

JEFFERSON'S ARCADIAN DREAM

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Although Thomas Jefferson considered the *Federalist* the "best commentary on the principles of government ever written" (in Chinard 200) and was James Madison's lifelong friend, his political philosophy differed considerably from Madison's and, particularly, from Alexander Hamilton's. Hamilton, clearly, was no Arcadian. Madison, admittedly, espoused some of Jefferson's Arcadian ideals. As president of the Albemarle Agricultural Society, he warned about the danger to human life posed by the destruction of the natural environment. But as a political philosopher, he preferred to rely upon the mechanics of political laws and the balance of factions, rather than upon the availability of free land and Nature's benevolence, in his vision of the good society in America. Jefferson, however, seemed to have little patience with the intricacies and technicalities of political organization and, like Henry David Thoreau, thought that the superiority of America did not depend so much on her democratic institutions as on the benevolent influence of her abundant and unspoiled wilderness. While Madison rejected Utopia and acknowledged the inevitable imperfections of all socio-political institutions, Jefferson, too, rejected Utopia, but became deeply committed to another type of ideal society—Arcadia.

The term "Arcadian," argues Northrop Frye in his seminal essay "Varieties of Literary Utopias," can be used to distinguish a certain kind of the ideal society, different from Utopia:

In the Renaissance, when society was so strongly urban and centripetal, focused on the capital city and on the court in the centre of it, the pastoral established an alternative ideal which was not strictly utopian, and which we might distinguish by the term Arcadian. (126)

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Following Frye, J.C. Davis elaborates on the main characteristics of Arcadia, the pastoral vision of a free, leisurely society, in which:

Nature is generously benevolent rather than hostile to man, but at the same time men's desires, in particular sociological ones, are assumed to be moderate. There is thus a harmony between men of moderation and nature. Arcadians tend to assume that, if the problems of material scarcity are resolved in a world of men of moderation, problems of sociological scarcity will also cease to exist. (*Utopia* 22)

Davis points out two characteristic differences between Arcadia and Utopia. While Utopia "seeks to illustrate man's capacity to dominate nature," Arcadia advocates a harmonious compromise between men and Nature. And whereas the Utopian imposes restraint on man's needs, the Arcadian "simplifies them and throws great stress on their satisfaction" (24). Arcadia is also unlike Utopia by its rejection of preoccupation with organizational perfection. Arcadians believe in man's benevolence and the loosening of societal and political control, given the benign influence of an Arcadian setting. They are impatient with the minutiae of political science and are against the establishment of a strong political authority. St. John de Crèvecoeur, a well-known proponent of agrarian philosophy and pastoral ideals in America, praised the American political system for the "mildness" of its government. "We are a people of cultivators," he said in 1782, "united by the silken bands of mild government" ("Letters" 653). A few years later, Thomas Jefferson, one of the most influential spokesmen for Arcadian America, echoed this anti-authoritarian sentiment when he said that he was "not a friend to a very energetic government. It is always oppressive" (Letter to Madison 917). In fact, as Davis says, Arcadians tend to reject "all institutions whatsoever" (24).

As in the case of Utopia, Arcadia represents an age-old search for the ideal society, one of the oldest and most persistent of human desires. It is present in the biblical story of Eden, of course, and in

the Greek myth of Elysium. The legend of Atlantis is permeated with Arcadian fantasy. The Greek poet Theocritus, regarded as the first pastoral poet, lived in the third century BC. As Leo Marx observes, "centuries of longing and reverie [have] been invested in the conception" (*The Machine* 39-40).

As early as the Elizabethan times, America was often described as the paradise regained. In 1584, Captain Arthur Barlowe described Virginia as an immense garden of "incredible abundance," and this metaphor became, as Marx points out, "a cardinal image of America" (37). For a short while, the concept of America as the Garden was challenged only by the Pilgrim Brothers' description of nature as "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men" (Bradford "Of Plymouth Plantation" 141). Expectedly enough, the New England Puritans largely accepted this "hideous wilderness" image, a characteristic example of their Utopian views of the ideal society. These two contrasting ecological images of America—as the Garden of the world or as "a hideous wilderness"—reflected two different modes of what Davis calls "ideal-society thought" at work: the Arcadian versus the Utopian. With the decline of the Puritan Utopia and the growing impact of the Enlightenment, the ambivalent, or even hostile orthodox Christian attitude towards Nature gave way to a pantheistic view instigated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Nature's "most fervent and effective apostle" (Durant 11) and subsequently embraced by such famous celebrants of American wilderness as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold.

By the time of the birth of the Republic, the rhetoric of Arcadian ideals was already well established in America. In 1785 Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* was published. "Nowhere in our literature," says Marx, "is there a more appealing, vivid or thorough statement of the case for the pastoral ideal than in *Notes on Virginia*" (118). Variouslly reinterpreted and elaborated upon as the Agrarian or Pastoral Myth, the Old Republican Idyll, the Myth of the Garden, the Frontier Thesis, or the Adamic Myth, American Arcadia is by far the most felicitous image of the essence of American civilization. As a mode of ideal-society thought, it is also

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more important for the understanding of American culture than the Utopian mode. "The pastoral ideal," Marx argues, "has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination" (Marx 3, 7). The present-day popular and political campaigns to protect the environment owe a great deal to the Arcadian tradition in American history.

The essence of American Arcadia can well be exemplified by Jefferson's agrarian ideology. Jefferson was, Marx says "the foremost celebrant of the pastoral theory of America" (88). He stipulated that a good society is possible only when there is a plenitude of free, uncultivated land and a predominantly agrarian mode of existence. In the absence of these conditions, Jefferson saw little hope for securing individual freedom. Politics to him seemed an idle speculation unless Arcadian goals were secured. This may help explain why his political philosophy often seemed to lack consistency. As Richard Hofstadter points out: "He never attempted to write a systematic book of political theory—which was well, because he had no system and lacked the doctrinaire's compulsion to be consistent" (23). But the Arcadian undercurrent in Jefferson's political ideology is quite consistent and explains the motives behind the politically shrewd if morally questionable Louisiana Purchase, which secured a long-lasting supply of "free" land for America's Arcadian democracy.

Jefferson admired and often quoted from the pastoral poetry of Theocritus, Virgil, and James Thomson. As a major figure of the Enlightenment, Jefferson helped popularize the *philosophes'* ideas of man's perfectibility and Nature's benevolence, two primary credos of Arcadian philosophy. He believed that the perennial dreams of a contented rural society with moderate tastes could be realized in America. The long-term availability of land in America, he felt, would help bring about a unique creation of the pastoral commonwealth of gentlemen farmers. No doubt, Jefferson himself tried to be a representative embodiment of the gentleman farmer, even though, paradoxically, he owned a several-thousand-acre estate with, at one time, 150 slaves.

A succinct statement of Jefferson's Arcadian philosophy is to be found in his only full-length book, *Notes on Virginia*, whose Query XIX is a "passionate defence of a rural society" (Marx 119). For Jefferson, the chosen people of God, "if ever he had a chosen people," are the laborers in the earth, whose "breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." According to Jefferson, the mere fact of owning land and being thrown upon his own resources and ingenuity is bound to help the husbandman to become happy and virtuous: through work on his own land he becomes self-reliant and does not depend for subsistence "on the casualties and caprice of customers." And dependence is evil because it "begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition." Work on land and constant communion with Nature promote the virtues of integrity and moderation. As Jefferson argues, "Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example" (*Notes* 743).

It is to be noted as further evidence of Jefferson's Arcadian ideals that his program was pastoral rather than just agrarian. That is to say, Jefferson was not a physiocrat who would advocate large-scale, profit-making agriculture, but an Arcadian who hoped man would prudently limit his acquisitiveness to moderate levels. Jefferson was concerned with refinement, education, moderation, leisure—not with business efficiency, incessant striving for wealth, industrial and economic expansion. He rejected "productivity and, for that matter, material standards, as tests of a good society" (Marx 127). This is why he initially as much as disavowed any commitment to the industrialization of America. He wanted America free of any large-scale industrial endeavor with its inevitable problems of unemployment, city mobs, and bad air. "Let our workshops," he declares in *Notes*, "remain in Europe" and while "we have land to labor ... let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a workbench, or twirling a distaff" (743). An educated American with a small family-sized farm will forever remain economically independent. He may not be rich, but he will be self-sufficient *and* free. "The loss by the transportation of commodities

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across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government" (Jefferson 743). Concludes Jefferson:

The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution. (743)

Jefferson's version of the pastoral ideal was not primitivist; he did not advocate a return to the "noble savagery" of pre-civilized life. What Jefferson espoused was an Arcadian compromise between pastoral primitivism and the political regimes of Europe, between the savage life of a barbarian and the urban sophistication of a European. Nature in America would be refined by the cultivation of land. America would become the Garden of the world. In it would live "moderate men in a world of natural bounty" (Davis 23) under a republican government benevolently supervised by a natural aristocracy. This is the quintessence of Jefferson's Arcadian vision of the perfect society. According to Jefferson, such a society could exist in America, and only in America, at the end of the eighteenth century.

It is easy to explain Jefferson's preoccupation with Arcadian ideals: Jefferson's political philosophy was contingent upon the search for a politically viable society of authentically free men. Jefferson would tolerate no tyranny over the mind of man: "I have sworn upon the altar of God," he said in his best-remembered statement, "eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Genuine freedom was possible only in the land of natural abundance, sparsely populated by self-reliant and self-sufficient gentlemen farmers of moderate yet refined tastes.

Yet Jefferson was not just an idealist; he could be as expedient as a politician. But he also realized, perhaps more than any of the Founding Fathers or, indeed, any of his contemporaries, that America was a unique opportunity to realize humankind's perennial dream of individual freedom. Here was a vast and sparsely populated land of incredible abundance and beauty, "discovered" by

an effete, urbanized European culture. The discovery could be regarded as divinely ordained or simply fortuitous; but, incredibly enough, the Arcadian ideal became realizable, and with it genuine freedom became a possibility for at least those who happened to live in America at the end of the eighteenth century. As Hofstadter points out, Europe "fortified [Jefferson's] conviction that America, with its republican government, broad distribution of landed property, agrarian economy, and oceanic isolation, was the chosen spot of the earth" (22). One could not help feeling mythopoeic about America's situation as one could not help seeing the difference between living on the frontier and living in Paris. But if the opportunity to enjoy freedom was unique, it was also transitory. Hence the sense of urgency in Jefferson's political program to secure as much free land for Americans as possible. Behind this urgency was Jefferson's realistic conviction that freedom was as transitory and precarious as the continued existence of unspoiled wilderness. Inevitably, industrialization, overpopulation, and vulgar and aggressive materialism would destroy American Arcadia of moderation and harmony. But while it was still possible, there was no reason not to attempt to secure the benefits of Arcadian freedom. That was the fundamental premise of Jeffersonian democracy: it sought freedom for the individual because freedom was made possible by the uniquely Arcadian setting of the American society.

From the vantage perspective of the twentieth century, it seems easy to criticize the hypocrisy of Jefferson's political ideals and the apparent naiveté of his concept of Arcadian America. Slaves whom he owned, even though he tried to set them free, were not free. The land was also not free: it had long been occupied by Native Americans and would have to be wrenched "free" only after frightful, genocidal wars. And already in Jefferson's time, shrewder politicians like Alexander Hamilton, "viewed Jefferson's preference for an empire of small, independent farmers as romantic nonsense" (in Skidmore 75). Soon it became obvious, as Jefferson regrettably admitted, that what the Americans wanted was not Arcadian simplicity and moderation—a proposition rather absurd in today's age of, say, Amway distributors and Wall Street market

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speculators—but unimpeded growth, unlimited wealth, and inexhaustible variety. If Americans wanted the Garden, then they also wanted the Machine; actually, in a typically American way, they wanted it all: the Garden, the Machine, and unlimited growth and wealth. To insist on keeping industry and technology out of America became preposterous as soon as Jefferson finished writing his *Notes*. When he assumed the presidency in 1801, there was hardly anything Jefferson could do to curb the Hamiltonian program of industrialization, national banking, and the growth of federal power. The nascent American fascination for the Machine was first elaborated into a coherent ideology by Tench Coxe, Hamilton's assistant in the Treasury. As Marx points out, it was Coxe who, aware of the "incredible productive power of machines and factories," first developed "a prophetic vision of machine technology as the fulcrum of national power" (153, 155).

The lure of technological power and the fascination for the Machine wrought havoc in the value system of incipient American Arcadia. Much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, as Marx contends in *The Machine in the Garden*, revolves around the "root conflict" of the disturbance caused by the Machine's sudden intrusion upon the quiet of America's Arcadian landscape. Beginning with Hawthorne's "Sleepy Hollow episode," this clash between two different value systems has been reiterated in, for example, *Walden*, *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Octopus*, *The Education of Henry Adams*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and "The Bear" (15-16). With the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and the space technology of the twentieth, the Jeffersonian ideal of Arcadian felicity has been relegated, if regrettably, to the dominion of social daydreams.

And with it seems to have been relegated the hope of securing individual freedom in the sense Jefferson thought Americans could be free. Today, Americans seem to be as dependent upon the uncertainties of the employment market as eighteenth-century English citizens were upon "the casualties and caprice of customers." They can regard themselves "free," but Arcadians like Jefferson would consider them slaves to their jobs, who all too often are victims of the whims of their corporate employers and are

vulnerable to the inevitable fluctuations of capitalist economy. And even if they own land, it is not because they aspire to become gentlemen farmers of self-limited and moderate tastes but probably because real estate is a good investment. They are vulnerable to myriad pressures and tyrannies resulting from living in a highly complex, overspecialized, and overpopulated society. At least since Paul Fussell published *The Middle Class*, it should have been common knowledge that members of the American middle class are in bondage to the corporations they work for and, stripped of much individuality, are allowed hardly any meaningful measure of self-expression or intellectual freedom. They are neither self-reliant nor self-sufficient: they either cannot be or, probably, don't think that they should be.

Arcadians argue that in the absence of an Arcadian land ethic, the process of industrialization and the rise of corporate-capitalist economy inevitably result in gradual destruction of the environment and loss of individual freedom. They point out that, unless grounded in an Arcadian milieu and Arcadian values, freedom becomes illusory and needs to be redefined and re-attained.

And this is why Jefferson's Arcadian dream, although a distant and receding myth, should not be forgotten. If anything, it can tell us how far we have gone, even if we don't quite know where it is we are headed.

Note: The word "Utopian" is capitalized because I use it in a narrow sense as defined by J.C. Davis in his book *Utopia and the Ideal Society*.

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