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Shadow & Substance

We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory..., united by the silken bands of mild government; all respecting the laws without dreading their power, because they are equitable... . Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, nobishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; We have no princes for whom we toil starve and bleed... . Here man is free as he ought to be; ... we are the most perfect society now existing in the world.

Stirring sentiments these, penned in the American colonies in the year 1770, not by Thomas Jefferson as one might suppose, but by a transplanted Frenchman known to his contemporaries as Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. We know that he was born of the French minor nobility near Caen, France in 1735, was educated primarily by French Jesuits and that he emigrated to Canada in 1754 where he served as a cartographer under the French commander, Montcalm, during the last French and Indian war. After the fall of Quebec in 1759,

Crevecoeur sailed to the American colonies where he traveled extensively for a number of years finally emerging from obscurity as a colonial citizen of New York in 1765. Four years later he married Mehitabel Tippet of Yonkers, settled down on an Orange County farm not far from the thriving seaport of New York and began to record his experiences of American rural life. At the time of his marriage, probably few colonists knew French and English America better than he.

The opening lines of this paper are excerpted from a Crevecoeur letter entitled "What is an American". Possibly the best known of his letters, it is certainly the one most frequently reproduced in those ubiquitous paper backed anthologies of ~~English~~ ^{American} Literature that embellish College English courses throughout our country. On reading it through one understands why. Probably at no time before or since has the "vision of America", its lure and its promise, been been more rapturously extolled by the written word. If in our time the American Dream has lost much of its lustre, it

was in the year 1770 still young, still vibrant, still capable of inciting men to an intense fervor and nowhere more intense than in the heart of the ^{recent} immigrant to these shores who, if he carried with him visions of this spacious and exciting new land, had precious few illusions concerning the old world he had left behind. Understandably ~~then~~ there runs through Crèvecoeur's remarkable letter a constant thread of contrast, implied and explicit, between the New World's "most perfect society" and those restricted, closed European societies he knew so well. Too, there existed a rationale for this dream. Like countless other children of the 18th Century Enlightenment Crèvecoeur believed that man's enlightened self interest given free reign in a society governed largely by fundamental natural laws offered the greatest hope of establishing peace and harmony in human affairs. Historically the problem had largely been one of finding a nation sufficiently free of restrictive laws and customs where rational man could uncover the workings of natural law. America, Crèvecoeur ardently believed, was such a place. Here the newly arrived immigrant -

...does not find, as in Europe, a crowded society, where every place is overstocked; he does not feel that perpetual collision of parties, that difficulty of beginning, that contention... . There is room for everybody in America; has he any particular talent or industry/ He exerts it..., and it succeeds. Is he a merchant? The avenues of trade are infinite; Is he eminent in any respect? He will be employed and respected. Does he love a country life? Pleasant farms present themselves; He may purchase what he wants and thereby become an American farmer. Is he a laborer, sober and industrious? he need not go many miles... before he will be hired, well fed at the table of his employer, and paid four or five times more than he can get in Europe.... Whatever his talents or inclinations, if they are moderate, he may satisfy them.

In America's vast reaches the Old World concept of geographic frontiers with their ^{ambitious} ~~restrictive~~ ^{climates} ~~denotations~~ of law, ^{and} ~~custom and nationality~~ recede into oblivion. Massachusetts English, Dutch Yorkers, Pennsylvania Germans, Delaware Swedes, all are transformed by this great alembic. To hear Crèvecoeur tell it, all such lose their ancient identities only to ^{ex-} ~~ex-~~ ^{per-} ~~per-~~ experience a unique and exhilarating rebirth:

A traveller in Europe becomes a stranger as soon as he quits his own kingdom;... it is otherwise here. We know properly speaking no strangers; this is every person's country. ... Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.

In a singular burst of rapture befitting an apostolic vision of the New Jerusalem this 18th century colonist writes to an old world correspondent:

... had I leisure and abilities to lead you through this continent, I could show you... an astonishing prospect... one diffusive scene of happiness reaching from the sea shores to the last settlements on the borders of the wilderness....

Was it ever thus? Perhaps. For a while - if not in reality, in the mind's eye at least. Truth, like beauty, lives in the eye of the beholder and our American Farmer wrote these lines during the happiest years of his life (1769-1774). Alas! the picture was soon to darken.

In the spring of 1775 Massachusetts Minute Men clashed with British regulars at Lexington and Concord. Word spread quickly that all Massachusetts was rising in revolt. Her sister colonies soon followed. For Crèvecoeur who personally witnessed a number of the more vicious and unsavory incidents of our Revolution the war was one vast tragedy for all concerned. He described what he saw in a series of essays discovered quite by accident in France 100 years after his death. These were published in this country in 1925 as Sketches of 18th Century America. Unlike the standard histories the sketches are not concerned with the larger issues of the Revolution. They focus instead on the plight of ordinary people. In particular the plight of the frontier settler, a man far removed from the sites of those noble proclamations emanating from Boston and Philadelphia, who finds himself caught up in a maelstrom of contending forces he understands imperfectly at best but which quite clearly threaten to destroy him. Crèvecoeur's own perplexity is mirrored in the

sentiments of one such settler who, seeing society convulsed, friends and acquaintances slaughtered and the property of innocent people confiscated ~~under the shoddiest~~ ~~pretenses~~, cries out in protest:

The people are urged neither by want nor impelled by any great distress... as to the argument on which the dispute is founded I know little about it... Much has been said and written on both sides.

and, bitterly:

How does one unravel an argument in which reason herself hath given way to brutality and bloodshed?

"There was no middle course to take...", reflects Rachel Budd, a woman whose family made every effort to remain scrupulously neutral and who eventually lost everything. In so saying she defines the classic predicament of the innocent and the well meaning during such times.

The situation of the frontier colonists proved to be especially perilous. The Iroquois, ~~reputedly~~ among the fiercest fighters of the eastern forest indians, had sided with the British. In 1778, under British officers and accompanied by a number of Loyalists they launched a series of raids against widely dispersed and thinly defended settlements. The no quarter butchery practiced by these attackers was savage in the extreme.

"We had orders for laying everything waste", a conscience stricken white cries afterwards. "Read a copy of them and see whether I can be justified before God." This man now has difficulty sleeping at night. "Yet when I did those things I felt no more concerned than if I had been girdling so many useless trees. "

From inside his barricaded house a survivor of one of these raids writes:

"Do you comprehend the difficulties of our situation? Everything is done at night and by surprise".

And then, despairingly:

If we stay here we are sure to perish at one time or another; no vigilance on our part can save us; if we retire we know not where to go; every house is filled with refugees as wretched as ourselves; and if we remove we become beggars.

And what were Crèvecoeur's thoughts as he witnessed the the seeming collapse of the society he loved so much. Appalled by the savagery of the fighting he was even more appalled by the moral disintegration of a people he had recently characterized as "a new race of men...the most perfect society now existing in the world". He saw justice, truth, honor, family loyalties time honored ties that knit men together first loosened, then torn asunder by the passions of civil strife. From these pages comes an anguished cry of disillusionment:

"Men are the same...(the same) in all ages... in all countries".

What was it that drove them so? "T'is the jealousy, the avarice", he writes, "the secret thirst of plunder under new and deceiving names". To this end, in the sacred name of patriotism, innocent and guilty alike were reviled, persecuted and pillaged by their countrymen; and in this climate the morally calloused, the hypocrite and the opportunist nimble enough to

ply both sides of the fence, survived and prospered.

Conspicuous among the latter were the papier mache saints who now revealed their true colors. For them Crèvecoeur reserves some of his most biting comments. Those

... great psalm singers,...zealous religionists who would not have cracked a nut on the Sabbath, meek lowly Christians, ...humble in their deportment, ...prudent in their outward actions,...men of plausible countenance,... These are the men who in the obscure parts of this country are become political tyrants.

These pious souls abruptly acquire a new zeal for their new cause. It must burn, it must conflagrate; the more violent the flames, the thicker the smoke, the more meritorious.

While the man of true principle in a world gone awry is "reprobated, shunned and despised", these men along with

... the secret liar, the hidden fornicator, the nocturnal drunkard, the stranger to charity and benevolence are up lifted on modern wings and obtain the applause of the world.

For the record, Crèvecoeur, however reluctantly, sided with the Loyalist party. We will never know precisely why he chose as he did. One suspects that though he praised and befriended the common man he remained "au fond" - at heart- an aristocrat, with an aristocrat's instinctive preference for the established order. He was not a subtle man and there are abundant hints in his writing that he suspected large numbers of the patriots to be at least as interested in ~~combating the unjust laws of Britain's Parliament~~ destroying the American squirearchy as they were in combating the unjust laws of Britain's Parliament. Whatever his reasons he paid dearly for his choice. In a memorable passage from a sketch called "The American Belisarius" he lashes out at his tormentors. There would come a day of reckoning.

"... were I not convinced of it", he cries,

... I would not suffer the rebukes, the taunts, the daily infamy to which I have exposed myself. ~~But~~ I'd worship the demon of the times, trample on every law break every duty, neglect every bond, overlook every obligation to which no punishment was annexed. ~~And~~ I'd set myself calumniating my rich neighbors... I'd trade on public moneys though contrary to my oath. Oath! (pah!) Chaff for good Whigs. I'd build my fortune on the depreciation of the money. ~~I'd~~ inform against every man who would make any difference betwixt it and silver, whilst I privately exchange ten for one. ... and... I'd grow rich (fast very fast). ~~So~~ I'd send others ~~to~~ a-fighting whilst I stayed home to trade and rule. I'd become a clamorous American....

It was of course not quite that dark. ^{The nation survived - as did Crevecoeur.} Forced by the patriots to abandon his farm he fled to New York where the British army under General Clinton offered him temporary refuge. Penniless and utterly without resources he suffered intensely until the autumn of 1780 when he managed to obtain passage on a ship bound for England, and from thence - to France,

Time healed his scars. After the Revolution he returned to America as French consul to the states of New Jersey and Connecticut where he performed distinguished service, writing a series of ~~articles~~ agricultural articles based on his personal experience for the American press, and introducing to American agriculture a number of soil improving legumes. In 1790 he returned to France for the last time to live quietly in his native Normandy until his death in 1813.

At this point one may well ask - Why bother to read Crevecoeur - a chronicler of relatively minor events in our nation's history. Scarcely a proper historian by modern standards, his facts, if not downright scrambled are frequently colored and distorted by emotionalism. Time and again his style lapses into crudity, into

phrases stilted and awkward even by 18th century standards and we become painfully aware that he speaks in an adopted tongue. What does come through is the integrity of a sensitive and compassionate man whose finest scenes are laced with a vitality worthy of Chaucer himself. In them we learn once more that the irritations of a bad peace may, conceivably, be preferable to the violence and personal tragedy inherent in the best of wars.

And then there's the dream - Crèvecoeur's impossible dream; overdrawn, recklessly optimistic, a travesty of reality - so judged and discarded wherever pragmatic men congregate in the world. And yet this Frenchman's vision glows luminously in the mainstream of American tradition. True, men have always dreamed of new starts, new harmonies in mythical places where human life would be more secure, more just, more meaningful. Yet only in America have they seized their dreams and consistently attempted to weave them into working patterns of national life. It was so from the beginning when John Winthrop and his determined band, bent on demonstrating to all Christendom the proper way to worship the Lord, sailed off to found their new Zion in the Wilderness, at Massachusetts Bay. It was true when Jefferson enshrined at Philadelphia that uniquely 18th century dream of human equality based on natural rights and then watched while the entire nation embarked on a course dedicated to proving him right. It is true today as we sing, albeit in muted tones, of a "patriot dream that sees beyond the years..." America's "alabaster cities gleam?/ undimmed by human tears".

As we begin America's ⁹ bicentennial year, it is perhaps *perhaps appropriate to reflect* ^{recall}
~~always we return to the dream. For, indeed,~~ ^{at} men do not live
by bread alone, ^{A truth we tend to neglect these days.} Shatter a nation's dreams and you shatter a part
of its humanity. A vacuum exists. Into it rush all manner of
fears and vain imaginings. Men wander "ona darkling plain;
confused, searching - now here, now there, for old truths that
elude them, for new lights to live by. Failing in their quest
and convinced they have been deceived they turn furiously on
those individuals and on those institutions ~~whom~~ they feel are
responsible for their plight and the nation sinks anew into the
mire of chaos and civil strife.

If we have not ^{indeed entered upon a} ~~passed the~~ time of questing, recent events
would seem to indicate we are perilously close. Your opinion,
gentlemen, as to these matters is herewith urgently requested.