

the garden city

in america

crevecoeur's *letters*

and the urban-pastoral context

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That the idea of America as a landscape of fresh possibilities has played a prominent role in the native imagination scarcely needs repeating. A line running from John Smith's description of the natural bounty of Virginia, through Jefferson's dream of an agrarian republic, to the back-to-nature movements of our own century points to a continuing faith in American uniqueness based on geographical distinctiveness. Certainly the tendency to conceive America in the image of a new, pre-lapsarian garden has been powerful. In accounting for the continual dissatisfaction that Americans have expressed toward their cities, that image has informed some of the best cultural and literary history written over the past thirty years. R. W. B. Lewis, in *The American Adam*, has shown how it helped our most compelling writers of the nineteenth century create a hero "in the open air" who would function as a new man. And both Richard Hofstadter and Henry Nash Smith have argued persuasively that the "agrarian myth" or the "myth of the garden" has been used to direct the American ethos away from the urban East and from Europe "toward the agricultural interior of the continent."¹

This contrast between country life close to nature and city life away from it is, of course, not unique to American culture. As Schiller once remarked, "all people who have a history have a paradise, a state of innocence, a golden age." But our experience as a nation undoubtedly has invested the opposition with immense moral significance. Here was a new continent that remained largely unsettled until the end of the nineteenth century. Little wonder that America was de-

defined for so long as nature's nation dedicated to the fulfillment of what Leo Marx has called the pastoral ideal. Nowhere has the basis for this attraction to nature and the accompanying contrast been more illuminated than in Marx's *Machine in the Garden*. Although primarily concerned with the American version of this idea, Marx's analysis cuts across national boundaries to suggest the universality of its appeal. Pastoralism, as he defines it, is not limited to any literary genre or rhetorical structure. Rather it entails a reaction to the world that can be found throughout the entire fabric of a society. Engendered by a desire to withdraw from the complexities of a structured civilization, it seeks an environment where the free play of instincts and individualistic fulfillment can exist. When this desire manifests itself it usually takes one of two forms: either it can seek a primitivistic paradise as far as possible from the nodes of urban power, or it can conceive or actually attempt to build a type of ideal middle landscape in which the conflicting values of art and nature, civilization and primitivism, are reconciled in an environment that is characteristically rural. The latter of these two, according to Marx, is more appropriately termed pastoralism.²

Although the centrality of pastoralism to native culture is well documented, its prominence has tended to obscure, as revisionist historians have been arguing for the last forty years, the role of the city in the development of American life. The work of Charles Glaab and A. Theodore Brown, Arthur Schlesinger, Carl Bridenbaugh and Richard Wade, among others, has demonstrated the importance of the city as the source of economic, political, educational and artistic advancement since the seventeenth century. Nor is this awareness a uniquely modern phenomenon. Even a cursory examination of such early nineteenth-century periodicals as *DeBow's Review*, *Putnam's*, and *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine* reveals that Americans long have been aware of the ameliorative effects of urbanization and have been quite willing to champion the city against the attacks of pastoralism.

Despite their polarity, however, it is important to recognize that the positions espousing rural and urban values, as they appear both in the culture at large and in the exposition of social, intellectual and literary historians, share a common infrastructure consisting of an ideological opposition between city and country. Indeed, whether the subject is the preference for the open landscape of fresh possibilities, as symbolized in the figure of the American Adam, or the development of the garden image of America, or the distinctive role of the city in fomenting political revolution, the tendency has been implicitly or explicitly to affirm the preeminence of this dialectic in American conceptions of the two realms. The result of this continual emphasis has been to deflect attention away from the fact that while such an opposition has punctuated much of American history, another equally significant strain of thought has conceived of the native scene as a place where that dialectic could be synthesized once and for all. Drawing on

the promise of the open landscape and pastoral sensibilities and rhetoric, it has envisioned and described urban America not in a pejorative manner, but with an air of hopefulness and fresh beginnings. In collapsing the opposition, proponents of this perspective have linked the city and the countryside to define America as a healthy, harmonious urban-pastoral society.

That pastoralism has acted as a galvanizing force for the creation of positive images of the American city needs an explanation. In our own time we need not search far to discover this phenomenon at work. At its most simplistic, it appears as the renewed interest in urban gardening in the 1970s and the recent call for a Jeffersonian simplification of the Washington bureaucracy. However, if we begin to examine our national past, we find it an already powerful ideal in mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, as Thomas Bender has explained, anticipating part of my argument, behind the park-planning movement of this period and the creation of mill-towns in western Massachusetts lay a faith that "art and nature, cityscape and landscape, organization and spontaneity . . . would enrich American life if they could be combined."³ Bender's point is well taken, not only because of the instances he cites but also because of the number of examples that could be marshalled to illustrate the pervasiveness of this belief. Perhaps the most illuminating is the first burgeoning of suburban development just before and after the Civil War. These communities of luscious lawns and well-trimmed houses provided, as one anonymous Chicago pamphleteer noted in the 1870s, "a happy answer" to "the controversy . . . as to which offers the greater advantage, the country or the city." Elaborating, he explained, "The city has its advantages and conveniences, the country has its charms and health; the union of the two . . . gives to man all he could ask in this respect."⁴

Even these brief examples suggest that the idea of an urban-pastoral synthesis has formed a distinct element in American culture, consisting of more than just an inclination to incorporate the city in the "American dream." The quest for this meld constitutes an effort to shape an alternative to conventional visions—based on an opposition of rural and urban and the attendant valuation of one over the other—by seeking an environment blending the pastoral attributes of freedom, simplicity and probity with the urban qualities of community, sophistication and progressive development. Moreover, urban pastoralism possesses its own formal structure. Although it begins, as does the purely pastoral impulse, as a desire to withdraw from an overly complex, oppressive society, this mode of thought stops short of a complete retreat to the rural world and the forest. Instead it seeks to superimpose an urban pattern upon the countryside, drawing upon the sanative potential and openness there provided. The urban-pastoral structure, therefore, substitutes for the rural-urban opposition a dialectic between the fallen, corrupt, overcivilized city (often

associated with Europe) and the organic city redeemed by contact with nature and pastoral values.

What, then, are the specific qualities of the city which this impulse seeks to achieve? Generally, we could characterize this city as one which blends harmoniously with the countryside and at times contains its physical and/or social attributes. It provides some means for the urban dweller to renew continuously his elemental connection to his spontaneous, passionate self while remaining a member of society, of the city—in a word, of civilization. This synthesis might take a number of forms, from an “organic” relationship among the inhabitants to a preservation of large open spaces in the urban topography.

Considering these characteristics, we should not be surprised to find urban pastoralism coming to fruition in the seed-bed of nineteenth-century romanticism with its accompanying fondness for nature. However, it would be a mistake to assume that this ideology was solely a product of romantic and post-romantic sensibilities. On the contrary, to understand its origins we must direct our attention to the eighteenth century. Although the early and middle decades of the 1700s witnessed tentative gestures toward identifying rural-urban harmony as the desirable product of native geography, only after 1770, under the impact of the Enlightenment and in the wake of the Revolution’s success, did the idea receive full expression, particularly in the national literature celebrating America as the center of a new golden age.

A useful illustration is Philip Freneau’s “The Rising Glory of America” (originally written in 1772 but revised repeatedly until 1809). Although Freneau begins his poem with the already conventional tribute to “agriculture [which] crowns our happy land / . . . And pours her blessings with a lavish hand,” he abruptly qualifies this paean by warning that “visions of the rustic reign” alone “would scarce employ the varying mind of man”:

Each seeks employ, and each a different way:
Strip Commerce of her sail, and men once more
Would be converted into savages. . . .⁵

To be truly civilized, man must develop a society that harmonizes agriculture and commerce, the latter of which Freneau identifies as an urban activity. Happily, such a society exists in America. Where once had been a wilderness of “rude inhabitants,” the foreign visitor now “descry’s our spacious towns, / He hails the prospect of the land and views / A new, a fair, a fertile world arise.” Reflecting the native *Zeitgeist*, Freneau employs natural images here to equate American cities with geological fecundity and to suggest that agricultural and urban development follow from and enhance one another. Moreover, Freneau projects the same equation into the future. With the vatic exuberance of an Isaiah, a Jeremy and an Amos, he foresees the nourishing waters of the Ohio converting the unimproved land into “Many a

town / Of note," while the "Potowmack, navigable stream," vies with the Thames, Tiber, and Rhine by yielding "an hundred towns."⁶ In Freneau's vision, the native geography will produce a natural paradise dotted with "cities and men" in a virtually spontaneous transformation.

A similar idea appears in David Humphreys' poem on the "Future State of the Western Territory." Like Freneau, Humphreys marvels at the way America has "blossom[ed] as the rose" and predicts that the wilderness shortly will "like Eden bloom." With this deft allusion to Isaiah, which connects his vision with the New Jerusalem, Humphreys announces nothing short of a perfect urban middle landscape in America:

Then cities rise, and spiry towns increase,
With gilded domes, and ev'ry art of peace.
Then Cultivation shall extend his pow'r,
Rear the green blade, and nurse the tender flow'r;
Make the fair villa, in full spleandors smile,
And robe with verdure all the genial soil.⁷

That Humphreys, who espoused the aristocratic leanings of the Hartford Wits, could be a trenchant poetic and political enemy of Freneau and still hold the same vision suggests just how potent the idea was. It could cut across what were otherwise unbreachable ideological lines to reinforce the belief in American uniqueness. Indeed, both Humphreys' and Freneau's poems reflect the intense national pride and confidence of this period. Any doubts about the compatibility of "robed verdure" and "golden" cities are swept away by the image of reconciliation borne aloft in a rising tide of native optimism. According to this belief, there is room for the city in the garden, a proposition which enlisted the efforts of a variety of native writers. One such individual was Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, naturalized citizen of New York and author of the popular *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). Despite its putative purpose of interpreting native experience in terms of a rural ideal, Crèvecoeur's *Letters* ultimately sanctions an urban-pastoral version of American development.

Traditionally, historians and literary critics have read Crèvecoeur's *Letters* as an impassioned, unqualified defense of American agrarianism, and it is not difficult to discover the reason for this tendency.⁸ In the first three letters of his work, Crèvecoeur establishes Farmer James, his fictive character/narrator for the bulk of the letters, as a votary of Enlightenment assumptions concerning the nature of man and the pastoral quality of life in America. A countrified Lockean, James accepts the ideas that people are inherently benevolent and that environment determines nearly everything: "men are like plants; the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil in which they grow." It follows, therefore, that men are best able to experience their natural goodness when they remain close to

nature. And what better place for such a life than in America, where, James intones, "nature opens her broad lap to receive the perpetual accession of new-comers." In the new land, "everything is prosperous and flourishing."⁹

In the farmer's moral geography, the primary feature of America is its agrarian character; it is an ideal middle landscape, bordered on one side by the primitive frontier and on the other by urban Europe. In contrast to Europeans, who live in "a crowded society where every place is overstocked," American yeomen "are almost insulated, and the houses are at a considerable distance from each other," allowing husbandmen to lead self-sufficient, independent lives (75). Above all, the abundance of land and the opportunity to work it distinguish life in America. "The instant I enter my own land," says Farmer James, "the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence, exalt my mind" (48). That is, James makes a linear connection, as Jefferson did, from private ownership of land to liberty and freedom.¹⁰ For him "the bright idea of property" is of a piece with "independence."

But aside from material or political advantages, what the farmer values most about the landscape are the spiritual benefits it imparts:

it is as we silently till the ground and move along the odoriferous furrows of our lowlands, uninterrupted either by stones or stumps, it is there that the salubrious effluvia of the earth animates our spirits and serves to inspire us. . . . (41)

Under the uniquely benevolent effects of native soil, it is possible for Americans to remain close to the elemental conditions which animate life. Indeed, as Leo Marx has noted, without the landscape as a controlling symbol, the *Letters* never could have been written.¹¹ Its power accounts for the singularly joyous tone pervading much of the work. Because of it, the farmer can assert confidently that he and his family will continue to lead happy, full, independent and insulated lives.

All in all, the picture that emerges in the first few letters is quite intoxicating. Aside from some of Jefferson's writings, these letters constitute the most exuberant statement in the eighteenth century of the pastoral ideal of America. The native scene appears as a world apart—a truly agrarian paradise where people can experience a secular "regeneration" and "resurrection." Given these facts, therefore, one would expect the *Letters* to end in a crescendo of optimism with an inspired vision of America as a permanently rural "asylum," as the farmer calls it at one point. But that is not what happens at all. By the close of the book the Revolution has come, and the farmer finds his family and whole way of life threatened. The great world of power, complexity, alliances, political contentions—in a word, the city—has intruded upon the farmer's domain, and he must make a choice. However, he realizes that neither of the most obvious alternatives offers much hope. If he joins his "mother country," that is, England, he will become an enemy to his own region, but should he follow his country-

men, he risks losing all in the fight. He settles, therefore, on a third course; he will move to the frontier where he will attempt to create a new rural asylum.

It is unlikely, however, that Crèvecoeur means us to see this choice as a total reaffirmation of the farmer's "rural scheme." Such a reading simply does not accord with the somber, tragic tone that defines the thrust of this last letter. Even in his ritualistic gesture the farmer admits that "my fate is determined; but I have not determined it." Dominating this letter is a sense of uncontrollable power (we may call it history) bearing down on the farmer's world, making any arcadia, at best, a temporary retreat. As the farmer asks, "Whatever virtue, whatever merit and disinterestedness we may exhibit in our secluded retreats, of what avail?" On the scale of great events, the purely pastoral world is "defenceless" (198-205).

Overtly, it seems, in the last letter Crèvecoeur distances himself from the values he has affirmed earlier, thereby establishing an ideological gap between the farmer and himself.¹² Indeed, within the past fifteen years, students of Crèvecoeur increasingly have pointed out the ironic qualifications surrounding James and have asserted, quite correctly, that he is only a persona. While a few have gone so far as to call James "an incorrigible idealist and moral coward" and Crèvecoeur's "straw man," most critics now agree that Crèvecoeur uses the farmer's plight to undermine Enlightenment assumptions and assert the failure of the American ideal.¹³ Unfortunately, these revisionist efforts, in attempting to compensate for earlier simplistic responses to the *Letters*, have gone to the other extreme in arguing for a tidy ironic dichotomy between James and his creator. To assume such a categorical distinction, however, is to ignore the function of the farmer as a persona—that is, as a literary device which embodies a perspective analogous to though different from the author's. Although qualifying Farmer James's suppositions, Crèvecoeur does not repudiate them. Continuing to adhere to the importance of environmental determinism, the human need to remain close to nature, and the sanative potential of the American landscape, he instead offers an alternative to the farmer's bucolic vision.

Our initial sense of that alternative develops as early as "Letter III," where the farmer formulates his answer to the question, "What is an American?" Despite his emphasis on the pastoral qualities of the native scene, he must admit that when a European first arrives in America, in addition to orchards and meadows, dotted here and there with family farms, he beholds fine roads, villages, and "fair cities." Furthermore, he calls these cities "miracles of industry and freedom," which dazzle the observer with their "elegance" (60, 74). What is odd about these remarks is that they are totally irrelevant to the ideography of the first three letters. There the farmer had defined the American scene as a bucolic retreat midway between the wilderness and the city. In the third letter, therefore, it is difficult to decipher what role

Crèvecoeur sees the city playing in this vision of America. And having established the thematic pattern of the first three letters, Crèvecoeur was no doubt wise in eschewing an explanation there.

We can obtain at least a rudimentary understanding of Crèvecoeur's position on this point, however, if we turn to his *Sketches of Eighteenth Century America*, a posthumously published continuation of the *Letters*. Despite the American farmer's ostensible self-sufficiency, Crèvecoeur explains here, for farm life to succeed the yeoman must have a market for his products.

Were not we to consume all these articles which our farms produce, were they not converted into wholesome, pleasant food, they would be lost. What should we do with our fruit, our fowls, or eggs? There is no market for these articles but in the neighborhood of great towns (299).

Unlike the farmer's ebullient prose, the language here strikes a hard-headed, practical note.¹⁴ At one point in the *Sketches*, Crèvecoeur says quite frankly that "to live, it is necessary to go to market," and markets require "sea-port towns" (238-39). Crèvecoeur, that is, implies in the *Sketches* that to survive, the middle landscape must take into account the great world with its laws of supply and demand, trade and economics.

In the first part of the *Letters*, Crèvecoeur suggests the same thing in a half-articulated manner. In effect he begins to expand the standard moral geography of pastoral writing—that is, its division into the three realms of the primitive, the middle landscape and the city—by incorporating an urban-pastoral component. Although qualified, many of the farmer's values remain alive at the close of the *Letters*, but his exclusively arcadian vision gives way to an idea of America as a rural-urban medley. That idea emerges fully in the *Letters* in Crèvecoeur's depiction of Nantucket.

Although constituting nearly half of the twelve letters, this section of Crèvecoeur's work generally has received little attention. As one critic has noted, most readers find the chapters on Nantucket disproportionately long and even tedious, and it is easy to see why.¹⁵ These letters contain little of the unqualified exuberance of the farmer's resonating voice. In fact, the sense of Farmer James as a character, a living being, is entirely absent from this section. The voice of these letters seems disembodied, like that of an impartial observer. But this impartial quality is what lends this section its significance. We sense here that the speaker, unlike the fictive farmer, closely resembles Crèvecoeur himself.¹⁶

Appropriately, Crèvecoeur adopts a more controlled tone in these letters. He admits that the soil on Nantucket is sterile and sandy and requires much effort to produce a crop. Yet he notes that "by bringing a variety of manure and by cow-penning" the inhabitants have "enriched several spots, where they raised Indian corn, potatoes, pom-

pions, turnips, etc.” (106). If life on the island appears more demanding than it does on Farmer James’s plot, it is nonetheless productive: “I believe there never were any people in their circumstance, who live so well, even to superabundance.” The people are happy, he explains, in their agricultural pursuits and “would not exchange their pleasure for those of the most brilliant assemblies in Europe” (152).

This is not to say that the island is devoted exclusively to agriculture. Crèvecoeur instructs his readers that they “must not imagine that every person on the island is either a landholder or concerned in rural occupations; no, the greater part are at sea, busily employed in their different fisheries” (109). This undertaking, which consists of a fleet of 200 ships, requires a complex, highly organized, communal effort. As such, its operations are centralized in the only town on the island, Sherborn, a community in which the “bustle and hurry of business” make one “imagine that it is the capital of a very opulent and large province” (106). This “little metropolis” of “about 530 houses” lends the society of Nantucket an urban character entirely missing from the world of Farmer James.

Of course, to our way of thinking, Sherborn hardly seems to be a great city, resembling instead a small rural town dominated by an extractive economy. But we should not project this distinction too far into the past. As Carl Bridenbaugh has explained, *town* and *city* connoted similar environments until the first few decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Robert Beverley, for example, in his *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705) employs the two terms interchangeably in writing about Williamsburg and Jamestown, and Franklin does the same in his *Autobiography*. This is not to say that colonial Americans could not distinguish a town from a city. They could and did, but their distinctions tended to be intuitive rather than quantitative. The point is that from the perspective of ideational historiography, the two terms are important not for their accuracy in describing place but for the concepts to which they refer—concepts which change diachronically. When Crèvecoeur speaks of cities, towns and the country, therefore, he is not thinking about population totals, precise ratios of demographic density, or complex definitions of metropolitan regions, as we do today. What concerns him are the types of institutions at Sherborn. Hence, in detailing life in the town, he explains that, in addition to agriculture and fishing, the inhabitants engage in local manufacturing and trade. The latter pursuit, resulting from the fishing industry, extends the community’s concerns beyond local extraction of raw goods to commercial relations with other locales. As Crèvecoeur notes, “the spirit of commerce, which is the simple art of reciprocal supply of want, is well understood here by everybody” (125). Whether or not Sherborn is a city by modern standards is ultimately irrelevant. What is germane, rather, is that Crèvecoeur presents it as a “little metropolis” clearly differentiated from the farmer’s rural milieu.

What allows Crèvecoeur to distinguish between Sherborn and its European counterparts is the way he integrates it into the thematic pattern of this section, making Sherborn and the rural scene coalesce:

The town regularly ascends toward the country and in its vicinage they have several fields and gardens yearly manured with the dung of their cows and the soil of their streets. There are a good many cherry- and peach-trees planted in their streets and in many other places (105).

At one point, in fact, Crèvecoeur calls the town a “pastoral one,” blending commerce, industry, and arcadia in a single environment (107). The inhabitants evince a similar synthesis. Many attend to the business of the town and still till gardens and farms or raise sheep. Even those involved solely in the fishing industry are absorbed in the pattern because, he explains, they are farmers of the sea. Like the noble husbandmen who trace “the furrows on the plain,” the fishermen at Nantucket “plough the rougher oceans,” gathering from the sea the material and spiritual “riches it affords” (104). Equally conducive to Sherborn’s distinctiveness is the absence of certain institutions which are also missing from the farmer’s world—institutions that Crèvecoeur associates with decadent Europe. The island possesses no aristocratic families, no kings, no ecclesiastical authorities “nor any pagentry of state, neither ostentatious magistrates nor any individual clothed with useless dignity; no artificial phantoms subsist here, either civil or religious” (119). In their stead, the inhabitants of Nantucket cultivate a community spirit and plainness of manners that “have acquired the authority of laws” (149).

Particularly decisive in preserving this community “in the bonds of peace and tranquility,” however, is the fact that “idleness and poverty, the cause of so many crimes, are unknown” (119). The reason is that here, as in all America, “human industry has acquired a boundless field to exert itself—a field which will not be fully cultivated in many ages” (159). Critics have often cited these last words as the encapsulation of Crèvecoeur’s faith in the American landscape and the special, superior position of the farmer. But that is not what Crèvecoeur is saying at all—or not quite that. Significantly, he includes this encomium not while discussing the life of the farmer, but when depicting the customs at Nantucket. If the American landscape presents a boundless field, Crèvecoeur insists, it is because it offers itself to numerous occupations, both rural and urban. As illustrated by this island community, what differentiates life in America is the opportunity to build a society where the two ways of life can exist in harmony.

Keeping with the more controlled quality of this section, however, Crèvecoeur displays no illusions about the quality of life at Nantucket. He admits that, by some standards, these people are less than affluent. But he is willing to accept that fact.

After all, is it not better to be possessed of a single whale-boat or a few sheep pastures, to live free and independent under the mildest government, in a healthy climate, in a land of charity and benevolence, than to be wretched as so many are in Europe, possessing nothing but their industry; tossed from one rough wave to another; engaged in either the most servile labours for the smallest pittance or fettered with the links of the most irksome dependence, even without the hopes of rising? (137)

If affluence and luxury are absent on the island, so too are their reprehensible cousins: poverty and degradation for the majority of the working class. Having admitted this limitation, Crèvecoeur can conclude his discussion of Nantucket by affirming that “the least imperfect [society] is undoubtedly that where the greatest good preponderates; and agreeable to this rule, I can truly say, that I never was acquainted with a less vicious or more harmless one” (154).

By privileging the community at Nantucket in this way, Crèvecoeur begins to qualify the idea expressed earlier that the farmer’s exclusively rural world is the best of all possible realms. Furthermore, he continues that qualification in the next letter, “Letter IX,” simultaneously reinstating the farmer as narrator. In this epistle the index of limitation appears initially in the subject matter. The farmer does not speak of his happy rural home, the bounty of the soil or the peculiar spiritual regeneration of husbandry. Instead, he begins with a description of the city of Charles Town in the Carolinas:

Charles Town is, in the north, what Lima is in the south, both are capitals of the richest provinces of their respective hemispheres; you may therefore conjecture that both cities must exhibit the appearances necessarily resulting from riches. Peru abounding in gold, Lima is filled with inhabitants who enjoy all those gradations of pleasure, refinement, and luxury which proceed from wealth. Carolina produces commodities more valuable perhaps than gold . . . ; it exhibits also on our northern stage a display of riches and luxury, inferior indeed to the former, but far superior to what are to be seen in our northern towns (160).

In light of both the farmer’s values expressed previously and the description of Nantucket just completed, this picture of Charles Town is hardly flattering. No doubt Crèvecoeur included this section, at least in part, to provide a contrast with Nantucket—one that would set off that society to ever greater advantage.¹⁸ Adhering to the Lockean environmentalism of the first few letters, the farmer explains that part of the reason for the distinctive way of life in Charles Town is “the softer situation of Carolina, where mankind reap too much, do not toil enough, and are liable to enjoy too fast the benefits of life” (141). Equally influential, though, is the fact that the society prospers through slavery, which allows the urban inhabitants to gain wealth from the “painful labours” of others. Consequently the people of

Charles Town simply exploit the country, ignore nature's messages and fail to develop a right relation with the landscape. Because they do not value human labor, they put a small premium on human life, including their own. Engaging in "dissipation and pleasure," though the heat of "the climate renders excesses of all kinds very dangerous," they live licentious but short lives. To the "scenes of misery overspread in the country" and the "woes of their poor slaves" they are oblivious: "Their ears by habit are become deaf, their hearts are hardened." Under this "strange order of things," as Farmer James refers to it, the very laws of nature seem abrogated—an idea which the farmer himself suggests when he asks of Charles Town, "Oh, Nature, where art thou?" (161-63). In the urban-pastoral structure of the *Letters*, Charles Town occupies the position of the fallen city, a product of European decadence released upon the American landscape.

But if this section functions as a contrast to the scene at Nantucket, its main purpose in the work as a whole is formalistic. Unlike the Nantucket letters, which only hint at the qualification of the farmer's vision, "Letter IX" begins to encircle the exhilarating rural landscape with dark, ominous implications. For in this letter a world of power, exploitation and carelessness—an urban world unredeemed by contact with nature—begins to intrude upon the farmer's sensibilities. Nothing makes the tenor of this letter clearer than the oft-quoted scene of the "Negro in the Cage," in which the farmer is shocked and sickened by the sight of a kenneled slave devoured by birds and insects. "Letter IX" foreshadows the mood and theme of the last letter in which the farmer's pastoral dream is revealed as a fiction.

In that culminating epistle, moreover, Crèvecoeur brings the farmer to a similar conclusion. As he surveys the present maelstrom, James admits that before the war he never considered fully the source of true felicity: "I lived on, laboured and prospered, without having ever studied on what the security of my life and the foundation of my prosperity were established." Now he realizes what he had ignored previously: the fact that man "cannot live in solitude; he must belong to some community bound by some ties, however imperfect. Men mutually support and add to the boldness and confidence of each other; the weakness of each is strengthened by the force of the whole" (195). Of course, having established the farmer's predilections and the turbulent situation, Crèvecoeur cannot allow James to act on his insight. Yet it is clear where Crèvecoeur's preferences lie. He believes that stability, peace, and abundance—values which the country was associating with a life closer to nature—require cohabitation and community. Taken as a whole, his text weaves a thematic pattern displaying the idea that pastoral America can exist only when yoked to urbanization, a process which itself can be redeemed by incorporating rural elements.¹⁹

What is striking about Crèvecoeur's position is the way details of his own life comport with the values of that ideal. After leaving his

farm in New York, he lived as a French Counsel in New York City and Boston, all the time maintaining contact with the rural world by composing papers on agriculture. While preparing a second French edition of his *Letters*, he worked on improving commerce and trade between France and America; he even played an important role in establishing botanical gardens in a number of American cities, most notably New Haven. In a way, his life constituted a personal version of the goals inherent in the urban-pastoral ideal — goals which he characterizes in his most important work. At the close of his *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur places his allegiance, not with the rural idyll of the fictive Farmer James, but with the rural-urban ideography manifested in and symbolized by Nantucket.

It should be noted, however, that the development of urban pastoralism in the eighteenth century was not an exclusively literary phenomenon. The ideal appeared also in city plans and in “beautification” projects in Philadelphia, Boston and Newport, where citizens began establishing municipal gardens and laying out public walks lined with elms. On a grander scale, the goal of reconciliation served as an implicit guide for L’Enfant’s plan for Washington, D.C., which was to be, as the engineer himself explained, both “a great metropolis” and “a complete heden [i.e., hedonistic] garden.”²⁰ A similar impulse even infused itself into the thinking of that arch-agrarian, Jefferson, who despite his professed aversion to cities, turned his attention at the close of the century to urban America. In an 1805 letter to C. F. DeVolny, Jefferson explained that Americans must begin “building our cities on a more open plan” to ensure the moral and physical health of those environments. To effect that purpose, he proposed his famous checkerboard pattern, in which every other square of the urban grid would remain free of buildings. Because “every square of houses will be surrounded by four open squares” in this ingenious design, “the atmosphere of such a town,” explained Jefferson, “would be like that of the country.”²¹

No doubt such discursive statements and the records of implemented urban plans provide the most direct, incisive indication of the importance of urban-pastoral ideology in eighteenth-century America. But clearly there is something uniquely compelling in such literary uses of the ideal as we find in Crèvecoeur. By virtue of its complex, dramatic pattern, the *Letters*, while graphically illustrating the historical strength of the ideal, manages to retain its tonic even today, as it resonates through the multiple levels of experience, from the national to the personal. This relation between form and idea is reciprocal, however, in that the historical context or urban pastoralism allows us to perceive in Crèvecoeur’s text a coherent, balanced design which otherwise remains draped and barely visible.

Yet the implications of Crèvecoeur’s book go beyond its own boundaries and even those of eighteenth-century thought. For Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* is only one embodiment of a pattern that has pervaded

our culture for more than two hundred years. In conjunction with the other pronouncements presented, the *Letters* suggests that historians of ideas need to reexamine the relationship between the edenic and urban images of America to delineate fully the centrality of urban pastoralism to native conceptions of the city.

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notes

1. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*, (New York, 1950), 304.
2. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964; rpt. London, 1973), 3-11, 20-21, and throughout.
3. *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Lexington, 1975), 17. For a brief discussion of a similar trend in the late nineteenth century, see Scott Donaldson, "City and Country: Marriage Proposals," *American Quarterly*, 20 (1968), 547-66.
4. *North Chicago: Its Advantages, Resources, and Probable Future* (Chicago, 1873), 8.
5. "The Rising Glory of America" (1809 text), in *The Poems of Philip Freneau*, Fred Lewis Pattee, ed. (Princeton, 1902-1907), II, 71, lines 283-88.
6. "Rising Glory" (1772 text), in *Poems*, II, 59-81, lines 197, 214-16, 538-41, and 609-12, respectively.
7. "Future State of the Western Territory," in *The Columbian Muse* (Philadelphia and New York, 1794), 164, lines 110, 112, and 87-92.
8. See, for example, Percy H. Boynton, "Crèvecoeur, the 'American Farmer,'" in *A History of American Literature* (Boston, 1919); 59-68; Chester E. Eisinger, "Land and Loyalty: Literary Expressions of Agrarian Nationalism in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *American Literature*, 21 (1949), 160-78; Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 107-16; and more recently, Marcus Cunliffe, "Crèvecoeur Revisited," *Journal of American Studies*, 9 (1975), 129-44.
9. *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth Century America* (New York, 1963), 65 and 36-37. Subsequent citations to the *Letters* and the *Sketches*, given parenthetically in the text, will be to this edition.
10. The best analysis of Jefferson's position on this relationship remains that of A. Whitney Griswold, *Farming and Democracy* (New York, 1948), 14-15, 36-37, and throughout.
11. *Machine in the Garden*, 110.
12. Accentuating the distinction between the two are the biographical dissimilarities carrying ideological implications. Among the more telling is the fact that Crèvecoeur's farm, unlike James's isolated retreat in Pennsylvania, was located in New York on a main route only three miles from the town of Chester. More importantly, while events of the Revolution did drive Crèvecoeur from his land, he did not move to the frontier as James does but returned to Europe, living for a time in both Paris and Hamburg. For fuller discussions of the differences between Crèvecoeur and his persona, see Thomas Philbrick, *St. John de Crèvecoeur* (New York, 1970), 22-27; and Julia Post Mitchell, *St. John de Crèvecoeur* (New York, 1916), 26-27, 37-38, 46, and throughout.
13. Proponents of this position include Elayne Antler Rapping, "Theory and Experience in Crèvecoeur's America," *American Quarterly*, 19 (1967), 707-18; James C. Mohr, "Calculated Disillusionment: Crèvecoeur's *Letters* Reconsidered," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 69 (1970), 354-63; Philbrick, 74-88; Russel B. Nye, "Michael-Guillaume St. Jean de Crèvecoeur: *Letters from an American Farmer*," in Henning Cohen, ed., *Landmarks of American Writing* (New York, 1969), 32-45; and Mary E. Rucker, "Crèvecoeur's *Letters* and Enlightenment Doctrine," *Early American Literature*, 13 (1978), 193-212. Delineations of the farmer as "straw man" and "moral coward" appear in Rapping and Rucker, respectively. The critical confusion about this matter is especially apparent in Nye and Mohr, who assert that Crèvecoeur denies James's ideals but nonetheless sanctions his decision to light out for the territory.
14. Although the letters published in 1925 as *Sketches* were written concurrently with those published in 1782 and though five of the former were included in the 1784 and 1787 French editions of the *Letters*, a substantial difference exists between the narrator of the *Sketches* and Farmer James. As Thomas Philbrick points out, the farmer of the *Sketches* "is a James manqué, a characterization . . . between the plowman of reality and the farmer of feelings" (113). That is, the narrator of the *Sketches* adopts a rationalistic, realistic response to agriculture characteristic of Crèvecoeur himself.
15. Albert E. Stone, Jr., Foreward, *Letters*, xvi.
16. Several points need to be made regarding the narrator of Letters IV through VIII. Although recognizing narrative voice in the *Letters* as belonging to a persona, critics generally assume that, except in "Letter XI," which Crèvecoeur explicitly attributes to one Ivan A1-z,

the voice is consistent and belongs to James. Only Russel Nye and Mary Rucker have noted a shift in "Letter IV," asserting that with that letter Crèvecoeur himself replaces the farmer as narrator. While Nye does not elaborate on what allows us to recognize that alteration, Rucker writes that "the depth of intellection and breadth of subject matter" in the letters on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard indicate that the speaker is Crèvecoeur (199). Insofar as they recognize the narrative displacement, these observations accord with my position, though they oversimplify by ignoring the text's literary, fictive status. Just as we would not equate author and narrator in an eighteenth-century epistolary novel, so must we understand that the narrator of Letters IV through VIII is not Crèvecoeur but another persona. The confusion, I believe, results from the fact that the narrator of this section is much more credible than James. While the farmer and his exclusively rural vision are finally undermined, no such qualification encumbers this second persona. Consequently, his position, we can reasonably assume, more closely parallels Crèvecoeur's. But the two men are not the same, and assuming that they are fails to appreciate Crèvecoeur's effective manipulation of perspective. In the following discussion I assume such a distinction, though for convenience I refer to this second persona as "Crèvecoeur."

17. *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America 1743-1776* (New York, 1955), 3 n.

18. Philbrick, 45 and 48, also notes the contrastive function of the Charles-Town description. A more penetrating insight is made by Jean F. Beranger ("The Desire of Communication: Narrator and Narratee in *Letters From An American Farmer*," *Early American Literature*, 12 [1977], 73-85), who calls Charles Town "an anti-society" diametrically opposed to the "American model" Crèvecoeur advocates in the letters on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.

19. Cecelia Tichi, *New World, New Earth: Environmental Reform in American Literature from the Puritans through Walt Whitman* (New Haven, 1979), 103-105, also argues that Crèvecoeur looked beyond an exclusively agrarian America to champion urban development in a still unpublished letter, "The Rock of Lisbon."

20. "Letter to the Commissioners," 30 May 1800, in H. Paul Caemmerer, *The Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant* (Washington, D.C., 1950), 398, 406.

21. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, H. A. Washington, ed. (New York and Washington, D.C., 1853-1854), IV, 572.