Le Tasse picks up the same theme in *Aminta*.¹¹³ As for Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, his novel *Paul et Virginie* describes a little virtuous community located in the charming setting of the island now known as Mauritius. The second of the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* joins this line of famous texts by describing a self-sufficient society whose members live in close contact with nature. Lezay-Marnésia begins by praising the orderliness and cleanliness that reigns among the Moravians: “The first thing I saw was a wide, clean, straight avenue bordered by stone houses, each separated from the others, with no sign of luxury or any exterior decorations but spacious, comfortable, and quite pleasant by their very simplicity” (55). This high praise is to be compared with

the far more severe judgment that Chastellux renders on one of their farms: “I was curious to see the farm; I found it well laid out, but the house was less clean and less well kept than the English farms; this is because the manners of the Moravians are still Teutonic, as is their language.”¹¹⁴ The mention of order and simplicity by Lezay-Marnésia resonates like a discreet reminder of the distinctive characteristics of any ideal society since the seminal work of Sir Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516).

If the description of Bethlehem is a catalog of accolades, it is because this community put into practice numerous measures advocated by Lezay-Marnésia when he was living in France, so that the praise he heaps on the Moravians is indirectly intended for himself. He expresses, for example, his admiration for the schoolteachers of Bethlehem who dispense to the young ladies an education whose role is to perpetuate the domination of the patriarchy by training them exclusively for their future domestic activities: “They learn to do all the work that is suitable to their sex. . . . They are prepared for all of the duties that they will need to assume later, and every effort is made to raise them in a manner that will make them good mothers” (56–57). These principles recall those that the marquis defended in his *Reading Program for a Young Lady*, in which he distinguished radically the studies suitable for men from those for women and discouraged the latter, notably, from devoting themselves to the sciences.¹¹⁵ Lezay-Marnésia likewise praises the prosperity of the Moravians: “It is a beautiful sight for both the eyes and the mind, this mixture of waters rushing onto the wheels and endowing them with their perpetual motion; . . . flocks in the abundant and rich pastures; and the patriarch who directs and commands, and who, his soul at peace, submits everything around him to his intelligence” (57). This tableau is familiar to the readers of the *Essay on Rural Nature*, in whose verse we see similar images employed to sing the praises of joyous rustic work.¹¹⁶ When all is said and done, this society so close to the dreams the marquis cultivated in France must serve as a model “for all those who wish to reach a state of perfection and wisdom and enjoy all the felicity of which men are capable” (58).

Where Is the Equality?

The ideal city that he was readying himself to describe in detail in the second half of the letter borrows numerous characteristics from the Moravian community. Saint-Pierre—the name that its inhabitants will give it to honor the author of *Paul et Virginie*—will also have its factories, and its women will likewise be raised to become good housewives (56–57). However, a fundamental dimension of Bethlehem disappears in Saint-Pierre: equality. Lezay-Marnésia declares, concerning the Moravians: “What do they lack? The honors that flatter pride, which are for but a small minority that always abuses them; this inequality of means that makes the disfavored dependent on the others, who are all too often

corrupted by their fortune and use it more to humiliate their fellow men than to help them” (58). Although he feigns admiration of the equality of social condition and fortune that reigns among the Moravians, the marquis prefers not to use it as a model when he plans the organization of Saint-Pierre. Indeed, the colony will be founded on hierarchical principles: the workers and the property owners will not be intermingled. The latter will treat the former as Lezay-Marnésia did his workers on his estate in France—as generous and charitable lords—whereas the former will be expected to be content with the subordinate position that is attributed to them in the division of work and administrative and political responsibilities.

According to the indications given by Lezay-Marnésia, it appears that this social inequality is built into the very spatial organization of the future city. Two spaces are separated by a wall: the first, dedicated to the production of goods and foodstuffs, is located outside and is intended for the farmers and artisans; the second, reserved for the landowners, is protected by a wall forming a half circle, enclosing the administrative, educative, and religious buildings. The separation of the two populations is the sign of a hierarchical organization. Although the landowners are substituted, in Lezay-Marnésia’s project, for the nobles of the Old Regime, they constitute a new dominant class that is impossible for the working classes to join.¹¹⁷ No matter that the privilege of birth has been replaced by property, the social classes that result from this new organization are just as impenetrable as those of prerevolutionary France and are a de facto contradiction of the principle of equality to which Lezay-Marnésia proclaimed his adherence. As Albert de Lezay-Marnésia observed about his father, whose contradictions he did not hesitate to point out with a ferociousness that revealed a certain rancor: “My father belonged to that school of philosophers whose philanthropy embraced the whole human race, but too often with the exception of those most close to them.”¹¹⁸ This inconsistency is notable in this particular case, for although the Moravian society provided a model for Saint-Pierre, it was nonetheless only admirable from a distance. In America, Lezay-Marnésia did not seek to experiment with an original social paradigm; he only dreamed of transposing there the superficially reformed double of a period that was brutally interrupted by the Revolution.¹¹⁹

Bethlehem in the Mirror of Memory

The model embodied by the Moravian society was recreated from memory by Lezay-Marnésia. In fact, the second letter was not sent from Bethlehem in Pennsylvania but from Fort Pitt, around sixteen months after the marquis’s visit to this community whose functioning he admired so much.¹²⁰ Although it was not very long, this period had been fraught with difficulties for Lezay-Marnésia, who had been forced to abandon the lands he had acquired in the Scioto region. It

had weighed heavily enough on his mind, no doubt, that he was led to recall with some nostalgia the days spent with the Moravians: “The mind rests so gently, the soul is so contented among the Moravian Brothers, that it is not surprising that mine have wandered in their midst, and that for a long while I have neglected my principal subject” (60). Written in the present, this sentence does not reflect the moment when Lezay-Marnésia was among the Moravians but, instead, the time when he recalled, from Fort Pitt, the days he lived in their company, lost in the mellowness of his reminiscences. Thus, the evocation of Bethlehem is the result of an *a posteriori* reconstruction during which Lezay-Marnésia was moved to idealize the community that had briefly hosted him, and to paint it in idyllic colors that we can assume to be suspicious when we compare them with the far more neutral testimony of Chastellux. The reversal of perspective observable in the last of his American letters, the one sent to Monsieur Audrain after his return to France, has already begun: America is no longer only a space in which a utopian dream can be fulfilled in the future; it already embodies the lost country that the author calls back to mind with a wave of nostalgia, and of which he gives a posthumous representation that turns it into fiction. In other words, the advertising role of posthumous America coexists with a commemorative function, facilitating the preservation of an imaginary period that has been substituted in the author’s memory for the one he actually experienced.

SAINT-PIERRE OR UCHRONOTOPIA

A Bipolar Writing

The description of the utopian project for which Lezay-Marnésia solicited Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s collaboration constantly wavered between two poles: the impatience to build a colony whose viability, necessity, and urgency he strived to prove; and the paradoxical confession of the imaginary and compensatory character of his plans. The marquis vigorously asserts his desire to move from words to action: “Will we never make anything but books? Shall we be contented with providing entertainment, with stimulating vivid, gentle, and sensitive imaginations, with giving them pleasure followed by regrets by continually offering them what are indeed often enchanting visions that we only see, unfortunately, in works of genius with no hope that they will ever be realized?” (63).

However, Lezay-Marnésia regularly contradicts his own pitch by revealing that he was only defending this project so relentlessly because of the ephemeral moral escape that it offers him: “Reduced to hopes, I like to indulge them” (98). Do these two contradictory discourses reflect the bipolar condition of an author going from euphoria to depression in the course of his writing? What is the relationship between his undertaking and the concurrent claims of France, England, the United States, and the Amerindian nations of the Ohio region? To

what extent, finally, is this project, which is apparently turned toward the future, the product of a posthumous representation, recording far more what it could have been than what it remains to become?

A New, New France

Lezay-Marnésia's ambition was to construct the city of Saint-Pierre on the western fringes of Pennsylvania, on the spot where he bought land after fleeing Marietta. He imagined, however, that the inhabitants of Saint-Pierre would soon found other cities in their turn, which would proliferate in the Northwest Territory and beyond (85). This region was, unfortunately, far from being as vacant as Lezay-Marnésia seemed to believe, characterizing it a little too quickly as a "wilderness of the New World" (54). After being explored at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the French, who developed the fur trade there, this part of the American continent was ceded to England by France in the Treaty of Paris in 1763. It changed hands again at the end of the War of Independence, when the United States took control of the area located to the north of the Ohio River and to the west of the Appalachians. Four years later, on July 13, 1787, the Northwest Ordinance was adopted by the American Congress, creating the Northwest Territory. This region was administered by the federal government until the population grew to at least sixty thousand, at which time its inhabitants were allowed to apply for statehood: Ohio became the seventeenth state of the United States of America in 1803.

In 1791, however, this territory administered by the United States was occupied both by Amerindian tribes and scattered British outposts that hindered the expansion of the Americans to the west.¹²¹ It was close to a zone of severe geopolitical friction that Lezay-Marnésia planned to create Saint-Pierre, followed by the founding of its "daughter" colonies there one after the other. His project was in direct competition with the growth of the United States and outlined a sort of new New France whose territory would no longer be oriented on the north-south axis, going from Quebec to Lower Louisiana, but on the east-west axis, between Pennsylvania and the Pacific coast.

Utopia or Uchronia?

At the center of this future expanding colony would be located the city of Saint-Pierre. Its primary vocation would be to welcome opponents of the Revolution: "French people who are still truly Roman Catholics" (61), the former nobles, judges, soldiers still faithful to the crown, and even artists deprived of their former patrons would form the first contingent of emigrants—or at least the marquis feigns to be convinced of this. If we were to believe him, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre would have no trouble recruiting a large contingent: "[Y]our only problem will be to choose from the multitude of those who will accompany you" (63).

Imbued with the nostalgia of a largely idealized feudal past, the Marnésian utopian project embodies at the same time a form of “uchronia” before the term existed.¹²² Literally, uchronia is an imaginary construct that consists of representing the possible development of a real society following a disruptive incident whose occurrence gradually modifies, through a chain of events, the general physiognomy of the world.¹²³ Obeying what we might call the “logic of the past conditional” (“What would have happened if . . .”), the author writes an alternative history in the course of which this hypothetical society, initially familiar, becomes more and more alien and eventually gives rise to a reality that is distinct from the one with which we are familiar. Lezay-Marnésia adopted a similar approach with Saint-Pierre, whose conception derived from a criticism of the history of France as it developed from the beginning of the Revolution—differing only in that he rewrote the history of France in another space: the fringes of the United States. The city of Saint-Pierre is both a utopia and a uchronia, because it embodies in America the ideal society that France could have become if its history had unwound differently. We might call it, in fact, a *uchronotopia*, a neologism that denotes the merging of utopia and uchronia in the same project.

What is the disruptive event that prompted Lezay-Marnésia to choose to rewrite the history of France in America? It is the moment when the actors in the revolutionary movement abandoned the goal of amending the absolute monarchy and began a systematic challenge to the very principles on which it was founded. Lezay-Marnésia deplored precisely the fact that the Revolution had sunk into what he considered to be an anarchical drift and declared that the patriots had rendered the people of France ferocious after having turned it away from the wisdom that would have consisted in restricting itself to selected reforms (63). The idea that the Revolution had exceeded the limits it should have respected is also articulated by Lezay-Marnésia’s fictitious double as he is presented in the satirical work by Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry* (1792).

Brackenridge had met Lezay-Marnésia in 1791 in Pittsburgh before turning him into a character in his novel. He attributes to the marquis reflections that correspond to those that the latter formulates in the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*: “[T]here never was a people more generally disposed to a degree of reform, than the people of France, at the commencement of the revolution. . . . But a reform once begun, it was found impossible to arrest it at a middle point. It may be resolved into a thousand causes, but the great cause was, the insatiable nature of the human mind, that will not be contented with what is moderate.”¹²⁴

According to Lezay-Marnésia, what had begun as a reformist movement whose ambitions were perfectly praiseworthy had fallen into unfortunate excesses, the very ones that had prompted his friend Duval d’Éprémesnil to say, “And I too, Monsieur, trusted in the people; I was severely mistaken; the

king that I was cursing is an angel; the people I was invoking is a fury."¹²⁵ The uchronotopia of Lezay-Marnésia is a mental experiment involving the imagining of a world in which the Revolution would not have plunged French society into what he sees as an anarchical drift, but in which it would have instead wisely confined itself to the reforms advocated by him and his friends in the Club des Impartiaux (Club of the Impartials).¹²⁶ In short, Saint-Pierre is an attempt by Lezay-Marnésia to revive a defunct France, a France whose rebirth seemed possible at the dawn of the Revolution and that, failing to be born in metropolitan France, could be born anew in the fringes of the United States.

France: A Veritable Scioto

If America is described by Lezay-Marnésia as a space in which a past France can be recreated, France is presented by the Parisian revolutionaries, conversely, as the true Scioto. Indeed, among the adversaries of the Scioto Company, numerous were those who borrowed from America the values that are most frequently attributed to it in the works of the *philosophes*—liberty, equality, authenticity, virtue, tolerance—in order to associate them hereafter with France as it embarked upon the Revolution. This transfer is observed by Desan in a multitude of pamphlets and satirical articles published between 1789 and 1790: “Once the nation no longer ‘trembled under an oppressive regime,’ remaking France took precedence over colonizing the New World. Transatlantic cultural exchange fortified nationalist sentiment: the self-dubbed Patriots sought to steal the mantle of authenticity and liberty from l’Amérique and drape it around the new French nation instead.”¹²⁷ While Lezay-Marnésia portrayed himself as a patriarch leading a persecuted people in the New World, it was France henceforth that was featured as the Promised Land in the discourse of the patriots. The abolition of privileges and the sale of the church’s property gave them new reasons to criticize the emigration of Frenchmen to the United States: if these people were really seeking equality, liberty, and land to cultivate, France could henceforth offer it all to them while sparing them the dangers presented by a risky transatlantic crossing and the American “savages,” not to speak of the dishonor attached to the desertion of your motherland.

Titled “The French on the Banks of the Scioto, Epistle to an Emigrant to Kentucky” (1790), a poem by François Andrieux (1759–1833) reveals the new meaning that is assigned to America in the writings of the patriots.¹²⁸ This text features a philosopher who, after being imprisoned in the Bastille, decides to take up residence on the banks of the Scioto. The news of the French Revolution is brought to him by aristocrats hostile to the Revolution. When he learns that the values of liberty and equality, formerly identified with America, are now alive in his country, he hastens to return there, abandoning the New World to the *ci-devant* who are preparing to recreate there the abuses of the Old Regime.

In Lezay-Marnésia's discourse, as in that of the Parisian patriots, "France" and "America" are less neutral toponyms than concepts laden with political, moral, and polemical connotations whose meaning changes according to the person who employs them. Before being geographical spaces, America and France are ideas whose definitions are so closely connected that their characteristic elements spread from one concept to the other according to the viewpoint the speaker is defending.

However, if the Marnésian utopia is indeed a reactionary political construction, it is not necessarily counterrevolutionary in the sense generally given to this expression. Unlike the aristocrats who gathered around the comtes de Provence and d'Artois in Coblenz, from whence they organized the struggle against the Revolution, the inhabitants of Saint-Pierre do not assemble with the intention of returning to France brandishing their weapons. Lezay-Marnésia foresees far more peaceful relations between the colony and the former country of its members: "I believe that good people should leave France in this time of willful disorder and misfortune; but I also believe that, forced by their sensitivity and their principles to abandon her, they should conserve a tender and painful memory of her and try to share with her all the good things they will have found in a more peaceful world" (74). For the citizens of the American colony, France will not be a country to conquer: there will only subsist a sentimental bond between it and Saint-Pierre, illustrated by the offering of "a wealth of plants" (74) to add new charms to the gardens of France. The peaceful character of the future colony is expressed, in addition, by its method of expansion. Lezay-Marnésia is convinced that happiness can only exist in cities of moderate size, recalling those of ancient Greece. When the population of Saint-Pierre has reached a maximum, the surplus colonists will leave to found other cities that, while independent of each other, will nonetheless remain united by an annual meeting of representatives charged with discussing their common interests (85). In short, Saint-Pierre will serve as the capital of an empire whose growth will be accomplished by demographic, and not military, means. But how does the ambitious marquis conceive the relations between Saint-Pierre and the government of the United States?

Birth of the "Salad Bowl" Theory

Lezay-Marnésia intends to build Saint-Pierre between the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers, not far from Pittsburgh. His text diverges from the utopian genre by anticipating the creation of a new society within a preexisting political entity, instead of situating it, as Sade does, for example, with the Tamoé utopia in *Aline et Valcour* (1793), in an unexplored region of the world, in this case in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The marquis clarifies that Saint-Pierre will submit to the established power: "I know that it cannot be a state in a state. It will be under the

authority of the state of Pennsylvania and will not be a power in and of itself” (90). However, the future society will still preserve its own characteristics: “Like the Moravian Brothers or, if you prefer, like the Jews, it would have particular usages and customs that, far from being contrary to the laws of the state, would only impose a stricter duty to conform to them” (90). The comparison of the citizens of Saint-Pierre to the Jewish people is useful to the marquis in imagining ways to preserve the identity of a particular people living within a larger community. By what means, therefore, does the marquis intend to safeguard the “usages” of his countrymen? Lezay-Marnésia recommends that the people of Saint-Pierre keep themselves at a distance from the rest of the United States. According to him, its isolation amid the American population will allow it to maintain its identity intact, a goal that will also be furthered by its refusal to participate in public affairs:

Passive citizens, enjoying the protection and benefits of a free and moderate government, your good Frenchmen will restrict themselves to paying their taxes and will levy none themselves unless it be at the request of the administration. The seats of representatives and senators, and especially the portfolios of ministers, would only distract them from fonder concerns and more precious interests. They will be far above these offices, which their sense of duty will always lead them to respect, but which their good sense will prevent them from ever occupying. (92)

In Lezay-Marnésia’s view, the inhabitants of Saint-Pierre will turn away from American political life owing to their attachment to their original language and culture, considered to be defining elements of an identity that they will need to guard all the more jealously as it could easily be contaminated. Conversely, the United States will only ever be for them a simple host country and not a superior community in which they would wish to dissolve their differences along with those of immigrants from other countries. If critics have credited Saint-John de Crèvecoeur with having offered in the third of the *Letters from an American Farmer* the original formulation of the concept of the melting pot, Lezay-Marnésia is a partisan, before its time, of the idea of the salad bowl, according to which the different components of the American nation are juxtaposed rather than mixed together, each preserving its own characteristics within the United States.¹²⁹ While it is true that the image of the “salad bowl” does not flow as such from Lezay-Marnésia’s pen (just as Crèvecoeur develops the idea of melting without employing the term “melting pot”), it is no doubt a prefiguration of multiculturalism that is conceptualized by this French aristocrat for whom communities of distinct origins can coexist on American soil without having to adopt the goal of melting their differences into a homogenous identity.

If the expression “salad bowl” (to which the Canadians prefer “cultural mosaic”) did not take on its current sociological import until the 1950s, the concept for which it serves as a metaphor had indeed been imagined as early as 1791 by Lezay-Marnésia.

The marquis is absolutely determined to demonstrate that the city that he describes at length to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre is feasible. His rationale rests in particular on precise economic calculations: “We said, Sir, that each family of property owners would possess 1,500 acres of land. With such an expanse of remarkably fertile land, how easy will it not be for them to furnish the workshops with all the hemp, flax, and wool they will need, as well as the wheat, potatoes, vegetables, and meat necessary to feed the workers? Each one of them will contribute a hundredth of the cost of the above” (82).

The recourse to precise calculations, to flattering expectations that are nonetheless wrapped in the mantle of prudence, was familiar to the readers of the *Prospectus* that the Scioto Company had distributed in the autumn of 1789. This document shared, notably, the following prediction: “Let’s suppose moreover that the settlers arrive here next March. The first harvest, that of autumn 1790, will be 1,500,000 bushels: a third will go to the farmers, another sixth will be put aside to donate to people who arrive on their own from Europe to settle in this country or who may arrive from some other part of America, and there will still remain 700,000 bushels to send to Europe.”³⁰ It is paradoxical that Lezay-Marnésia borrows from the Scioto Company a mendacious rhetoric of which he was himself a victim, and that he uses it to persuade his countrymen to come share a fate that, as he knows better than anyone, is far from idyllic. On paper, the lands are claimed, divided up, farmed, and produce profits in scarcely a few years: Crèvecoeur, whose *Voyage* may be read in many respects as publicity for America, had nevertheless the honesty to warn candidates for emigration of the numerous challenges that awaited them at the beginning of their undertaking.³¹ With more experience in gardening and in the laying out of property than in the clearing of lands and draining of swamps, Lezay-Marnésia passed willingly over difficulties that he had never personally faced.

A Paper Castle

However, as detailed as Lezay-Marnésia’s uchronotopic project is, it is nonetheless haunted by the specter of its own negation. Although the author predicts that Saint-Pierre will subsist a great number of centuries, certain passages of the letter clearly betray misgivings. Lezay-Marnésia presents the different stages of construction of the future city: “Whether of wood or bricks, the houses are quickly erected” (76); “In the second year, the Lord’s house will be built. . . . In the third year, the buildings designed to render justice and to hold assemblies will rise” (83–84). The succinct character of these notations (83–84) reveals the minimal

interest the author has in the practical conditions of the construction of the future settlement: everything happens as if the buildings were going to rise on their own, with the swiftness and ease of an opera set. This comparison is, in fact, used by Lezay-Marnésia to insist that it is an inappropriate manner of describing his writing: “Do not think, Sir, that driven by the pleasure of imagining and describing I am using my pen as if it were the whistle at the opera used to produce new decorations in the blink of an eye. Nothing is so rigorously true as everything that I have the honor of telling you” (76).

We are dealing here with a veritable denial in the Freudian sense of the term, that is, a statement by which a subject reveals the very truth that he is in the process of denying.¹³² The opera image that Lezay-Marnésia only uses to assert that it in no way characterizes his writing is, paradoxically, the best metaphor for it: despite himself, he reveals to the reader that his forecasts do not rest on anything tangible, and that his colony will have no more reality than a cardboard decor. After the out-and-out lies contained in his letters in the *Nouveau prospectus* and the first missive of the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*, Lezay-Marnésia turned to a subtler form of fabrication in which he proves to be a victim of his own rhetoric and only awakens so brutally from his own illusions because he had deluded himself with them for so long a time. He also interrupts the thread of his discourse to comment on the writing of the letter: “Excuse me, Sir, for these innumerable details, perhaps useless and boring to you but quite attractive to me. When the whole face of the earth is battered by dreadful storm winds, the idea of your republic gives me repose, consoles me, and charms me; it grips me, and I caress it lovingly. I am like a passenger surrounded by dangers in a furious sea, threatened by lightning, terrified by waves, who discovers, by the bright, fleeting, sinister light of the flashes, one of the Islands of the Blessed” (87).

This passage contradicts the dominant discourse of the letter. In order to promote the idea of emigration, Lezay-Marnésia multiplied the promises of peace and happiness to the future inhabitants of Saint-Pierre. However, this paragraph dispels the dreams that the rest of the text had painted in such glowing colors by hinting at the unenviable fate of its author. Moreover, the comparison of Saint-Pierre to the Islands of the Blessed further undermines his arguments. At first glance, the rural tranquility that reigns, according to Pindar, on these mythical islands could justify the parallel Lezay-Marnésia draws with the banks of the Monongahela.¹³³ Nonetheless, in Greek mythology these islands are located in hell: that is where virtuous souls find their repose after death. “Utopia” is a term whose meaning is rendered ambiguous by its Greek root: is it the “place of happiness” or the “place that exists nowhere”?¹³⁴ The fundamental ambiguity of the utopian plan is at the very heart of the society imagined by Lezay-Marnésia: while he pretends to believe that Saint-Pierre embodies the promise of happiness on earth, he is led to admit that it represents especially

the hope of a postmortem felicity that helps him, albeit with great difficulty, to bear his current misfortunes. Lezay-Marnésia is nowhere so clear about the true object of the letter, however, than in the concluding paragraph:

Finally, Sir, I've reached the end of this enormous letter, which I have just as much trouble tearing myself away from as you will have reading it, if you have the energy to read it to the end. *Reduced to hopes, I like to indulge them.* Deceived in my expectations both by the people I fled and by the one I came looking for, I thought that the latter would take justice and reason as guides in seeking liberty, and that the former, who seemed to have become wiser, would be able to benefit from the liberty that both circumstances and the innumerable mistakes of its former masters gave to it. (98; emphasis added)

By admitting the difficulty he experienced in putting an end to his letter, Lezay-Marnésia recognized the therapeutic character of an exercise in writing of which he was, ultimately, the true addressee, since it was highly unlikely that he would receive a response from a famous writer whom he had never met (and no sign of a response has, indeed, ever been found). The length of the letter, which represents by itself more than three-quarters of the volume, suggests that the time devoted to the writing gave him a brief respite from his oppressive personal difficulties. Saint-Pierre was already playing a compensatory role in relation to the initial plan for a settlement on the banks of the Scioto. In the end, it is the writing of this letter that mitigates the pain of the failure of Saint-Pierre by permitting the author to savor in his imagination a city that he senses will never be born: "May the man of genius, the good man I am asking to assemble them, accept this honorable mission and become the benefactor of a society of true wise men and of their descendants! At the very least, may my ideas, so pure, not be dismissed as pleasant pipe dreams!" (98). The repetition of the formula "May . . ." turns this letter into a kind of supplication and reveals the chimerical character of a paper castle he has strived in vain to build in America. While it was being presented as a project to be realized in the near future, the uchronopic city of Saint-Pierre was described when it was already defunct. Not being able to actually bring it into existence, Lezay-Marnésia gives it a consistency in language through its posthumous representation.

LETTERS FROM THE MONONGAHELA: FROM A POSSIBLE AMERICA TO A
POSTHUMOUS AMERICA

A French America

In many respects, the last letter of the volume is the most interesting by what it does not say rather than by what it does. It is addressed by Lezay-Marnésia to

his eldest son, Adrien, and begins by speaking of “Azile,” the four-hundred-acre plantation the marquis had acquired in Pennsylvania after the collapse of his plans in the Northwest Territory: “I have left, my dear Adrien, this *Azile* that I have praised so much without going too far. In all likelihood I will never see it again; however, I wish to speak to you about it once again, or rather I want to acquaint you with the neighbors I left there. I need to do this to soothe my heart. This little picture, worthy of ancient times, may interest you, although to paint it well a common brush would not suffice; one would need Greuze’s delicate strokes” (99; emphasis original).

It is essential to note this “or rather,” which effects a change of theme in the course of a sentence, in order to understand the stakes hidden in this letter. Lezay-Marnésia announces the elegiac description of a lost paradise before modifying the object of the text by introducing into it Monsieur and Madame des Pintreaux, his neighbors. Why does he immediately leave the property on which he had spent the last remnants of his fortune? And to what extent does the story of his countrymen allow him to gloss over the pathetic outcome of his grand projects in the New World?

Lezay-Marnésia takes numerous liberties with the biography of a Frenchman whom he had indeed met in Pittsburgh in 1791, Jean-Baptiste-Charles Lucas des Pintreaux.³⁵ The story narrated in the third of the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* may be read as a rewriting of the life of Lucas des Pintreaux, heavily influenced by the memory of a moral tale published by Lezay-Marnésia in 1766, *L'Heureuse Famille (The Happy Family)*.³⁶ The marquis relates to his son the love between Monsieur des Pintreaux and Élise, opposed, alas, by their families because of the disparity of their social conditions. After receiving letters of recommendation from Benjamin Franklin, Monsieur des Pintreaux and his beloved embark for America, where they are married before acquiring property not far from Fort Pitt.

In scarcely five years, Monsieur and Madame des Pintreaux achieve prosperity: “Their flocks had grown and their fields expanded; their orchard was already producing an abundance of fruit, and three charming children added a new interest to their days, doubling their happiness” (109). Just as in the second of the *Letters*, the grammatical constructions used by the author illustrate his lack of concern for the practical dimension of life in the New World: in reading him, one would be led to believe that the flocks multiply without any help from the farmers, that the fields increase in size by virtue of a natural disposition to grow, and that the fruit fall on their own accord into the baskets of the farmers.

This letter presents a remarkable chiasmus between the path of Monsieur des Pintreaux and that of Lezay-Marnésia himself. Whereas the marquis went to America by choice and decided to return to France at the beginning of 1792, Monsieur and Madame des Pintreaux were forced to emigrate by their families

and prefer to stay in the United States when the opportunity to return to their motherland presents itself. Indeed, Lezay-Marnésia tells us that years after her departure, Madame des Pintreaux returns alone to France to collect the money from an inheritance. Repenting, her family greets her with open arms and urges her to stay with them and send for her husband and their children back in the United States. But the courageous Élise leaves as quickly as possible, eager to find again the “peace of mind” and the “pure pleasure” (109) that one only enjoys in the New World. By staging the refusal of Élise, Lezay-Marnésia was suggesting that even if an emigration to America is initially the result of exterior constraints, it may ultimately become a matter of personal choice. This crossing of Lezay-Marnésia’s path and the discourse in his *Letters*, in opposite directions, reproduces the same phenomenon we saw in Crèveœur’s letters, since the latter writer decided to prolong his leave from his consular position in New York until he lost it, while continuing to praise the United States in the *Voyage dans la Haute Pensylvanie et dans l’État de New York*.¹³⁷ After portraying America as a land of milk and honey, the two authors preferred to contradict their works by their acts rather than publicly repudiating their declarations in favor of French emigration across the Atlantic. Lezay-Marnésia concludes the story of Monsieur and Madame des Pintreaux with this statement: “If a few French families, with sufficient personal fortunes, were to settle around Fort Pitt, they would discover in this country the charming banks of the Loire and the Seine, but even more favored by nature and with the peace and happiness that have abandoned them” (112). This fascinating utterance implies that the American territory is another France where immigrants can rediscover the most pleasant things that they left behind in their country while liberating themselves from the evils, injustices, and violence that rendered life in their motherland unbearable.

The Art of Denial

In a movement of self-contradiction that is typical of Lezay-Marnésia, however, he does not close his letter with this reassuring and paradoxical image, comparing emigration to America to a trip to France. The letter finishes with a declaration of gratitude to M. Audrain, “a Frenchman living in Fort Pitt for five or six years”: “He brought enchantment to my solitude with the most interesting conversations, guided me through the most difficult circumstances, consoled me in my distress, and prevented me from falling into total despair. He helped me with his time, his work, his intelligence, and all the resources of his mind, and ultimately rescued me from a horrible predicament, from the misery in which the dishonest actions of the disastrous Scioto Company had plunged me” (112).

“Most difficult circumstances,” “total despair”: the reader will learn no more than that, for the letter is soon closed, once Lezay-Marnésia has recommended M. Audrain and his children to his elder son. One notes the strange structure of

this text, which begins, as noted previously, on an elegiac note in order to evoke the loss of a property of which, ultimately, the author says nothing, before speaking of a couple that he proposes as a model for potential emigrants although he reinvents their story, and then speaking in veiled terms of his return to France for reasons that he does not divulge. These literary obfuscations are the reflection of contradictions by Lezay-Marnésia, who has turned denial into a fine art: while still dreaming of promoting the colonial project to which he sacrificed two years of his life and most of his fortune, a project that was the conclusion of an existence devoted to reading and political meditations, he knew very well that he was the victim of his own illusions and of the Scioto Company. The story of Monsieur and Madame des Pintreaux is only a diversion that allowed Lezay-Marnésia to pass over the failure of his grandiose dreams in America.

“The Kind Illusions of the Golden Age”

A text published in 1800 by Lezay-Marnésia in the second edition of the “Reading Program for a Young Lady” is complementary to the third of the *Letters* in that it continues the elegiac discourse that this letter only sketched out. Titled “Letter to M. Audrain, merchant in Pittsburg,” this missive suggests how greatly he misses the country that he was only too happy to leave eight years before: “Beautiful Monongahela, wide and clear Allegheny, my happiness has remained on your delightful banks; I shall not find it on the shores of the rivers in France where peace will surely not return anytime soon” (139–40). Although he had promised the Frenchmen who would settle in America that they would rediscover there the banks of the Loire and the Seine, he declares himself incapable of feeling in France the delightful emotions that suffused him on the banks of the New World: “However, I had scarcely left it when my heart leapt back toward this tranquil America. . . . Yes, my friend, on these happy shores one is always young at heart, always at peace because he desires nothing more than the facile perfection of the beautiful, superb sites that are so easily rendered fertile by his spade. It calls out to settlers from all reaches of the universe, inviting them to come and *bring to life the pleasant illusions of the golden age on the soil where it should exist, if it is still possible for it to exist anywhere*” (142–43; emphasis added).

In appearance, nothing has changed between this letter and the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*: the reader finds the same latent influence of Crèvecoeur’s *Lettres*, the same celebration of a felicity available to the reader if only he will consent to cross the ocean. And nonetheless, something has clearly changed beneath the surface. While the *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain* moved from the description of a posthumous America to that of a potential America, the progression goes in the opposite direction in Lezay-Marnésia’s writings, which end up commemorating the memory of a retrospectively idealized country after having depicted it as a place in which one could revive a France that had

disappeared. Despite the fact that the *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* sometimes sound like an advertisement, touting the advantages of emigration and the profits awaiting Frenchmen in America, they still betray now and then the uncertainties of the author—allowing a complaint about the Scioto Company to escape him or sharing a detail that revealed how much more difficult his situation was than he wanted to admit. In the end, if Lezay-Marnésia presented himself as a contemporary of an American Golden Age, it was especially to get his revenge, through language, on a reality that resisted his desires.

Conversely, his letter to M. Audrain represents a different exercise. If we are to believe him, the America that he hurried to leave, at the risk of losing his life in his own country, was still the home of the Golden Age that is constantly evoked in both his and Crèvecoeur's texts. Of course, this ideal period has not completely vanished at the time of his writing: "There, for many long years to come, the people will enjoy few of the pleasures that luxury and the arts bring, but they will be rich with the gifts offered by a fertile, inexhaustible, magnificent nature and happy with the absence of uncontrollable passions and the vices that corrupt, ravish, and destroy many peoples who used to be civilized" (139–40). However, it was now impossible for Lezay-Marnésia to return there, and it was with many regrets that he described a country that appeared to him, henceforth, with the deceptive allure of an increasingly distant past. The advertising function of the posthumous representation, which reproduced the fruits of a collective imagination that preceded the journey, thus gave way, once the trip itself was over, to a commemorative function that idealized an expired America at the time of the writing. It was in this country now doubly distant (since both space and time now separate the author from it) and in this country alone that a perfect felicity was possible: "Farewell, my friend, my heart is heavy; I glimpsed happiness, and it is with the fondest regret that I recall it; tears are coming to my eyes. Farewell" (143). This was, of course, a retrospective illusion. Just as Crèvecoeur recalled sentimentally the life he had led in the New York colony, a life that entailed numerous difficulties, Lezay-Marnésia was embellishing the memory of the existence he knew near Pittsburgh, the very existence that displeased him so much that he sold his paradise dirt cheap and left Eden at the risk of meeting the guillotine at the end of his journey. For Lezay-Marnésia and Crèvecoeur, not only is happiness elsewhere, but it is also before. The conjunction of American exoticism and the nostalgia for a past age, this convergence that we call "posthumous America," is at the heart of their respective works. It is a special case of the manner in which men deceive themselves on the nature of happiness; that is, by setting it in a time and place that they can only access by memory. The nostalgia provoked by an America that has radically changed in the interval between the journey and the writing is likewise the source of the literary venture that will be studied next: that of Chateaubriand.