

The Myth of the Land and Crevecoeur's Vision of Self in Letters from an American Farmer

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Tsutomu Takahashi

Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) has been considered as an exposition of the agrarian ideal in America and discussed chiefly in relation to the myth of virgin land (Smith 1950) or to the pastoral ideal (Marx 1964). The mythical aspect of the book is reinforced further by Crèvecoeur's environmental determinism, a view that emphasizes the shaping force of American land. Consequently, the role of the American farmer has been underestimated. The present essay attempts to illustrate the active role of the farmer in the process of his economic and spiritual transformation.

Crèvecoeur defines American farmers as a "race of cultivators." To cultivate American land is literally a process of establishing a middle settlement on the one hand, and metaphorically that of improving one's moral condition on the other. The farmer should consciously curb his own destructive nature and endeavor to build a peaceful and spiritual existence. Crèvecoeur, moreover, emphasizes the importance of the farmer's principles of sobriety, honesty, and industry in his regeneration. Men without moral principles, on the contrary, degenerate into a bestial state of being. The farmer's principles are directly opposed to the "idleness" and "drunkenness" of a hunter or to the "dissipation" and "fraud" of a city-dweller. It is the farmer's dynamic interaction with nature, not a static one as Marx seems to suggest, that finally determines his regeneration in America.

Crèvecoeur's perception of reality, furthermore, is strongly attracted by such destructive human situations as wars, tyranny, and devasta-

tion. Even the representation of destructiveness in nature often becomes metaphorical for human situations. In *Letters*, therefore, human situations are not merely determined by natural reality, but actively involved in shaping it. What Crèvecoeur is chiefly concerned with in *Letters* is not the deterministic force of American land, but the philosophical speculation of man's regeneration and degeneration in his spiritual landscape.