Henry Steele Commager

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

In the eighteenth century all the philosophers were moralists, whatever their philosophy, whatever their religion. They were not pious, they were not devout, certainly they were not orthodox, but they had a religion all the same. It was the religion of happiness. That is what they were after in morals, politics, society; that is what they were after in life itself. Not the answer to the old question, what shall I do to be saved, nor the more familiar question, what is man's whole duty to God. No, theirs was a secular religion. What must man do to be happy? What should government do to assure happiness to its citizens? Pope had made this clear, Pope who summed up so neatly what the age thought:

> O Happiness! Our being's end and aim
> good, pleasure, ease, content, whate'er thy name:
> that something still which prompts the eternal sigh
> for which we bear to live, or dare to die.
>
> (*Essay on Man*, IV, I, 1 ff.)

For once Rousseau and Voltaire agreed. "Happiness is the end of every sentient being," said Emile's devoted tutor; "it is

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the first desire impressed on us by nature, and the only one that never leaves us." And Voltaire said more simply that "happiness is the object, the duty, and the goal of all sensible men." The Abbé Raynal added to this that "there is, properly speaking, only one virtue, which is justice, and only one duty, to make one's self happy. The virtuous man is he who hath the most exact notions of justice and happiness, and whose conduct conforms most rigorously to them" (*Hist. of Indies,* VIII, 350, 1783 ed.).

Was there ever a generation so obsessed with happiness? Everyone talked about it, everyone wrote about it, everyone sought it. Open where you will the theological tracts, the philosophical treatises, the histories, the poems and plays and novels of the time, the story is the same. Like the song of a whip-poor-will comes the refrain, felicity, felicity, felicity. The French immersed themselves in it and made a career of it; the English considered it and rationalized it; the Germans analyzed it; the Italians wrote operas about it; in America it was not only romantics like Jefferson and Tom Paine who invoked it, but sober statesmen like Washington and John Jay and dour statesmen like John Adams. Montesquieu wrote an *Essay on Happiness*, and the learned Muratori down in Modena submitted a comprehensive treatise, *De la Pubblica Felicità*: what he really wanted was what we would call a welfare state. The tough-minded Dr. Johnson made the pursuit of happiness the theme of his only novel. Imprisoned in the Happy Valley, and surrounded by everything that could pander to the senses or gratify the desires, Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, is bored and desperate, and thinks only of escape. Accompanied by his philosopher friend Imlac, he makes his escape, and for years searches everywhere for happiness. In vain; no one is really happy, and in the end Rasselas returns, disillusioned to his prison. That is life—the everlasting search for happiness. Voltaire wrote on happiness, in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, and Helvetius, who consulted him about a theme worthy of his pen, composed a long poem *Le Bonheur*. Johan Friedrich Struensee, who later became prime minister of Denmark, began his career by editing a *Zeitschrift für Nützen und Vergnügen* and his later career made clear that it was the *Vergnügen* that interested him

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most. Poor Struensee, beheaded and quartered because he sought happiness not only for the Danish people, but for himself and his Queen! In Warsaw, the College of Nobles sponsored a series of public lectures on "Man's Happiness Here Below" and there was even a secret society, l'*Ordre de la Félicité*. The Marquis de Chastellux, who was a General to boot, did not agree with Dr. Johnson about the futility of the search for happiness. He provided a two volume history of that search, *De la Félicité* (*On Public Felicity or Considerations on the Lot of Man in the Various Epochs of History*, was the English title). No people of the past had ever really known happiness, said the Marquis, not the Greeks nor the Romans, certainly not the hapless victims of the dark ages, not even those who lived during the Renaissance —excitement, yes, but not happiness. "But now, at last, we are truly enlightened; now happiness is within our grasp."

Meantime the dramatists and librettists played incessantly with the theme: Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi, and Beaumarchais and Da Ponte who ended up in the new world, not at all happy. And from Misson's *Voyage of François Legant* of 1708 and *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 to Sebastian Mercier's novel about *The year 2440* (1770) and Saint-Pierre's lacrymose *Paul and Virginia* (of 1787) novelists sought happiness on some island paradise or in some imagined Utopia.

All well enough, but what is happiness? What is it, where is it to be found? "Real happiness," wrote the Marquis d'Argens, "consists first in not having any crime on the conscience; second being able to rest content in the station to which God has called us; third, a clean bill of health" (Qt. in Hazard, 22). It was poverty, frugality, temperance, courage, wrote the Abbé De Mably, who thought that only a communistic society could nourish these virtues. It was nature, it was the pastoral life, said Rousseau. Not at all, wrote Chastellux, happiness depends on a hundred things: climate, legislation, natural wealth, and it finds expression in lifting the burden from the toilers of the world. It was to live under a philosophical king—perhaps some Chinese Emperor—said Christian Wolff and promptly lost his job for his temerity. It was a divine project, said the mighty Blackstone, who was not usually so abstract; it was the greatest possible abundance of objects for our enjoyment, said Mercier de la

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Rivière; it was education and improvement, said Joseph Priestley. It was Freedom, it was Enlightenment, it was a fluorishing population, said the Americans. From all of which we conclude with Pope that

> who thus define it, say they more or less,
> than this, that happiness is happiness?

Surely there must be somewhere a common denominator. An so there is. Man was born to be happy, why is he everywhere unhappy? With one voice the philosophers answer, because government, religion, society, the institutions of civilization prevent it. Turn where you will, you can see how these artificial contrivances frustrate the native goodness and happiness of man. The poor who work from morning to night for a pittance are ground down by taxes and oppression, decimated by disease and death; even their little children are not exempt from the burden of civilization. Incessant wars drain away the young men, and destroy them, while armies ravage the land that nature intended for the bounty of man. The church tyrannizes over the minds of its victims, keeps them in ignorance, plagues them and robs them, and if they protest they can expect the fate of a Calas or a La Barre. Even the rich and the powerful are unhappy. They are enervated by luxury, plagued by ambition, eaten by envy, poisoned by jealousy. They are condemned to idleness, and waste their talents in senseless debaucheries. They are strangers to the happiness that flows from simple virtue, to the faithfulness of husband or wife, or the affection of children. They are slaves to the King, to the Church, to Society, as truly as the poor blacks stolen from Africa and carried to the Indies ... Society was the enemy of happiness. Look at Candide, look at Cunegonde. How touching their search for happiness and how futile, until in the end they learned to cultivate their garden.

Only Man in a state of nature was happy. Man before the fall.

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Now the Noble Savage stalks into the salons and the courts of Europe in all his naked majesty. He was a South Sea Islander;

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he was a Huron or a Cherokee; he was an Inca Emperor before the coming of the wicked Pizarro; he was some child of nature, Paul or Virginia on a wind-swept island of the Caribbean; he was a rude Corsican or a Caledonian, or even a Viking. He was anything and everything but a modern European.

He was the Tahitian chief, Orou, who instructed one of Bougainville's young clerics about love and virtue—especially love. Diderot wrote it all down for the edification of those who still clung to the absurd notions of the Church about these matters (*Supplement to Bougainville*). He was Prince Lee Boo of the Pelew Islands, brought over to England by Captain Wilson of the *Antelope*, where he disported himself and died of the small-pox. He was the wonderful Omai who sailed to England with Captain Cook in 1774, and promptly became the darling of the Court and of drawing rooms. Dressed in a suit of Manchester velvet lined with white satin, with lace ruffles at his wrists, he was presented to the King. "How-do King Tosh," he said, and the delighted George III gave him a sword which he thereafter wore. Joseph Banks carried him from one country house to another, and Lady Sandwich conceived a passion for him (it was to her husband that George III addressed the famous letter of condolence on the death of his mistress). Joshua Reynolds painted him in a flowing toga because that is the way he should have looked, and Mr. Dance painted him in his native costume; he dined with Dr. Johnson; Fanny Burney put him in her diary; and a hundred poets wrote verses about him and his island paradise. He proved how civilized savages could be, and went back to his island home with a barrel-organ, a box of muskets, and his sword, and promptly died.

Or turn to the forests of America for your Noble Savage. He was some Indian like John Shebbeare's Cannassatego. "No human form was ever seen more graceful," wrote his biographer, "his person was straight as the arrow which his hands directed from his fatal bow, his stature six feet, the most perfect high in human nature," and "from his eyes flashed forth beams of courage and compassion, as each passion, at different moments, animated his bosom, within which his heart beat with honest throbbing for his country's service" (*Lydia, or Filial Piety*, London, 1755). Or he was the Noble Adario who conducted

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that profound philosophical conversation with Lahontan which contrasted so painfully the virtues of savage life with the vices of European. Or perhaps he was the Abbé Lafiteau's Huron, indubitably the descendant of Achilles or Agamemnon. Half a century later the romantic Irish rebel, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, discovered that the red men were still nature's noblemen. He had fought on what he came to believe was the wrong side in the American Revolution; he went back to America, was adopted into an Indian tribe in New Brunswick, yearning to cast his lot forever with his forest friends. "Savages," he wrote, "have all the real happiness of life, without any of these inconveniences or ridiculous obstacles to it." If only he were a savage he would never again be plagued by politics, fashions or duties. Poor Lord Edward, so passionate for liberty, killed in the Irish uprising of 1898.

Even the Americans who should have known better succumbed to the myth of the Noble Savage. Here was Mrs. Morton's *Ouabi* who possessed:

> Native reason's piercing eye
> melting pity's tender sigh,
> changeless virtue's living flame,
> meet contentment, free from blame
> open friendship's gen'rous care.
>
> (*Ouabi, or the Virtues of Nature,*
> by Mrs. S.A.A. Morton, Boston, 1790)

And here was Philip Freneau's Creek Indian Tomo-Cheeki (stolen, no doubt, from John Cleland's Tombo-Chiqui of 1758), languishing in a Philadelphia garret, and longing for the life of the forest. "Why," he asks, "hath my countrymen sent me to make a treaty with white men who are corrupt and dishonorable . . . who hath proved proud, cruel, base, and treacherous?"

The Noble Savage did not even have to be a savage, just so he was primitive, just so he was nature's child. Look at Paul and Virginia on their island in the Caribbean: "No care had troubled their peace, no intemperance had corrupted their blood, no misplaced passion had depraved their hearts. Love, innocence and piety possessed their souls. Still in the morning of life, they

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had all its blooming freshness, and surely such, in the garden of Eden, appeared our first parents when coming from the hands of God." This, as no less than Napoleon observed, is the "language of the soul." Or consider the proud Corsican, Paoli, noble leader of a noble cause, a figure out of Plutarch. Rousseau wrote a constitution for him; Boswell adopted him, and Mrs. Macaulay tried to. England almost went to war for him. The Philadelphia painter Henry Baibridge painted him; the Americans named a town after him—an ill-fated town as it proved. Sometimes the philosophers went back to an earlier day to find the children of nature in their primitive nobility. Every one knew Juba, the Numidian chief, whom Addison had immortalized in his *Cato.* Juba admired the Roman Cato, but were not the Africans even nobler? Styphas, general of the Numidians,

> believe me, Prince, there's not an African
> that traverses our vast Numidian desert
> in quest of prey, and lives upon his bow,
> but better practices these boasted virtues . . .
>
> (*Cato*, Act. 1, Scene IV)

Perhaps you would prefer the Vikings, whom the enterprising Paul Mallet was restoring to their place in history, a primitive people, but nature's noblemen. Or there was Macpherson's celtic bard, the incomparable Ossian, or the Barbarians sweeping down from the German forests to overrun—and reinvigorate—Rome. "The giants of the North," wrote the great Gibbon, "restored a manly spirit of freedom," "while" the untutored Caledonians, "glowing with the warm virtues of nature," contrasted with "the degenerate Romans pulluted with the mean vices of wealth and slavery" (Everyman ed., *Decline and Fall*, V, 87).

What did they have in common, these children of nature on the little islands of the south Pacific, or in the forests of Canada, or the towering Andes, or the rude mountains of Scotland or along the fiords of Norway? What they had in common was that they were not Europeans, not contemporaries. They had in common the absence of government, laws,

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churches, and social classes. They had in common the absence of cities, commerce, industry, money to corrupt, wealth to enervate. Their world was the world of nature. Like Tomo-Cheeki they "rose early to hail the first dawn of the sun; they ran amidst the luxuriant vegetation of nature beneath trees bending with plump and joyous fruits; they quaffed their thirst in the clear waters of the streams."

What is more, like the South Sea Islanders and the Hurons, they loved as their hearts dictated. "Nor do we think less of our young women if before they are married they indulge in that amiable passion," said Tomo-Cheeki (Philip Freneau, *Prose Works*, 341). Above all they were not Europeans, that was the great thing. "It is impossible," says the Old Man to the innocent Paul of *Paul and Virginia*, "for a person educated according to nature to form an idea of the depraved state of society" of that world (1900 ed. p. 170). "You Europeans," exclaimed Saint-Pierre, "whose minds are imbued from infancy, with prejudices at variance with happiness, cannot imagine all the instruction and pleasure to be derived from nature. Your souls, confined to a small sphere of influence, soon reach the limits of its artificial enjoyments, but nature and the heart are inexhaustible."

Nature—and the heart! But it was not nature unalloyed, nor the heart untutored, and a kind of bright falseness shimmers over it all. Adario displayed the learning of a savant; Omai delighted London with his wit; Tomo-Cheeki was a veritable *philosophe*; Orau confounded the seminarians with his logic; Logan, the Mingo chief, spoke with the eloquence of a Demosthenes; Ossian was a celtic Homer. But Adario was really the Baron Lahontan as Orau was really Denis Diderot, and Tomo-Cheeki was of course Philip Freneau, and how much of Logan's eloquence was Jefferson is still a matter of dispute. And as for the blind bard Ossian, he proved a fraud, just as Dr. Johnson had predicted. It was nature, but it was more art than nature. If it was not the art of Versailles or Tivoli, neither was it the nature of the Brazilian jungle. In fact it was all very much like Marie Antoinette milking the cows or dressing in a greek costume, and Fragonard's children playing in the forests; it was very much like the famous "English" gardens with their

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carefully wrought naturalness, their touches of the Chinese, their calculated surprises.

Where then was happiness? Was it all in the minds of the philosophers, like those Utopias described in the imaginary voyages that so delighted this century? (See Chinard, and Atkinson).

Ah, no, things are not that desperate. There was still America.

*

It was America that had most to teach—English America that is. What could you learn, after all, from Tahiti or China or Corsica that would be of any use? There was not really much likelihood that France would go Polynesian or England Chinese. While London tamed Paoli, Paoli did not inflame London! No, what was needed was some evidence that you could have both nature and civilization, both innocence and sophistication. What was needed was some evidence that you could find, or achieve, virtue and happiness without a convulsive escape to the south seas: some evidence that civilization was not incompatible with virtue and happiness. And for a demonstration of that, where do you go except to America—to those English colonies which were now to be the thirteen United States.

Perhaps it all started with Voltaire—Voltaire who took no stock in nature but voted for civilization, and who loved to contrast Chinese sages with European fops. Voltaire was not really interested in America—it is extraordinary how he manages to ignore it in his *Philosophical Dictionary*; and in his histories, too. But he had discovered the Quakers partly for their own sake, and partly because they provided the most dramatic contrast to the Church, and he equated the Quakers with Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania with Franklin, and Franklin with America. Every step of this equation was a bit misleading, but no matter, the total added up all the same: that's the way it was with Voltaire's arithmetic.

Look at the good Quaker as he goes about his business and the business of God, so simple, so upright, so virtuous, so wise

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and serene, unspoiled by luxury, untempted by avarice, unseduced by power. "William Penn," wrote Voltaire, "could boast of having brought to the world that Golden Age of which men talked so much and which has probably never existed anywhere but in Pennsylvania." (*Lettres philosophiques*) And in his *Discourse on Toleration* he wrote of Pennsylvania that "discord, controversy, are unknown in the happy country which the Quakers have founded, and the very name of Philadelphia, which reminds them constantly that all men are brothers, is the example and the shame of peoples who do not yet know tolerance." (It was of this that Franklin observed that "while we sit for our picture to that able painter, it is no small advantage to us that he views us at a favorable distance.") Where Voltaire led, others followed, and soon Pennsylvania was all the rage, a kind of synonym for Utopia.

Here was the true happy valley, not in Abyssinia; here was innocence, not in Tahiti; here was virtue, not in Santo Domingo. Here was industry and frugality, here was modesty and kindness, here was freedom and justice. Here men were virtuous and women were chaste; they married young and reared large families. Here was abundance, prosperity, and happiness. "Do you wish to see a virtuous people?" asked the Abbé Coyer: "Go to a great city, the rival of Paris, there is to be found that remarkable group . . . the Quakers." (*De la Prédiction*, 1756) The Abbé Robin, who had fought with Rochambeau, was even more enthusiastic about Philadelphia. "Paris has good taste, Philadelphia has a taste for the good; Paris is refined, Philadelphia is simple; Paris has good manners, Philadelphia has pure manners; the French are the most sociable, the Pennsylvanians the most honest of men; Paris has excellent police, Philadelphia has none . . . Philadelphia is a city of happiness." (qt. Phillips, *The Good Quaker*, p. 103). And Raynal, as if to make amends for all the unkind things he had said of America, made an exception of Pennsylvania. "This Republic, without wars, without conquest . . . became a spectacle for the whole universe. Its neighbors, in spite of their Barbarism, were enslaved by the gentleness of its ways and distant peoples, in spite of their corruption, rendered homage to its virtues. All nations rejoiced to see renewed the heroic times of antiquity

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which the customs and laws of Europe had made to seem like a fable. They saw at last that people could be happy without masters and without priests" (*Hist. of Indies*, qt. Edith Phillips, *The Good Quaker*, 101-2). And to prove it all, here was the testimony of the American farmer that the wisdom of Lycurgus and Solon never conferred on man one half the blessings and uninterrupted prosperity which Pennsylvanians now possess: "the name of Penn, that simple and illustrious citizen, does more honor to the English nation than those of many of their kings" (Letter II, *Letters from an American Farmer*).[1]

Pennsylvania caught the imagination of Europe, and came to stand for the whole of America. For *Pennsylvania had produced the divine Benjamin Franklin.* Fortunate nation, to be the mother of *Franklin*! He was a child of nature, he was a Philosopher, he was a Quaker, he was a Deist; he was a Wit, he was a Statesman; he was a Scholar, he was a Scientist. He was Solon and Lycurgus, Priam and Ulysses; Condorcet said he was Socrates; he was even Rousseau and Voltaire. With his long white locks falling about his benign countenance, his beaver hat which spoke of the backwoods, his brown homespun suit —, on a famous occasion brown velvet—his gold rimmed spectacles of his own make. He was the very picture of innocence and symbol of wisdom. This printer's apprentice from frontier America (for all America was Frontier), had wrested the lightning from the skies and the scepter from the hands of tyrants. He went everywhere, he knew everybody, all doors were open to him and all hearts as well. He wrote for all the journals, he sipped chocolate in all the salons, he made love to all the great ladies—that was safe enough for both sides. He was Bonhomme Richard and gave his name to the most famous of ships, ever-victorous. When he and Voltaire met, at the Academy, all Europe exclaimed in ecstasy that it was the meeting of Solon and Sophocles. Every learned society honored itself by counting

[1] Pennsylvania had no monopoly on felicity. Connecticut commanded respect, and so too Virginia. Gaspard de Beaurieu dedicated his *Elève de la Nature* (Nature's Pupil) to the Inhabitants of Virginia. "In that land," he wrote somewhat wildly, "there are to be found neither cities nor luxuries, nor crimes, nor infirmities. Every day of your lives is serene, for the purity of your souls is communicated to the skies above you ... You are as nature would wish us all to be." (*Elève de la Nature*, qt. in Echevarria, *Mirage in the West*, p. 32-33).

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him a member, and after the revolutionary war, the Royal Society over in London sent him a gold medal for his services to humanity. Even John Adams who distrusted him and envied him could not withhold his tribute:

> His reputation was more universal than that of Leibnitz or Newton, Frederick or Voltaire, and his character more beloved and esteemed than any or all of them. His name was familiar to government and people, to Kings, Courtiers, Nobility, Clergy and Philosophers, as well as to plebians, to such a degree that there was scarcely a peasant or a citizen, a valet de chambre, coachman, or footman, a lady's chambermaid or a scullion in a kitchen who was not familiar with it, and who did not consider him as a friend to human kind. When they spoke of him, they seemed to think he was to restore the Golden Age. (See *Spirit of Seventy-Six,* 678 f., C. F. Adams, *Works of John Adams,* 659 ff.)

Surely a people who produced Franklin had found the secret of happiness!

Do the Americans know how fortunate they are?

Indeed they do. For the Americans, too, were concerned with happiness. But they were not obsessed with it. They had no need to be. They did not have to ask themselves why man is everywhere born free and is everywhere in chains, why man is born to be happy but is everywhere miserable. For here men were not in chains—not white men, anyway—nor were they miserable. Americans could take happiness for granted as they took freedom for granted. They did not have to romanticise nature, they knew both nature and the Indian far too well to give way to uncritical sentiment. They did not have to revolt against luxury or vice, for they knew neither.

Happiness runs like a golden thread through the thinking and the writing of the revolutionary generation. Their idea of Happiness was almost wholly secular. It had not always been thus. When President Willard of Harvard College, preaching in Boston's old south church in 1724, said that "the object of man's happiness is out of himself. Man cannot be his own felicity . . . The whole creation affords no such object, the fruition whereof can make a man happy . . . God, and he only, is such an object in the enjoyment of whom there is

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perfect satisfaction and blessedness," almost all who heard him would have nodded assent. But listen to another divine, a generation later, Dr. Samuel Johnson of King's College, but now we can already detect the influence of Pope or of those philosophers whom Pope reflected, Soame Jenyns, Joseph Butler and Lord Shaftesbury (See Basil Willey, *The 18th Century Background*). Here is the Good Angel Raphael, explaining the purpose of God with man. Everything was designed for the pleasure, the happiness, the improvement, and the ultimate salvation of man. Everything, he said, is contrived for the service, the use and benefit of man, the chief and Lord of all.

How exquisitely is the whole system of nature about you, fitted to every one of your necessities, occasions, and conveniences! How agreeably is your sight feasted with the variety of colors, your hearing with pleasing sounds, your smelling with grateful odors, and your taste with delicious morsels. In short how exactly is everything fitted to all the purposes both of your subsidence, comfort and delight. And lastly what a wonderful machine is that which you carry about you by which you are enabled to have commerce one with another. (*Raphael or the Genius of English America*, in Schneider, *Samuel Johnson*, 536-8).

Happiness, then, is the will of nature and of God. Clearly it is a duty of government and a right of man. The *Pennsylvania Farmer*, John Dickinson, had made this clear as early as 1766: "Kings or Parliaments could not give the rights essential to happiness . . . They are not annexed to us by parchments and seals. They are created in us by the decrees of providence . . . It would be an insult on the Divine Majesty to say that he has given or allowed any man or body of men a right to make me miserable. If no man or body of men has such a right, I have a right to be happy" (Commentary on *Correspondence in Barbadoes*, 1776, *Writings*, vol. I). John Adams was no sentimentalist but he wrote in 1776 that

Upon this point all speculative politicians will agree that the happiness of society is the end of Government, as all divines and moral pholosophers will agree that the happiness of the individual is the end of man. From this principle it will follow that the form of

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government which communicates ease, comfort, security, or in one word, happiness, to the greatest number of persons, and in the greatest degree, is the best. (*Works,* IV, 193)

George Mason, down in his beautiful Gunston Hall in Virginia, picked up the notion from his reading of philosophers, and wrote it into the very first paragraph of the Virginia bill of rights:

All men are created equally free and independent, and have certain inherent natural rights, of which they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity: namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means ... of pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.

Jefferson did not go quite that far—but he went to immortality. "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" was the way he put it, and left it to future generations to quarrel over the meaning of the words.

That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's.
What did he mean? Of course the easy way
is to decide it simply isn't true.
It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.
But never mind, the welshman got it planted
where it will trouble us a thousand years.
Each age will have to reconsider it.
(Robert Frost)

Jefferson returned to this theme again and again—to no one of that generation was it more vital—in his letters and in official statements alike. Here he is congratulating Maria Cosway on the birth of a daughter (named, we may note in passing, Paolina, after the Corsican chief). "They tell me *que vous allez faire un enfant* ... You may make children there, but this is the country to transplant them to. There is no comparison between the sum of happiness enjoyed here and there." And to General Kosciusko he wrote that "The freedom and happiness of man ... are the sole objects of all legitimate government" (V Ford, 509). And the famous first inaugural address invokes the blessings of "an over-ruling providence which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter."

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Tom Paine, too, looked with rapture upon the paradisiacal scene which was spread before the American people at the close of the revolution.

> Never had a country so many openings to happiness as this. Her setting out in life, like the rising of a fair morning, was unclouded and promising. Her cause was good, her principles just and liberal, her temper serene and firm, her conduct regulated by the nicest steps, and everything about her wore the mark of Honor. It is not every country that can boast so fair an origin. (*Crisis,* 13)

And more ravishing still was the prospect before Americans:

> To see it in our power to make a world happy—to teach mankind the art of being so—to exhibit on the theatre of the universe a character hitherto unknown . . . (*Ibid.*)

Nowhere in American literature is there a more touching appeal for the vindication of happiness than in the words of Washington's circular letter of 1783.

> the citizens of America . . . are, from this period, to be considered as the actors on a most conspicuous theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designated by providence for the display of human greatness and felicity. Here, they are not only surrounded with every thing which can contribute to the completion of private and domestic enjoyment, but heaven has crowned all its other blessings, by giving a fairer opportunity for political happiness than any other nation has ever been favored with. . . . The foundation of our empire was not laid in the gloomy age of ignorance and superstition, but at an epocha when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period; the researches of the human mind, after social happiness, have been carried to a greater extent, the treasures of knowledge, acquired by the labours of philosophers, sages and legislatures through a long succession of years, are laid open for our use, and their collective wisdom may be happily applied in the establishment of our forms of government; the free cultivation of letters, the unbounded extensions of commerce, the progressive refinement of manners, the growing liberality of sentiment, and above all, the pure and benign light of revelation, have had a meliorating influence on mankind and increased the blessings of society. At this auspicious period, the United States came into

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existence as a nation, and if their citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own. (Fitzpatrick, *Washington*, 483 ff.)

Note that the Father of his Country invokes happiness or felicity five times in this one appeal!

Meantime the right to happiness was becoming official. George Mason had started it with the Virginia bill of rights. Not to be outdone John Adams wrote happiness into the Massachusetts bill of rights five times, as well. Thereafter the guarantee of happiness spread from constitution to constitution. If the United States Constitution does not invoke the term, that may be because it was clear that happiness was something the states would take care of. And so they did. Altogether, from the Revolution to the beginning of the twentieth century (when Francis Thorpe made his monumental compilation) there were some 120 state constitutions. Howard Mumford Jones has gone faithfully through them all and discovered that about two-thirds of them provide some kind of garantee of happiness, and that most of these guarantee not only the right to seek it but the right to obtain it as well. Keep in mind that in the United States happiness is not merely a moral but a legal right. (Jones, *Pursuit of Happiness*, 23 ff.).

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The Americans did not really explore happiness: it was too familiar. That was left to a Frenchman who had fought with Montcalm, and then settled in frontier New York. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecœur, he called himself, and his book, *Letters from an American Farmer*. Happiness is the theme. In the wilderness of America, in the abundance and the freedom of the new world, the husbandman can find happiness. Happiness in farming, and hunting, and fishing; happiness in intimacy with a beneficent nature, in watching the birds, in following the bees, in contemplating the changing seasons of the year, and of life. Happiness in cheerful association with neighbors of whatever race or faith or tongue; happiness in wife and children, the wife not doomed to labor in the fields, but bustling about

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her cheerful kitchen or sitting at her loom, each child a blessing, not, as in the old world, a burden. Happiness, too, in the avoidance of war (alas, it came, even to Crèvecœur's paradise), in the absence of an established church, and of religious quarrels and wars; and happiness in virtue and freedom.

Crèvecœur strikes this note at once, and it echoes, like some lovely Mozartian refrain until the very end, until the chords get jangled by war. "Don't you think, neighbor James," says the minister, who appears just this once . . . "Don't you think that the mind of a good and enlightened Englishman would be more improved in remarking throughout these provinces the causes which render so many people happy? . . . How we convert huge forests into pleasing fields, and exhibit throughout these thirteen provinces so singular a display of easy subsistence and political felicity." (*Letter 1*) So James is persuaded, and undertakes to write his letters to his great friend in England, letters "setting forth the situation and feeling and pleasures of an American farmer." (Letters dedicated to Raynal)

"I felt myself happy in my new situation," he writes—let us call him Crèvecœur, now—"and where is that station which can confer a more substantial system of felicity than that of an American farmer?" Where indeed? In his second letter, Crèvecœur tells us how he inherited his land (no primogeniture here, no entail, no taxes) and extended it by his industry, and how he raised a family, and prospered. In this letter he refers to happiness or to felicity no less than thirteen times. "No wonder that so many Europeans who have never been able to say that such portion of land was theirs, crossed the Atlantic to realize that happiness."

Happiness is the theme, too, of the famous letter III, where Crèvecœur tells us what is an American, and gives free scope to "the train of pleasing ideas which this fair spectacle suggest." It is one sustained paean of rapture, it is a kind of song of songs to the beauty of America. Who can fail to adore this country, and to cleave to it: a soil that is rich, land in abundance, a salubrious climate; a government that is benign and laws that are mild; a happy intermixture of nations and peoples; a society that is simple and virtuous, religious toleration, peace and

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friendship, no armies, no tax gatherers, no great cities with their luxuries and their vices. Everywhere "happiness and prosperity," everywhere "hospitality, kindness, and plenty." "Ours is the most perfect society in the world."

So with the additional letters, on Nantucket, on the Vineyard, on Bartram the botanist. The letter on Nantucket opens with the statement that "the happiness of their people" should be "the primary object of the attention of the most patriotic rulers." And so it is. "How happy are we here, in having fortunately escaped the miseries which attended our fathers; how thankful ought we to be . . ." Nantucket is a veritable Arcadia — there is something about an island, after all—it seems to have been settled "merely to prove what mankind can do when happily governed." It was "not founded on intrusion, forcible entries, or blood, as so many others have been; it drew its origin from necessity on the one side, and from good will on the other, and ever since, all has been a scene of uninterrupted harmony." (*Letter 10*) "Here, happily unoppressed by any civil bondage, this society of fishermen and merchants live, without any military establishment, without governors or any masters, but the laws; and their civil code is so light that it is never felt."

The moral is the same almost everywhere (not in Charleston, alas, cursed by slavery), and it is driven home relentlessly. Here, for example, is an imaginary Russian gentleman visiting Quaker Bartram. He begins his letter home with a rhapsody to the good fortune of the new world, and concludes with one of those prophecies already becoming commonplace:

> O, America! exclaimed I, thou knowest not as yet the whole extent of thy happiness: the foundation of thy civil polity must lead thee in a few years to a degree of population and power which Europe little thinks of.

It was all familiar enough, this search for happiness, this celebration of felicity. Yet there were some new ingredients, too, and it is important for us to note them. There was, for example, the assumption of material abundance for all—really for all; if you take that for granted let me remind you that emigration literature (especially the America letters) for a hundred years

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was to exclaim in amazement that Americans ate meat every day, that there was milk enough for the children, that there was white bread on the table. There was the assumption of progress. The philosophers, to be sure, had imagined progress (Bury has given us a fascinating book on the subject). But much of the idea of progress in the old world was the clearing away of obstacles. It was not so much painting a new picture as cleaning off the grime of centuries and revealing the master's original intention in all its beauty. It was doing away with war and injustice, and misery and poverty, and ignorance and corruption—that is one reason the primitive exercised such a fascination for the philosophers. But Americans did not have the problem of overthrowing the past—they did not even have a past to overthrow. They started fresh. They could imagine new institutions and new blessings, and achieve them too.

Closely allied with the idea of progress was the idea of universal enlightenment. How odd that the term enlightenment in Europe should refer to a program imagined by philosophers and carried through—or neglected—by despots, while in America it meant popular education. "Enlighten the people generally," said Jefferson, and it was as much a rallying cry as Voltaire's "*Ecrasez l'infame*" and to George Wythe "no other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness . . . Preach a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people can protect us against the evils of misgovernment." (IV Ford, 268).

All the founding fathers were educators: Franklin who founded an academy and a college, and a philosophical society and a library; Washington who left part of his fortune to found a college, and ceaselessly advocated a national university; John Adams who wrote into the Constitution of Massachusetts a prevision for a learned academy, and privileges for his own Harvard College, and who lived to see his son installed as Boylston professor of Rhetoric; Noah Webster who devoted his life to raising the standards of popular education; Richard Rush who helped found two colleges, and advocated the education of women; William Johnson who represented Connecticut in the Federal Convention and served as first president of the

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renamed Columbia College; the Pennsylvania Farmer, John Dickinson, who had the happiness to sponsor a college named after him; George Wythe who was not only Chief Justice of his state but Professor of Law at its college. And, greatest of them all, Jefferson, who planned a Complete Educational System for Virginia, wrote educational provisions into the ordinances governing the West, and built the University of Virginia . . . Where else do you find anything like this?

There was another ingredient, not new, to be sure, but new in the special meaning it came to hold for America. To the philosophers, as we have seen, happiness and virtue consisted in being true to nature; consisted, consequently, in not being Europe. Americans accepted the first part of this formula only insofar as they identified themselves and their way of life with nature—which mostly they did. They embraced the second with uncritical enthusiasm.

*

We are in the presence here of one of the great themes of American history and culture: the theme of new world innocence and old world corruption. It is too large to explore in all of its ramifications but too important to ignore.

The theme of new world innocence and old world corruption emerged early, and persisted all through the nineteenth century: it is a constant of American literature as of American politics, and if it no longer haunts our literature, it still bedevils our politics and diplomacy. Royal feudal Europe may sail with us, as Walt Whitman wrote, somewhat confusedly, but there is perilous stuff in that cargo. Young Philip Freneau warned against the connection with Europe as early as 1772:

> What are the arts that rise on Europe's plan
> but arts destructive to the bliss of man?
> What are all wars, where'er the marks you trace
> but the sad records of our world's disgrace?
> Reason degraded from her tottering throne,
> and precepts, called divine, observed by none.
> Blest in their distance from that bloody scene,
> why spread the sail to pass the Gulphs between.

(*Discovery*, 1772)

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Why indeed? Why risk infection in these

> Sweet Sylvan scenes of innocence and ease
> how calm and joyous pass the seasons here!
> No splendid towns or spiry turrets rise
> no lordly palaces—no tyrant Kings
> enact hard laws to crush fair freedom here,
> no gloomy jails, to shut up wretched men;
> all, all are free!—here God and nature reign;
> their works unsullied by the hands of men.

For here Paradise anew

> shall flourish, by no second Adam lost.
> No dangerous tree or deathful fruit shall grow,
> no tempting serpent to allure the soul,
> from native innocence . . .

Freneau, it might be said, was at once unsophisticated and enthusiastic. Franklin was neither, but after a long residence in England he could deprecate the notion of a reconciliation between the Americans and the mother country on moral grounds.

> I have not heard what objections were made to the plan in congress, nor would I make more than this one, that, when I consider the extreme corruption prevalent among all orders of men in this old, rotten state, and the glorious public virtue so predominant in our rising country, I cannot but apprehend more mischief than benefit from a closer Union. (*Works*, V Bigelow, 435)

It was a sentiment which was echoed by the *Pennsylvania Gazette* the following year: "Remember the corrupt, putrifed state of that nation (Britain) and the virtuous, sound, healthy state of your own young constitution." (March 13, 76) (Qt. Williamson, *Suffrage in America,* 75).

How deeply they were shocked, these American innocents, by the goings-on of Europe. Thus the Rhode Island lawyer, Henry Marchant, hoped that "no son of his might wish to see the blaze of princely power and magnificence, or to be over-curious after what the world calls knowledge and wisdom." For

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to him there was "scarcely any virtue in an American getting to heaven, so infinitely less are the temptations which lead off to dissipation, vice, and folly." Ebenezer Hazard thought London a "sink of sin," and even the loyalist Samuel Curwen was shocked by "vicious indulgences of every kind," (Sachse, *Colonial American in Britain*, 205), while William Samuel Johnson of Connecticut thought the political morality of Britain beneath contempt. "We that have been used to none but sober, regular, fair, and righteous elections, can hardly form any idea without being upon the spot, of those made here, where none of those principles seem to have any share in the business, but the whole depends upon intrigue, party, interest, and money" (Qt. in Sachse, *op. cit.*, 207).

Dr. Benjamin Rush, who had studied in Edinburgh and in London, never ceased to preach the danger of contamination from abroad. "America," he said, "should be greatly happy by erecting a barrier against the corruptions in morals, government and religion, which now pervade all the nations of Europe." And years later he was still advising editors to "avoid filling your paper with anecdotes of British vices and follies—duels, elopements, kept mistresses, suicides, boxing matches," stuff which would "destroy that delicacy . . . which is one of the safeguards of the virtue of a young country." (*American Museum*, May 1789) David Humphreys, one of Washington's aides, reflected the views of his beloved commander in his poem *On the Happiness of America*:

> All former Empires rose, the work of guilt,
> On conquest, blood, or usurpation built:
> But we, taught wisdom by their woes and crimes,
> Fraught with their lore, and born to better times;
> Our constitutions form'd on freedom's base,
> Which all the blessings of all lands embrace;
> Embrace Humanity's extended cause,
> A world our Empire, for a world our laws.
>
> (*Miscellaneous Works,* p. 30)

And Timothy Dwight, later President of Yale College, admonished Columbia:

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> Let the crimes of the east ne'er encrimson thy name
> Be freedom, and science, and virtue thy fame.
> To conquest and slaughter let Europe aspire,
> Whelm nations in blood, and wrap cities in fire,
> Thy heroes the rights of mankind shall defend
> and triumph pursue them and glory attend.

Frontier Georgia threatened to deprive young men who went abroad for their studies of their citizenship. With Jefferson—surely the most cosmopolitan American of his generation—American innocence and old world corruption was almost an *idée fixe*. He expressed this in the famous letter to John Bannister about the education of his son, Mark.

> Why send an American youth to Europe for education? . . . Let us view the disadvantages . . . to enumerate them all would require a volume. I will select a few. If he goes to England, he learns drinking, horse racing, and boxing. These are the peculiarities of English education. The following circumstances are common to education in that and the other countries of Europe. He acquires a fondness for European luxury and dissipation, and a contempt for the simplicity of his own country: he is fascinated with the privilege of the European aristocrats and sees with abhorrence, the lovely equality which the poor and the rich enjoy in his own country. He contracts a partiality for aristocracy or monarchy, he forms foreign friendships which will never be useful to him . . . He is led, by the strongest of all the human passions, into a spirit for female intrigue, destructive of his own and others' happiness, or a passion for whores, destructive of his health, and in both cases learns to consider fidelity to the marriage bed as an ungentlemanly practice . . . It appears to me, then, that an American coming to Europe for his education, loses in his knowledge, in his morals, in his health, in his habits, and in Happiness. (*Works,* Boyd ed., VIII, 636-7)

Thank God—or nature—for the Atlantic Ocean! So Jefferson wrote to his old mentor, George Wythe, in 1786:

> If all the sovereigns of Europe were to set themselves to work to emancipate the minds of their subjects, from their present ignorance and prejudices, and that as zealously as they now endeavor the contrary, a thousand years would not place them on that high ground on which our common people are now setting out. Ours could not have been so fairly put into the hands of their own common sense, had they not

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been separated from their parent stock and been kept from contamination, either from them, or the other people of the old world, by the intervention of so wide an ocean. (Boyd ed., 244)

So he wrote, fifteen years later, to the Earl of Buchan:

> I feel real anxiety on the conflict to which imperious circumstances seem to call your attention. And bless the almighty being who, in gathering together the waters under the heavens in one place, divided the dry land of your hemisphere from the dry land of ours. (*Writings,* Mem. ed., X, 400)

Another fifteen years and he had developed this sentiment into a policy.

> The day is not distant, he wrote to his old friend William Short, when we may formally require a meridian of partition . . . which separates the two hemispheres . . . and when, during the rage of eternal wars of Europe, the lion and the lamb within our regions shall lie down together in peace . . . The principles of society there and here are radically different, and I hope no American patriot will ever lose sight of the essential policy of interdicting in the seas and territories of both Americas, the ferocious and sanguinary contests of Europe. (4 Aug. 1820, Mem. ed., XV, 263)

The theme, and the arguments, persisted. Young Edward Everett, newly returned from Germany just as Jefferson was formulating those ideas which were to emerge as Mr. Monroe's doctrine, asked rhetorically:

> To Europe's History why each thought confine?
> Mark where afar in blameless lustre shine
> Columbia's stars . . .

And James Russell Lowell—it was in his anti-British period —advised his fellow countrymen to

> Forget Europe wholly, your veins throb with blood
> to which the dull current in hers is but mud . . .
> O, my friends, thank your God, if you have one, that he
> twixt the old world and you sets a gulf of a sea . . .

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It is the most persistent theme in American literature from Crèvecœur to Tocqueville, from Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* to *Daisy Miller* and *Portrait of a Lady* from *Innocents Abroad* to the *Sun Also Rises*. Something of its complexity and difficulty can be seen in the position of the expatriate. Here Americans maintain a double standard; it is taken for granted not only that the European immigrants to the United States give up their nationality and identify themselves with their adopted country, but that they do so exultantly. And Theodore Roosevelt made substantial political capital by his campaign against hyphenated Americans. But for Americans to give up their nationality and identify themselves with a foreign country is another matter altogether.

Needless to say there are philosophical and psychological implications here which we ignore at our peril. For this concept of new world innocence and old world corruption encouraged that sense of being a people apart already sufficiently dramatised by nature herself. How characteristic that Jefferson should have combined nature and morality in the first inaugural: "Kindly separated by nature from one quarter of the Globe: too high minded to endure the degradations of the others . . ." To this day Americans are inclined to think that they are somehow outside the stream of history, that they are somehow exempt from the burden of history. The philosophes in general ignored the American experience, and so, for long, did European monarchs and statesmen, and Americans were prepared to accommodate themselves readily enough to that attitude. As if it were a reality. "Are we a peculiar people?" asked Chancellor Kent indignantly in the New York Constitutional Convention of 1820. And the answer was of course, yes, we are. Elsewhere human nature condemned revolution to futility, but not in America: here revolution could be orderly and benign. Elsewhere corruption poisoned the body politic, but not here; America was to be miraculously free from corruption! Elsewhere faction set men at each others' throats, but here faction was tamed into party and parties were benevolent. Elsewhere men of different faiths burned each other at the stake. But here they could live peaceably side by side . . . All well enough. But there was more to it than this. Other nations experienced defeat, but it was

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contrary to nature for America to know defeat; other nations suffered misfortune, but Americans were exempt from misfortune. Other nations had learned from experience or necessity to accept compromise, but it was unbecoming in Americans to accept compromise. Other nations acknowledge limitations long familiar to them, limitations on power, limitations on will, limitations on fortune, but Americans know that the oceans and the skies belong to them.

Whether all this is part of that happiness guaranteed the American people in their constitutions I leave to the reader.

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