

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Letters from an American Farmer. 1782

Hector St John de Crevecoeur. 1735-1813

Overview

The early Romantic passage in Western Europe meant that for the first time the land of America was just starting to demand attention, as a national polity. The United States of America did not yet exist, though a growing number of British colonies, scattered along the east coast of North America, represented a growing tendency toward confederation. The collective energy, of this growing collective, enlarged the European sense, that the effective dimensions of the culture world were, expanding. The Romantic Movement was on its way to becoming much more than a literary development.

It was in this setting that the *Letters from an American Farmer* had their inception. They were written by a Frenchman, J. Hector St John de Crevecoeur, and first published in 1782. The twelve letters cover many aspects of the American agricultural experience—what goes on in the typical American farm, what is raised and planted, how the fields are ploughed and maintained, what kind of domestic life prevails there—the farmer in question is located in Orange County, Upstate New York. As the letters develop we see them flay out into other venues of New England agricultural life—Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard — and into the culture of highly developed cities like Charleston, South Carolina. Many of the final thoughts of the book pertain to the widespread practice of slavery, which Crevecoeur finds cruel and inhumane. So firmly, in fact, does Crevecoeur come down on this last point, that his entire text has been viewed as a litany of decline, tracing independent enterprise back into its roots in enforced labor.

The Posture of the Letters

The farmer writer, who creates *The Letters from an American Farmer*, has recently, as he says, been the beneficiary of a five week visit from an Englishman of consequence, who has been touring in the American colonies, and has expressed his desire to see American agricultural life up close. (The writer of this fiction is in fact J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, a Frenchman of aristocratic background and Jesuit schooling, who upon completing his education travelled to England, to which he formed a lifetime attachment. The beginning of the adventure of his life was in fact his youthful visit to Britain, to visit relatives, the subsequent death of his British fiancée, his decision to join a French regiment fighting in the French and Indian War, his wounding in battle at the Plains of Abraham (1759) and his consequent travels in Pennsylvania and New York.

We settle down, like Crevecoeur himself, at a creative point where past can thrive on its intelligibility for its present and future. That is where Crevecoeur sets in to transform his experience: from 1770-1776 he works at writing the *Letters* we have before us, while of course, in large part, making his own life the substance of the very agricultural life he is writing about. He is his own creative existence and ably makes his life the substance of his art.

The Message of the Letters

At the time we meet him Crevecoeur has been asked to write an account of the life and work setting of an American farmer. The requester of this account is a (fictive) British gentleman who has spent five weeks with Crevecoeur, watched him at work, and developed a healthy interest in American farming. Nonetheless, and despite the fact that Crevecoeur is a true life time farmer, Crevecoeur is reluctant to present himself as a worthy commentator or representative figure of American farm life. Crevecoeur diffidently puts off the gentleman's request, until, apparently, he can yield no longer. Even Crevecoeur's wife has urged him to give up the project, and mocks him for even considering the gentleman's request, to know more, in depth, about life on an American farm, and throughout the colonies. Crevecoeur however thinks otherwise. He assembles the few old texts left to him by his father, sets his mind into a readerly posture, and begins working on an ambitious account of agricultural life in America. It is of great interest that he breaks from the confines of his own farm, to discuss the

cultures of Nantucket Island, Cape Cod, Charlestown, South Carolina, and indeed to take on the thorny, broader, issue that he has in fact a great appetite for writing into this book. His acquaintance with elements of Conquistador culture, deep in South America, testifies to his de facto world curiosity.

From the start, however, the narrator places us fully within the American perspective. He offers us considerable tracts of dialogue between himself and his minister, a fellow farmer, who confirms him in his sense that all the fine arts and historical wonders of Europe will never rival the simple freedoms of America. Where else, the Minister asks, will we find such respect for the laws, or such liberty to dismiss the worn out practices of antiquity? Gradually the minister enforces the ardor of Crèvecoeur, who increasingly sees the case to be made for occupying precisely the land he owns. He is on the verge, now, of introducing us to that very land.

What did Crèvecoeur himself inherit in New York State? He is quite specific. 'My father left me three hundred and seventy acres of land, forty seven of which are good timothy meadow, an excellent orchard, a good house and a substantial barn.' Crèvecoeur proceeds to detail his richness in beef, mutton, and fowl—we see that he writes as a very substantial yeoman farmer—to which he adds that 'my negroes are tolerably faithful and healthy. 'And what does Crèvecoeur do with this inheritance? (When we reach the end of this inventory, and reflect back from the bitter condemnation of slavery with which this text ends, we may well wonder what kind of view Crèvecoeur has, of his own participation in the social practices of his time.)

From God and nature Crèvecoeur inherited the greatest of his bounties, his son. Father's self-confidence, sense of meaning in the future, pride in his own fruitfulness; all these life blessings assemble around the small creature dad carefully takes with him on his many ploughing expeditions through the black soil of upstate New York. The author treats us to a variety of verbal vignettes of the glistening around them. Through this idyll passes the talk of the tiny family gathered around a winter log fire, peace in the day, permeated with gentle talk of the events that have made up the day.

The gentle turns of daily life are a regular pleasure to Crèvecoeur, whose particular joy rests in observing the birds overhead—and the abundant colonies of bees. The social life of these two creatures is of endless interest to the author, who frequently rests in the shade of mid-day, watching the creatures' own antics of husbandry and mating. He is fascinated by the long distance flights of wild pigeons overhead—and notes, upon dissecting them, that they carry bellyful of still undigested rice, which they had to have brought from a distance of at least five hundred miles. Crèvecoeur expatiates on the elegance of birds' house construction, sharply contrasting it to the slovenliness of the farms of many of his neighbors. The chorus of robins, outside his window, wakes him every morning to the symphony of the world.

In a remarkable exordium, this self-deprecating, but crafty American farmer concludes his detailed account of the sturdy pleasures of daily life on the farm with a visionary perspective onto the illimitably vast spaces that lie to the interior and beyond, of his still undiscovered country. 'We are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Who can tell how far our land extends? Who can tell the millions of men it will feed and contain?'

The dark finale

The concluding pages of *The Letters* bring us to sharp final reflections on slavery, particularly as it pertains to the fairly opulent white culture of Charlestown, South Carolina. It has of course marked Crèvecoeur's text, from the outset, that it values independence—he proudly asserts that the new country of America knows neither princes nor Kings, assures every person equality before the law, and rewards just labor appropriately. Yet the wealth of our land is dependent, in many settlements, on the labor of the oppressed.

Are we faced, in this discrepancy, with a later and matured authorial perspective? How can the Crèvecoeur in whose independent masculine grasp we have walked, square that posture with his appreciation of Charles town's affluent elegance, built as it was on blood, sweat and tears?