

“STRANGE ORDER OF THINGS!”:
THE JOURNEY TO CHAOS IN
*LETTERS FROM AN
AMERICAN FARMER*

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When Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur first published *Letters from an American Farmer* in England in 1782, an advertisement described the letters as “the genuine production of the American farmer whose name they bear. They were privately written to gratify the curiosity of a friend and are made public because they contain much authentic information little known on this side of the Atlantic: they cannot therefore fail of being highly interesting to the people of England at a time when everybody’s attention is directed toward the affairs of America” (27). For the next one hundred and seventy-five years the American reading public—at least that portion that remembered *Letters* at all—viewed Crèvecoeur’s work largely as a straightforward natural and social history of young America. Such an attitude is, however, the product of a distorted view of *Letters*: it stresses the early, optimistic epistles at the expense of the bleaker closing sections of the work, and it fails to distinguish between Crèvecoeur and his protagonist, Farmer James.

More recent critics have come to understand the complex—and darker—nature of this supposedly simple work.¹ Among the richest suggestions made are the largely undeveloped claims by Albert Stone, Jr., that *Letters* is a “prototypical romance” (208) and by Harry B. Henderson III that it is “an epistolary romance of ideas” (4). Crèvecoeur’s work *is*, in fact, a germinal romance and needs to be examined as such. To make such a claim is not, of course, to argue that Crèvecoeur was necessarily fully conscious of romance archetypes as he wrote. Nevertheless, those points of contact between the structure and devices of *Letters* and those of romance in

general will help explain more clearly the tension between Farmer James's early positive dreams and the final, darker vision against which those hopes are balanced.

To begin, a review of some of the most important features of romance is in order. In *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, Northrop Frye argues that romance "moves from one discontinuous episode to another, describing things that happen to characters, for the most part, externally" (47) instead of creating a group of characters and building a plot from them:²

The characterization of romance is really a feature of its mental landscape. Its heroes and villains exist primarily to symbolize a contrast between two worlds, one above the level of ordinary experience, the other below it. There is, first, a world associated with happiness, security, and peace; the emphasis is often thrown on childhood or on an "innocent" or pre-genital period of youth, and the images are those of spring and summer, flowers and sunshine. I shall call this the idyllic world. The other is a world of exciting adventures, but adventures which involve separation, loneliness, humiliation, pain, and the threat of more pain. I shall call this the demonic or night world. Because of the powerful polarizing tendency in romance, we are usually carried directly from one to the other. (53)

That these two worlds exist in *Letters from an American Farmer* is painfully obvious to James, to Crèvecoeur, and to the reader. Moreover, the epistolary structure of the work enables Crèvecoeur to switch abruptly from episode to episode, from the idyllic to the demonic. One need only examine the optimistic ending of Letter 8, the final letter in the Nantucket series, and contrast it to the deeply disturbing description of Charles Town and slavery in the very next letter to understand these shifts.

In generalizing further about literature, and especially romance, Frye notes: "There are four primary narrative movements. . . . These are, first, the descent from a higher world; second, the descent to a lower world; third, the ascent from a lower world; and fourth, the ascent to a higher world" (97). As an examination of the general patterns of *Letters* makes clear, Crèvecoeur's work partakes of more than one of these movements. The book opens with a discussion of whether the project of corresponding with Mr. F. B. should be undertaken at all. It moves to a presentation of America as idyll, a place where the European may begin again,

may be redeemed from "demonic" Europe, and this process is demonstrated in Letter 3 with the example of Andrew the Hebridean. Letters 4-8 further illustrate the possibilities of America through an examination of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. With Letter 9, "On Charles Town and Slavery," the reader confronts the "demonic" side of America. This confrontation continues through the sequence about the snakes and hummingbirds in Letter 10, which offers further examples of cruelty and violence, this time in nature. With Letter 11 the work rises to the possibility of the idyll once again, but here a European traveler, not James, is the author. In the last letter, James returns to insist that he can once again enjoy life in America despite the Revolution. When he suggests that he and his family will escape to the West to begin again, he reaffirms his own hope for the ideal. The work ends only on a neutral note, however, because James's dream is constantly qualified by the intrusion of such realities as Indian attacks and the possible "Indianization" of his children.

A closer examination of the structure of *Letters* as a whole is necessary, however, in order to appreciate fully the ways in which romance elements structure this work. In Letter 1, Crèvecoeur establishes the fitness of both his narrator, Farmer James, and his subject matter, America. James is an appropriate narrator because he is a representative, practical American. He functions, in the language of Henry James, as a central consciousness, a locus for observation and understanding, but he does not select his own topics for discussion.³ As the man of action, the doer, the farmer, James is carefully dissociated from learning and sophistication; instead, his European correspondent, Mr. F. B., must select the subjects: "Remember that you have laid the foundation of this correspondence; you well know that I am neither a philosopher, politician, divine, or naturalist, but a simple farmer" (43). By removing the onus of selection from James, Crèvecoeur retains his own freedom to control his work's structure while allowing his "simple farmer" to seem free from artifice. If James, the artless tiller of the soil, dwells too long on a particular aspect of American life, he is not to blame; it is not James's interests that are being consulted but those of a European with relatively little American experience. If, on the other hand, James is so disturbed by something that he seems to initiate a letter on his own, thereby violating his carefully established relationship with Mr. F. B., the reader should recognize Crèvecoeur's hand, pointing to the importance of some moral issue by manipulating his protagonist.⁴ That is, by

controlling the questions to which James responds, Crèvecoeur is able, in John C. Stubbs's words, "to order the random happenings of experience into artful patterns so that the reader [can] *comprehend* the experience—either intellectually or emotionally," much as the major American romancers of the nineteenth century would do (6).

In short, Crèvecoeur, the sophisticated literary craftsman, presents his materials in a studiously unsophisticated form in order to ensure his reader's engagement and understanding. This can be seen, for example, when James insists repeatedly that in his letters he can write only as a humble planter: "It is true I can describe our American modes of farming, our manners, and peculiar customs with some degree of propriety because I have ever attentively studied them; but my knowledge extends no farther" (33). In fact, James's knowledge does extend further than this; he is a man with keen powers of observation and a highly curious mind. After all, when asked to talk about Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, he is able to do so for five letters. Nonetheless, this insistence on James's limited knowledge constantly separates him from the learned European and confirms him as a kind of American Everyman, typical of his class and his nation. In this sense Crèvecoeur, in creating his protagonist, foreshadows that group of "historical romancers," described by Michael Davitt Bell, "who took their art seriously [and] tended to develop their materials symbolically. Perhaps 'representatively' would be a better word (as the Emersonian hero was to be a 'representative man'); characters and events, in historical romance, really *are* a part or example of what they represent, since history was itself regarded as, in a sense, a *representation* of moral truth" (6).

Just as James is established as an appropriate narrator, so America is shown as a fit subject. The New World, unlike the Old, is progressive, constantly presenting the American with both novel challenges and the materials to meet them. Rather than looking to someplace like Italy "to trace the vestiges of a once-flourishing people now extinct," James should look to America since there "everything would inspire the reflecting traveller with the most philanthropic ideas; his imagination, instead of submitting to the painful and useless retrospect of revolutions, desolations, and plagues, would, on the contrary, wisely spring forward to the anticipated fields of future cultivation and improvement, to the future extent of those generations which are to replenish and embellish this boundless continent" (36-37). In short, it is in

America that James can "record the progressive steps of this industrious farmer throughout all the stages of his labours and other operations [rather] than examine how modern Italian convents can be supported without doing anything but singing and praying" (37).

In terms of romance structure, Letter 1 functions to establish the everyday world. That is, America as a subject for literature is delineated, but America as idyllic or demonic has yet to be presented. In Letter 2, "On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures of an American Farmer," the portraying of America as ideal place begins. The letter is devoted to James as representative American man. Although James begins by noting that "Good and evil . . . are to be found in all societies" (45), Letter 2 is really a treatment of why America is the best of all possible worlds for him. It quickly becomes clear that the farmer's happiness depends upon ownership of property (his farm) and a stable, secure environment, as he himself indicates when he asks, "What should we American farmers be without this distinct possession of that soil? It feeds, it clothes us; from it we draw even a great exuberancy, our best meat, our richest drink; the very honey of our bees comes from this privileged spot" (48). James realizes that he must contribute to his own security, and he describes the efforts he makes to regulate his barnyard, pointing out that it is a process analogous to the process of governing men: "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. . . . Thus, by superior knowledge I govern all my cattle, as wise men are obliged to govern fools and the ignorant" (51). At the same time that James presents this kind of governance as a positive image, the reader apprehends an implied danger. Crèvecoeur suggests here that James's entire system of living can be endangered if rule by wise men is overturned, as the coming Revolution will demonstrate. And, as we see later, James has no real defense against instability; once his farm is endangered, and thus made insecure, he is plunged helplessly into the chaotic night world of romance.⁵

The central illustration that James employs in Letter 2, the anecdote of the kingbirds and the bees, demonstrates precisely this problem and, in so doing, presents a microcosmic version of the larger patterns of ascent and descent that structure *Letters from an American Farmer*. James's loving, and in many ways idealized, description of his farm leads him to the tale of some of his bees that, by forsaking a group defense (a "military array") and "dis-

band[ing]" themselves (50), allow themselves to be captured and eaten by a marauding kingbird. Crèvecoeur thus shows that even within this idyllic world the demonic can suddenly intrude. In order to save his honey, James intervenes, killing the bird and rescuing his bees. While earlier critics like D. H. Lawrence have cited this passage as "a parable of the American resurrection" in which the democratic bees escape the kingbirds of Europe, the author actually foreshadows the "neutral" ending of *Letters* as a whole (27-28); after all, only 54 of the 171 bees James rescues from the stomach of the bird survive the attack, and, as James himself has pointed out, "nothing exists but what has its enemy" (49). When James is cast in the role of the bees by the events of the Revolution, when he must flee his beloved farm, there is no beneficent protector who can rescue him.⁶ Moreover, when he finally strikes out on his own to save himself and his family, an action clearly parallel to that of the bees, his chances for success must be heavily qualified: the majority of the bees died.

In this episode, then, Crèvecoeur demonstrates the patterns of ascent (the establishment of the idyllic world of the farm) and descent (the intrusion of the destructive kingbird) that ultimately balance one another in the closing pages of *Letters from an American Farmer*. Therefore, while the prospects for James's future, and thus the future of the America he represents, are bright at this point, conflicts that foreshadow the appearance of a demonic world are already present. In Letter 3, the famous "What is an American?," however, the stress is even more on the positive. This section of *Letters* is really the apotheosis of the American farmer, a description of, to use Henry Nash Smith's phrase, "the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow" (123). James traces the American farmer's success from the moment the immigrant lands in America, and the crucial point he makes again and again is that in America the immigrants find that "Everything has tended to regenerate them." In America "they are become men" while "in Europe they were as so many useless plants" (62-63).

But if all men have felt some regeneration, not all have attained what is for James the highest possible station, that of husbandman. Those who live along the coastline tend to be bold and enterprising; though they largely neglect the land and earn their livelihood from the sea, they tend to be good, honest men. For example, in Letters 4-8, a rather lengthy description of the life and customs of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, James portrays

the residents as generally embodying the moral rectitude, industry, and selflessness that he describes as central to his life. Those who live along the frontier are entirely different, however, for "There men appear to be no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank, living on the flesh of wild animals when they can catch them, and when they are not able, they subsist on grain" (66). For those men there is very little in the way of hope; they are outcasts from every society. The heart of James's America is, of course, the farmland between the sea and the frontier: "Those who inhabit the middle settlements, by far the most numerous, must be very different; the simple cultivation of the earth purifies them, but the indulgences of the government, the soft remonstrances of religion, the rank of independent freeholders, must necessarily inspire them with sentiments, very little known in Europe among a people of the same class. What do I say? Europe has no such class of men" (65).

In fact, the tripartite structure that Crèvecoeur sees shaping American landscape is roughly equivalent to the romance worlds defined by Frye. For example, while the sea coast is essentially positive, it is clearly not as beneficial to men as the middle landscape. That is, the coastline is like the everyday world of Letter 1, a new world of challenge and opportunity that is the first step on the road to the idyllic. In fact, in Letter 7 James even points out that large numbers of Nantucketers have emigrated both to New Garden in North Carolina and the Kennebec in what is now Maine, there establishing fruitful communities that seem to approach the ideal of his farm (139-42). The central area of husbandry seems equivalent to the idyllic world of romance. However, the fact that not all immigrants are successful here allows for the descent into the demonic or night world of the frontier where men constantly war with neighbors and with nature. Thus, when people emigrate to America, they enter a new world, leaving the nightmare of Europe. They then ascend to the idyllic farming community offered them if they are industrious and honest. If they are unable to sustain themselves in the morally upright communities of farmers, they are forced out into the wilderness, clearly a pattern of descent since people there are little more than carnivorous animals.⁷

While some may fail in America, by and large James is optimistic. In order to demonstrate the almost limitless possibilities of the continent, he provides the example of Andrew the Hebridean: "I therefore present you with the short history of a simple Scotch-

man, though it contain not a single remarkable event to amaze the reader, no tragical scene to convulse the heart, or pathetic narrative to draw tears from sympathetic eyes. All I wish to delineate is the progressive steps of a poor man, advancing from indigence to ease, from oppression to freedom, from obscurity and contumely to some degree of consequence—not by virtue of any freaks of fortune, but by the gradual operation of sobriety, honesty, and emigration” (84). What James wishes to do here is to make the experience of Andrew’s Americanization comprehensible, to order the experiences of Andrew’s life so that Mr. F. B. and the reader will apprehend the moral, social, and historical importance of the example. At the same time, Crèvecoeur presents a tale that in many of its outlines exemplifies the structure of romance, and thus the structure of *Letters* as a whole.

James traces Andrew’s metaphorical route as he journeys out of the night world into the idyllic world of the middle landscape. If Europe is a figurative lower region for the American yeoman, the bustling cities of America’s coast are only the first step up for the newly arrived immigrant. Confused and lost, the European can expect to experience pain, separation, and struggle in his new environment. Nonetheless, James is optimistic, constantly insisting that obstacles can be overcome; the idyll awaits after the trials of the night world, just as it has before, because “these are the struggles through which our forefathers have waded, and they have left us no other records of them but the possession of our farms” (85–86). James himself reaffirms his role as benefactor by aiding the ignorant Scotsman as he earlier helped his bees, on the principle that the wise must always lead the foolish. While Andrew is successful in farming and establishing a community with his neighbors, Crèvecoeur inserts several incidents that appear ironic in view of later letters. For example, Andrew’s apparently humorous ineffectiveness in dealing with a band of Indians seems foreboding in light of both the Indian attacks described in Letter 12 and James’s projected sojourn among an Indian tribe, especially because James will be almost as inexperienced on the frontier as Andrew was in his first encounter with “savages.” Furthermore, while Andrew manages to become a member of his community, and thus to integrate himself and his family into the life of America, James will seek to avoid overly close contacts with his Indian neighbors. After all, the frontier is still a demonic world for James.

Despite these shadows, though, the story of Andrew the Hebri-

dean basically involves a movement from the demonic worlds of Europe through Philadelphia to an idyllic farming community like James's own home. Andrew's history is really the story of James's father, the founder of James's fortune who rose above the negative elements of life on the frontier to become a morally and materially successful man.

It is at this point that James spends five letters (4-8) describing Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. Why does Crèvecoeur spend so much time discussing the islands when he is really only restating virtues that he presented in Letters 1-3? He does so in order to establish the potential of the idyllic world as strongly as possible, to prevent its being completely vitiated by the less-satisfying aspects of life in America. He must do this since the next letter, Letter 9, introduces a society in which virtually all the earlier values of the colonies are denied. This abrupt shift from episode to episode is, of course, characteristic of the romance, enabling the author to order the experiences presented into a coherent moral pattern, and Crèvecoeur's moral position is made amply clear in a variety of ways. For example, he introduces a style of living that is utterly antithetical to earlier moderation:

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. . . . The inhabitants are the gayest in America; it is called the centre of our beau monde and is always filled with the richest planters in the province, who resort hither in quest of health and pleasure. . . . The climate renders excesses of all kinds very dangerous, particularly those of the table; and yet, insensible or fearless of danger, they live on and enjoy a short and a merry life. The rays of their sun seem to urge them irresistibly to dissipation and pleasure. . . . (160-61)

Charles Town's inhabitants are completely self-indulgent: in a climate in which excess is dangerous, they persist in excesses of all kinds, and they needlessly die young. Such attitudes mean that in James's view Charles Town is very close to Europe. Even his vocabulary reflects this idea when he writes of Charles Town as "the centre of our beau monde" and claims that the inhabitants "have reached the *ne plus ultra* of worldly felicity" (161). The farmer never resorted to French when describing Pennsylvania or Nantucket, and his constant stress on "riches," "luxury," "dis-

sipation," and "pleasure" reinforces his criticism. Thus, Thomas Philbrick is correct when he writes that "Insofar as Letter IX contributes to the depiction of American experience, it functions to establish a foil to the sturdy and humane life of the farmers and fishermen of the North" (48).⁸

This connection between Charles Town and Europe is, of course, crucial to the romance structure of *Letters* as a whole since the city is yet another night world into which the unwary American may descend. James's language, then, suggests that Charles Town is a center of urban decadence, a moral wilderness that is every bit as dangerous as the physical wilderness examined in Letter 3. Indeed, James's constant comments on the "dissipation" and "pleasure" of the inhabitants of Charles Town should recall his earlier comments on the barbarous frontiersmen where he focused on *their* "idleness" and "frequent want of economy," as well as other faults, in condemning them: "When discord, want of unity and friendship, when either drunkenness or idleness prevail in such remote districts, contention, inactivity, and wretchedness must ensue" (66). Those who escape such a life do so as Andrew the Hebridean has done, or as James's own father did: "my father himself was one of that class, but he came upon honest principles and was therefore one of the few who held fast; by good conduct and temperance, he transmitted to me his fair inheritance, when not above one in fourteen of his contemporaries had the same good fortune" (67). Those who wish to escape the dangerous style of living in Charles Town must also embrace the principles of "good conduct and temperance" if they wish to pass on a "fair inheritance" to their descendants. In sum, all this suggests that the South, like the frontier, may be atypical of America for Crèvecoeur, but nonetheless it *is* part of the new land. While James's southern experience does not completely negate his earlier praise of America, it certainly qualifies that praise heavily. Letter 9 thus demonstrates in a most forceful manner that it is possible to descend into a demonic world at at least two points in America itself: on the frontier and in the South.

Charles Town is part of the night world not only because its climate is too luxurious, however. Rather, the climate combines with wealth to produce a class of people who build careers upon slavery, and it is slavery that embodies James's distrust of the South. In his eyes, southern slavery is so vicious because the planters are devoid of "kindness and affection" (163). While many northern men, including James himself, hold slaves, he views his

blacks as happy inferiors who "participate in many of the benefits of our society without being obliged to bear any of its burthens" (165). While not excusing James's slave holding, the reader recognizes the sincerity of his hope that all slaves will soon be emancipated and is, like him, deeply offended by the unnecessary cruelty that he sees in and around Charles Town.

The result of James's trip to Charles Town is that James believes he has sunk into what is almost literally a nightmare world, and the closing episode of Letter 9, the tale of the caged Negro, clearly confirms this view. As James tells the tale, he is walking through the woods to dine with a planter. In the course of his journey, he encounters a Negro, in a suspended cage, who is almost dead, half-devoured by birds of prey. James fires at the birds and scares them off, only to have the man immediately attacked by insects. It is clear, too, that the birds will soon return to continue their grisly feast. This scene is really the cause of all James's troubled thoughts. As he points out when he begins the anecdote, "The following scene will, I hope, account for these melancholy reflections and apologize for the gloomy thoughts with which I have filled this letter: my mind is, and always has been, oppressed since I became a witness to it" (171). The kinds of imagery used to develop this narrative sequence are crucial. For example, the fact that the Negro is being devoured by birds and insects darkly echoes the episode in Letter 2 in which James destroys a kingbird and liberates some bees. Here James cannot intervene to rescue the Negro: he runs out of ammunition before he can do for a man what he did for lowly honeybees in the North on his farm. His impotence defines the debilitated state in which James finds himself in this demonic world. It is a moral wasteland in which his beliefs and desires are assaulted, thwarted, and finally defeated, and these attacks are a measure of the loss of the idyll. The fact that the positive values that James spent eight letters developing can be undercut in only one is a mark of the fragility of the idyll.

If Letter 9 destroys much of what has been done prior to this point, does Letter 10 continue the destruction or does it attempt to restore the idyll's power? In fact, just as the Nantucket section of the book expands and illustrates the idyllic world of James's farm, Letter 10, which also takes place there, expands and further proves the existence of the demonic world.⁹ The chapter consists of two parts, a discussion of snakes and a discussion of hummingbirds, both of which force the reader to recognize the effect of the South on James's whole outlook. What he now sees are destructive

elements in nature which he can no longer control. In Letter 2, for example, James could talk about his role as law giver in his barnyard, and, when the demonic intruded, he could act to defend his idyllic existence, to save his bees. By the time of Letter 10 he can only act as an observer. He can only follow along behind the snake fight; he can only observe the hummingbird: "When it feeds, it appears as if immovable, though continually on the wing; and sometimes, from what motives I know not, it will tear and lacerate flowers into a hundred pieces, for, strange to tell, they are the most irascible of the feathered tribe" (178). This unexpected destruction again stresses his powerlessness before this new nature. In fact, the descriptions of both the snakes and the hummingbird reveal a man who is shattered before the mounting evidence of instability in his life. Just as he responded with exquisite pleasure to his farm in the early letters, he now responds with exquisite pain to the destruction of his dreams.

In an effort to reassure himself, James turns from his own experience of the demonic world and invokes John Bartram, a gentle man, a farmer, a Quaker. Admittedly James does not, perhaps cannot, write the description given in Letter 11 of life on Bartram's farm himself, but the fact that he clings so desperately to the idyll suggests the continuing power of James's earlier vision, despite the trials he has recently undergone. When James presents the letter as the writing of Ivan, a Russian gentleman, he once again allows the reader to see the idyll from the point of view of the man escaping the Old World and entering the New to be redeemed. The proxy visit to Bartram is, however, only an interlude, and the last letter, "Distresses of a Frontier Man," begins with James plunged once more into despair because "the hour is come at last that I must fly from my house and abandon my farm!" (194). The American Revolution is upon James. Once more the kingbirds of Europe assault the democratic bees of America, but here the assault of the demonic world is no longer parable (as it was in Letter 2), but reality, and in his final letter James reveals what happens to him when his world becomes unstable and insecure: "Whichever way I look, nothing but the most frightful precipices present themselves to my view, in which hundreds of my friends and acquaintances have already perished; of all animals that live on the surface of this planet, what is man when no longer connected with society, or when he finds himself surrounded by a convulsed and a half-dissolved one? . . . I feel as if my reason wanted to leave me, as if it would burst its poor weak tenement" (195).

But James's reason does not leave him in the course of *Letters from an American Farmer*; instead, he makes a choice. He decides to move west. James worries that his children may become "savages" rather than husbandmen, but he has chosen to live with a peaceful tribe of Indians, and he will do what he can to take his farm with him. Fearing that "the imperceptible charm of Indian education may seize [his] younger children," James argues that he has "but one remedy to prevent this great evil, and that is to employ them in the labour of the fields as much as I can; I have even resolved to make their daily subsistence depend altogether on it. As long as we keep ourselves busy in tilling the earth, there is no fear of any of us becoming wild; it is the chase and the food it procures that have this strange effect" (213-14). With all hope of remaining on his farm gone, the best James can do is head west and reassert the power of the idyll;¹⁰ in this sense, the hope held out to Ivan in Letter 11, and to Europeans generally in Letters 2 and 3, is reaffirmed by the American farmer himself.

James's success remains in doubt, of course. He can only assert his plans, and he, like the reader, foresees dangers. In some respects, though, it is this very uncertainty that connects *Letters* to the coming tradition of the American romance. As Richard Chase points out on the first page of his study: "The American novel tends to rest in contradictions and among extreme ranges of experience. When it attempts to resolve contradictions, it does so in oblique, morally equivocal ways" (1). The ending of *Letters from an American Farmer* clearly conforms to Chase's generalization, and it does so for several important reasons. Frye points out that "most romances end happily": "This means that most romances exhibit a cyclical movement of descent into a night world and a return to the idyllic, or to some symbol of it like a marriage . . ." (54). More specifically, "the quest romance takes on a spiral form, an open circle where the end is the beginning transformed and renewed by the heroic quest" (174). This means that those values established in *Letters* that are associated with the idyllic world of James's farm, those that constitute the central myth of life in America that the work promulgates and defends, should be celebrated at the work's conclusion. After all, as James is told by his minister in Letter 1 when America is extolled as a place worthy of consideration, "Here everything would inspire the reflecting traveller with the most philanthropic ideas; his imagination, instead of submitting to the painful and useless retrospect of revolutions, desolations, and plagues, would on the contrary, wisely spring forward to the anticipated fields of future cultivation and im-

provement, to the future extent of those generations which are to replenish and embellish this boundless continent" (37). That is, theoretically America should still be what it was for Crèvecoeur in Letter 1, and what it became for those nineteenth-century romantic historians like George Bancroft and Francis Parkman, a land whose history was clearly "progressive" (Bell 6-8).

By the time of Letter 12, however, Crèvecoeur must confront a contemporary historical dilemma: the revolution and "desolations," which he must take into account, are not "retrospective" but immediate, and he needs to explain what such a war means to the typical American husbandman who cannot fully understand the experience in which he finds himself involved. As James says, "The great moving principles which actuate both parties are much hid from vulgar eyes, like mine; nothing but the plausible and the probable are offered to our contemplation. . . . Great events are not achieved for us, though it is *by* us that they are principally accomplished, by the arms, the sweat, the lives of the people" (198). Thus, while Crèvecoeur's initial impulse leads him to employ some of the same structures his successors would use, he cannot distance himself sufficiently from his materials to see precisely how—or even whether—James's idyllic world will be "transformed and renewed" through the Revolution.

As Stubbs points out, "History gave the nineteenth-century romancer his simplest solution to the problem of artistic distance. A fictional work could be set off from the world of the reader through time. Such a work would have the advantage, over straightforward history, of fictional shaping" (28). Thus he could, as noted earlier, structure his materials in patterns so that the reader could "comprehend" those historical materials, not just as a sequence of discrete events, but as parts of a larger moral pattern that was the real subject of the romancer. Crèvecoeur, however, because of his own historical situation, must confront the Revolution with no mediating perspective, and, as a result, *Letters* can only end with the outcome of James's emigration unresolved, with the larger pattern finally unfinished. James can only convey as much of the experience as he can understand, and he clearly does not understand the Revolution.

The result of this, for Letter 12, is that the book closes with a prayer in which James asks God's mercy so that he and his family may once again find peace and happiness.¹¹ His prayer here evokes the prayer for the distressed Europeans James recites at the beginning of the anecdote of Andrew the Hebridean (83-84).

Now the American farmer is as troubled and as frightened as the newly arrived Europeans. However, in asserting his faith in God, James once again raises the narrative of the book from the demonic to the level of the everyday world. In so doing, he has come to what Sacvan Bercovitch terms a "sense of intermediate identity, . . . an identity in progress, advancing from prophecies performed towards paradise to be regained" (143). That is, the representative American is about to start *Letters from an American Farmer* over again. What he succeeds in doing in Letter 12 is identical to what he did in Letter 1; he reconfirms that America is a fitting subject for consideration. Although the idyll is pushed further west, it is not completely vitiated because James maintains enough faith in it to set out again. Just as the European comes to America to escape the devastation of his homeland, so James sets out for the frontier, extending the path his father followed. At the end of *Letters from an American Farmer*, James is poised in the everyday world of romance, uncertain whether he can ascend to the idyllic world or will instead descend to the demonic.

Letters from an American Farmer leaves the reader poised as well—at the beginning of a developing tradition of American romance. As Crèvecoeur grappled with the ambiguities he saw in American history and culture, he created a series of structures to deal with those materials that are strikingly like those developed by Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville. Behind what at first appears to be a series of separate treatments of diverse American subjects lies a larger pattern, what Stubbs calls "an ideal truth or an abstract universal pattern beneath the surface of reality" (13). Thus, while Crèvecoeur was not a theoretician of romance as was Hawthorne, he *was*, nevertheless, a conscious craftsman who was led by his American materials to structures that unmistakably anticipate major works of nineteenth-century fiction like *The Pioneers*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *The Confidence-Man*.

As a result, Crèvecoeur occupies a significant position in the development of American literature. One hundred and fifty years earlier, John Winthrop confidently proclaimed that the plantations of New England would "be as a city upon a hill" as long as he and his fellow settlers fulfilled the terms of their covenant with God, and he concluded his sermon with the injunction to move forward, to "choose life, / that we, and our seed, / may live; by obeying His / voice and cleaving to Him, / for He is our life and / our prosperity" (83–84). In 1630, Winthrop could assert what America should be. Almost one hundred and fifty years after

the publication of *Letters from an American Farmer*, F. Scott Fitzgerald could see what America had become. Like Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald recognized that the "transitory enchanted moment" was gone, that one could no longer "[hold] his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." In 1925, Fitzgerald saw not progress, but regress, as his representative Americans "beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (182). In 1782, Crèvecoeur struggled to develop a form through which he could show what America might still be. Like Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville, Crèvecoeur was a man whose imagination was "shaped by the contradictions and not by the unities and harmonies of [American] culture" (Chase 1). Like his nineteenth-century successors, Crèvecoeur, too, turned to the romance to explore those contradictions, to investigate both the idyllic and the demonic sides of America, and thus to present his version of America's "intermediate identity" through his representative American.

NOTES

1. David Robinson, for example, sees in *Letters* "a much greater balance between the dark and the light side of human experience, even in the concluding letters" since he sees the work "as the story of the education of the narrator James, who is forced to sift out the relative values of 'civilized' or European society, and 'primitive' or American society at the book's close" (552-53). Mary Rucker sees the entire work shaped by "an important tension" between James, "whose humanitarianism is hardly more than self-indulgent sentimentality and whose approach to the natural and social orders is . . . strictly emotional," and Crèvecoeur himself, "a second consciousness, antithetical and corrective, [who] undercuts James's narrative reliability either implicitly through irony or explicitly through displacement" (193). For James Mohr, "the delineation of an ideal community is not Crèvecoeur's end purpose at all, but rather the first step in developing a larger pattern. The larger pattern is almost circular and involves not simply the fulfillment of social ideals but their failure as well. The idyllic image of America which Crèvecoeur develops during the first eight letters of his book becomes the dream against which the intensity of later disillusionment is measured" (355).

2. See also Chase (12-13).

3. Thomas Philbrick argues that "the letter writer functions not only as a reporter . . . but also as a literary character endowed with a particularized and significant sensibility, equipped with a background of past experience, and meaningfully involved in the world that his letters reveal" (75).

4. There has been considerable discussion of the epistolary form of *Letters*, with most critics arguing that the letters are, essentially, separate documents that produce a loose structure for the work as a whole. See Philbrick (75), Rapping (707-18), Plumstead (287), Marx (109), and Nye (35). For an especially full treatment of the relationship of James and Mr. F. B., see Béranger (73-85).

5. Philbrick, too, recognizes the importance of "order and stability" to James (78), and he writes of Letter 2 as a "fable of government" which "anticipates in many ways what we are later to learn of the society and government of America" (98). Joel Kehler, on the other hand, views James's barnyard as important in terms of his discussion of "self-interest" (208-09).

6. Stone also suggests the danger of James's "interven[ing] like God in the natural order" (210).

7. For another discussion of the "moral geography" of *Letters*, to a different end, see Marx (107-16).

8. Philbrick also points out that "in Charleston, the New World is already grown old" (45). Henderson echoes this, arguing that the end of Letter 9 shows "the ideal of a society 'better' than that of Europe . . . pursued by the Nemesis of History" (6).

9. Other critics see Letter 10 as little more than a "charming interlude after the tense atmosphere of the description of Charles Town" (Lewisohn xxii); see also Nye (41). Lawrence, on the other hand, sees the letter as "a fine essay, in its primal, dark veracity" (29).

10. Leo Marx, calling James an "exponent of the pastoral theory in America," says that even as the farmer "veers toward the primitive" he "reaffirms the ideal of the middle landscape" (113). Philip Beidler, on the other hand, contends that Ivan's letter is "largely a desperate rhetorical ploy . . . to shore up the impression of confidence created" earlier and that in the final letter, "confronted with the wreckage of his former assumptions, he envisions new possibilities for their enactment in a setting even further at odds with the realities he surveys, thereby committing himself at the last to the specious rigidities of a mind hopelessly trapped within the mythic designs of its own imaginings" (61). For readings of the conclusion as "disillusionment," see Nye (42-43), Mohr (362-63), Philbrick (85-88), and Rapping (714). Rucker argues that "Both Crèvecoeur and his persona end up where they began: James the incorrigible idealist and moral coward sustains the challenge to his assumptions and regains his comic view of the world; Crèvecoeur the pessimistic realist finds confirmation of his lack of faith in the benevolence of nature and in man and his social constructs" (211). Robinson's more charitable conclusion that Letter 12 forces a "refinement" of James's earlier view of the frontier, now "a place of hope rather than threat" (561), is much closer to my own.

11. Elayne Rapping notes that "The narrative ends where it started, then, with a vision of an agrarian democracy. But there is irony in James's renewed faith, for his reassertion of the model's ideals take [*sic*] the form of prayers rather than statements" (714).

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