

QUOTATIONS



J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur

(1735-1813)

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur was a Frenchman who settled in rural New York like James Fenimore Cooper later and wrote the first major work of American pastoralism, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). Crèvecoeur and Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784-85) established (1) the tradition of agrarian pastoralism that continues to this day, including such writers as Thoreau, Hawthorne, Jewett, Frost, Cather, Anderson, Faulkner and Steinbeck. *Letters* also (2) introduced the social metaphor of the “melting pot” and (3) the myth of the American Adam and Eve in the New World Garden, which inspired the westward movement and throughout American cultural history counters the myth of getting ahead in the City, as represented by the Puritans and then by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography* (1789).

ORDER OF TOPICS: American farmer, America as a symbol, agrarian pastoralism, husband and wife, early Victorianism, animals, machines, What is an American?, the melting pot, the New Man, ethnicity:

from *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782)

AMERICAN FARMER

Behold, sir, an humble American planter, a simple cultivator of the earth, addressing you from the farther side of the Atlantic...

AMERICA AS A SYMBOL

You viewed these provinces of North America in their true light: as the asylum of freedom, as the cradle of future nations and the refuge of distressed Europeans.

AGRARIAN PASTORALISM

Here we have in some measure regained the ancient dignity of our species: our laws are simple and just; we are a race of cultivators; our cultivation is unrestrained; and therefore everything is prosperous and flourishing....the law is to us precisely what I am in my barnyard, a bridle and a check to prevent the strong and greedy from oppressing the timid and weak.... Thus, by superior knowledge I govern all my cattle, as wise men are obliged to govern fools and the ignorant.

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...this is what may be called the true and the only philosophy of an American farmer.

HUSBAND AND WIFE AS PARTNERS

My wife (and I never do anything without consulting her) laughs... “Well, well, wife, thee art wrong for once; if I was filled with worldly vanity, thy rebuke would be timely, but thee knowest that I have but little of that. How shall I know what I am capable of till I try? Hadst thee never employed thyself in thy father’s house to learn and to practice the many branches of housekeeping that thy parents were famous for, thee would’st have made but a sorry wife for an American farmer; thee never should’st have been mine. I married thee not for what thee hadst, but for what thee knewest...”

[Wife] “If this scheme of thine [to write a book] was once known, travelers as they go along would point out to our house, saying, ‘Here liveth the scribbling farmer.’ Better hear them as usual observe, ‘Here liveth the warm substantial family that never begrudgeth a meal of victuals or a mess of oats to any one that steps in. Look how fat and well clad their Negroes are’.”

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. I felt myself happy in my new situation, and where is that station which can confer a more substantial system of felicity than that of an American farmer possessing freedom of action, freedom of thoughts, ruled by a mode of government which requires but little from us?

EARLY VICTORIANISM

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.

ANIMALS

The astonishing art which all birds display in the construction of their nests, ill-provided as we may suppose them with proper tools, their neatness, their convenience, always 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. In the middle of my parlour, I have, you may remember, 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 to 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...and though they are fierce and vindictive, yet kindness and hospitality has made them useful and harmless.

MACHINES

Sometimes I delight in inventing and executing machines which simplify my wife’s labour.... I bless God for all the good He has given me; I envy no man’s prosperity, and with no other portion of happiness than

that I may live to teach the same philosophy to my children and give each of them a farm, show them how to cultivate it, and be like their father, good, substantial, independent American farmers...

WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?

Some few towns excepted, we are all tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida. We are a people of cultivators scattered over an immense territory, communicating with each other by means of good roads and navigable rivers, united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws without dreading their power, because they are equitable. We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself... We have no princes for whom we toil, starve, and bleed; we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be, nor is this pleasing equality so transitory as many others are.

THE MELTING POT

What, then, is the American, this new man?... Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the East; they will finish the great circle.... The American ought therefore to love this country much better than that wherein either he or his forefathers were born. Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest; can it want a stronger allurement?

THE NEW MAN

The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. This is an American....the simple cultivation of the earth purifies them... Such is our progress; such is the march of the Europeans toward the interior parts of this continent....

ETHNICITY

Whence the difference arises I know not, but out of twelve families of emigrants of each country, generally seven Scotch will succeed, nine German, and four Irish. 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, which they understand better... The Irish do not prosper so well; they love to drink and to quarrel...

