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When Self-Reliance Sows Seeds of Self-Destruction

There does not initially seem to exist a modicum of commonality between a sermon describing in disturbing detail the inevitable damnation of ignorant infidels, and a series of nominal letters praising the growth of human industry, thus marking the subsequent decline in religious fervor. In fact, Jonathan Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," serves as a scathing repudiation of the emerging movement, the Enlightenment, which J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur is a proponent of, and writes about in his "Letters from an American Farmer." Enlightenment thinking lauded man's intrinsic potential for greatness; the movement allowed for ground-breaking discoveries and advancements in science and technology, and newfound freedom of expression within the realm of the arts. The most salient aspects of this era were the individual's heightened initiative to question the world around him, and the ability to do things for his own sake, to build himself from the ground up. The question under consideration is one regarding the extent of the role that this idea of self-reliance should play in human lives, evident in the subject matter the authors delve into, and how they present it. Despite their opposing stances on the notion of self-reliance, authors Edwards and De Crevecoeur, through their individual abilities to manipulate language in their attempts to justify their claims, reveal contradictions within their own thinking, thus suggesting that self-reliance is, within itself, a paradoxical concept.

Edwards is acutely aware of the frighteningly immense power words possess and demonstrates his masterful command of language in the title of his sermon, "Sinners in the

Hands of an Angry God.” This clever use of synecdoche prompts the reader or listener to associate an intimidating and imposing presence with the notion of God, that the hands of a transcendental entity are constantly hovering over the expanse of the universe; the idea of an invisible, omnipotent being controlling the entire course of everything that was, is, and will be, is not the simplest for a human to grasp, but hands are. Edwards’ belief about self-reliance can be encapsulated as such: that all humans are completely and utterly helpless unless saved and thereby mercifully held in the hands of the Almighty himself. For the multitude of sinners who have not repented, those “foolish children of men delude[ing] themselves in their own schemes, and in confidence in their own strength and wisdom” who, “trust to nothing but a shadow” (Edwards 196), God will not hesitate, when the day of Judgement arrives, to “withdraw His hand” (Edwards 197) and watch without pity as they fall into the fiery pits of hell in which they will suffer for all of eternity. Edwards is calling for individuals to relinquish their illusions of being independent, of being in control of any aspect of their lives. However, if humans are truly incapable of anything themselves, are truly powerless, entirely dependent creatures, Edwards would not be fervently urging sinners to repent. This is a choice humans have the power to make for themselves *because* of their ability to think and reason, and only upon ruminating can they come to the conclusion that they need saving, especially after considering how much destruction human hands are truly capable of. Perhaps it would be helpful to look at what happens when people are, or rather, when they believe that they are completely self-reliant, and trust in their own definitions of right and wrong.

Readers and listeners of the Edwards sermon alike are fully capable of understanding the power that hands enable humanity to wield, both in their creative and destructive potential, the latter of which is delineated in one of De Crevecoeur’s perturbing encounters on an otherwise

pleasant stroll through Charleston, South Carolina. “I perceived a Negro, suspended in the cage, and left there to expire! I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes, his cheek bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places, and his body seemed covered in a multitude of wounds...The living specter, though deprived of his eyes, could still distinctly hear, and in his uncouth dialect begged me to give him some water to allay his thirst” (De Crevecoeur 336-7). Human hands are capable of unspeakable, unjustifiable acts of cruelty, a sentiment further supported by De Crevecoeur’s inability, or lack of desire to, attempt to explain how or why one human being could subject another to the fate of the slave within the cage. The reader shudders along with De Crevecoeur as he/she pictures a bloodied, beaten, and bruised body with gaping holes where eyes should have been, once a human being, then treated as an animal, now left as mere food for the birds and begging for death.

What De Crevecoeur depicts is the paragon of human helplessness and brokenness. What kind of world could the slave with gouged-out eyes possibly see for himself? Certainly not a world in which self-reliance was ever a possibility for him. He lived in a world where he had to use his hands to work for his own survival, but where no amount of that work would have been able to buy his freedom. He lived in a world where ownership meant power, but where he could own nothing because he was considered property. He lived in a world where literacy meant the ability to question and challenge authority, but where he was intentionally kept illiterate. If self-reliance involves depending solely on one’s resources, then this is impossible for the individual who starts with nothing, and therefore has no resources to begin with. If the person starting without resources at their disposal is virtually incapable of becoming self-reliant, then that leaves the person starting with resources at their disposal, in which case the concept is undermined. It is impossible for a human to create something out of nothing.

De Crevecoeur's description of America as having "an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself" (323), is flawed since the success of America's agrarian economy cannot exclusively be attributed to the Europeans' "national genius" (323), but to a system of labor that exploited millions of enslaved people. In this case, the work of the American, whose hands were largely soiled with blood instead of dirt, is negligible. The notion that America "is a people of cultivators" (323), might have been true at one point in time, but as the nation saw an increase in population and the need to sustain it, self-reliance was realized as an impossible feat; rapid growth of industry requires mass production of goods, and this requires a massive workforce able to withstand the demanding conditions of plantation farming. This is where the institution of slavery comes in. Self-reliance in this case ironically involves dependence, and once this dependence proves beneficial to one's personal gain, moral imperatives fly out the window.

What is somewhat comical is that, before happening to stumble upon the poor soul left to perish in the tree, De Crevecoeur wouldn't have hesitated to denounce the lives of those living on the outskirts of agrarian society; "once hunters, farewell to the plow...In a little time their success in the woods makes them neglect their tillage. They trust to the natural fecundity of the earth, and therefore do little; carelessness in fencing often exposes what little they sow to destruction" (330). Neglecting their tillage? Disgraceful! Not grabbing the plow and starting up a farm, not utilizing man's incredible tools, his hands, to sustain himself, was the equivalent of a crime in De Crevecoeur's mind, the wrong way to live. One could argue that these hunters are more self-sustaining than "self-made" plantation owners could ever imagine themselves being. Hunters gather resources with their own two hands. They rely on their knowledge of the forest and all of the plants and creatures inhabiting it, and trust in the ability of their hands to steady the

gun with which they use to procure their next meal, or fend off enemies, in order to survive. Perhaps best of all, not having any use for slaves, these backwoods settlers are spared from having to witness scenes from which “Humanity herself would have recoiled back with horror” (337), scenes that force De Crevecoeur to re-evaluate the moral cost of upholding the ultimate American value of so-called self-reliance.

Lest the creative potential of human hands be forgotten amongst all the talk of death and destruction, both authors compare man to a plant, a symbol of life and growth potential, as a method of delineating the degree of man’s inherent power, or lack thereof. “Under all the cultivations of heaven, they brought forth bitter and poisonous fruit” (Edwards 192). The cultivations of heaven could only be the work of the Creator himself, and if Edwards believes that God created the heavens, he must also accept the notion that God’s hands also crafted the earth, and all of the creatures and plants that inhabit it—including the sinners. No plant can yield anything unless a planter is initially present to plant the seed. In the same way the “poisonous fruit” cannot be produced without the actions of the “wicked unbelieving Israelites” (192), sinners cannot be produced without the actions of God. According to Edwards, however, it isn’t God, but sinners who are able to produce this fruit, and by attributing a product to those assumed incapable of anything on their own, being fragile, powerless humans and all, Edwards betrays his opinion regarding self-reliance, but not without making a good point. Sinners come up with their own notions of morality instead of relying on what God deems as right or wrong. In doing so, in trusting solely in their own devices, their own ideals, moral corruption is inevitable, as evidenced by the product of self-reliance in De Crevecoeur’s account of Charlestown. Self-reliance produces bad fruit, which contains bad seeds, which then produce more bad fruit. The whole point of self-reliance is supposedly human progress, yet it appears every time humans put all

their faith in themselves, they end up destroying each other, and ultimately themselves, further expounded upon in a series of surprisingly fitting plant metaphors.

While it is true that neither plants nor people can grow entirely on their own, they both possess traits that enable them to survive because of the very fact; for plants, the ability to turn light into nourishment, for humans, cognition aiding in resourcefulness. This commonality between man and plant is reinforced by De Crevecoeur via simile; “Men are like plants; the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow. We are nothing but we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment” (326). Who and what people become is influenced by certain pre-existing conditions. The environment into which one is placed determines who one will become, which directly conflicts with De Crevecoeur’s stance on complete self-reliance. A farmer must rely on myriad factors to enable his survival, which include, but are not limited to, the crops he decides to grow, soil quality, elevation, proximity to a water source, animals and other pests, season, weather, etc. He must accept that there exist factors outside of his control, and work with these limitations in mind to prevent disaster, and to ensure a good harvest.

Now, one cannot always assume that all growth is beneficial. In another branch of his plant metaphor, De Crevecoeur, regarding the Europeans who migrated to America, states, “like all other plants they have taken root and flourished” (325)! The type of plant the author claims is flourishing is not specified; these thriving plants may just as well be weeds. Human hands are not required to plant them, and in that respect, weeds are considered self-sustaining. Conversely, weeds cannot survive completely on their own, which is why they engage in parasitic relationships with the organisms around them, draining their surrounding environment of life;

“They are as great heaps of light chaff before the whirlwind; or large quantities of dry stubble before devouring flames” (Edwards 193). These plants, and the humans they represent, burn easily because their efforts were fruitless, literally produced nothing substantive, leading to their ruin, their death. Weeds consume everything but yield nothing. They continue to grow and spread until everything around them is dead, and, once they have nothing to draw from, are forced, by their own hands (or rather, leaves) to meet their inevitable end.

Even though Edwards and De Crevecoeur are superficially strictly anti-self-reliance and pro-self-reliance, respectively, their method of conveying their intended message is the same: the written medium. Sure, Edwards and De Crevecoeur have specific messages they intend to convey to their audiences about self-reliance, but within this lies a message they have inadvertently addressed to themselves, messages revealing doubts about their own stances on self-reliance. This doubt manifests itself in De Crevecoeur’s speechlessness, wherein he experiences somewhat of an existential crisis, after witnessing the horror of the slave-labor dependent economy the self-reliant American mindset had created. For Edwards, this realization is not as apparent. What Edwards does not realize in his illustration of the unfathomable power of God, through hand-centered imagery, is that he humanizes God. Edwards uses the power he claims humans do not possess, to explain the powers of God; he was forced to rely on his own notion of God, and to draw from his own knowledge as a mere human to express how utterly incapable humans are.

Complete self-reliance is a human ideal; man wishes to pride himself on success based on his ability alone, but this ideal is just that—an ideal. On the other hand, total dependence is unproductive and unrealistic. Both are ultimately destructive. Human progress requires trusting in one’s own ability to recognize that he/she is flawed, and to realize that one is surrounded by

other people for a reason. We all rely, to some extent, on the thoughts and beliefs of others for sources of inspiration, for senses of purpose, for answers. It requires accepting that, while the hands of man are not capable of everything, they are indicative of great potential, especially since they allow him to communicate the inner workings of his mind to the world around him—and there is immense power in that.

Works Cited

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