“Nail-gnawing” in a New World Landscape: From Allusion to Disillusion in John Beveridge’s *Epistolae familiares*

How new the “New World” actually is represents one of the central issues of early European-American literature. For while much of colonial writing aimed at communicating what few Europeans before had experienced, the compositional and metaphorical strategies utilized by these literary pioneers were remarkably familiar. This article, by focusing upon one American Neo-Latin example, John Beveridge’s 1765 *Epistolae familiares et alia quaedam miscellanea, Familiar Epistles and Other Miscellaneous Pieces*, will illustrate the not infrequent consequences of this apparent familiarity. For, on the one hand, the cultural milieu and training of writers such as John Beveridge made certain classically-influenced practices, such as Neo-Latin verse composition, almost inevitable. On the other hand, despite the great faith placed in such linguistic skills to tame the American landscape, the strategies for coping with the “New World” often met with abject failure.

In John Beveridge’s *Epistolae familiares et alia quaedam miscellanea*, “the last poetic miscellany printed in Philadelphia before the revolution” (LeVernier 142-143), the reader is confronted with the poetic reification of the American immigrant experience. Beveridge’s Latin poems, written throughout his life (1703-1767), both in Edinburgh, Scotland and the New World, reveal his metaphorical concept of America and his unsuccessful attempts, through his verse, to reconcile that vision with the realities of the actual Northern New England landscape.

While termed *epistolae*, “letters,” the majority of the forty-five selections are Horatian odes in various meters, written both before and after his late 1752 emigration to Falmouth, Maine on Casco Bay. Finally published in Philadelphia in 1765, the *Epistola familiaries* reveal an intriguing, though quite disheartening, metamorphosis of opinion during Beveridge’s trans-Atlantic life (Kaiser 215). Beveridge’s Old World existence as a teacher utterly frustrated him. As he writes in his farewell *Epistola XIX, Ad Ludimagogros Scotiae*, “To the Schoolmasters
of Scotland," he'd prefer anywhere and anything to his present
life - even the worst places and punishments of classical litera-
ture. Indeed, no fate could be worse than a teacher's:
Praestat algentes Seythiae prunias,
Seu pati saevas ubicunque gentes,
praestat arentes Libyae per ore
Ducere remos.

Credo vos versas Danai puellas
Doli rimas reparare frustra,
Sisyphus verum toties recurrens
Volvere saxum.

Quam piget vestrae meminnisse fortis
Lubricae laeae, sterilis, malignae!
Quam vicem vestram doleo sinistram
Quae tibi aeger. (13-24)

Better the frosts of Seythia to engage,
Better to brook the fierce Barbarian's rage,
Better, indeed, near Libya's parched shore,
A Galley-Slave to wield the pond'rous oar.
As Danaus' Nymphs in vain fill up their cask,
As Sisyphus in vain essay'd his task,
Such are your labors, such your endless toil,
Which every day with new-born force recoil.
When your unhappy fate my thought employs,
Condemn'd to poverty, bereav'd of joys,
Expos'd to censure, malice, and what not?
In sympathy I mourn your rig'rous lot. (74)

In contrast, for the soon-to-be-former-Scottish-teacher,
America represents an opportunity for a new beginning in a
mythically beautiful place. In the New World, for example,
Florida is where Bacchus and Ceres play (XIX.30) and where
the lands of New England:
Laeta Saturni referunt et aurum /Tempora priscum (55-56)
bring back the happy times and Golden Age of Saturn.

Beveridge also employs this idea of America as the embodi-
ment of the Saturnian Golden Age, the era when divinities and
mortals walked the Earth together, in a pair of earlier poems to
one John Garmer (VI and X) in order to characterize the desti-
nation to which he hoped one day to travel:
Credibile est homines, Saturno rege, priores
Aut hos aut tales incoluas locos. (VI.13-14)

It is believable that earlier men, during Saturn's reign,
lived in these (or some such) lands.

Furthermore, America is a place where proge volueri,
"winged Procne" (X.6), the mythical wife of Tereus who was
changed into a swallow, dwells alto...sole, "under another sun"
(X.5-6).

Beveridge, trapped in his Old World life, projects upon the
New World the promise of regeneration offered by the Golden
Age topos. America thus represents the pastoral home of gods
(Ceres and Bacchus) as well as mythical mortals (Procne).
Even after the arduous voyage to Maine late in 1752 (Kaiser
219), Beveridge views the New World as a pastoral paradise, as
he writes in Epistola XX:
Taedium longi magis et viarum
Bella ventorum varias vicesque
Et procellosi rabiem profundi
jam superavi;

Atque compositus requiesco pace
Laetus ad ripam viridantis amnis
Tuta qua CASCO sinuosus offert
Littora nautis;

Gratior qua sol radiis refugiet
Aptior tellus avidis colonis
Lenior gratia Zephyri susurris
Murmurat aura. (XX.1-12)
I've now o'ercome the long fatigue
Of seas extend'd many a league,
The war of wind, their rage and sleep,
And all the dangers of the deep.

Once more in joyous peace abide
Upon a river's verdant side
Where Casco's shore of winding form
Invites the Sailor from the storm.

Where shoots the sun a milder ray,
And scatters round the genial day;
Where a more kind and gen'rous soil
Invites the eager lab' rer's toil;
Where murmuring zephyrs still I hear,
And gentler breezes fan the air (Beveridge 75-76).

Further in the poem Beveridge explains that at Casco Bay
he is:

Caeterum vivunt vegetantique nostri
Omnibus ridet locus, atque ridet
Copiam spondens inarata cornu
Terras benigno (XX.33-36)

Charm'd with the country where we dwell,
And charm'd while here the bounteous field
Spontaneous promises untill'd,
With a copious horn its shores to yield (76).

That this image of Maine as a farmer's paradise owes far more to the "self-generating fields" of Eden and the classical pastoral than personal experience can be deduced from three details: 1) the poem's date, 31 December 1752, when, I imagine, few fields in Maine are yielding "spontaneous promises"; 2) the fact that, later in the poem Beveridge mentions painfully twisting his ankle on the ice; and 3) his apology for his brevity, at the poem's conclusion, not on account of the pressing duties of a cultivator, but with an allusion to the Roman poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus and his experience on his Sabine farm:

Scire nunc haec te volui: Tabellae
Scripta sunt aevi brevis, ut probavit
Carmine Flaccum. (XX.37-40)

I tho' t it could not much displease,
To tell a friend such things as these;
And would have wrote a longer letter,
Only his verse whose drink is water,
Can live but a moment's time,
As Horace prov'd long since in rhyme. (Beveridge 76)

Beveridge, even in the thick forests of Northern New England continues to view his experience through the cultural lenses of his Horatian training. He still imagines that he is resurrecting Horace's fabled Sabine farm, a gift from his patron Maecenas, a place of ease, beauty, and poetry.

While Maine, his new home, is, then, but a "promise until'd," the reality of life in the New World wilderness quickly begins to overwhelm him. For, in the very next poem, XXI, addressed to Nathaniel Gardner (1719-1760) of Boston, Beveridge has begun already to complain that, while he may wish to spend time with the classical muses, he simply cannot. The labors of plowing the land, a land clearly hostile to such poetic leanings, however, are too difficult and time-consuming:

In super et credas - Arctoo frigore tacta
Musa riget, sanguis concretit et entheus olim
Qui fuerat iuvemi mihi nunc deferbiuit ardo.
Me labor assiduos vel bobus vertere terram
Destinet, aut versis committere semina sulcis,
Sue validis stérides rastris contundere globas,
Et cumulare solum marmi, ne crescere semen
Noxia tritici praecocet gramina messe... (66; 9-14)
...you know the soft Sicilian nine
Ill brook the rigours of this northern clime;
And no more I breathe my lines along
As when gay fancy wonton'd through my song.

...But doomed by cruel fate's relentless hand,
With the dull ox I turn the furrow'd land.

Now with the massy harrow rend the plain,
Or sow the meadows with luxuriant grain;
Or with the mattock dress the yellow soil,
Lest noxious weeds should blast the reaper's toil (76)

His work, in fact, immediately interrupts whenever he even begins to think of poetry:

Jam nunc et versus meditor, dum ligna requiro
Nutrimenta focus: en’ hic est asculus ingens.
Incola per multos annos, et gloria sylvae
As caelum ramos amnosaque brachia tendens,
Glande ferax...
Condemmo capitis; multa vi brachia tollo.
Vestibus abjectis, sonat icta securibus illex;
Et resonat sylvae reboant cava sixa, remugit
Omne nemus, longe gemitique remurmurat eccho...

...durisque subacta bipennisbus arbor
munc labat, instabilis siliem vertice nutans,
icipit et denum caput inclinare superbum.
(17-21; 23-26; 28-30)

E'en now I meditate some pleasing lay
But lo! a tow'ring oak, which long had stood
The pride and glory of the spacious wood;
Whose aged arms with loaded acorns bend,
And o'er the wild their mazy shades extend...
The yielding tree now feels the conq'ring blow

...And trembling totters o'er the vale below.
Stroke following stroke, the temper'd axe I ply,
Beat from its sides, the chips around me fly.
It cracks, it bends, now cracks and bends again,
At last, with hideous roar, falls dreadful
on the plain. (77-78)

At day's end, Beveridge, can but return home and, exhaust-
ed, bid a short farewell to the reader (XXL53-54). As he writes in exasperation:

Nec jam finis erit. (47)
There will be no end.

Things would get worse for Beveridge, try as he (and his poetry) might to forge ahead. Incidents such as broken ribs from a falling tree, in Epistola XXVII, for example, would follow the aforementioned sprained ankle. These minor accidents, because of their innocent nature, nevertheless can be observed by the poet through such Horatian filters as Odes 2.13, in which Horace also is almost killed by a falling tree, and Odes 1.22, in which a wolf flies from the poet who is armed only with the song of his love, Lalage. Beveridge thus still equates the truly perilous American environment with the comically hazardous Sabine countryside, a landscape transformable through verse. Pain is held at arm's length — although the perils of the French and Indian war are beginning to be felt (XXXIV.1-8).

And it is, finally, real loss that alters Beveridge's perception. For in Epistola XXVII, a 1756 poem to John Lovell (1710-
1778), headmaster of Boston Latin School, the threat of native assaults looms large in the poet's mind:

Inculsa sylvas barbariae tenet,
Lovelle, nostras... (25-26)

Lovell, uncivilized barbaries possess our forests.

Nevertheless, the farmer-poet remains confident the muses might find a home here:
Frustra disertos Graecia iactit
mendax poetas, nostra Nov-Anglia
Pindarique, Parnassumque, doctos
et propios habet ipsa vates. (5-8)

Greedy Greece bandies about eloquent authors
in vain; New England herself has her own
Pindar, Parnassus, and learned poets.

The threat of attack during the French and Indian War would
prove real, however, when his son would be killed by natives
(Kaiser 222). Writing from Philadelphia to James Sterling
(1701-1763) of Maryland in a 1758 poem, Beveridge again men-
tions the muses, only here he focuses not upon their settling in
America but rather the impotence and disinterest they have
revealed to him, their obedient attendant, when he most needed them:

Carmina num redolent vigilem, Sterline, lucernam?
Unguiculos vivos rodere mene putas?
Phoebus amicus erat, castaque fuere sores
solamen vitae, subsidiumque meae.
At quamvis fueram doctis pia cura Camoenis,
Palladis aut Phoebi nulla querela fuit. (1-6)

Sterling, poetry does not smack of a warning lamp, does it?
Do you think I am gnawing on my nails?
Phoebus was a friend; the chaste sisters had been the
solace and support of my life.
But although I had been a dutiful charge of the learned Muses,
there was no complaint of Pallas or Apollo.

At one time, Beveridge had been blessed to sing of this inspired land:
...Phoebus enim quoadam dedit hos mihi versus
quos eceini sylvis, ruricolisque Diis (33-34).
...For Phoebus once granted me these verses

in which I celebrated the forests
and country-dwelling gods.

But Apollo and the muses aid him no longer.

The murder of his son provoked him to leave the forests of
Casco Bay immediately. Having first moved to Boston and then
to Hartford, Beveridge, travelled in 1758 to Philadelphia where
he became "Master of the Latin School and Professor of Languages"
at the College of Philadelphia, from which position
he was dismissed in 1762 (Kaiser 221-222). While he never
stopped writing Latin verse, his productivity declined after his
appointment and the poems he did write were "conventional trib-
utes" to various colonial leaders (Thomas Penn, Governor
William Shirley, James Hamilton). His American life, in essence,
ended as his Scottish life had: as a disgruntled schoolmaster.

Beveridge, it seems, never quite rides himself of the image
of America's poetic promise. For once Beveridge abandons his
rural life in Maine for the more urban one of Philadelphia, the
safe distance from the wilderness enables the poet to once again
assert a more metaphorical, and positive, vision of America.
While he no longer can equate America with the Golden Age
revisited, he can characterize it, with poets like Gardner,
Sterling, and Lovell dwelling there, as the rightful heir to
Helicon, the Greek home to the Muses. As Beveridge writes:

Inter Novanglos nunc AGAMENTICUS
Pindo relicto fit locus aptior
doctis Camoenis; hinc revolunt
Pierias ibi, Gardner, undas. (XXII.17-20)

In this new world, this happy clime,
Stands Agamenticus [York, Me.], fair seat;
Then leaving Pindus' hallow'd mount,
There raise thy infant warblings sweet.
There to the muses build some sacred shrine,
Here let Pieria roll her streams divine.
Once again safe within his bookish world, Beveridge can view America as a "happy clime" dear to the muses once more.

Beveridge's Neo-Latin verse exemplifies many of the uses to which literature was put by the colonial settlers. For while the verse composed in Scotland about America encouraged him to leave his homeland and his profession for a brand new life, it simultaneously allowed him to bring with him a tradition that he obviously held dear, a tradition within which he felt safe.

What Beveridge discovered, however, was the ineffective nature of such a solitary shield. The muses alone cannot protect one from an Indian raid or the never-ending demands of farming. The classical paradigm, as useful as it might be for easing one's mind in a new hemisphere, is incapable of protection from warfare or the elements. Not unlike the elegant house ill-suited to its wilderness locale in James Fenimore Cooper's The Pioneers, Beveridge's poetic outposts, while "properly ornamented," nevertheless "continued to yield" (Cooper 56; Faris 153). Beveridge's lyric edifices, in other words, simply cannot dominate the landscape. Not hard to understand then is Beveridge's flight from the life of the frontier farmer back to academia in the urban centers of Boston, Hartford, and Philadelphia. Equally understandable is the redirection of his verse from the autobiographically Horatian epistolar poem to encomiastic verse. In Governor William Shirley (XXIII); Deputy-Governor James Hamilton (XI); General Braddock (XXIX, XL); Thomas Penn, a proprietary of Pennsylvania (XLIII), and George Montague Dunk (the second earl of Halifax) (XXX). Beveridge was seeking a Maccenas, the patron who could offer the poet the well-insulated environment Horace enjoyed on his farm.

Like so many other colonial American writers, Beveridge, armed only with his poetry, was, in the end, alone against the wilderness. His strategy - to conquer the vastness by populating it with the familiar language and images of classical antiquity - therefore only led the poet back to the safety of the Old World framework: the very profession from which he fled Scotland.

Fred J. Nichols has suggested that most Neo-Latin poetry is,

NOTES

1. XI and XVI are not epistolae in that they are not addressed to anyone in particular and XLIV is not in verse.

2. The text of Ad Ludinagistros Scotiae, "To the Scottish Schoolmasters" (XIX), is taken from the 1765 edition of Beveridge's Epistolae familiares. Translations, except where noted, are my own.

3. Compare with Parmenius' De Navigatione:

   Aurea in hoc primum populo caeptisse feruntur
   Secula sicque homines vitam duxisse beati. (62-63)

   The Golden Age began, or so they say, in such communities and thus men lived in blessedness. (Trans. Quinn and Chesire)


5. "Fighting had begun in America in 1754, and what should certainly be styled war in 1755. Maine suffered during the war from Indian raids, ambushes, and murders, but more serious invasions were feared and several new forts were built to protect the settlements" (Hatch 24).

6. In Epistolae familiares, this translation is credited to a "T-----H------, Student of Philosophy" (78).

7. Clearly the voice of what Kenneth Mitchell has called "the archetypal American literary hero" had not yet been born. As Mitchell describes the hero:

   The American literary hero is nearly always victorious, because his very independence, his determination to act as an individual provides a kind of magic protection, like an invisible shield. (26)