

5 CRITICS DISCUSS

Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur

(1735-1813)

"Crèvecoeur was not a mere cultivator of the earth. That was his best stunt, shall we say. He himself was more concerned with a perfect society and his own manipulation thereof, than with growing carrots. Behold him, then, trotting off importantly and idealistically to France, leaving his farm in the wilds to be burnt by the Indians, and his wife to shift as best she might. This was during the American War of Independence, when the Noble Red Man took to behaving like his old self. On his return to America, the American farmer entered into public affairs and into commerce. Again tripping to France, he enjoyed himself as a *litterateur* Child-of-Nature-sweet-and-pure, was a friend of old Benjamin Franklin in Paris...

Hazlitt, Godwin, Shelley, Coleridge, the English romanticists, were, of course, thrilled by the *Letters from an American Farmer*. A new world, a world of the Noble Savage and pristine Nature and Paradisal Simplicity and all that gorgeousness that flows out of the unsullied fount of the ink-bottle. Lucky Coleridge, who got no farther than Bristol. Some of us have gone all the way. I think this wild and noble America is the thing that I have pined for most ever since I read Fenimore Cooper, as a boy.

Franklin is the real practical prototype of the American. Crèvecoeur is the emotional. To the European, the American is first and foremost a dollar-fiend. We tend to forget the emotional heritage of Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur....It wasn't to be expected that the dry little snuff-colored Doctor should have it all his own way....Benjamin overlooked Nature. But the French Crèvecoeur spotted it long before [Bryant and] Thoreau and Emerson worked it up....Crèvecoeur's *Letters* are written in a spirit of touching simplicity, almost better than Chateaubriand....This American Farmer tells of the joys of creating a home in the wilderness, and of cultivating the virgin soil....

This Nature-sweet-and-pure business is only another effort at intellectualizing. Just an attempt to make all nature succumb to a few laws of the human mind. The sweet-and-pure sort of laws....So that's why you get the purest intellectuals in a Garden Suburb or a Brook Farm experiment. You bet, Robinson Crusoe was a highbrow of highbrows. You can idealize or intellectualize. Or, on the contrary, you can let the dark soul in you see for itself. An artist usually intellectualizes on top, and his dark under-consciousness goes on contradicting him beneath. This is almost laughably the case with most American artists. Crèvecoeur is the first example....He wanted his ideal state. At the same time he wanted to know the other state, the dark, savage mind. He wanted both.

We are left to imagine him retiring in grief to dwell with his Red Brothers under the wigwams. For the War of Independence has broken out, and the Indians are armed by the adversaries; they do dreadful work on the frontiers. While Crèvecoeur is away in France his farm is destroyed, his family rendered homeless. So that the last letter laments bitterly over the war, and man's folly and inhumanity to man."

D. H. Lawrence
Studies in Classic American Literature
(Viking 1923, 1968) 23-33

"Crèvecoeur was of the romantic school of Rousseau and eloquent in praise of life lived close to nature, yet even he discovers the frontier to be a blot on colonial civilization, the abode of rude and lawless figures who precede by a decade the sober army of occupation."

Vernon L. Parrington
Main Currents in American Thought
(Harcourt, 1927, 1958) 389

"The twelve essays, or "letters," vary greatly in length, and it seems probable that the letter form was an after-thought...The first three essays are a general and highly favorable view of American life, emphasizing the construction of a new and superior society in sharp contrast with Europe, which he regarded as

decadent, stratified, and priest-dominated. The next six essays are more particular; four of them deal with Nantucket, which Crèvecoeur regarded as 'inhabited merely to prove what mankind can do when happily governed,' one with Martha's Vineyard and the whale fishery, and one with Charleston and the deplorable institution of slavery. A nature essay, a description of the visit of a Russian gentleman to John Bartram, and 'Distresses of a Frontier Man' complete the book. The final essay is the only one which contains hints of the 'desolating consequences' of the Revolution, mentioned in the Preface and described so vividly in 'The American Belisarius'."

Theodore Hornberger
The Literature of the United States
(Scott, Foresman, 3rd ed., 1953, 1966) 328-29

"To account for the peculiarly 'modern, peaceful and benign' qualities of his rural life, the farmer introduces all of the familiar environmentalist assumptions of the age. He believes that men everywhere are like plants, deriving their 'flavor' from the soil in which they grow. In America, with its paucity of established institutions, however, the relation between mankind and the physical environment is more than usually decisive. Geography pushes men into farming, which is of course the noblest vocation...."

It is not surprising that Crèvecoeur was one of the writers who convinced D. H. Lawrence that only the 'spirit of place' really can account for the singular voice we hear in American books. In the *Letters*, as elsewhere in our literature, the voice we hear is that of a man who has discovered the possibility of changing his life. Landscape means regeneration to the farmer....

Crèvecoeur, like many another American writer, often is mistaken (in Lawrence's derisive phrase) for a 'litterateur-Child-of Nature-sweet-and-pure.' But he is nothing of the sort. He does not believe, as Lawrence says he does, that Nature is sweet and pure. He admires improved nature, a landscape that is a made thing, a fusion of work and spontaneous process. 'This formerly rude soil,' he explains, 'has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return it has established all our rights.' Taken as a whole, the moral geography of the *Letters* forms a neat spatial pattern, a compelling triptych that figures an implied judgment upon all the conditions of man which may be thought to exist between the savagery of the frontier on one side and the court of Versailles on the other....

Instead of Arcadia, we have the wild yet potentially bucolic terrain of the North American continent; instead of the shepherd, the independent, democratic husbandman...Crèvecoeur begins to explore the difference between American and European cultures, a complex variation of the grand Nature-Art antithesis which informs all pastoral literature...It is now reinforced by the agrarian philosophy and the 'middle state' theory of the age, and it thereby takes on a credibility it never before had possessed. Today, looking back across the great gulf created by industrialism... We say that [agrarian pastoralism] embodied a naive and ultimately static view of history, and so it did. But to project this judgment into the past is to miss the compelling power of the ideal in its eighteenth-century context....

Here, as he saw it, was a fringe of settlements on the edge of an immense, undeveloped, and largely unexplored continent. At the time nine out of ten Americans were farmers living in a virtually classless society, and all of the best informed statesmen and political economists agreed that agriculture would remain the dominant enterprise of the young nation for centuries to come....As he thinks about America's future, it involves nothing of that irreversible and accelerating process of change now regarded as the very powerhouse of history....

The farmer describes America as the 'great asylum,' a 'refuge' from Europe, from power struggles, politics, or, in our sense of the word, from history itselfIt is still possible to identify the main features of the idyllic Virgilian landscape in this idealized picture of America. It is a place apart, secluded from the world--a peaceful, lovely, classless, bountiful pasture."

Leo Marx
The Machine in the Garden
(Oxford 1964) 109-116

"It provided two generations of Europeans with their chief impressions of the American colonies. The book was, of course, tailor-made for the Romantic imagination. Followers of Coleridge and Rousseau embraced it enthusiastically; physiocrat and pantisocratist alike were affected by a book offering the veritable account (as they felt) of a trans-atlantic utopia under the wigwams.

What makes this work American?...Several qualities that in the test of time have turned out to be characteristic of numerous later writers in this country...The first distinctive mark might be called the posture of the provincial as he presents American life. It is a voice deliberately but deceptively self-mocking, a manner slyly satiric of the European reader before whom the untutored colonial pretends to prostrate himself....

The Farmer's wife...has a sharper wit than [D. H.] Lawrence allows...Her remoter American offspring are Mark Twain and Will Rogers. Her vernacular speech--right down to the final, authentic 'real'--is a hallmark of the American comic tradition, which subsequently produced the *Connecticut Yankee* and other innocent spoofers of Europe like Henrietta Stackpole, the tart-tongued reporter in James's *The Portrait of a Lady*....

We note at once how comprehensive his picture is of life in the new land. The sense of delight, novelty, discovery--the attitude of wonder...The overall plan is plain: to typify the three chief American regions by describing life on his own farm, on Nantucket and the Vineyard, and in Charles Town. Each district has its distinctive mode of life, its own ecology--seafaring in New England, subsistence agriculture in the Middle Colonies, slavery in the South. Crèvecoeur's basic outlook is, of course, agrarian: cities are mentioned but usually ignored...only a small proportion of Americans in 1770 dwelt in towns...From *Walden* on, this has often meant turning away from urban life....

Letters exhibits many of the qualities identified by Richard Chase in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* as characteristic of our finest fiction: idyll or melodrama as modes, the borderland as the locale where actual and imaginary worlds can mingle, alienation and disorder as themes, and, at the end, not development and resolution but persistence of those polarities...prototypical American romances. The *Letters* fits this pattern especially well...because of Crèvecoeur's use of James as an innocent mouthpiece. This narrative device sets up the kind of ironic interplay between naive actor and knowing narrator that...is characteristic of many American novels and autobiographies....

Crèvecoeur bridges the Enlightenment and Romanticism in his appreciation of nature....James, the American Farmer, is the precursor of the sensitive, naive individual alienated eventually from the community and longing, like Natty Bumppo or Huck Finn, to head for the western territories....The slave in the cage has spiritual offspring in the books of Melville, Stephen Crane, Faulkner, Richard Wright, and Ellison....Crèvecoeur has to a remarkable extent laid the ground plan for later literature."

Albert E. Stone, Introduction
Letters from an American Farmer
& *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*
(Penguin 1981)

Michael Hollister (2016)