

ANALYSIS

Letters from an American Farmer (1782)

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur

(1735-1813)

INTRODUCTION

Letters from an American Farmer is a pastoral counterpart to the puritan *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. 18th-century American cultural history is embodied in Franklin, who defined the myth of the self-made man getting a-head in the City, and Crèvecoeur, who defined the complementary myth of the American Adam and Eve in the New World Garden, balancing the values of the head with the values of the heart.

In the 18th century, about 95% of Americans were hardworking farmers with agrarian values, most of whom read Franklin's almanac of Poor Richard because they also had the puritan values necessary to sustain farms and livestock. Like Franklin's *Autobiography*, Crèvecoeur's *Letters* begins with a narrative comparable to an epistolary 18th-century English novel, then becomes discursive historical reporting. Both authors also project a simplified image of themselves as protagonists, though James the farmer is more fictional than young Ben. Crèvecoeur acknowledges the fiction by naming his farmer James and by setting his farm in Pennsylvania rather than in his own home state of New York. Also like Franklin, Crèvecoeur uses anecdotes from his life as homilies to illustrate various moral principles in the didactic tradition of Neoclassicism.

Addressed to Europeans, Crèvecoeur's book is a series of letters supposedly written by a typical American farmer in the northern colonies, at the solicitation of a visiting English traveler, who admires the simplicity, freedom and dignity of agrarian life in America. The farm of James is a metaphor of America: "The law is to us precisely what I am in my barnyard, a bridle and check to prevent the strong and greedy from oppressing the timid and weak." And, "Thus, by superior knowledge I govern all my cattle, as wise men are obliged to govern fools and the ignorant." Though as a Tory he opposed the Revolution, Crèvecoeur agreed with the Founding Fathers that freedom and civil rights derive from owning property: "This formerly rude soil has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return, it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens."

Crèvecoeur has been labeled a sentimentalist, aptly, because he is so emotional, his farmer is idealized and he depicts rural America as like a new Eden--despite slavery. Actually, he is not as optimistic as most thinkers during the Enlightenment and is more conservative than Jefferson. His farm was a retreat after four years of fighting in a war, a vulnerable sanctuary surrounded by hostile Indians. It was his "good place," comparable to Huck's raft and to the first part of Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River." Like the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, Crèvecoeur saw the world as brutal and unjust. Like the tortured Mark Twain, he doubts the goodness of the Creator:

"If we attentively view this globe, will it not appear rather a place of punishment, than of delight? And what a misfortune! that those punishments should fall on the innocent, and its few delights be enjoyed by the most unworthy....Gracious God! to *what end* is the introduction of so many beings into a mode of existence in which many must grope amidst so many errors, commit so many crimes, and meet with so many diseases, wants, and sufferings!"

Crèvecoeur was like John Adams rather than Jefferson in his view of human nature, seeing man as selfish and untrustworthy: Self-interest and struggle are the rule in life. Man's evil inclinations are ineradicable and perhaps predominant. Crèvecoeur does not see America as a utopia, nor does he expect it to become one: "Good and evil I see is to be found in all societies, and it is in vain to seek for *any* spot where those ingredients are not mixed." America is simply the best spot he has ever seen, because it has

more liberty, opportunity and land. Along with Jefferson, he believes that the best society in both moral and economic terms is a society of freeholding farmers.

IDEAL AGRARIAN CONDITIONS IN AMERICA

1. There were sufficient natural resources for all
2. Farming freed men to work for themselves
3. Just laws mitigated conflicts

CHARACTERISTICS OF AGRARIAN PASTORALISM IN *Letters*

1. The “good place” is the farm
2. Counterforces are Wilderness (wild Indians) and City (laws)
3. The good shepherd is the farmer
4. The wife is the good shepherdess, an equal complementary partner
5. Hard work on the farm requires puritanism
6. Agrarian values blend with pastoral Christianity
7. Ideals are peace, harmony and productivity
8. Nature is more authoritative than in the City
9. Transcendence may be attained through atonement with Nature

MAJOR THEMES IN *Letters*

1. The American Adam and Eve in the New World Garden (Cooper, Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Twain, James, Cather, Steinbeck, Gordon, Stegner)
2. American innocence contrasted to European experience, corruption, and decadence (Royall Tyler, Brackenridge, Freneau, Hawthorne, James, Twain)
3. Democracy versus aristocracy in America (Brackenridge, Tyler, Irving, Hawthorne, James, Twain)
4. The Manifest Destiny of power moving westward from Egypt through Greece, Rome, The Holy Roman Empire, Spain and Great Britain to the United States (Irving, Bryant, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, Gordon, Frederick J. Turner)
5. Westward movement as progress (Bryant, Cooper, Hawthorne, Whitman, Twain, Cather)
6. Diversity of Americans and differences among regions (local color movement in late 19th century)
7. Evils of slavery (Samuel Sewall, Franklin, John Woolman, Timothy Dwight, Barlow, Freneau, Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Twain, Stephen Foster, Stephen Crane, John Gould Fletcher, Hart Crane, Stephen Vincent Benet, Vachel Lindsay, Faulkner, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison)

THE LITERARY NARRATIVE

Just as young Ben Franklin learns to do, James “puts on the humble inquirer”: “Behold, sir, an humble American planter, a simple cultivator of the earth...” He portrays himself as simple, humble and artless--no match for European intellectuals, whereas in fact, he is artful in pleasing Europeans by catering to their prejudices, confirming their vision of a primitive America and bowing to their sense of superiority. His pose is pastoral in its deference to the dominance of Europe.

VISION OF AMERICA

James the farmer defines America “as the asylum of freedom, as the cradle of future nations and the refuge of distressed Europeans,” who become “new men.” James has found his refuge at “the edge of the

great wilderness.” Looking westward, he sees a “boundless continent,” as if America is infinite: “Who can tell how far it extends?...For no European has as yet traveled half the extent of this mighty continent.” Here, he goes on, “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men,” because “labour is founded on the basis of Nature, self-interest.” His metaphor of the “melting pot” will endure into the 20th century as a unifying theme in American history, until after the 1960s when integration got rejected by blacks including Toni Morrison and by white Feminists at war against men: “We are the most perfect society now existing in the world.”

PHILOSOPHY

Crèvecoeur's psychology and epistemology are drawn from John Locke, whose philosophy contributed to the Enlightenment, then was superseded by Immanuel Kant and the Romantic Movement: “Your mind is a *tabula rasa* [blank slate] whose spontaneous and strong impressions are delineated with facility.” He believed in the mechanistic universe of Newton and the deists: “We are machines fashioned by every circumstance around us.” At the same time, he was part of the cultural movement called “sentimentalism,” a right-brained corrective to the dominance of left-brained rationalism in the 18th century--affirming sensibility as well as sense, feeling as well as reason--exemplified by Laurence Sterne in *A Sentimental Journey*, Oliver Goldsmith in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Henry Mackenzie in *The Man of Feeling*, Washington Irving in *The Sketchbook* and Victorian women throughout the 19th century. James the farmer is a New Man of sensibility with “a tender and well-meaning heart,” who treats his wife as an equal: “I endeavour to follow the thread of my feelings.” In fact, he calls himself “the farmer of feelings”:

“When I contemplate my wife, by my fireside, while she either spins, knits, darns, or suckles our child, I cannot describe the various emotions of love, of gratitude, of conscious pride, which thrill in my heart and often overflow in involuntary tears. I feel the necessity, the sweet pleasure, of acting my part, the part of an husband and father, with an attention and propriety which may entitle me to my good fortune....Whenever I go abroad, it is always involuntary. I never return home without feeling some pleasing emotion....The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence, exalt my mind.”

AGRARIAN MARRIAGE

James and his wife have an agrarian marriage: the complementary relationship of spiritual equals: “My wife (and I never do anything without consulting her)...” To sustain a farm, husband and wife must be working partners, mutually supportive and interdependent. At the same time the wife of James is so independent within the marriage, so outspoken and humorous she has been compared to Mark Twain and Will Rogers, though that part of the narrative is lamentably short: “‘If thee persistest in being such a foolhardy man,’ said my wife, ‘for God’s sake let it be kept a profound secret among us’.” Their amusing banter is comparable to that of Poor Richard Saunders and his wife in Franklin’s popular almanac: “Well, well, wife, thee art wrong for once.”

GENDER ROLES

As evident in *Letters*, separate gender roles evolved from an agrarian division of labor in the 18th century as well as from industrialism in the 19th. Women commonly worked in the fields in Europe, Asia and early America: “The Scotch are frugal and laborious, but their wives cannot work so hard as German women, who on the contrary vie with their husbands, and often share with them the most severe toils of the field.” As soon as American farmers could afford it, they freed their wives from the drudgery of hard labor in the fields. In agrarian America, when women’s place became the home, it was an emancipation that empowered them and gave them time to devote to their families and to schools, churches and the creation of the 19th-century culture called Victorianism:

“My wife would often come with her knitting in her hand and sit under the shady tree, praising the straightness of my furrows and the docility of my horses; this swelled my heart and made everything light and pleasant, and I regretted that I had not married before.”

NATURE AS AUTHORITY

Crèvecoeur's turn from Reason to Nature as his supreme authority is characteristically American and contributes to the cultural transition from Neoclassicism to Romanticism. As an agrarian and a sentimentalist, he moves closer to Romanticism than Freneau or Brown, especially with his exaltation of instinct: "Vain man, though adorned with the additional gift of reason, might learn from the perfection of instinct how to regulate the follies and how to temper the errors which this second gift often makes him commit." Nature is his authority: "This is the only line I am able to follow, the line which Nature has herself traced for me." His letters "will smell of the woods and be a little wild."

Like Thoreau and Twain later, James the farmer sees animals as superior in some ways to people: "The sagacity of those animals which have long been the tenants of my farm astonish me; some of them seem to surpass even men in memory and sagacity....What, then, is this *instinct* which we so debase" [italics added]; "My labour flows from instinct, as well as that of my horses"; "a gentle, useful hen lead[s] her chicken with a care and vigilance which speaks shame to many women." And, "like men, it is only the want of room that induces [bees] to quit the maternal hive." Birds "make me ashamed of the slovenliness of our houses; their love to their dame, their incessant careful attention, and the peculiar songs they address to her while she tediously incubates their eggs, remind me of my duty could I ever forget it." Later, he calls himself "a feebler bird."

James regulates the ecology of his farm by killing overpopulated king-birds that are eating his valuable bees. His account of battle becomes a political allegory when he implies that his bees are like the colonies of democratic Americans, who must band together to survive attacks by the King. In Cooper's *The Prairie* (1827) and Bryant's "The Prairies" (1832) bees swarming west are analogous to human pioneers.

ATONEMENT WITH NATURE

In the fields, he says of farmers, "the effluvia of the earth animate our spirits and serve to inspire us." Crèvecoeur like Cooper and Bryant is not a pantheist, since his God speaks *through* Nature, while remaining separate from it as in Deism. James overcomes the separateness of humanity from the hostile forms of Wilderness and exhibits atonement with Nature, a characteristic of literature in the *transcendental mode*, when he brings the Wilderness into his house: "In the middle of my parlour, I have...a curious republic of industrious hornets; their nest hangs to the ceiling by the same twig on which it was so admirably built and contrived in the woods. Its removal did not displease them, for they find in my house plenty of food; and I have left a hole open in one of the panes of the window, which answers all their purposes. By this kind usage they are become quite harmless; they live on the flies, which are very troublesome to us throughout the summer; they are constantly busy in catching them, even on the eyelids of my children."

Michael Hollister (2015)