LETTERS, LIBERTY, AND THE DEMOCRATIC AGE IN THE
THOUGHT OF ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

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When Alexis de Tocqueville observed the spread of modern democracy across France, England, and the United States, he saw that democracy would give rise to a new state of letters, and that this new state of letters would influence how democratic citizens and statesmen would understand the new political world. As he reflected on this new intellectual sphere, Tocqueville became concerned that democracy would foster changes in language and thought that would stifle concepts and ideas essential to the preservation of intellectual and political liberty. In an effort to direct, refine, and reshape political thought in democracy, Tocqueville undertook a critique of the democratic state of letters, assessing intellectual life and contributing his own ideas and concepts to help citizens and statesmen think more coherently about democratic politics. Here, I analyze Tocqueville’s critique and offer an account of his effort to reshape democratic political thought. I show that through his analyses of the role of intellectuals in democratic regimes, the influence of modern science on democratic public life, the intellectual habits that democracy fosters, and the power of literary works for shaping democratic self-understanding, Tocqueville succeeds in reshaping democratic language and thought in a manner that contributes to the preservation of intellectual and political liberty within the modern democratic world.
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As Alexis de Tocqueville observed the spread of modern democracy across Europe and America he witnessed the emergence of a new state of letters. Amidst the pervasive cultural changes ushered in by democracy, Tocqueville saw that the literary arts and the intellectuals who contributed to them would be transformed. He saw that men of letters would acquire new powers in the realm of public opinion, that classical literary authorities would lose sway, that industry would fuel the circulation of literature, that language would become increasingly innovative, and that new subjects—science, nature, and the future—would be fertile ground for imaginative exploration. Wary as he was of many of the potential pitfalls of the emerging democratic world, Tocqueville was also concerned about what these changes would mean for the literary tradition and how they would influence the human mind. Therefore, as a part of his broad effort to guide the democratic world toward healthy democracy, Tocqueville also undertook to reform the state of letters.

One can recognize Tocqueville’s efforts in this regard in *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution* where he offers us critical analyses of the literary
sphere as it is transformed by democracy (DA II 1. 1-20, 403-476; OR III 1, 195-209). His critique focuses on three subjects: the liabilities of public intellectuals in democratic regimes, the intellectual habits that democracy fosters, and the pitfalls and potential of literary works in democracy. His analyses of these topics convey his vision of a model literary sphere for the democratic world. What I offer here is an account of this vision.

In my view, Tocqueville’s teaching on the literary sphere is among the most penetrating analyses of the prospects for intellectual flourishing in democracy. I consider his teaching to be highly valuable in several respects, some timeless and others particularly relevant to contemporary political life. Among the former, Tocqueville draws attention to perennial questions surrounding the relation between philosophy and politics. As he observes the rise of democracy, he recognizes that the democratic world will foster a new relationship between political thought and political action. A new kind of intellectual—the public intellectual—will bring political theory to bear more directly on democratic institutions and popular opinion. Tocqueville’s reflections on the relationship between political theorists and statesmen in democracy are intended to illuminate the

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1 References to Democracy in America (originally published as De La Démocratie en Amérique in two volumes in 1835 and 1840 respectively) and to The Old Regime and the Revolution (originally published as Ancien Régime et la Révolution in 1856) will henceforth be given in parentheses in the text by volume, part, and chapter number, followed by page numbers. References to Democracy will be noted by DA; references to the Old Regime will be noted by OR. I have relied on Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, eds. and trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), and Alexis de Tocqueville, The Old Regime and the Revolution, eds. François Furet and Françoise Méléndez, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) for quotations. I have relied on Alexis de Tocqueville, De La Démocratie en Amerique ed. François Furet (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1981), and L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution, ed. J.-P. Mayer (Paris: Gallimard, 1952) for the original French.
ways in which political theory might serve as a help rather than a hindrance to democratic politics. In his exploration of the ambition of intellectuals in democratic politics, Tocqueville illuminates some of the new hazards that public intellectuals present to democratic regimes. Through a genealogy of the decline of the aristocratic intellectual tradition and the rise of the modern public intellectual, for instance, he explains democracy’s receptiveness to opinion leaders who peddle pseudo science, demagoguery, and linguistic distortion. In recognition of these sources of intellectual vulnerability, Tocqueville discourages reinforcement of them by presenting a portrait of the responsible public intellectual in democracy.

Tocqueville’s lessons also awaken us to the influence of democratic political life on the human mind. He shows us that life in an egalitarian age fosters intellectual habits that cloud our judgment and impede our ability to reason critically, thoroughly, and clearly. Because of our intellectual freedom we are often blind to the possibility that life in our particular regime, like life in illiberal regimes, can have an oppressive influence on our minds. Tocqueville shows that democracy has its own intellectual cave. By awakening us to the existence of our prejudices, Tocqueville helps us to benefit fully from the intellectual freedom that we do enjoy.

As he alerts us to some of the intellectual leanings fostered by life in democracy, Tocqueville also helps us to become conscious of the role that the literary sphere plays in shaping and directing our thinking as individuals and citizens. One of the motivations for this project was my recognition that modern political thought frequently recognizes the power of four spheres of influence over the modern world, but the literary sphere is not
among these. Politics, religion, science, and economics appear regularly as spheres of influence over modern political life, but we are less likely to hear of the power of the poets or the state of letters in the same way. This fact prevents us from recognizing, exploring, and questioning the influence of intellectuals, writers, and poets on our political thoughts and actions.

Tocqueville’s account helps us to gain intellectual traction on this elusive part of our world. He shows how writers and intellectuals capture and direct the changes in language and thought that democracy fosters, and how writers fuel the love of novelty and innovation in democratic language and thought. At the same time, he shows that certain kinds of writing—both classical works and certain well crafted modern works—are able to correct the objectionable inclinations of the democratic mind. For those in his audience ambitious to continue to write new literary works, Tocqueville helps them understand how to craft works that appeal to the democratic mind without reinforcing its prejudices.

As he reveals the influence of democracy on the literary sphere and the human mind, and as he illuminates the reciprocal relationship between democratic thinking and democratic writing, Tocqueville also reveals how in modern democracy the mind develops a preference for scientific explanation over literary explanation. As he explains, democratic audiences are more inclined to trust in explanations that are grounded in material proof and couched in scientific terms than those that are illustrated metaphorically or poetically. As he traces out this inclination of the democratic mind, Tocqueville draws our attention to the need to understand the importance of each kind of
explanation for meeting democracy’s intellectual needs.

This dimension of Tocqueville’s work has particular contemporary relevance; for it presages the rise of science as a new intellectual authority and the decline of the literary tradition as a source of political, psychological, and moral guidance. The phenomenon that Tocqueville describes suggests that our inclination to prefer for our guide works that are presented in a scientific manner may be rooted in a prejudice rather than a clear rational judgment about the superiority of one over the other. Tocqueville alerts us to the need to continue to examine the rise in popularity of scientific explanation and scientific language, and to ask about the appropriate domain of scientific explanation and literary explanation in modern life. Tocqueville is, of course, friendly to science as he is to democracy, but he also points to the need for understanding what might be lost in a turn toward popular science to the exclusion of the literary arts.

Ultimately, Tocqueville contends that democracy will give rise to a new condition for the human intellect and will afford new powers to intellectuals. In his analysis of the state of letters as a whole, it is his task to scrutinize the development of this condition so as to prevent the hardening of intellectual prejudices and to ensure that intellectuals do not have a pernicious effect on public life. As we take up his critique and see how intellectual life unfolds in democracy, we become better equipped to discriminate between the various offerings of intellectuals, and more aware of the kinds of works that help us to cultivate and develop our reasoning capabilities. My account brings into relief Tocqueville’s critique of the literary sphere in democracy for the sake of illuminating his teaching on the circumstances most favorable to intellectual flourishing in the democratic
A Few Remarks on the Powers of the Literary Arts

Tocqueville helps us to see how the literary sphere takes on a new shape in democracy, but to see the significance of these changes we will do well to review some of the basic powers of the literary sphere simply. In my understanding and Tocqueville’s, the literary arts are comprised of a range of written and spoken works that include history, poetry, literary fiction, speechwriting, play writing, conversation, oratory, and political rhetoric. In our experience, we can recognize the influence of the literary arts in the books and poems that we read, the plays and films that we watch, the history and journalism that we read, and the political speeches that we hear. Works like Homer’s Odyssey, Plato’s Apology, Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War, Aristotle’s Politics, Virgil’s Aeneid, Machiavelli’s Prince, Montaigne’s Essays, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Rousseau’s Emile, Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, and Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals are all part of our literary sphere; as are Melville’s Billy Budd, Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, Mencken’s journalism, Democracy in America, The Star Spangled Banner, Emerson’s public lectures, Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” and The Sound of Music.

It may be difficult to see what unifies all of these forms. One might object to this variety of works on the basis of the differences in medium or their varying degrees of gravity. What do monumental speeches and comic novels and political journalism, for instance, share in common with respect to content and form? High or low, rhyme or rant—all of these kinds of works give order to imagination and thought through language,
and they are crafted for the sake of influencing the direction of ideas, politics, and culture.

The literary arts also share in a number of perennial poetic powers that have been wielded by writers and thinkers in the West since the writings of Homer, Sophocles, Plato and Aristotle. First—and this is perhaps their most fundamental power—poets offer us analogies for understanding our experiences. They provide us tacit answers to such questions as “What is a man?” and “What comprises a political community?” In so doing, they suggest to us certain ideas about the ends of human life and the nature of politics.

When we take their images as true representations of the phenomena they purport to represent—when we believe that a poetic image “holds a mirror to nature”—we respond accordingly. For instance, we regard the ends of politics differently when we believe that we are part of a global family, or that the demos is like a beast, or that lawmaking is like sausage making. The state of letters is not simply an abstract academic realm: the images that we take in shape our understanding and our actions as political beings.

Second, the poets present a narrative on our political experiences. From the Greek dramatic poets to modern journalists, those who employ the literary arts work to draw our attention to features of our regime and way of life: they attempt to show “the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”

potential, and its limitations. They try to help us determine what is most significant and most needful of attention in the times in which we live.

Third, they draw attention to individuals as exemplars. They present stories about heroes, villains, and fools often for the sake of discouraging or encouraging imitation. In encouraging imitation, the poets act as teachers of the ambitious. They give honor to certain kinds of political actors, and in so doing, encourage the imitation of particular kinds of actions. When poets celebrate the actions of scientists or warriors, entrepreneurs or factory workers, statesmen or intellectuals, they imply the worth of different kinds of human activities, and encourage the ambitious to engage in them. Insofar as these exemplars serve as role models, they also help to shape individual self-understanding: the imitator envisions himself as the one he imitates and strives to become like the one he imitates.

Fourth, in telling stories about the actions of human beings, the poets provide the inspiration for many of the other arts. The literary arts often govern humanistic representations in the visible arts, for they provide the stories behind the subjects that painters and sculptors represent. In an essay comparing the plastic and the poetic arts—Laocoön or The Limits of Painting and Poetry—Lessing tells his readers that while the poets create images of human actions in motion, it is the task of the sculptor to distill the precise moment of action that is worthy to be isolated for representation.³ It is the poet

who points the sculptor to the crucial moment worthy of attention and thus it is often the poet who shapes what is brought into relief in the visible arts.

Fifth, in presenting human actions and guiding the visible representation of human actions, the poets invoke the sentiments of the audience for which they write. In so doing, they manipulate sensibilities about what is noble and base. Because the poets are often able to represent the same subject matter as high or low, laughable or lamentable, and because they can invoke some of our deepest sentiments, they can be influential in shaping what we regard as beautiful, tragic, comic, hateful, fearful, and so on. Insofar as they shape our sense of what is high and low, the poets shape our morality.

Although by no means exhaustive, this brief reflection on some of the most significant ways in which the poets wield their power is intended as a reminder of how the health of the literary estate is significant for our self-understanding as individuals and citizens. When Tocqueville undertakes a critique of the new shape of the literary arts in the democratic world it is for the sake of ensuring that our new political self-understanding—our democratic self-understanding—is in the service of intellectual flourishing and in accord with the health of liberal democracy.

The Literary Arts in America

Because this self-understanding is not only democratic but also American, and because Tocqueville’s account taps into the literary experience unique to the United States, it is also worth considering a number of qualities specific to the American state of
letters before turning to Tocqueville’s critique of it. Perhaps the most important feature of
the American literary tradition is that it is has served as a forum for philosophic reflection
on the American political experience. In fact, American political thought frequently
appears in its deepest form in American fiction.\textsuperscript{4} Those seeking political philosophy in
the American tradition do well to turn to American novelists and poets.

In part, the prominence of philosophical literature in the United States is rooted in
the American preference for philosophic narratives over abstract philosophy. While
American readers have turned in the past to political philosophers who write in treatise
form, and while there are some popular theoretical works in the United States, American
readers often seek philosophic explorations of their experiences in novels.\textsuperscript{5} This
preference is rooted in part in the character of American culture itself: unlike Europe, the
American tradition is drawn from political experiences and political traditions more than
from theoretical tradition. On the whole, we draw analogies from life more than from
theories, and as readers we expect our writers to offer experientially grounded works.

Nevertheless, though in our literature we seek concrete explorations of particular
cultural experiences, our preferences do not prevent our writers from delving into
timeless philosophical questions. As Catherine Zuckert argues in \textit{Natural Right and the
American Imagination}, insofar as novelists reflect on the philosophical basis of American

\textsuperscript{4} Catherine H. Zuckert, “The State of Nature in Classic American Fiction,” in \textit{Natural Right and the
American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form} (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield,
1990), 2.

\textsuperscript{5} Patrick J. Deneen and Joseph Romance, “Introduction,” in Patrick J. Deneen and Joseph Romance
eds., \textit{Democracy’s Literature: Politics and Fiction in America} (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield
political institutions and principles, they also take up the central issue of political philosophy: “the question of the relation between nature and convention.”

When Nathaniel Hawthorne explores the Puritan experience, for instance, he takes up the question of religion simply. When Mark Twain examines slavery in the South, he offers an account of human nature and the problem of political equality. When James Fennimore Cooper reflects on native life and life in the American wilderness, he offers an image of the nature and foundation of political society. When Herman Melville examines the laws of English merchant ships, he explores the problem of political justice.

As Zuckert shows, some of the deepest philosophical reflections in the tradition of American political thought appear in works of fiction that depict experiences in the natural world in order to explore the state of nature theories employed by the Founders. As she explains, state of nature theories and their attendant doctrine of natural rights were particularly appealing to the American Founders for two reasons: first, “the experience of settling the frontier made the notion of a ‘state of nature’ eminently plausible to the American public”; and second, “the break from Britain forced American political leaders to make the principles of their practice explicit” and the social contract theorists provided a means for doing so. In the American tradition the “return-to-nature literary motif” is therefore a natural means for undertaking a philosophical examination of the doctrines asserted by the Founders. State of nature stories allow for concrete inquiries into the philosophical consensus of the founding. Hence, when American writers turn to the state

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of nature they not only revisit the relation between nature and politics entrenched by the Founders, they question it: they challenge the very idea of a state of nature, they inquire into the status of rights, duties, and laws, and they question self-evident truths.

Aside from the themes just mentioned, American literature also provides some of the most insightful reflections on a number of other themes particularly salient in the American political experience including individualism, commerce, science, slavery, political ambition, the nature of work, American identity, and the family. To survey a few examples: Washington Irving wrestles with the formation of a new American identity, asking how American citizens respond to the legacy of the British. Henry James takes up similar themes, and also offers some of the most profound insights into the liberation of women in democracy. Faulkner examines the cultural drama of the North and the South asking about the incorrigible relation between the two. Twain explains the unfolding of equality, the nature of youthful ambition, and the problem of technology. The transcendental poets and essayists, Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau take up our relation to the natural world and explore the activities of work. Robert Penn Warren explores political ambition and American optimism. And Wallace Stevens brings the questions of twentieth century philosophy into the American poetic experience.

In short, American literature offers penetrating philosophical commentary on problems unique to the modern democratic political experience. This is not even to mention the political brilliance of the Federalist Papers, Lincoln’s speeches, and the

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countless films, plays, essays, speeches, and commentaries that offer deep insight into American political life. Nevertheless, many of the themes of the American literary tradition just mentioned are also themes that Tocqueville takes up in his exploration of the democratic and the American literary experience. If we bear our experience with the themes of American literature in mind as we review Tocqueville’s critical assessment of the writers who explore them, then we will be better equipped to deepen our understanding not only of democratic literature in general, but also of the American literary tradition in particular.

The Scope of Tocqueville’s Literary Sphere

As mentioned, for Tocqueville, the literary arts encompass a wide variety of written genres. While Tocqueville’s account demonstrates that he believes that the literary arts influence our political self-understanding in all of the ways I have discussed thus far, he also indicates that within democracy the literary arts operate within a particular set of parameters.

One can begin to see the outlines of Tocqueville’s literary domain by identifying where he places his discussion of the literary arts in relation to the other parts of *Democracy in America*. One notes, first, that Tocqueville’s discussion of the literary arts falls in the second of the two volumes of the book. While the first volume discusses the legal and political ramifications of the rise of democracy, the second volume complements and completes the first volume, and takes up the social, moral, and
psychological consequences of the new democratic political system (DA II Notice; 399). Therefore the literary arts can be understood to figure in the social-cultural-psychological realm more than in the realm of political institutions. This is not to say that the literary arts do not enter into political discourse; as I have indicated above, and as Tocqueville also asserts, political speeches are also a part of the literary realm. At the same time, as Tocqueville presents them, the literary arts ought to be understood as distinct from certain kinds of political writing.

In the literary realm, a city in speech is no sooner stated than realized. Legal writings—constitutions, laws, and court decisions—on the other hand, are each crafted to direct a particular course of political action in light of particular political circumstances. As Zuckert points out, “books like The Federalist, Notes on Virginia, and Congressional Government were written by active statesmen who concerned themselves primarily with institutional responses to practical problems rather than with more fundamental questions about the basis and ends of political life.”9 In other words, unlike works of literature, legal writings are crafted in light of concrete circumstances, and are designed primarily for the sake of having a direct impact on these circumstances.

Works like the Federalist Papers or monumental political speeches—works that contain both a particular teaching for a time and a universal political teaching—might be said to span both the realm of the literary arts and political writings, but the main point here is to distinguish the particular, circumstantial, institutional, and political dimension of political writings from literary works. While the literary arts often enter the realm of

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political discourse, they are not typically aimed at guiding a particular course of political action.

Tocqueville’s discussion of the literary arts also occurs within the first of four sections of the second volume. These parts address, first, the influence of democracy on the intellectual climate; second, the influence of democracy on the sentiments; third, the influence of democracy on mores; and fourth, the reciprocal influence of the social and psychological consequences of democracy that are discussed in the first three parts, on democracy itself. The first two parts of the second volume can be understood to address the influence of democracy on the rational and emotional parts of the human psyche, while the third and fourth parts can be understood as illuminating the moral and political consequences, in turn, of the emergence of the new kind of psyche that democracy fosters.

In this light, the literary arts proper wield their power primarily in the realm of the intellect. Democracy influences how we think, but it is in the domain of language and hence the realm of the literary arts, that we give expression to democracy’s influence on the mind. As Tocqueville depicts it, in democracy, the domain of letters is an intermediary between the social circumstances and our understanding of political life.

That Tocqueville’s discussion of the literary arts appears in his discussion of the intellect rather than his subsequent discussion of the sentiments also indicates that he regards the domain of the literary arts as the domain of reason rather than of sentiment. Although the literary arts invoke the sentiments, the literary arts proper always have a logographic—that is, an essentially rational—core.
Tocqueville’s placement of the literary arts in his discussion of the intellect (again, as opposed to his discussion of the sentiments) also indicates that he further distinguishes the literary arts from two other kinds of linguistic works that are significant for public life: religious works and newspaper journalism. With respect to religion, it is notable that Tocqueville separates religion from the literary arts; for it is only relatively recently that the literary arts in general have come to operate in a sphere distinct from that of religion. The Greek poets, for instance, were understood to be divinely inspired; and Renaissance painters did not hesitate to blend Christian, classical, and humanistic themes in their sculpture and painting. In distinguishing these two realms, Tocqueville alerts us to characteristics of the modern psyche that are significant for understanding how the literary realm influences our minds.

Tocqueville’s lessons on the role of religion in democracy appear throughout *Democracy in America* and also in his discussion of literature in democracy, but in looking at the role that he outlines for religion in democracy, Tocqueville indicates that the literary arts and religion play distinct roles in tending to the psyche. One can see this first by consulting Tocqueville’s claims about the role that religion plays in correcting certain psychological ailments of democracy, namely, the taste for material enjoyment and the excessive love of well-being. Notably, Tocqueville’s account of these ailments falls within his discussion of the sentiments rather than in his discussion of the intellect. This indicates that insofar as it attends to the psyche, religion figures more dominantly in the realm of the sentiments, while the literary arts figure more significantly in the realm of the intellect.
At the same time, Tocqueville indicates that religion does play a role in the realm of the intellect, but again, it is distinct from the role that the literary arts play. While Tocqueville points to the role of religion in tending to democratic sentiments, he also says that in democracy religion reigns not so much as revealed dogma but as common opinion (DA II 1.2; 409). What Tocqueville means here is that religious dogma in democracy is accepted more through the force of common opinion than through revealed teaching or religious authority.

In claiming that religion reigns in the realm of opinion, Tocqueville also indicates that religious belief is something of an intellectual influence as well. Although religious belief appears in the realm of the intellect, Tocqueville also suggests that in the realm of opinion, religion operates as a frame or fixed point. This fixed point orients intellectual inquiry either by providing starting points for reflection or by setting the bounds of reflection (DA II 1.5; 418-419). For those who hold religious beliefs, the literary sphere operates alongside the fixed point of religion.

We can isolate the scope of Tocqueville’s vision of the literary arts on one further point by observing that Tocqueville also makes a qualified distinction between the literary arts proper and newspaper journalism. By placing his discussion of journalism in his discussion of the sentiments rather than in his discussion of the intellect, Tocqueville indicates that he regards journalism as distinct from the literary arts proper. By speaking of journalism as a part of the literary arts in early America, however, Tocqueville suggests that journalism also has a unique place within the American literary sphere. To understand the place of journalism in the literary sphere we must consider both sides of
Let us consider, first, Tocqueville’s reasons for treating journalism as distinct from the literary arts. This separation is, in part, a function of an historical distinction between *belle-lettres* and popular polemic which has become blurred in contemporary democracy. In one sense, this distinction is a matter of form. As Tocqueville describes them, in early America, newspapers consisted of three kinds of writing: public information, advertising, and argument. When they are the latter, they are characterized by violent, inflammatory language (*DA*I 2.3; 174-175). In this light, newspapers differ from the literary arts for being practically and politically oriented. Tocqueville’s distinction is not simply a matter of style. Newspapers also have distinct political and partisan ends, and guide the actions of associations. Insofar as they serve an organizational role in politics, newspapers bear a similarity to practically oriented political writing.

Tocqueville also appears to distinguish newspaper journalism from the literary arts because of the nature of its influence. As in his discussion of religion, while analyzing journalism in his chapters on the sentiments, Tocqueville emphasizes the psychological value of newspaper journalism for unifying groups that share sentiments, and for its ability to combat individualism. While Tocqueville indicates that newspaper journalism operates on the mind (*DA*I 2.3; 172), he also maintains that its most important function is to bring groups together by giving expression and direction to sentiments already present in them (*DA*II 2.6; 495).

Yet again, Tocqueville also tells his reader that in early American democracy
journalists are the only writers that speak to American readers (DA II 1.13; 446). He thus recognizes that journalism is a nascent form of the literary arts for democratic peoples. Although journalism as he views it is primarily a kind of writing that appeals to the sentiments, Tocqueville also indicates its kinship with literary works that appeal to the intellect. Because of this kinship, I have opted to include Tocqueville’s account of journalism in my analysis.

Tocqueville’s Account of the Literary Sphere: Lessons for Intellectuals

When Tocqueville presents his teaching on the literary sphere he suggests that much of his teaching is aimed at intellectuals in his audience. One can recognize this suggestion by observing that Tocqueville’s claims on these subjects are often interwoven with allusions to debates in political theory that would only be recognizable to intellectuals familiar with the political thought of the Enlightenment and the Western tradition. His critique of the democratic mind, for instance, contains both explicit and implicit suggestions that concern a broader debate about Cartesian philosophy and its influence in France (DA II 1.1; 403-407), and his account of democratic poetry recalls Bacon and Machiavelli’s respective scientific and political projects (DA II 1.17; 461).

Tocqueville appears to direct his teaching on the literary arts to intellectuals because intellectuals are ultimately the ones most instrumental in directing the literary sphere in democracy for good or ill. In light of the pointed direction of his comments on the literary arts, Tocqueville’s account can be understood as a series of lessons offered to
intellectuals. In the chapters that follow, I will explain Tocqueville’s teaching on the literary arts in terms of lessons that he offers to intellectuals on the subjects mentioned above: the liabilities of intellectuals in democracy (Chapters 1 and 2), the influence of democracy on the mind (Chapters 3 and 4), and the character and potential of democratic literature (Chapters 5 and 6). While doing so, I will also draw out some of the allusions and insinuations that Tocqueville makes to intellectuals in order to illustrate some of the broader implications of his lessons historically and in light of the Western tradition.

In Chapter 1, I explain what Tocqueville teaches regarding the new powers of intellectuals in the democratic world, and how democratic institutions are best structured to correct the potentially corrupting influence of intellectuals in modern democracy. It explores Tocqueville’s account of the new relation between theory and practice in democracy, and his suggestions on how political practice ought to take up, moderate, and refine theoretical doctrine. It also explores Tocqueville’s suggestions on the appropriate place of intellectual doctrine, particularly rights doctrines, in the foundation of democracy, and outlines his argument that intellectuals ought to take a moderate stance toward religion, which he regards as essential to the health of democracy.

In Chapter 2, I explain what Tocqueville teaches concerning the proper place of the aristocratic intellectual tradition, and specifically classical literary works, in democracy. To the end of clarifying this teaching, I interpret both Tocqueville’s explicit account of the value of the classical tradition and his own use of classical sources. I make the case that, for Tocqueville, the classical literary tradition is valuable for three reasons.
First, it is helpful for the cultivation of the human mind. Second, it is important for educating both hostile reactionaries to, and zealous supporters of democracy on the prospects and limitations of modern democratic politics. Third, it is essential for what it reveals, by comparison to ancient democracy, about the unique features of modern democracy. These features include modern democracy’s political innovations, its relationship with Christianity, and its dependence upon commerce, science, and industry.

In Chapter 3, I offer an account of the intellectual leanings of the democratic mind. This account serves as a teaching on the character of democratic audiences for intellectuals in Tocqueville’s audience who wish to influence public thought. It also serves as a lesson to intellectuals on the influence of certain kinds of theories on democratic thought. In this analysis, Tocqueville critiques a number of intellectual inclinations that he concludes are characteristic of democratic peoples, including trust in majority opinion, a preference for material explanation, love of generalization, and faith in progress. I offer an account of Tocqueville’s analysis of these penchants, and argue that through his assessment of the democratic intellect as he had observed it in the United States, Tocqueville also offers a critique of Cartesian skepticism, Cartesian doubt, and Rousseauian perfectibility—intellectual doctrines circulating through Europe that, he suggests, augment and reinforce intellectual prejudices characteristic of the democratic mind.

In Chapter 4, I present Tocqueville’s lessons on the changes in language that democracy fosters and the science of writing for democratic audiences. By looking at the nature of democratic language and the literary tastes of democratic peoples, Tocqueville
explains how democratic writers must write if they are to be received by democratic audiences without flattering the prejudices of these audiences. For this lesson, Tocqueville draws attention to his own writing as a model work that both speaks in a language to which democratic readers are receptive, and helps to cultivate in them the ability to reason about political life.

In Chapter 5, I expand on Tocqueville’s teaching on writing for democratic audiences by taking up a set of his more focused discussions of particular literary genres. This chapter explores Tocqueville’s lessons on poetry, literary fiction, oratory, and theater, which together encompass Tocqueville’s teaching on what I call democratic poetics. Tocqueville’s account of democratic poetics points his readers to the orientation of the imagination in democracy, and explains the novel subjects—including nature, science, and the future—that democratic peoples find appealing. With reference to the works of Whitman and Emerson as illustrations of democratic poetic forms, I draw out Tocqueville’s warnings to poets, novelists and orators on the liabilities of presenting visions of the future, and his suggestions to writers on how they must craft fiction to support a healthy public understanding of the future and the advancement of science.

Turning from here to Tocqueville’s discussion of democratic theater, I look at Tocqueville’s contrast between aristocratic theater and democratic theater. I show that as Tocqueville draws attention to the dramatic longings of democratic audiences, he helps playwrights understand how they can cater to democratic taste without flattering democratic prejudices, and helps his readers understand how they can be better judges of the theater.
In Chapter 6 I draw out Tocqueville’s lessons on literary forms that are politically oriented, including works of history, journalism, and political speechwriting. I call these genres works of political literature (not to be confused with practical political writings, as discussed above). Tocqueville’s lessons here concern the role of literature for maintaining political liberty in democracy. With respect to history, Tocqueville emphasizes the need for narratives that illuminate the free actions of individuals over the movements of democratic peoples as a whole. With respect to journalism, Tocqueville stresses that journalism is particularly important for mobilizing and revealing the significance of free associations, which serve to resist the leveling effects of both the democratic majority and the administrative state. With respect to political speeches, Tocqueville outlines the universal power of democratic political rhetoric, and helps his readers understand how political speeches can serve to educate and direct democratic peoples on the maintenance of liberty within democracy. To illustrate the latter point, I close with an exploration of three of Lincoln’s speeches.

In reviewing the elements of Tocqueville’s teaching in the conclusion, I consider Tocqueville’s suggestion that both his lessons on writing, as well as the particular written work that he offers, are essential to the new literary sphere that he envisions for democracy. I suggest that through his own written model, Tocqueville strives to enlist his audience in support of a literary sphere that is most conducive to the preservation of liberty within democracy and to the promotion of intellectual flourishing in an egalitarian age.
Scholarship on Tocqueville and the Literary Arts

Although I address relevant scholarship directly in the chapters that follow, before turning to the main argument, I would like to draw attention to the five groups of scholars who have been most helpful for framing my project: those who have brought Tocqueville into the tradition of political philosophy; those who have explored Tocqueville’s thought on the psyche in democracy; those who have explored Tocqueville’s rhetorical style and his development of language for democracy; those who have explored Tocqueville’s thought on the character of intellectual life in democracy; and those who have explored democracy’s cultural prospects.

_Tocqueville and the Political Philosophy Tradition_

The scholars who have named Tocqueville a philosophical interlocutor in the tradition of Western political philosophy have been among the most helpful for my project because their writings reveal the depth of Tocqueville’s thought. Writers like Pierre Manent, Harvey Mansfield, and Delba Winthrop, for instance, have helped me to see that amidst his commentary on democratic life, Tocqueville asks foundational philosophic questions and provides his readers with the linguistic and intellectual tools for beginning to explore them. As Tocqueville explains the shift from aristocracy to

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democracy, for example, he asks: Which of the two is the most just? Which promotes human excellence? Which is most divine?

While this school of thought, in my view, has rightfully pointed to the philosophical underpinnings of Tocqueville’s work, it is nonetheless controversial to those who question whether Tocqueville is fully enough engaged in the political philosophy of the Western tradition to hold a place alongside the likes of Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche.\textsuperscript{11} To understand the nature of the controversy, it is helpful to understand the genealogy of Tocqueville’s rise to political philosophy the United States.

Tocqueville begins to make his appearance in the tradition of political philosophy following his extended revival in both America and France, which began in the early twentieth century. In the United States, Tocqueville began to be recognized for his insight into the liberal tradition; in France, primarily through the work of Raymond Aron, Tocqueville began to be recognized as a foundational sociologist whose essential contribution to sociology was his distinction between the social state and the political regime.\textsuperscript{12} It is against the backdrop of Tocqueville’s rise in America and France, that Pierre Manent makes the case that Tocqueville’s thought is rightfully understood as an integral part of the political philosophy tradition. According to Manent, Tocqueville’s rise to prominence has helped to reveal how Tocqueville challenges our most fundamental opinions as democratic citizens. According to Manent, Tocqueville offers us


\textsuperscript{12} Harvey Mansfield, “Forward,” in \textit{Tocqueville and the Nature of Philosophy} ; Manent, “Tocqueville as Political Philosopher,” 109-112.
a philosophical critique of our regime and our time: he demonstrates that he has the
capacity to “[lead] us out of the social cave.”

Manent grounds his claim regarding Tocqueville’s status as a political
philosopher, more specifically, in his understanding of Tocqueville’s assessment of the
egalitarian basis of modern society. According to Manent, Tocqueville’s most profound
philosophical insight lies in his account of the nature of democracy in contradistinction to
the nature of aristocracy. Tocqueville recognizes that different regimes give rise to
different kinds of psyches: democratic and aristocratic men are distinct anthropological
types, and his book is an assessment of the different characteristics of the democratic type
in comparison to the aristocratic type. Tocqueville earns the rank of political philosopher
according to Manent, because he reopens the debate originally brought to light by the
ancient Greek philosophers between the democratic and aristocratic forms of regime. And
he does so when we as moderns had already, dogmatically, settled the question in favor
of democracy. Thus, according to Manent “Tocqueville…is a full fledged if
unintentional member of the school of political philosophy founded in Athenian
democracy.”

Of the critics of Manent’s reading of Tocqueville, Cheryl Welch is perhaps the
most fair-minded. Welch claims that Manent, along with Harvey Mansfield, Delba
Winthrop, and Sheldon Wolin, place Tocqueville in an unlikely context by situating him

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13 Manent, “Tocqueville, Political Philosopher,” 120.
14 Manent, “Tocqueville, Political Philosopher,” 120.
against the backdrop of ancient political thought. As she points out (drawing from Manent’s essay itself), Tocqueville barely read Plato and Aristotle. In doing so she implies that Manent’s claim that Tocqueville reintroduced debates central to ancient political thought is somewhat misplaced.\textsuperscript{16} Manent anticipates Welch’s criticism by suggesting that if Tocqueville was not versed in the tradition of Western political philosophy, he is at the same time working in the spirit of that mode of thinking. To Manent’s justification for placing Tocqueville’s thought in the context of the western tradition of political philosophy one might also add that Tocqueville emphasized the need for classical literary education in the modern world (cf. \textit{DA} II 1.15; 450-451). If he was not thoroughly familiar with the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, he was intimately familiar with Plutarch, and also with Rousseau, who himself was a philosophical student of the ancients.

Another challenge to the proclamation of Tocqueville as political philosopher comes from those who regard him as better situated against the backdrop of the thought of Pascal, and hence Christian theology. Peter Lawler challenges those who locate Tocqueville in the political philosophy tradition on the grounds that Tocqueville “was not an ancient liberal in the sense of affirming the superiority of the theoretical life to the political life.”\textsuperscript{17} Instead, Tocqueville affirms political life, and does so in response to a need to overcome the sense of urgency and angst generated by the reflective life of the theologian—the life epitomized by Pascal.


\textsuperscript{17} Lawler, “Was Tocqueville a Political Philosopher,” 107.
While I am receptive to Lawler’s argument that Tocqueville is reacting in part to the theological model of Pascal, and that Tocqueville resists the purely contemplative life in favor of a more practically grounded politics, I maintain, along with Manent and Mansfield, that Tocqueville is also engaged in a political-philosophic project that is aimed at reconciling the ambitions of political theorists with the practical needs of democratic politics. As I argue in Chapter 1, Tocqueville aims to carve out a new relationship between political theory and politics, a relationship that generates both political theory that is informed by practice, and a pragmatic politics that is grounded in theory.

Another criticism of the depiction of Tocqueville as political philosopher, and hence the idea that Tocqueville is a great teacher of democracy, arises out of the claim that Tocqueville deeply misunderstood the character of American democracy. The most powerful variant of this charge is made by Thomas G. West, who contends that Tocqueville failed to grasp the nature of the American founding, and hence that his insights into democracy—insofar as they are derived from American democracy—are somewhat flawed. According to West, Tocqueville failed to grasp the role of natural rights doctrine in the American mind, and his misunderstanding is evidenced by the fact that he was unable to anticipate the Civil War.¹⁸ Tocqueville’s crucial mistake, according to West, is that he did not recognize the manner in which the principle of natural right encapsulated in the Declaration had taken root in the American consciousness. Hence he

did not recognize that the principle of equality would be the basis for a war not between blacks and whites, but between Americans. Because Tocqueville understood the influence of equality in terms of the equality of condition, rather than as a principle, Tocqueville misunderstood the fundamental character of American democracy.

West’s criticism is compelling: it is true that Tocqueville does not discuss natural rights doctrine as a motivating force behind American democracy, and it is true that equality understood as equality of conditions is central to Tocqueville’s understanding of the egalitarian social state that makes for American democracy. Yet again, Tocqueville’s account of equality is multidimensional: sometimes he treats the equality of condition as the ‘fundamental fact’ driving all others; sometimes he treats the love of equality as force fueling the democratic way of life. Additionally, it is conceivable (and thus open for debate) whether Tocqueville did not deliberately downplay the role of individuals and ideas in American democracy while writing for his French audience, whose revolutionary idealism he sought to moderate. I address this possibility in Chapter 1.

Nevertheless, to the extent that West is right in charging Tocqueville with misunderstanding the nature of the American founding, his criticism infuses a healthy skepticism into our understanding Tocqueville’s conception of American democracy. At the same time, even if Tocqueville unduly neglected the way in which natural rights theory became rooted in American democracy, he does succeed in drawing our attention to the possibility that an egalitarian social state made its reception possible. Tocqueville’s thought, with West’s criticism in the background, is valuable for helping us understand the American receptiveness to the principle of equality, and for asking about the extent to
which the Founders needed a certain social state to begin to craft their regime. In short, Tocqueville seems to understand the fundamental character of the democratic spirit—and it is in this capacity that we can find his value as a teacher. Whether he rightly holds a place in the tradition of political philosophy or not, Tocqueville has much to teach us about democracy; and, if we bear in mind West’s criticism, he also has much to teach us about the underlying character of American democracy.

_Tocqueville on Intellectual Life in Democracy_

Aside from the thinkers who have come to view and approach Tocqueville as a part of the political philosophy tradition, the second group of scholars who have been particularly helpful for my project are those who have articulated Tocqueville’s understanding of the influence of democracy on the psyche. Among Tocqueville’s most profound insights as a teacher of democracy is the insight that democracy shapes the human soul. It is because of his recognition of the changes to the human soul that democracy fosters, that Tocqueville sees the need for his educational literary project. More specifically, it is because of his recognition of the changes to the human mind, that Tocqueville sees the need for lessons on reshaping the democratic literary sphere. Generally, however, the scholarship on Tocqueville’s influence on the human psyche often treats the psyche as a whole, rather than treating separately the different parts of the soul that Tocqueville distinguished: the sentiments and the mind. When scholars have addressed different parts of the soul, they have focused primarily on single characteristics—individualism, love of well-being, mental restlessness—which
Tocqueville describes in the second and third parts of Volume II. The literature on Tocqueville’s account of the mind is more limited, and so it is my intention to extend it through this project.

Allan Bloom has opened the way for inquiry into Tocqueville’s understanding of the undesirable habits of the democratic mind and the potential correctives for them. In his brief but rich discussion of Tocqueville, Bloom explores how “the democratic regime causes a particular intellectual bent, which if not actively corrected, distorts the mind’s vision.” In his account of this leaning, Bloom analyses the problem of the intellectual tyranny of the majority—the tendency for majority opinion to become the sole intellectual authority. Bloom then draws on Tocqueville to make his own argument, first, that certain works, particularly works of the classical tradition, are essential to helping the mind escape the democratic cave, and second, that the university is essential to the intellectual health of the modern mind because it provides a realm in which the most fundamental thoughts—thoughts that are not taken up as serious alternatives by the democratic majority—can be explored.

Bloom’s account of the implications of Tocqueville’s teaching, however, is not without critics. Ralph C. Hancock argues that Bloom extrapolates incorrectly from

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Tocqueville’s claims concerning the study of great books. According to Hancock, Tocqueville was more discriminating about which books and traditions he saw as important to retain in the democratic world than Bloom’s account admits. This criticism points to something of a puzzle: What exactly are the books that Tocqueville has in mind? Would they be for private consumption only, or could they be a part of public education? Tocqueville claims in his chapter “Why the Study of Greek and Latin Literature Is Particularly Useful in Democratic Societies,” that while classical literary education is necessary for some minds so disposed, “it is [also] evident that in democratic centuries the interest of individuals as well as the security of the state requires that the education of the greatest number be scientific, commercial, and industrial rather than literary.” Otherwise, citizens might be inclined to “trouble the state in the name of the Greeks and Romans instead of making it fruitful by their industry” (II 1.15; 451). Classical literary education seems to have a limited sphere in Tocqueville’s account—therefore, sorting out Tocqueville’s teaching on the role of classical literary education for cultivating the democratic mind will be an important part of understanding Tocqueville’s literary vision as a whole. My discussion of this problem appears in Chapter 2.

Generally, I have aimed to continue in the spirit of Bloom’s account of Tocqueville’s diagnosis of the democratic mind by exploring not only the power of majority opinion, but also the theoretical doctrines to which the democratic mind is receptive. As for the correctives to the democratic mind, in addition to exploring how

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Tocqueville envisioned classical literary education in the modern democratic world, I also endeavor to explain Tocqueville’s full vision of democratic literary forms, including his vision of new public literary works.

Tocqueville’s Rhetorical Strategy and Use of Language

Another series of works that have been helpful for my project appear in the French literature scholarship. These works explore Tocqueville’s use of rhetoric and his development of language as essential to his political thought. In her article, “The Writer Engagé: Tocqueville and Political Rhetoric,” Laurence Guellenc explains how Tocqueville wrestled with the problem of the connection between political thought and political action, and how he attempted to develop an effective democratic rhetoric.22 Guellenc argues that on the one hand, Tocqueville was suspicious of the pedagogical and literary efforts of his contemporaries: he did not want to partake of the Enlightenment project of establishing “a republic of professors”; on the other hand, he wished to develop a political rhetoric that would aid the development of practical political reason in democratic peoples: he wanted school and improve democracy by means of a certain kind of political education.23

While making his educational attempts, Tocqueville struggled, alongside his liberal and Enlightenment contemporaries, to ascertain the appropriate place for intellectual, artistic, and literary endeavors in public life. According to Guellenc, in

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Democracy in America we see “all the modesty of a teacher eager to make himself understood and all the determination of a rhetorician for whom, by his own admission, the value of his book will be measured by its power to convince.”

Thus Tocqueville sought to develop a form of writing that would “enlighten without asserting superiority…make knowledge explicit by way of the „common’ language as opposed to the jargon of specialists, and take account of the reader and his constraining presence, which requires a complex deployment of the commonplaces of traditional eloquence.”

At the same time, Guellenc also contends along with Lawler, Craiutu, and Jennings that by the time he had written the Souvenirs Tocqueville had become deeply pessimistic about his pedagogical hopes. While I grant that Tocqueville had come to doubt his ability to persuade in the political realm, Tocqueville’s presence in our political discourse indicates that even his own pessimism may be ill-founded. In what follows, I strive to show in addition that many of Tocqueville’s lessons remain vital and relevant to an extent that he might not have expected.

Tocqueville on the Problem of Intellectuals

A fourth kind of work that has been a helpful cautionary tale, is represented by James Ceaser’s seminal analysis of Tocqueville’s thought on the role of the intellectual in

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public life. According to Ceaser, Tocqueville was concerned with moderating the direct influence of intellectuals and their ideas on public life in democracy. As Ceaser explains, one of Tocqueville’s central efforts was to create a practically oriented political science that would offset the powerful ideological influence of the *philosophes*—the intellectual force behind the French Revolution. According to Ceaser, Tocqueville’s political science was aimed at encouraging “certain mental habits [which] were characterized less by any particular content (in the sense of a set of ideas outlining a program or agenda) than by a way of thinking that people would employ.” Tocqueville’s strategy involved showing those who direct society what kinds of social and political institutions could limit intellectuals’ influence over public opinion and help citizens learn to reason from particulars to generals rather than from generals to particulars. In Chapter 1, I expand upon Ceaser’s account, and try to articulate further Tocqueville’s vision of the relation between practical politics and intellectuals.

*The Problem of Democracy and Culture*

The last group of works that have helped to frame my inquiry are those that ask whether Tocqueville can help us to meet the challenges of democracy’s cultural critics. Both by way of discussion, and by way of his own example, Tocqueville hoped that in introducing new modes of writing he could help to cultivate the democratic mind, and to


create a citizenry that could sustain liberty—in both its political and intellectual modes—within the new democratic world. The measure of Tocqueville’s success would lie in the extent to which his efforts would generate liberally minded citizens and a critical mass of the citizenry in support of true liberal democracy. In other words, the measure of Tocqueville’s success would be found in the emergence of a sort of liberal democratic culture—meant in the root sense of the word: a sphere for the highest cultivation of individuals. 30

This prospective democratic culture would not be an aristocratic culture, and so it would stand or fall on the possibility of educating and elevating the minds of certain members of the democratic citizenry within the new egalitarian world. The literary world as Tocqueville saw it, however, would be driven by mass taste (DA II 1.14). Would it be possible to develop literary forms that would cultivate the democratic mind, given the powerful influence of mass taste? Other political philosophers have had doubts concerning this prospect. For Friedrich Nietzsche, a political philosopher who shared Tocqueville’s concern with the decline of aristocratic culture in the democratic age, democracy and culture operate in opposition to one another. For Nietzsche, the diversity and toleration that sustain the democratic world are at odds with true culture—the idea of a democratic culture is a contradiction in terms. 31


While Tocqueville was aware of the difficulty of his vision, he nonetheless sought to show how democratic intellectual life could be elevated and deepened within democracy. Ultimately, the debates about whether Tocqueville, or anyone, could succeed in helping to retain a philosophic literary sphere within democracy have forced me to consider one of the most difficult questions concerning the opposition between democracy and aristocracy: Is it the case that only aristocracy promotes the highest forms of human excellence while democracy hinders and limits this possibility? Ultimately, this question has helped me to recognize that Tocqueville wished to draw the model of aristocracy into democracy’s intellectual horizon and in so doing to preserve the possibility of philosophic life therein. While exploring this possibility in Chapter 4 and in the Conclusion, I strive to show that Tocqueville offers a plausible defense of democracy to its harshest cultural critics.
CHAPTER 1
A NEW ROLE FOR MEN OF LETTERS IN THE DEMOCRATIC WORLD

When Tocqueville observed the revolutionary progress of politics in France, one of the first things that he recognized was that democracy could yield new power to men of letters. During the French Revolution, public intellectuals in France had successfully extended the sphere of letters over public government. Poets and writers became deputies and journalists; political theorists became ministers and politicians. Unlike German intellectuals, who remained isolated from politics, French intellectuals attempted to apply their theories and doctrines to public life (OR III.1; 195). Because of its receptiveness to progressive political change and reform, the French public had allowed intellectuals to rule: the political state was subsumed by the state of letters.

Tocqueville reflected on this phenomenon with disapproval. As Tocqueville saw, most efforts to bring theoretical ideas to bear on political life in France had had harmful effects. For this reason, in both The Old Regime and in Democracy in America Tocqueville criticizes the French for their deference to intellectuals. In Democracy in America Tocqueville offers his criticism by means of a comparison with American democracy. He observes that unlike France, in the United States, the influence of

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intellectuals on politics was limited. He also observes that this fact had had healthy consequences for American political life.\(^\text{33}\)

Tocqueville’s exploration of the relative merits of the French and American stances toward intellectuals provides the basis of his account of the appropriate place of letters in the new democratic world. Examining this comparison can thus serve as a starting point for developing an account of Tocqueville’s teaching on how letters ought to figure in politics once politics becomes democratic.

What one begins to see is that Tocqueville saw the need, first, to curb the French inclination toward the intellectual systematization of politics. Instead of theoretical systems, abstraction, and rational enlightenment, Tocqueville advises intellectuals—if they insist on involving themselves in public life at all—to ground their activities in practice. The American model has worked well in this regard, in part, because its democratic origins prevented intellectuals from gaining status as authorities in public life. It has also worked because of the practical orientation of American politics. Nevertheless, despite its unique situation, for Tocqueville, the American example is to serve as a guide. Ultimately, Tocqueville suggests that American institutions foster a new kind of practically oriented political theory, and that this kind of political theory is the appropriate mode of thought for politically inclined intellectuals in the democratic age.

The Problem with of the Intellectual Systematization of Politics

In the Old Regime Tocqueville offers his clearest statement on the causes and dangers of the influence of intellectual doctrine on democratic political life. According to Tocqueville, the central problem with the role of French intellectuals in the Revolution was their attempt to systematize and rationalize politics and to abandon political tradition. According to Tocqueville, the violence of the French Revolution was due to the intellectual attempt to craft politics on the model of abstract literary ideas:

When we study the history of our Revolution, we see that it was carried out in precisely the same spirit in which so many abstract books on government are written. The same attraction for general theories, for complete systems of legislation and exact symmetry in laws; the same contempt for existing facts; the same confidence in theory; the same taste for the original, the ingenious, and the new in institutions; the same desire to remake the whole constitution all at once and according to a single plan, rather than trying to fix its various parts. A frightening sight! For what is merit in a writer is sometimes vice in a statesman, and the same things which have often made lovely books can lead to great revolutions. (OR III 1; 201)

In other words, the attempt of French intellectuals to order politics neatly and systematically on the model of geometry was fatally flawed. French intellectuals ignored the extent to which political life resists the imposition of perfect order that is possible in the imagination.

French intellectuals came to approach politics in this manner as a consequence of a number of political circumstances. According to Tocqueville, in France before the Revolution the state of letters and the political world were distinct spheres. The political world restricted participation, while the literary sphere was free (OR III 1; 197-198). In the face of an increasingly oppressive regime, intellectuals and citizens alike were free to
discuss and imagine remedies to the political ills that they suffered. Their ideas, however, were not tempered by political experience.

With a free literary sphere and an oppressive and decadent aristocracy, intellectuals voiced a number of ideas to which the public was particularly receptive. “The spectacle of so many abusive or ridiculous privileges, whose burden was more and more felt, and whose justification was less and less understood, forced or rather simultaneously encouraged all of them towards the idea of the natural equality of ranks” (OR III 1; 196). The decadence of the aristocracy also generated in intellectuals “a disgust for old things and for tradition, and they were naturally led to want to rebuild contemporary society according to an entirely new plan” (OR III 1; 197). The public was receptive to the ideas of intellectuals because intellectuals gave voice to public sentiments as well: “There was no taxpayer hurt by the unequal distribution of the tailles who did not feel warmed by the idea that all men ought to be equal; no small landowner devastated by his noble neighbor’s rabbits who was not happy to hear it said that all privileges whatsoever were condemned by reason” (OR III 1; 198). The public was thus driven toward the literary sphere.

Writers and intellectuals, in turn, took up the popular mandate by becoming party leaders, and aimed to apply their theoretical systems to the political world. According to Tocqueville, however, both the French public’s receptiveness to intellectual doctrine, and the hopes that most intellectuals had for their own doctrines, were characterized by naïve optimism for the prospects of political change. Tocqueville argues that the intellectuals who drafted the Cahiers calling for reform immediately prior to the Revolution did not
recognize the possibility of violence: “[they] think that the rapid and complete
transformation of a society so old and complicated can happen without a jar, with the aid
of reason, and by its means alone” (*OR III* 1; 199). The reason for this naïveté on the part
of intellectuals, according to Tocqueville, was their complete lack of experience in the
political realm:

> At the almost infinite distance from practice in which they lived, no experience
tempered the ardors of their nature; nothing warned them of the obstacles that
existing facts might place before even the most desirable reforms; they didn’t
have any idea of the dangers which always accompany even the most necessary
revolutions. They did not even have the least suspicion of them; for the complete
absence of political freedom had made the world of action not merely badly
known to them, but invisible.

(*OR III* 1; 197)

In short, without political experience, intellectuals failed to grasp the historical and
political limitations to political idealism.

The receptiveness of the public to intellectual doctrines was rooted in the same
cause. This could have been prevented, according to Tocqueville, with even a little
political experience on the part of the public:

> If, like the English, the French had still taken part in government through the
Estates-General, if they had even continued to be daily involved in regional
administration through their provincial assemblies, we may affirm that they would
never have let themselves be inflamed by writers’ ideas as they were then; they
would have retained a certain practical experience which would have warned
them against pure theory.

(*OR III* 1; 197)

In short, for Tocqueville, political experience tempers idealism, and a lack of public
experience permits the influence of idealism. This suggests that new democracies—
especially those that emerge from politically restrictive regimes—are particularly
vulnerable to intellectual doctrine. With even a minimal level of political power,
democratic publics become suspicious of abstract intellectual doctrine, and this way, serve to inoculate democracy against revolutionary idealism.

How the Americans were able to Correct the Democratic Penchant for Abstract Systems

Whereas the French did not confront practical politics until the Revolution was underway, the Americans and the British, according to Tocqueville, were more successful at refining ideas for practice in their own democratic revolutions. In *Democracy in America* Tocqueville fills out his account of the need for political experience for correcting idealism when he explores his claim that the Americans have been less inclined toward abstract theoretical ideas than the French (*DA* II 1.4). It is the American political experience that reveals to Tocqueville how democratic political experience makes citizens wary of applying abstract theoretical ideas to politics.

Tocqueville begins his explanation by discussing precisely how democracies are vulnerable to idealism. As he explains, democracy fosters a taste for abstract general ideas. As Tocqueville depicts them, abstract general ideas are sweeping ideas that explain a vast expanse of phenomena, or a broad set of ideas at a stroke. The occident and the orient, liberty, enlightenment, feminism, conservatism, liberalism, and communism are examples of such ideas. 34 These ideas appeal to democratic citizenries because they simplify and order the chaos of political change without exacting strenuous intellectual effort on the part of those who employ them. Democracies, especially new ones, are

characterized by flux and innovation, and citizens of democracies are constantly occupied with attending to practical life. General ideas are appealing to these citizenries because they do the work of explaining the motion of political life quickly. In Tocqueville’s words: “Men who live in democratic countries are very avid for general ideas because they have little leisure and these ideas free them from wasting their time in examining particular cases” (DA II 1.4; 416). As we shall see, though Americans have a taste for general ideas and are also drawn away from particular cases, they remain superior to the French at measuring these ideas against political experience.

General ideas are the enemy of practically moderated thinking because they are the building blocks of theoretical systems. The inclination toward general ideas permits the development of abstract theoretical systems that prescribe particular courses of political action. All too often these are unintentionally harmful courses of action, and they are so for not being grounded in practical experience—as illustrated in the French case by the general concepts liberté, égalité, fraternité. Abstract ideas take on the character of abstract ideals. They do so because they suggest the possibility of reforming politics on the basis of newly discovered order: the recognition of the general idea of equality leads to the doctrine of egalitarianism. Similarly, the recognition of human equality against the backdrop of an unequal political order, leads to the call for a political order based on human equality.

According to Tocqueville, democratic citizens seize general and abstract ideas in all manner of subjects, and they will apply these ideas to all other subjects with which they lack experience: “Those in commerce will readily seize all the general ideas one
presents to them relative to philosophy, politics, and the arts without looking at them” (DA II 1.4; 416). If they have particular experience with a subject, however, they will adopt a generalization that pertains to it only after subjecting it to scrutiny: “they will entertain those that have reference to commerce only after examination and will accept them only with reservation” (DA II 1.4; 416).

The implication, then, is that in democratic political life, if citizens do not engage in politics in a manner that refines their political ideas, their views of political phenomena will be distorted by generalizations circulating in popular discourse. Without political experience they are more inclined to take up abstract ideas like human equality and to become partisans of ideal systems, like communism and fascism, for example, instead of constitutional democracy—a system based in both the ideals of equality and liberty and the particular experience of the country in which these ideals are established politically. According to Tocqueville, America has succeeded in countering dangerous forms of idealism because its citizenry is engaged in politics.

Although Tocqueville holds forth the American example in contrast to the French as successfully countering the democratic penchant for the theoretical systematization of politics, he also draws his readers’ attention to the British example, where the citizenry shows even less of an inclination toward theoretical abstraction than the Americans or the French. This example helps to reveal further the necessity of an experiential corrective to idealism in democracy.

According to Tocqueville, the British have only turned toward generalizations in so far as their “ancient constitution has weakened” (DA II 1.3; 412). What he means by
this is that as the British have lost their political traditions and their aristocracy, they have become increasingly receptive to generalization and theoretical abstraction. The reason for this is that aristocratic constitutions encourage people to recognize rank, hierarchy, and difference rather than similarity, or commonality, across peoples. Generalizations are based on the recognition of similarity and commonality. Aristocratic peoples, therefore, “never conceive very general ideas in relation to themselves, and that is enough to give them a habitual distrust of these ideas and an instinctive distaste for them” (DA II 1.3; 412).

At the same time, like the Americans and the French, Tocqueville observes that the British are increasingly turning toward abstraction and generalizations. The implication is that as peoples become more and more democratic, they are more likely to adopt abstract modes of thought. To the extent that this mode of thinking generates abstract political idealism like that which drove the French Revolution, democratic peoples are more vulnerable to revolutionary idealism than are aristocratic peoples. In this light Tocqueville indicates that while aristocratic tradition has been an effective means of preventing the rise of revolutionary idealism in the past, it is no longer a means of correcting this kind of intellectual ambition in the democratic age. In the absence of an aristocratic tradition that frames political thought and habit, political education through political experience is the best means to ensure the development of public resistance to revolutionary idealism.
Local Resistance to Intellectuals and the Prospects for Democratic Intellectuals in Light of this Fact

As for the kinds of political experiences that moderate democratic citizenries, Tocqueville stresses participation in local politics. In his view, township government is among the best means for cultivating resistance to idealism in democracy. As he claims, "the institutions of the township are to freedom what primary schools are to science" (DA I 1.5; 57). Township politics affords citizens a number of political experiences that help to moderate and refine their ideas of what is politically possible and desirable. Township politics reveal, for instance, that different groups do not always follow the same path of reasoning; that citizens are not always rational; that politics involves compromise; that there is usually a tension between the common good and the private good; and that politics takes place against a backdrop of tradition and habit that is powerful and does not change easily or quickly. As these lessons emerge out of experience with local politics they inculcate a commonsensical resistance to political idealism. Through experience with local politics, then, democratic citizenries become wary of intellectual idealists, and resist their influence on public life.

Insofar as local politics is typically unappealing to intellectuals with grand political visions, one suspects that Tocqueville’s portrait of healthy democracy might be particularly unappealing to the politically inclined intellectuals in his audience. As Tocqueville indicates, some of the intellectuals in his audience were entertained hopes for the reversal of the democratic movement (cf. DA I 2.9, II Notice; 302, 399-400). If Tocqueville’s ideal democracy is one that houses a citizenry hostile to intellectual
ambition, and he has suggested that intellectual ambition ought to be moderated and refined through local politics, how ought ambitious intellectuals respond to Tocqueville’s account? One suspects that they will not respond favorably.

Tocqueville indicates his awareness of this problem when he acknowledges that local politics will typically be an unappealing outlet for enlightened men. As he writes, enlightened society is "revolted at the sight [in local politics] of the numerous lapses and despairs of success before having attained the final result of experience" (DA I 1.5; 57). Cosmopolitan citizens find the parochialism of local politics distasteful. In light of this fact, Tocqueville recognizes that local politics will not be an entirely satisfactory outlet for intellectual ambition, and while in his ideal democracy the citizenry on the whole will be hostile to intellectuals, there remains a place in this democracy for intellectuals who wish for more than a retreat to the private realm or to an apolitical literary sphere.

Thus Tocqueville advises that although intellectuals must not imitate the grandiose efforts of French writers to impose the literary sphere on political life, there are other avenues of political life that they may find satisfactory. To the end of demonstrating the potential political role that he would allow for intellectuals, Tocqueville reminds his readers of the example of British political theorists, who were engaged in politics, but whose ideas were moderated by politics. Tocqueville contrasts French intellectuals with British intellectuals to make his point:
In England, those who wrote about government mingled with those who governed, the one introducing new ideas into practice, the other correcting and limiting theories with the help of facts, in France the political world remained as if divided into two separate provinces without commerce between them. The first governed; the second established the abstract principles on which all government ought to be founded. Here one took the particular actions indicated by routine; there one proclaimed general laws, without ever thinking about the means to apply them: on one side, the conduct of affairs; on the other side, the direction of mind.

("OR III I; 200"

On the model of the British then, politically inclined intellectuals are admonished to engage in dialogue with political men. The realm of political action on a grander scale is open to them—they are presented the model of British and American intellectuals who were involved in crafting an entirely new political world—but they are advised to place their ideas under the scrutiny of men of action.

A New Account of the Relation between Theory and Practice

In this light, Tocqueville’s praise of British intellectuals also introduces his readers to an alternative understanding of the appropriate relation between theory and practice that departs from the French model. While the French were inclined to sever the intellectual sphere from the political sphere, Tocqueville suggests that these two spheres ought to operate in a closer relationship. On this model, theory is to be moderated and taken up in light of particular circumstances: that is, politics is to frame and inform political theory. Although this teaching pertains primarily to the relation between political theory and political practice, it provides a model for practically-oriented theorizing more generally, a theme that appears in many of Tocqueville’s lessons to intellectuals.
By encouraging its orientation in practice, Tocqueville aims to correct some of the characteristic tendencies of political theory that can be inimical to politics. For instance, political theory often conceives of politics in universal terms; it tends to ignore the need for political expediency; it neglects the distance between what is politically possible and what is politically imaginable; it does not always consider the difference between the political limitations of a particular time, and the limitations of politics generally; and it tends to reason from extreme examples rather than from particular circumstances.35 Through an orientation in practice, however, political theory is refined in light of the needs of political action. If political theory is explored in light of political needs on the ground, political theorists are compelled to refine political theory for the purpose of political action.

This account of the appropriate relation between theory and practice departs from the French model notably in that it emphasizes a direct relation between politics and theory, and the importance of a practical orientation for guiding human action.36 At the same time, Tocqueville’s illustration suggests that while he regards it as necessary that political action frame, limit, and refine political theory, he does not think that political theory needs to be subsumed entirely by political practice. In praising the manner in which political theorists worked and conversed with political men in England, Tocqueville indicates that political theorists can have their own place alongside political


men.

In this claim, Tocqueville differs also from the English thinker Edmund Burke, who was inclined toward a view that eliminated the theoretical orientation from practical politics altogether. Burke regarded theory as inimical to politics and suggested instead that the only sound kind of political theory is a “self-denying” one or one that prevents theory from becoming involved in practice. Yet as Harvey Mansfield contends, it may be an impossible demand to make of theory that it “serve only as a watchdog against theory and never be needed as a guide.” Tocqueville too appears to be aware both that certain theories may be necessary or helpful for healthy democratic politics (he names rights theory in particular; cf. DA I 2.6; 228), and that it may be impossible to require of all theoretically inclined individuals that they restrain themselves from political theorizing altogether.

It is in light of his realism regarding the inclinations of intellectuals and the potential need for their wares that Tocqueville advocates a dialogue between theoretically inclined and politically inclined men. Democratic politics can and must channel intellectual ambition to its benefit by moderating its direct influence in the public realm, and allowing it to express itself and to enter into political life through discourse that is practically oriented.

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America as a Model and the Question of the Founding: Two Difficulties

Again, as Tocqueville depicts it, the American regime has succeeded in channeling intellectual ambition because its citizens learn through political experience and because the few intellectually inclined men in its midst (being originally Englishmen themselves) are engaged in politics in a manner similar to that of the British. In this way the United States is a model example of a democratic regime that provides a corrective to the democratic penchant for generalization, public zeal for abstract ideals, and intellectual ambition. As Tocqueville presents it, democracies ought to imitate the United States in the way that it cultivates intellectuals.

Then again, Tocqueville’s depiction of the American model presents two particular difficulties that must be clarified for understanding his teaching on intellectuals in relation to democracy. The first of these problems is that the American situation with regard to intellectuals appears to be significantly different from that of the French and many other European countries. The French had a powerful intellectual class that dominated and ruled public opinion. On the face of it, such a class appears to be absent in America. In this light, could the American case really serve as a model example for future democracies? That is, if future democracies possess elite intellectual classes (Marxist intellectuals in the former Soviet Union, for instance, or perhaps Islamic scholars), could these regimes imitate the American example where intellectual life originally appears less prominent?
We can begin to answer this question by exploring the characteristics of intellectuals who appear in Tocqueville’s portrait of America. Initially, Tocqueville explains, in the United States intellectuals did not form a distinct and isolated class that drove public opinion; nevertheless, as he also says, an enlightened group of men were present during the colonial era and for the writing of the Constitution. As Tocqueville points out, both in early New England and while the Constitution was drafted, America was shaped by educated British men who were themselves versed in the intellectual doctrines of the English political tradition. Tocqueville argues, moreover, that the superiority of the American system stems from the enlightenment of this group. Contrary to appearances, an intellectual elite is present in Tocqueville’s America.

Tocqueville makes the following observations to detail this group’s contributions to American politics. He notes, for example, that in New England the legal system is superior to that of France because it is informed by the education of those who wrote it. He also says that the New England law works to "satisfy a host of social needs, about which in our day there are still only confused sentiments in France" (DA I 1.2; 41). Under New England legislators, for example, "the lot of the poor was made secure," "measures were undertaken for upkeep of highways," public registers for deaths, births and marriage were introduced, and officers were charged with attending to vacant property (DA I 1.2; 41).

Tocqueville also credits the superior enlightenment of the authors of the Federalist Papers with the greatness of the Constitution (DA I 1.8; 143). Their enlightenment was informed by their experiences with English law, with the American
Revolution, and with the New England township. Again, as Tocqueville notes in his discussion of the role of intellectuals in shaping new democratic laws in England, intellectuals figured prominently in English politics, but unlike the French, the English were moderated by experience. The American founding drew on the British tradition, and, relative to the French Revolution, the American founding displayed a sober character as a result.

The existence of a group of politically engaged intellectuals in the United States suggests that the country was not without the potential liability of an intellectual class. The theoretical orientation of many of the founding documents further attests to this fact. In this sense, America is not so idiosyncratic an example that it cannot serve as an educational model for Tocqueville. In response to the first difficulty—that the American example may be too great an exception to serve as a universal model—it appears that the United States can indeed serve as a model of a democracy that has been successful in avoiding the potential pitfalls of an intellectual elite in the democratic world.

The fact of the theoretical orientation of many intellectuals in American democracy leads to a second difficulty with America as a model, however. This is the problem that contrary to Tocqueville’s depiction, America is known for being the consummate example of regime created by abstract political theory. Liberalism, with its attendant abstract doctrines of „the state of nature,‟ „the social contract‟, and „natural right‟ form an essential part of America‟s origins. Rather than exploring these theoretical elements of America‟s beginnings, however, Tocqueville tends to focus on America‟s religious origins and social experience in his explanation of the regime. As I discussed in
the Introduction, because Tocqueville downplays the theoretical origins of America, the value of his understanding of American democracy has been questioned.\(^{39}\)

If Tocqueville does not address the theoretical character of the founding, what are we to make of his account of America as an example democracy with respect to the influence of intellectuals and the theoretical systematization of politics? To begin to answer this question, one must recognize that Tocqueville is not entirely silent about the role of theory in shaping the American regime. It is not with respect to theory simply, but with respect to particular dimensions of the theory informing the founding that he is silent.

Tocqueville demonstrates his understanding of significant theoretical elements of the American regime when he argues, for example, that the American Constitution “rests on an entirely new theory that will be marked as a great discovery in the political science of our day” (DA I 1.8; 147). This theory is federalism, which allows for the virtues of both a decentralized government (the primary virtue of which is political participation on a local level), and a powerful union. He also speaks of the Constitution as a work of art (DA I 1.8; 157). And he discusses how the Constitution only works well as a result of a certain set of theoretical ideas that are understood by the citizenry; as he says of its operation: “The general theory being well understood, the difficulties of application remain; they are innumerable…Everything is conventional and artificial in such a government, and it can be suitable only for a people long habituated to directing its

affairs by itself, and in which political science has descended to the last ranks of society”
(DA I 1.8; 155-156). In this light, Tocqueville is aware of the theoretical nature of the American regime.

What is nonetheless absent from Tocqueville's account is the theoretical basis of the American Revolution. Strikingly, Tocqueville does not mention the Declaration of Independence. He neither takes up the liberal political theory of Locke, nor does he discuss the extent to which liberalism and its attendant abstract ideas factor into the character of the regime.\(^{40}\) Furthermore, Tocqueville does not discuss the Bill of Rights in his analysis of the Constitution.\(^{41}\) Does Tocqueville's silence on the Declaration and the rights theories that informed and shaped the regime compromise his teaching on the appropriate relation between theory and practice in democratic politics?

One might begin to address this question by exploring Tocqueville's possible reasons for remaining silent on the Declaration. The first possibility is that Tocqueville did not regard the Declaration as a significant document for shaping the United States beyond the Revolution because its significance after the Revolution was not fully apparent at the time of his visit (1831 to 1832). Independence Day celebrations had resurrected the Declaration from an obscure status by 1826, but before then, and even during the Jubilee, the Declaration had had something of a partisan status. It was Jeffersonian Democrats who hailed it, while Federalists expressed contempt for its


It was Lincoln, after Tocqueville, who would ensure that the Declaration remained a unifying patriotic symbol. Because of its status in America at the time, the Declaration may have appeared to Tocqueville as a partisan symbol more than as a document that encapsulated the political theory at the heart of the American political experience. In this case, it is possible that Tocqueville’s silence on the Declaration and the ideas presented in it is due in part to its status when he visited.

At the same time, it is possible that Tocqueville wished deliberately to downplay the theoretical orientation of the Declaration for the sake of presenting his teaching to the French. Whether or not Tocqueville failed to recognize the manner in which the Declaration encompassed the theoretical orientation of America at the time of his visit and beyond, Tocqueville certainly recognized its revolutionary influence in France. For in France, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen had been written on the model of the Declaration of Independence. Tocqueville also says, for example, that “the philosophy of the 18th century is rightly considered one of the principal causes of the Revolution” and that that doctrines concerning “the natural equality of men” and “the sovereignty of the people…are not only causes of the French Revolution, they are its substance” (OR III.2; 96).

For Tocqueville, the Declaration of Independence illustrated for the French how intellectuals could give motion to political change by giving a voice to it. As he writes in

43 West, “Misunderstanding the Founding,”168.
the Old Regime, "the Americans seemed merely to apply what our writers have thought of: they gave substantial reality to what we were dreaming about" (OR III 1; 201). It is conceivable, then, that Tocqueville's silence on the Declaration in Democracy in America is due to his recognition of its liabilities for a French audience. In this vein, Tocqueville perhaps did not wish to emphasize the role of a revolutionary document built on theoretical abstraction at the origin of a successful democracy. Ultimately, it appears that Tocqueville may have regarded the success of American democracy not simply to be the result of the ideas in the Declaration.

One can recognize this possibility further when one observes Tocqueville’s suggestion that it was the Federalists rather than Jefferson who ensured America’s success. In a number of cases, Tocqueville reveals his differences with Jefferson on the political needs of democracy. Although one can note many similarities between Jefferson and Tocqueville, Tocqueville ultimately appears to part ways with Jefferson on a number of significant points. Unlike Jefferson, Tocqueville is not an advocate of revolution or revolutionary renewal (cf. DA II 4.7; 671). It also appears that Tocqueville ultimately sides with the Federalists in their own wariness of Jefferson and the Declaration; for in Democracy in America Tocqueville expresses regret at the rise of popular power that he portrays in his account of the political changes that followed the election of Jefferson in

44 West, “Misunderstanding the Founding,” 168.
1801. He also establishes his preference for the Federalists when he praises them for restricting popular power through the Constitution. He tells his reader that, "the coming of the Federalists to power is, in my opinion one of the most fortunate events that accompanied the birth of the great American Union" (DA I 2.2; 168).

It is perhaps in part due to his wariness of Jefferson's popular inclinations and the revolutionary character of the Declaration, that Tocqueville saw fit to downplay the Declaration and the theoretical principles that inspired it. Presumably, the similarities and kinship between Jefferson and many of the French intellectuals whom Tocqueville criticizes led him to this position. Thus, by remaining silent on the abstract theory behind the Declaration in favor of the political orientation of the Federalists and the Constitution, Tocqueville distills his ideal portrait of democracy while downplaying what he appears to regard as America’s liabilities. Although Tocqueville’s account may be incomplete as an explanation of America, his general teaching remains valuable for guiding modern democracy on the liabilities of theory in general and for indicating some of the potential liabilities of the theory at the heart of the American Revolution.

Rights Theory: One Further Point of Clarification

To understand Tocqueville’s teaching on the appropriate relation between theory and practice in democracy most fully, it remains to clarify one further point. While Tocqueville has reservations about Jefferson’s egalitarianism and is cautious about the revolutionary intellectual doctrines that he advocated in the Declaration, he at the same
time makes an important exception: he does not object outright to the concept of rights—the abstract idea which emerges out the principle of natural equality and which lies at the heart of the Declaration. Ultimately, Tocqueville concurs with Jefferson that rights are essential for resisting tyranny in the democratic world (*DA* I 2.6; 227-228). Nevertheless, as he discusses rights, he also offers correctives regarding how they ought to be conceived politically.

Before he makes his emphatic statement that “there are no great people without the idea of rights,” Tocqueville reminds his reader that the idea of rights has been profoundly and dangerously misunderstood by French revolutionaries and European intellectuals (*DA* I Introduction, 1.2; 11, 42). Instead of recognizing rights as individual powers essential to the healthy conduct of self-government, many of Tocqueville’s contemporaries came to conceive of rights as liberty to override the rule of law in the name of popular will. The French tended to understand rights in terms of the will of society rather than in terms of the natural freedom of the individual (*DA* II 4.7; 670). In order to show how they are better understood, Tocqueville draws attention to a number of instances where rights have appeared in the United States.

In the American context, particularly in New England, rights were tied to the task of governing the township. New England citizens understood that their rights were to be exercised and circumscribed in light of their experience with the necessities of political rule (*DA* I 1.5; 64). Rights were put to use for the sake of community ends and limited for the same. They were also coupled with duties. In this light, Tocqueville stresses that rights are best conceived in light of the needs of self-government.
Despite the pragmatic orientation of his account of rights, Tocqueville does not deny the need to grant certain rights to all individuals in democracy. He stresses that once all men are regarded as equal, the best means for resisting claims to power by might is to grant certain political rights to all (cf. DA I 1.3, 2.6, 2.9; 52, 226, 301). He also suggests that the idea of rights is important when the “divine notion of rights” is in decline (DA I 2.6; 228). A new idea of rights serves as the basis for judging political legitimacy in an egalitarian regime.

For Tocqueville, the idea of rights is spread through practice. The peaceful exercise of basic political and property rights helps to teach respect for all other individuals’ rights: “In America, the man of the people has conceived a lofty idea of political rights because he has political rights; so that his own are not violated, he does not attack those of others” (DA I 2.6; 228).

As Tocqueville stresses the value of individual political rights for resistance to illegitimate claims to power, he also indicates that another conception of rights is equally essential to the political health of democracy. When Tocqueville emphasizes the need to preserve basic political rights for all, his teaching is typically coupled with a lesson on the importance of upholding certain political rights for those who rule—for instance, political rights for magistrates and judges (cf. DA I 1.5, I 2.6; 65, 67-68, 227-228). We typically understand these kinds of rights as political powers. Presumably, Tocqueville wishes to retain the concept of rights for both individuals and rulers for the sake of relating the concept of individual rights to necessary political limitations on them. It is this latter
dimension of Tocqueville’s discussion of rights that is most important for understanding his broader teaching on the subject.

Perhaps the most significant and illustrative variation on this theme is Tocqueville’s claim that “the idea of rights is none other than the idea of virtue introduced in the political world” (DA II 2.6; 227). Tocqueville explains this statement by discussing how the idea of rights is not simply to be understood as one’s own individual rights, but also an idea that pertains to the rightful political powers of political leaders and magistrates. When Tocqueville suggests that the idea of rights is like the idea of virtue, he means that the idea of rights helps to craft a new idea of rightful conduct—in the case of democracy, a certain deference to individuals who have been granted political powers for the sake of political rule. As Tocqueville says, “The man who obeys violence bows and demeans himself; but when he submits to the right to command that he recognizes in someone like him, he raises himself in a way above the very one who commands him” (I 2.6; 227). The idea of rights in the political world ought to be understood in a manner that helps to foster rightful deference to political powers granted to otherwise equal citizens.

In other words, for Tocqueville, individual rights for equals always are to be coupled with the recognition that political life requires that rulers possess different political rights for the sake of governing. Tocqueville’s European contemporaries have failed to recognize the latter part of his teaching because they demand respect for political rights for all without acknowledging the need for deference to political rights of governing bodies as well. Hence, Tocqueville suggests to his contemporaries that the idea
of rights for individuals ought to be coupled with the idea of rights as necessary powers of political magistrates.

To be sure, Tocqueville’s account of rights does not fully take up the American deliberations on rights in its entirety. In this sense, and in light of his silence the political theory informing the Declaration, one must acknowledge that Tocqueville’s teaching may be somewhat inadequate as an account of the manner in which the ideas of the Declaration take shape in the American regime. As an explanation of America, then, it appears that Tocqueville's teaching would need to be supplemented by a more systematic account of the influence of the theories behind the Declaration and of the debates on rights doctrine.

As a broad teaching on the appropriate place of intellectuals and their ideas in democracy, however, Tocqueville's silence illuminates what he regards as the most essential lessons on intellectuals and their ideas for the democratic world as a whole. Ultimately, Tocqueville wishes to draw from America a model for ideal political processes and institutions for an emerging democratic world. While he is silent on the Declaration, he does emphasize the importance of rights, and offers an account of how rights ought to figure in democracy in general. Without emphasizing the revolutionary character of the Declaration, Tocqueville recognizes the implications of its central teaching.
Lessons on Religion

Aside from setting out a model for the practical orientation of intellectuals, emphasizing the role of the authors of the Constitution and the Federalist Papers in directing and moderating popular opinion, and offering a statement on the appropriate understanding of rights for democracy, Tocqueville offers a final set of lessons for intellectuals regarding the problem of anti-religious sentiment amongst them. As mentioned in the Introduction, Tocqueville regards religion as essential to the health of democracy. It is perhaps also for this reason that Tocqueville opts to stress the Puritan origins of America over its revolutionary origins. One of his central concerns was to persuade Enlightenment intellectuals of the importance of religion for democracy. While he recognized that the religious sphere and the literary sphere would have different kinds of influences on democratic life, he also observed that many intellectuals wished to encroach upon the religious sphere—often out of an attempt to eliminate it. Ultimately, Tocqueville’s final set of lessons to intellectuals on their new place in democracy—his lessons on religion—are aimed at showing the virtues of religion for democracy against intellectuals who are hostile to it. By making a case for the value of religion in democracy, Tocqueville advises intellectuals on the appropriate demarcation between the literary sphere and the religious sphere.

Tocqueville saw the need to persuade intellectuals of the value of religion for democracy as a consequence of his observations of anti-religious sentiments in France. To make his case, he explores the relationship between intellectuals and religious leaders in
France. He begins his account with the claim that the French Revolution was in essence a political rather than a religious revolution, even though the Revolution fueled anti-religious sentiment in France. His explanation for this claim forms the basis of his teaching on the appropriate stance of intellectuals toward religion. Because the Church represented an impediment to the political revolution (representing tradition, authority, and hierarchy) it stood in the way of some of the philosophical principles driving the Revolution (the authority of reason, the abandonment of tradition, and equality) and for these reasons it was attacked (OR III 2; 204). Tocqueville contends that the attacks on religion on the part of intellectuals were rooted in their failure to distinguish the qualities of political and religious institutions. Because intellectuals treated the Church as a political institution, they attacked it wholeheartedly instead of recognizing its potential virtues as a religious institution independent of politics.

According to Tocqueville, a Church that remains separate from politics is compatible with, and healthy for democracy. The outright attack on the Church in France was a failure on the part of intellectuals to recognize that the Church did not need to be abolished, only removed into a separate sphere from politics. To the credit of intellectuals, Tocqueville also implies that the Catholic Church did much to foster the conflated understanding of religious and political institutions that was pervasive amongst revolutionary intellectuals (cf. OR III 2; 204-209). As he shows, the Catholic Church had become completely enmeshed in French political institutions. Nevertheless, Tocqueville stresses in both The Old Regime and Democracy in America, that even when religious
institutions encroach upon politics, they ought to be preserved in a separate sphere rather than abolished altogether.

In order to ensure that religious institutions are both supported and limited in the way he envisions, Tocqueville offers a dual teaching to intellectuals and religious leaders. As he suggests to intellectuals the potential value of religious institutions, he also suggests to religious leaders the proper scope of their action. For instance, in The Old Regime he criticizes the Church for its weak but antagonizing censorship of intellectuals and its hypocritical involvement with the aristocracy (OR III 2; 204-205); in Democracy in America he praises American preachers for their avoidance of politics and their willingness to adapt to democratic political culture (DA I 2.9 and II 1.5; 276-277, 282-288, 419, 421, 423-424).

At the same time that he suggests the proper limitations on religion to religious leaders, Tocqueville also makes the case for the value of religious institutions to intellectuals. Notably, in both Democracy in America and The Old Regime Tocqueville makes his arguments for religion based primarily on its utility rather than on its truth. Tocqueville wrestles with the truth of Christianity elsewhere (cf. DA II 4.8; 674-675), but in the discussions of religion that relate to the intellectual climate of democracy he opts to speak in terms of utility. He even suggests that those who think Christianity false might still support its existence if they recognized its potential political value (DA I 2.9; 280, II 1.5, OR III 2; 206-207). Presumably, atheists or anti-religious intellectuals in his audience would be more receptive to utilitarian arguments than theological ones.
Tocqueville’s most comprehensive statement on the value of religion for democracy appears in *Democracy in America* at the heart of his discussion of intellectual movements. He argues that religion is particularly important in democracy because it serves as an intellectual orientation point. According to Tocqueville, without religion, the mind is prone to lapse into a paralyzing form of doubt. Religion gives the mind traction on the most fundamental moral questions. Without it, Tocqueville says, “one deserts of being able to resolve by oneself the greatest problems that human destiny presents” and therefore, “one is reduced like a coward to not thinking about them at all” (*DA* II 1.5; 418).

This paralysis of thought can lead to political complacency and a vulnerability to demagogues and sways of the political tide. Hence, “it slackens the strings of the will, and prepares citizens for servitude” (*DA* II 1.5; 418). According to Tocqueville, when men cannot find order in the spiritual world, they “want at least that all be firm and stable in the material order,” hence, “as they are no longer able to recapture their former beliefs, they give themselves a master” (*DA* II 1.5; 418). In contrast, religion helps to buttress a resilient mind with moral clarity that helps democratic citizenries remain vigilant against political encroachments on their freedom (cf. also *DA* I 1.2; 42-44).

In a similar vein, Tocqueville argues earlier in *Democracy in America* that religion helps to encourage political restraint and moderation. He explains that while the political world appears to be open to the free ambition of men, the influence of religion in the moral realm helps to limit political ambition (*DA* I 2.9; 279). As he says, “at the same time that the law permits the American people to do everything, religion prevents them
from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything” (DA I 2.9; 280).

Therefore, in what he had observed of America, no one had “dared to advance the maxim that everything is permitted in the interest of society” (DA I 2.9; 280). The intellectual experience of freedom on the one hand and limitation of religion on the other inculcates habits of restraint.

Aside from suggesting its value for fostering political vigilance and restraint, Tocqueville also argues that religion can serve as a corrective against a number of propensities of egalitarian peoples, including individualism, materialism, and excessive love of well-being (DA II 1.5; 419). With respect to individualism, Tocqueville argues that because any religion implies some duties to other human beings, it helps to prevent withdrawal to the private sphere and discourages political disengagement. It also guides pursuit of self-interest in the direction of the public good.

According to Tocqueville, Americans benefit from the pursuit of self-interest because they have adopted a moral doctrine to guide a particular kind of self-interested pursuit, which is not entirely self-interested, strictly speaking; he calls this “self-interest well understood.” Americans accept as true the idea that it is in the interest of the common good that they pursue their own private interest. They are not ashamed of self-interested pursuit, but are rather proud of it, because they recognize the ways in which their own prosperity can contribute to common prosperity. The morality of self-interest well understood—the pride in the pursuit of self-interest that is in accord with common interest—helps to ensure that the pursuit of self-interest remains in the common interest (DA II 2.8; 501-502). According to Tocqueville, this morality is responsible for much of
the cooperative power, industriousness, and material flourishing of the United States (DA II 2.8; 502).

It also helps to ensure that—for all that Americans say about being self-interested—their self-interest is not narrowly self-interested at all. In this light, Tocqueville suggests that religion does much to help ensure that self-interest remains well understood, which is to say, that it remains elevated and in accordance with the common good. Democratic freedom and the pursuit of self-interest can also be pursued in the direction of more apolitical private goods. Religion helps to buttress a more public spirited and elevated form of the pursuit of self-interest because it encourages actions of self-sacrifice (DA II 2.9; 504). When men are accustomed to small sacrifices—limitations on their activities and passions, for instance—they are more amenable to limitations to their self-interested pursuits broadly and to a public morality that encourages small sacrifices for public goods in exchange for a limited kind of self-fulfillment.

With respect to the closely related democratic inclinations toward material enjoyment and well-being (or the satisfaction and comfort of bodily things), Tocqueville argues that religion helps to moderate and limit the more pernicious effects of these inclinations. He tells his reader, for instance, that religion can help to make the objects of material longing modest rather than great. He also claims that it can lend a certain degree of moral honesty to the pursuit of material gain (DA II 2.11; 509). Perhaps most importantly, religion can turn the mind from material and bodily things to sublime ends. As Tocqueville sees it, if democratic citizens abandon religion, they tend to become compulsively focused on material and bodily things at the cost of their humanity. Religion
draws them beyond small pursuits and reminds them of the sublime—in so doing it helps to retain the highest faculties of human beings (DA II 2.15; 519).

As Tocqueville depicts it, religion thus helps to preserve what is highest in human beings and helps to buttress public spiritedness in an age that pulls men away from high things to useful things, and from public life to private life. It is thus by arguing for the individual and public value of religion, and by suggesting how it can be retained without being an impediment to politics or to intellectual pursuits, that Tocqueville makes his case for religion to intellectuals.

Intellectuals are advised, then, to offer public support for the tenets of religion that support these ends. Generally, Tocqueville favors the Christian religion, but above all, he emphasizes to intellectuals the importance of preserving beliefs in immaterial order, the immortality of the soul, and the need for self-sacrifice. To the extent that he suggests that religion directs the mind toward questions of the sublime, Tocqueville also indicates to irreligious intellectuals that they may find something worthy of reflection in religion. Insofar as they have already rejected religion, however, Tocqueville emphasizes its political value. Thus, Tocqueville guides religious leaders toward support of free of speech and distance from politics, and in exchange, intellectuals are advised to maintain public support for doctrines that help to preserve public spiritedness and human striving.
Conclusion

Observing the virtue of American democracy and recognizing the corrupting influence of intellectuals on French democracy, Tocqueville makes the case for practical engagement with politics and political problems, respect for politically grounded theory, rights doctrine, and intellectual moderation toward religion. Moreover, as he offers these lessons to intellectuals on their appropriate role in the new democratic world he does not simply leave them to their own devices. Instead, and as we shall see next, he also helps them understand how they can draw on the older aristocratic literary tradition for understanding and navigating the new world.
CHAPTER 2

ON THE PLACE OF CLASSICAL LITERARY EDUCATION IN TOCQUEVILLE’S DEMOCRACY

Alongside his lessons on the appropriate role of intellectuals in the new democratic world, Tocqueville also offers lessons on the place of literary education, and particularly classical literary education, in democratic political life. Before offering his teaching on the value of the classical tradition for modern democracy, Tocqueville first offers some comments on literary education in general. In the first volume of Democracy in America, he tells his readers that it does not suffice to educate men in letters if one wishes to make them citizens (DA I 2.9; 291). As we saw in Chapter 1, Tocqueville stresses that it is not literary education, but the practical experience of self-government that is most essential for the cultivation of democratic citizens. Literary education can help citizens receive the kind of practical knowledge essential to healthy political life, but it does not typically provide an alternative to it (DA I 2.9; 291).

The benefits of literary education for democracy, then, are somewhat limited. And they are far more limited, Tocqueville suggests, than many of his European contemporaries tend to think (cf. DA II 1.15; 451). In addition to reflecting on the limitations of literary education in general, Tocqueville entertains the possibility that the classical examples that figure in the Western literary tradition may be obsolete and even a hindrance to modern democratic politics. In Volume I, Tocqueville tells his readers that observing efforts to compare the republics of antiquity, with their “manuscript libraries
and coarse populace,” to modern democracy, with its “newspapers and enlightened populace,” had tempted him to “burn [his old] books so as to apply only new ideas to a social state so new” (DA I 2.9; 289). By Volume II of Democracy in America, however, Tocqueville refines and qualifies this statement, and asserts that in a certain regard, classical literary works are essential to modern political education. In light of Tocqueville’s reservations about the value of literary education for modern intellectuals and citizens, and his speculations on the potential irrelevance of classical literary works for modern politics, one might wonder about the place Tocqueville envisions for classical works in the modern world.

Tocqueville’s response to this problem appears most prominently in a chapter entitled “Why the Study of Greek and Latin Literature is Particularly Useful in Democratic Societies” (DA II 1.15). There, Tocqueville contends that in a limited sphere, classical literary education is essential to the health of modern liberal democracy. Tocqueville’s teaching on the appropriate place of classical education in democracy forms a cornerstone of his vision of the literary sphere in the modern world. By surveying this teaching, one can develop a more refined understanding of his vision. What becomes apparent is that Tocqueville regards the ancient literary tradition as an essential orientation point for teaching intellectuals about the advancements and limitations of modern politics, but that he also sees the need for a new kind of public education that speaks to the unique needs of modern democratic peoples—peoples whose flourishing depends upon the vitality of science, commerce, and industry.
On the Value of Ancient Works for Modern Peoples

One of the reasons that Tocqueville reserves a place for classical literary education in the modern world is that he recognizes that classical texts provide the best corrective to the chaotic habits of thought fostered by democracy. Allan Bloom has captured this dimension of Tocqueville’s thought. According to Bloom, Tocqueville asserts the value of classical works in modern democracy for correcting a “particular intellectual bent [that] distorts the mind’s vision.”47 Because democracy tends to undermine tradition and convention, it leaves the mind to itself to sort through the infinitude of novel ideas that attend the rise of the new regime. Democratic literature tends to mirror and augment this state of confusion. It too, abandons tradition and caters to new tastes. In contrast, classical literature, based as it is on linguistic convention and aristocratic aesthetics, provides a potential corrective to the chaos of thought characteristic of the democratic mind. Its precision helps to habituate the mind to more orderly and more discriminating patterns of thought and makes it more receptive to reason.

It also provides a potential alternative to public opinion, which becomes the primary intellectual authority in the democratic age. When tradition and authority no longer form the basis of opinion, citizens (consciously or unconsciously) often base their opinions on the assumption that “when all have the same enlightenment, truth [is] found on the side of the greatest number” (DA II 1.2; 409). By providing an alternative to

common opinion, classical literature can serve as a preventative against “the great
democratic danger [of] enslavement to public opinion.” Classical literature is a means
for intellectual liberation from the democratic cave.

Tocqueville’s call for classical literature is not simply a matter of liberal
education for its own sake, however. He stresses that literary education is essential, in
particular, to the education of those who “have the ambition to excel at letters” (DA II
1.15; 452). If, as Tocqueville claims, literary education for its own sake should be
accessible to those whose nature or fortune inclines them to it, its availability is
particularly important for the education of those who are ambitious to excel at it. Again,
Tocqueville is concerned with the liabilities of ambitious intellectuals.

In this vein, it may also be the case that Tocqueville has a more limited range of
works in mind for the cultivation of ambitious intellectuals in his audience than what
Bloom suggests. Indeed, Bloom has been criticized for suggesting that Tocqueville’s
vision of the literary works integral to liberal education is more expansive than
Tocqueville had intended. This charge points to the need for further clarification on
Tocqueville’s teaching on the works appropriate to the literary sphere in democracy.
Does Tocqueville indeed have a narrower vision of classical education than that of our
liberal arts tradition? What curriculum would Tocqueville prescribe for modern
democratic citizens? To answer these questions it will be helpful to examine what aspects

49 Ralph C. Hancock, “Liberal Education and Moral Liberty: Tocqueville as Critic of Bloom,” in
Tocqueville’s Defense of Human Liberty, eds. Peter Augustine Lawler and Joseph Alulis (New York:
of classical works Tocqueville emphasizes and why he sees these works as important for educating ambitious intellectuals in particular.

A cursory survey of Tocqueville’s own use of ancient works indicates that insofar as literary education is valuable to democracy, Tocqueville favors a curriculum of overtly political works with practical political teachings, over philosophically oriented literary works, which tend to offer more abstract or imaginary teachings. Thus, in *Democracy in America*, examples of Roman political events, and particularly the insights of Plutarch, figure far more prominently than Plato and philosophical or poetic figures.

With respect to the literary education of democratic peoples, Tocqueville appears to prefer works like Plutarch’s *Lives* over more abstract or fictional philosophical works because the former are more overt in presenting practical political lessons, and are aimed more clearly at the cultivation of political prudence than the latter (at least on the face of it) seem to be. Tocqueville’s claim that a healthy democratic citizenry is cultivated not through literary works, but through the political experience of self-legislation is relevant here (cf. *DA* I 2.9; 295). Though Tocqueville prefers practical experience over literary experience as a means for educating democratic peoples, he also suggests that when individuals are insistent on learning from books, he would have them turn to books that draw on historical experience and impart practical political wisdom.

In this regard, Tocqueville’s thought seems to resemble that of Machiavelli or Xenophon more than that of Rousseau or Plato: he prefers teachings that are based on the effectual truth rather than the imagination of it. In fact, Tocqueville echoes the dismissive tone of Machiavelli when he tells his reader “I no more believe in republics like these
than in Plato’s [i.e. ancient republics known for their festive revelry, the account of which is drawn from in Rousseau’s *Letter to d’Alambert*]; or if things took place there as recounted to us, I do not fear to affirm that these alleged democracies were formed of very different elements than ours, and that they had nothing in common with ours except the name” (*DA* II 3.15; 583 and note).\(^{50}\) The ancient books that Tocqueville emphasizes, then, are those of statesmen more than those of philosophers.

Lessons from the Ancients for Ambitious Intellectuals

One can also learn about what Tocqueville wishes for his students to take from the ancients by looking at his own use of them. What is distinctive about his observations on the ancients is that most of them are made for the sake of comparison with modern experience.\(^{51}\) Thus, Tocqueville’s ambitious students are to gain insights by means of comparing their own political experience with ancient examples.

Two comparisons pertinent to his discussion of the role of classical literature for intellectuals appear in his explanation of the value of Greek and Latin literature for democratic times. It is here that Tocqueville observes that while ancient literature is distinguished by its orderly and perfected forms, modern literature is ill formed and void of unified aesthetic convention. Tocqueville explains that this difference in literary


\(^{51}\) E.g. *DA* I 1.2, I 1.4, 1.8, 2.6, 2.9, 2.10; II 1.3,1.5, 1.10, 1.13, 1.15, 1.16, 2.25, 3.1, 3.5, 3.15, 3.18, 3.22; 40, 65,122, 147-148, 201, 233n, 266-267, 269, 289, 301, 315, 316-317, 326-327n, 328, 334, 390,413, 420,436, 438, 446-447, 451-454, 511, 520, 539, 544, 583, 593, 621,630, 661.
excellence stems from the fact that ancient democracies were actually democratic aristocracies, whereas modern democracies are democratic through and through (DA II 1.15; 451).

Tocqueville observes that in ancient democracies the ancient citizens who crafted aristocratic literature were sustained by a slave class that “fulfilled most of the functions that in [modern democracy] belong to the people and even to the middle class” (DA II 1.15; 450). What are Tocqueville’s students to make of these observations? Exposure to literary accounts of ancient aristocratic democracy reveals to modern readers what is lost culturally with the rise of democratic politics. At the same time, and as Tocqueville also indicates, exposure to ancient politics reveals that aristocratic literature and culture come at the cost of liberty for the majority of the population. Observation of ancient politics suggests that there is a tension between high literary culture and democratic politics.

Tocqueville seems also to be cognizant of two particular sets of responses to the example of ancient letters (cf. DA Introduction and II Notice; 11, 399-400). On the one hand, recalling the ancients, there are those who would wish for a return to an aristocratic regime on cultural grounds, despite the recognition that this may mean enslaving or at least oppressing the vast majority of people; on the other hand, there are those who are inclined to continue to urge on a more general democratic enlightenment, perhaps abandoning aristocratic art forms altogether.

Variations on these two types of readers appear in a number of scholarly works on Tocqueville. James Ceaser argues that Tocqueville, in his discussion of the intellectual climate of democracy, aims to counter two ideologically grounded schools of thought on
the rise in France at his time: traditionalism, a more conservative and reactionary mode of thought, and what he calls “philosophe rationalism”, a more progressive Enlightenment mode of thought. The latter, the more dominant of the two, is espoused by the kinds of progressive intellectuals who reject aristocratic tradition almost entirely. In contrast, traditionalist intellectuals are inclined to return to the old aristocratic order, following Burke, and reject philosophe rationalism as a “dangerous doctrine that threatens political stability, diversity and the noblest elements of civilization.” While the traditionalists are more inclined to urge on a return to aristocratic tradition, the rationalists are inclined toward democracy.

In another work, Pierre Manent contends that Tocqueville is dealing with two kinds of enemies to democracy: the first “refuse the principle of democracy, the equality of men, which they judge contrary to natural inequality. They wish to stop the progress of equality and restore the supposedly natural and necessary inequalities.” The second, and more numerous type, “the excessive friends of democracy,” who have an overzealous commitment to equality and wish to realize equality even where inequality is more just. In other words, the former prefer the regime of aristocracy because they claim inequality is more fundamental, whereas the latter prefer democracy because they regard equality as more fundamental.

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Since the example of ancient republics can provoke reactionary inclinations on the one hand, or a progressive rejection of classical democracy on the other, what does Tocqueville intend for these types of readers to learn from classical examples? An answer to this question can begin with an examination of some of the other observations on antiquity to which Tocqueville draws his readers’ attention.

One of the lessons that Tocqueville suggests can be drawn from a turn to the ancients concerns the ways in which modern democracy has improved upon ancient democracy. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Tocqueville observes that the United States Constitution “rests on an entirely new theory that will be marked as a great discovery in the political science of our day” (DA I 1.8; 147). The Constitution, according to Tocqueville, advances a new and more successful kind of government, which, he says, “is neither precisely national nor federal,” but rather an “incomplete national government” (DA I 1.8; 149). Tocqueville argues that in contrast to confederations of the past, the American system acts directly on individual citizens rather than on intermediate political bodies, but unlike central governments, it only executes its power with respect to “certain common interests” while remaining “separated and only confederated for all others” (DA I 1.8; 148). The federal government operates on individuals as national governments do, “but it acts in this way only in a restricted sphere” (DA I 1.8; 149). Tocqueville says this new form of government lacks a name, but he describes it as a mixed kind of government—a middle way—that reaps the benefits of both confederations and national governments while correcting their respective flaws.
Tocqueville suggests that one comes to understand the virtues of the American system most clearly by observing how it differs from failed republics of the past. He illustrates his point with examples of both modern and ancient democracies. Tocqueville says that past federal systems were faced with one of two problems: either the government was impotent to execute its laws over individuals, or one state within the system would overtake the interpretation and execution of the laws in the name of the federal government (DA I 1.8; 148). Tocqueville suggests that the latter problem was a primary problem of ancient politics. He draws attention to the example of “the Greeks under Philip when this prince was charged with executing the decree of the Amphictyons” (DA I 1.8 note). In drawing attention to this example, Tocqueville suggests that the American Constitution has provided a corrective to the imperialist tendencies of the Greek confederation.

He also suggests that those who study the ancients will come to see more clearly that American democracy benefits by not subjecting all of the states to a centralized capital, which according to Tocqueville is a “defect of republics of antiquity” (DA I 2.9; 266). By preserving the independence of townships, American democracy has prevented the tyranny of a central authority—which, he contends, was the primary cause of the fall of Rome and Athens. Again, having his readers look to ancient politics helps to clarify the particular innovations or improvements that modern democracy has made on ancient democracy. For those ambitious intellectuals who look longingly to ancient regimes, Tocqueville provides some material to suggest that at least in certain respects, modern
democratic politics (if not modern democratic culture) makes improvements on ancient democracy.

At the same time, Tocqueville indicates that these kinds of improvements are not without limits: certain features of democratic politics that pertain to both ancient and modern politics reveal the limits to democratic political development. Tocqueville points out that like modern democracy, ancient democracy also struggled with the problem of popular control. He discusses, for example, how the extension of suffrage in both ancient and modern democracies can exact undue stress on the public treasury when the citizenry is too poor. When democratic citizens are not in possession of material well-being, they often demand it from the state, and if the state is not designed to generate it, the citizens often turn to tumult (DA I 2.5; 201).

For Tocqueville, democracies do well to establish conditions that allow their citizenries to attend to their material well-being. For this reason, he argues that if modern democracy is to avoid constant revolution, its education must be practical education in material advancement rather than education in abstract Enlightenment thought (cf. OR III.1; 197-198). Ultimately, Tocqueville wishes for his readers to understand the specific virtues of modern democracy over ancient democracy, while at the same time recognizing its limitations. Thus, he directs reactionary conservatives to the improvements upon ancient democratic politics, while directing progressives to the inherent limitations of democratic enlightenment.
The Irreversibility of the Democratic Movement

As he presents evidence for the advancements of modern democracy, Tocqueville appears to be particularly cognizant of the need to attend to those readers who would urge on a return to aristocratic politics on cultural grounds. For these members of his audience, Tocqueville stresses the futility and danger of urging on such a return. He tells them that despite his understanding of the drawbacks of democracy, he is “firmly of the opinion that the democratic revolution to which we are witness is an irresistible fact against which it would be neither desirable nor wise to struggle” (DA II Notice; 400). It is by observing ancient democracy in comparison to modern democracy that he makes his case for the undesirability and impossibility of a return to aristocratic politics.

He begins by observing that political life appears to have undergone a fundamental change with the advent of Christianity. This change can be recognized by comparing ancient politics with politics after the advent of Christ and the rise of Christianity. As Tocqueville explains, prior to Christianity, ancient aristocrats regarded different classes of men, and particularly slave classes, as though they were members of different species (DA II 1.5, 3.1; 420, 593). Under the “scepter of the Caesars,” however, which rendered all but one equally subject to force and law, a common humanity became apparent, and Christ was able to “make it understood that all members of the human species are naturally alike and equal” (DA II 1.3, 1.5; 413, 420). According to Tocqueville, it is the recognition or discovery of equality that allows for the eventual transition from aristocratic politics to democratic politics.
The kind of equality of which Tocqueville speaks is the equality of likeness. According to Mansfield and Winthrop, the idea of those like oneself—that is, the idea of “semblables”—forms the basis of Tocqueville’s understanding of democracy. “Tocqueville sees in democracy not only self and other but a third thing, those like oneself.” The democratic citizen is inclined to think in terms of the similarity of others rather than in terms of differences, whereas aristocrats are more inclined to think in terms of differences and hierarchical relationships. The recognition of similarity under Christianity provided the future impetus for an egalitarian social state.

As a consequence of the recognition of human equality under Christianity and the Caesars it also appears to be impossible to return to aristocratic or monarchic politics. Once all are equal, the monarch is no longer able to rule on the model of a patriarch: as a ruler of equals of which he is one, the monarch is only a master by force, not a superior by nature (DA I 2.9; 301). Hence, the modern political alternatives are to “make all free or all slaves” (DA I 2.9; 301).

The only form of ancient aristocratic politics that might figure in the modern world is caesarism. According to Tocqueville, in Europe, groups based on class, trade, or family tradition have been dissolved, and do not form the basis for opposition to tyrants. Egalitarianism has reduced citizens to individuals; as individuals, they are weak and disunited, and hence ineffectual in the face of tyrants. Thus, Tocqueville emphasizes again that the new political alternatives are democratic freedom or the tyranny of “one alone” (DA I 2.9; 302).

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Reading the ancients allows Tocqueville’s students to recognize this most significant difference between ancient and modern politics. In Cicero, for example, they discern a man who takes for granted the view that foreigners are comparable to members of a different species (DA II 3.1; 539); reflecting on their own times, they recognize that a belief of this sort is now being replaced by a belief in the fundamental equality of all men. Although slavery is still ubiquitous when Tocqueville is writing, he nonetheless suggests that eventually no one but a peripheral few will take seriously the possibility that some groups of humanity are by nature superior or inferior to others. When human equality is recognized as a fundamental fact, rule cannot be founded on the basis of the superiority of one group of humanity over another.

Democracy’s Providence

As he examines the emergence of democracy against the backdrop of the ancients, Tocqueville also depicts the movement of democracy as providential (II 1.5; 420). In taking up the idea of providence, Tocqueville suggests that a genealogical survey of ancient to modern politics also reveals that democracy emerges as not only inevitable but good. Paradoxically, his account of the providence of democracy is equivocal, and his equivocation on it must be examined for understanding exactly what his readers are to take from his lessons on the providential movement from ancient to modern democracy.

Tocqueville offers a variety of contrasting statements on the providence of democracy. In some places, he states that democratic politics is providential and thus
good only because aristocratic politics is no longer possible, and because the only possible alternative to democratic politics is tyranny (\textit{DA Notice}, Volume II, I 2.9, II 4.7; 399, 301, 672-673). On other occasions, Tocqueville indicates that he regards the democratic movement as good simply because it has a necessary or inevitable motion to it that appears to be divinely although mysteriously ordained (\textit{DA II 4.8}; 674). At the same time, Tocqueville suggests that democracy is good because it is grounded in the discovery of the equality of human beings and that for this reason it is more just. And, yet again, Tocqueville qualifies his suggestion that democracy is good for being based on the truth of equality because he recognizes that there is also truth about inequality that democracy often fails to acknowledge and that points to a different view of justice.

While Tocqueville’s comparative observations of the emerging democratic world have helped him to make a relatively lucid case for the inevitability of democracy, they have led him to a rather complex view of why it is good. Ultimately, Tocqueville determines that while there are aspects of democracy that make him doubt its goodness, he opts to regard it as good because it appears to him to be more just than aristocracy (\textit{DA II 4.8}; 674-675).

He also suggests that there is a certain degree of faith in his judgment. As he leans toward viewing democracy as superior to aristocracy because he regards it as more just, he also reveals that he trusts that the justice of democracy is divine even though its goodness is not always clear in his eyes (\textit{DA II 4.8}; 674-675). Tocqueville suggests that the best one can do is to try to understand the potentially divine character of the
democratic movement, but he also concludes that his knowledge in this regard is limited and hence his conclusions are not certain:

I strive to enter into this point of view of God, and it is from there that I seek to consider and judge human things.

No one on earth can yet assert in an absolute and general manner that the new state of societies is superior to the former state; but it is already easy to see that it is different.

(DA II 4.8; 675)

Whether democracy is divinely ordained or not, it is certainly different; and at the very least, Tocqueville is persuaded that “the political world is changing [and] henceforth one must seek new remedies for new ills” (DA II 4.7).

Tocqueville opts to depict democracy as providentially good, then, based on a provisional judgment. He accepts that democracy is good and divine because it appears to be more just than aristocracy, but he indicates also that this determination is not certain.

To the reactionary intellectuals in his audience, then, Tocqueville indicates his understanding of their rejection of democratic politics while offering both a clear analysis of the untenable prospects for a return and a reminder that a rejection of democratic principles would leave modern peoples more vulnerable to tyranny.

A Charge Against Tocqueville

At this point, it may be valuable to consider a significant criticism against Tocqueville regarding his account of the providential character of democracy. In this respect, Tocqueville has been charged with two significant crimes: first, with historical determinism for suggesting that democracy or tyranny will become the only regimes
possible in the modern world and, second, with deciding dogmatically in favor of
democracy over aristocracy. A limited defense of Tocqueville might be made on two
grounds. First, although Tocqueville states fairly forcefully his conviction that it would
be neither desirable nor possible to return to aristocratic politics, his subsequent
statements on the providential character of democracy reveal that he is ultimately
uncertain about the irreversibility and desirability of the democratic age. As we have
seen, he reveals that his account of democracy a providential fact is based on an uncertain
judgment.

Second, and more importantly, Tocqueville reintroduces the question of
aristocracy into the modern political landscape. If Tocqueville (problematically or
paradoxically) presents democracy as the best possible political form in the modern age,
he also remains open to the possibility that aristocracy may have been a better regime
simply: again, he says outright that “no one on earth can yet assert in an absolute and
general manner that the new state of societies is superior to the former state” (cf. II 4.8;
675). While admittedly, Tocqueville leans toward the impossibility and undesirability of
a return to aristocratic politics on the grounds of justice, he indicates at the same time that
the model of aristocratic politics is essential for correcting the dangers of democratic
politics. If he is closed to the possibility of a de facto return to aristocratic politics, he at
the same time wrestles constantly with a renewal of aristocracy within the limits of

55 Leo Strauss, “Notes on Tocqueville,” Autumn 1962
These notes are drawn from Leo Strauss’s lectures and were circulated posthumously.

Companion to Tocqueville, p. 120.
modern democracy.

As I will show in Chapter 4, one of Tocqueville’s central tasks is to open democracy to true aristocracy, that is, natural hierarchy. He does so by developing a particular understanding of liberty and setting it in opposition to democracy as the egalitarian state. By replacing aristocracy with liberty as the complementary opposition to democracy, Tocqueville begins to pave the way for a democracy that supports natural aristocracy. Tocqueville not only reintroduces the question of aristocracy into the egalitarian world, he also allows for a certain kind of aristocracy within democracy. In light of his equivocation on democracy’s inevitability, his renewal of the question of aristocracy, and his efforts to carve out a space for natural aristocracy within the egalitarian state, I submit that Tocqueville is guilty of neither historical determinism nor holding a dogmatic preference for democracy.

Modern Democracy’s Unique Reliance on Science, Commerce, and Industry

As he makes his qualified case for the inevitability of democracy and its goodness, Tocqueville also draws on the ancients to help his readers understand the unique characteristics of modern democracy—particularly its reliance on science, commerce, and industry. The ancients are to help his readers recognize the implications of this reliance and see the best means of tending to it. Tocqueville’s begins by observing the differences between ancient democracy and modern democracy with respect to their physical situations and stances toward nature. Here, he observes that whereas ancient
societies “were all founded in the midst of enemy peoples whom one had to defeat so as to settle in their place,” the Americans advanced across a vast expanse of space. To this observation he adds that when the Americans advance across the wilderness they are “already master[s] of the most important secrets of nature, united with those like [them], and instructed by an experience of fifty centuries.” Whereas the men who flocked toward Rome ultimately met with death and destruction, the men spreading across the expanse of space that is North and South America bring “the seed of prosperity and life” (*DA* I 2.9; 269). Tocqueville suggests then, that with regard to material prosperity, and the prospects of peaceful political growth and expansion, the modern democratic regime will surpass ancient democracy.

His account of the scientific and material prospects of America, moreover, appears to be an endorsement of the modern scientific project in general. Tocqueville’s favorable depiction of the prospect of mastering of nature and the “triumphant march of civilization across the wilderness,” indicates indeed that he is optimistic about the capacity of material prosperity and scientific advancement to support human flourishing within democracy (*DA* I 2.9; 268). Additionally, when he tells his reader in this context that it is “as if God had held [North America] in reserve and it had only just emerged from beneath the waters of the flood,” he indicates that his endorsement of the democratic conquest of nature is an endorsement of the Baconian project in particular (*DA* I 2.9; 268).57

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Tocqueville also follows Francis Bacon in suggesting that the shift from the conquest of men to the conquest of nature that is the mark of the modern world might be regarded as a great political advancement. He argues that the conquest of material nature and the prosperity generated thereby fosters a more stable political order, and insinuates that the shift in orientation from war in ancient democracy to the conquest of nature in modern democracy may provide a solution to the problem of Roman imperialism (Cf. DA I 2.9; 269). Thus, Tocqueville suggests that observing the difference between ancient democracy and modern democracy with respect to both their physical circumstances and their possession of scientific knowledge, reveals a great political potential on the side of modern democracy.

In order to support the new kind of civilization that is advanced by the prospect of mastering not men but nature, Tocqueville suggests that intellectuals must recognize a number of liabilities new to this regime. As I will show in Chapter 5 (in the discussion of democratic poetry), Tocqueville is cognizant of the dangers of the democratic imagination’s turn toward democracy’s new scientific and technological powers. Here, however, he suggests that the new features of the democratic regime will necessitate the pursuit of the theoretical as well as the practical sciences, and that lessons can also be gleaned from ancient examples in this regard.

Drawing on the example of Plutarch’s Archimedes, Tocqueville explains that whereas aristocratic regimes are drawn to the beauty of the theoretical sciences, democracies tend toward the utilitarian applications of the sciences. Without the development of the theoretical sciences, however, the advancements of the practical
sciences can be lost. Tocqueville suggests that the decline of the theoretical sciences is tantamount to a return to a dark age, and in this vein, he admonishes his reader to recognize that “because Roman civilization died following the barbarian invasions, we are perhaps too much inclined to believe that civilization cannot die in any other way” (DA II 1.10; 438). Thus, he concludes, “one must therefore not reassure oneself by thinking that the barbarians are still far from us; for if there are peoples who allow the light to be torn from their hands, there are others who stifle it themselves under their feet” (DA II 1.10; 439). Thus Tocqueville suggests that though the sciences themselves might provide a corrective to the instability of ancient democracy, to preserve this prospect, modern democracy must recognize that it must remain vigilant at guarding the theoretical basis requisite to the advancement of science. Hence modern democracy must resist the democratic inclination toward the useful sciences and the tendency to turn from the theoretical sciences.

In a similar vein, Tocqueville also makes use of a contrast with ancient democracy to bring into relief the commercial and industrial character of modern democracy. Drawing on Plutarch’s description of the spirit of Rome, Tocqueville recalls that whereas Rome was centered on valor, war, and imperial conquest, “the Americans are unceasingly impelled toward commerce and industry…they therefore presently form an almost exclusively industrial and commercial association, placed in the bosom of a new and immense country whose exploitation is its principal object” (DA II 3.18; 593). Hence, Tocqueville argues, by necessity, democratic countries do well to cultivate the peaceful virtues associated with commerce rather than the warlike virtues of Rome.
In suggesting that there are indeed certain virtues that are both generated by and help to sustain commercial regimes, Tocqueville also parts ways with critics of commercial regimes, including Rousseau, and follows another of his favorite teachers, Montesquieu. Tocqueville points out to his readers that the commercial orientation of modern democracy, rather than fostering the decadence that is characteristic of the nouveau riche, has instead fostered moderation and thrift (DA II 2.11; 508-509). To this Tocqueville adds that the commercial and industrial spirit of the United States also makes virtues of industriousness and economic risk-taking, which fuel the scientific mind and aid the progress of innovation. Lastly, he argues the commercial spirit has fostered a different variant of courage, but one that nonetheless retains the name virtue. He writes,

In the United States, warlike valor is that which makes one brave the furies of the ocean to arrive sooner in port, to tolerate without complaint the miseries of the wilderness and the solitude, more cruel than all its miseries; the courage that renders one almost insensitive to the sudden reversal of a painfully acquired fortune and immediately prompts new efforts to construct a new one. (DA II 3.18; 595)

If ancient valor is lost, Tocqueville also suggests that courage is not entirely lost to democracy, even in the commercial realm. More peaceful virtues will come to the fore by necessity, but they can bring out the courageous in new ways.

Tocqueville also suggests that commerce will be essential to sustaining the peaceful prosperity of democracy and for preventing the tumult that unsettled Rome. As
he argues, the well-being produced by the spread commerce and fruits of industry is what prevents democratic citizens from overturning the state. As he says,

General well-being favors the stability of all governments, but particularly of democratic government, which rests on the disposition of the greatest number, and principally on the disposition of those who are the most exposed to needs. When the people govern, it is necessary that they be happy in order for them not to overturn the state. Misery produces in them what ambition does in kings. Now, the material causes, independent of laws, that can lead to well-being are more numerous in America than they have been in any country in the world at any period in history.

(\textit{DA I 2.9; 267})

Those who wish to reap the benefits of the vision of stable democracy that Tocqueville presents, then, are advised to retain the commercial spirit of American democracy.

For what he offers in terms of encouragement for the state of commerce in modern democracy, Tocqueville also suggests that establishing and maintaining a system of commerce that will continue to contribute to peaceful virtues and general prosperity will continue to be a great challenge. He suggests that while industry in particular can draw out rare talents, it can also develop a dehumanizing division of labor, as epitomized by the factories of the Industrial Revolution. Tocqueville thus adds to his praise of commerce a caution against economies that divide labor in a manner that renders workers mindless (\textit{II 2.20; 530-531}). Those who embrace the commercial spirit of modern democracy are also advised to promote industry in a way that supports the development of the enterprising.

By looking at ancient democracy, the politically inclined intellectuals in Tocqueville’s audience are to see that modern democracy, itself seemingly inevitable, is also attended by a set of features that contribute greatly to material prosperity, political
stability, and, if correctly ordered, a series of individual virtues. Intellectuals are advised
to come to understand science, commerce, and industry as well as their ancient
counterparts had understood war. In this light, Tocqueville’s new model intellectual
might look something like Benjamin Franklin.

Recalling those earlier readers of his who would look longingly to ancient aristocracies and who willingly employ their intellectual ambition in the service of political efforts to renew aristocratic politics, Tocqueville thus points to the evidence that with the rise in human equality, the political world has undergone an irreversible change, and that despite appearances from the perspective of an aristocrat, this change may not simply be for the worse: democracy appears to usher in a more just form of regime, and it offers the intriguing prospect of scientific progress and material flourishing. With a combination of resignation and optimism, Tocqueville would have his readers believe that it is better to attempt to reap these benefits than to support reactionary political efforts.

The Necessity of Limiting the Literary Realm

In order to encourage the realization of democracy’s potential, however, Tocqueville also suggests that public education must cater to the intellectual needs of democratic people. This means that, for the most part, the literary sphere will need to limit its influence: not classical literary enlightenment, but experiential enlightenment and practical education will be essential to democratic flourishing. It is for this reason
that in his discussion of the value of classical works for modern democracy, Tocqueville makes the following caveat:

It is evident that in democratic centuries the interest of individuals as well as the security of the state requires that the education of the greatest number be scientific, commercial and industrial rather than literary.

(\textit{DA II 1.15; 451})

Tocqueville’s teaching in this regard is based on a distinction between a people’s literary needs, on the one hand, and its social and political needs, on the other. As he explains, “A study can be useful to the literature of a people and not be appropriate to its social and political needs” (\textit{DA II 1.15; 451}). Literary needs pertain to the needs of intellectual classes—what ought to be circulating in the realm of letters?

Again, the ambitions of intellectuals in modern democracy are best corrected by the ancients. As we have seen, reading the ancients helps both democratic progressives and reactionary conservatives see the limits to democratic politics, as well as the features of politics that change from ancient to modern times. Nonetheless, even if the literary works of the ancients are generally superior to works produced within the literary industry of democracy, they are not to form the basis for public education. The project of advancing a classical literary enlightenment is threatening to the foundations of the modern democratic regime:

If one persisted in teaching only \textit{belle-lettres} in a society where each one was habitually led to make violent efforts to increase his fortune or to maintain it, one would have very polite but very dangerous citizens; for every day the social and political state would give them needs that they would never learn to satisfy by education, and they would trouble the state in the name of the Greeks and the Romans instead of making it fruitful by their industry.

(\textit{DA II 1.15; 451})
The benefits of modern democracy, the prosperity and peace, necessarily come at the cost of the literary realm. Classical works are necessary for curbing and moderating the ambitions of lettered citizens, but as a general form of education, they distract most citizens from meeting their needs. If classical literary education is necessary for cultivating intellectual ambition and political understanding, it must be taught within a circumscribed sphere.

By reading the ancients, ambitious intellectuals are exposed to the virtues of modern democracy and the limitations of democratic politics. In the latter regard, they see that in order to sustain stability in popular governments, the vast majority of citizens need to be held by force or educated in a manner that allows them to meet their material needs. The modern regime allows for the latter alternative because, unlike the peoples of Rome, peoples of the new world have access to the vast material resources available in the Americas and the scientific enlightenment to cultivate them. The new world requires the continued spread of knowledge of how to cultivate material resources and precludes a classical literary renaissance or general literary enlightenment. At the same time, the new world allows for democratic justice and the abolition of slavery because the scientific enlightenment provides for the needs of otherwise tumultuous citizenries.

Reading the ancients shows ambitious intellectuals this monumental development of modern democracy, and at the same time, shows readers the limits of their literary hopes: a comparison with ancient democracy shows that for modern democracy to flourish, literary enlightenment can only extend so far. Intellectuals can read the classics, but publicly, they are urged to support the advancement of science, commerce, and
industry. In other words, if intellectuals wish to excel at classical letters, they can do so privately, but if they wish to write and act as public intellectuals, they must recognize the social and political needs of democratic peoples. Thus, once he has demonstrated this need, Tocqueville turns to offer his readers lessons on the intellectual characteristics of the audience for wish they wish to write.
CHAPTER 3
ON THE INTELLECTUAL HABITS OF DEMOCRATIC PEOPLES

In order to help his readers better understand the intellectual needs of democratic peoples, Tocqueville offers an assessment of democracy’s influence on intellectual life. In his assessment, he alerts his readers to the pitfalls of both democratic intellectual habits and theoretical ideas that shape intellectual life in democracy. What is most notable about this part of Tocqueville’s discussion is the ubiquity of references to theoretical doctrines. Here, Tocqueville suggests that a key part of understanding democratic intellectual life is understanding the theories that influence it.

Tocqueville opens this part of his account, famously, by telling his readers that Americans are unconscious Cartesians. By including such references in his discussion, Tocqueville indicates that he sees a kinship between the influence of American democracy on the intellect and the prominence of Enlightenment theories in modern intellectual life. In order to explain this kinship, Tocqueville undertakes a series of comparisons that help to bring into relief the habits of the mind that are generated by modern democracy and shaped by Enlightenment doctrines. In comparing French, English, and American habits, Tocqueville suggests that while American habits have developed as a consequence of democratic experience, the French have embraced similar intellectual habits more deliberately and to a greater extreme because they have been influenced by intellectual doctrines circulating through Europe (DA II 1.1; 404-405; cf.
also OR 3.1; 195-209). Tocqueville’s inclusion of Enlightenment ideas in his analysis of
democratic intellectual habits, then, is also for the sake of a second critique—a critique of
particular doctrines that have the potential to compound the undesirable influence of
democracy on intellectual life. In offering this second critique, Tocqueville offers a
teaching to both French intellectuals and future American intellectuals on the kinds of
ideas detrimental to the health of the intellect in the democratic world.

The Propensities of the Democratic Mind: Skepticism, Materialism, Generalization, Love
of Unity and Faith in Progress

Skepticism and Materialism

Before delving into Tocqueville’s analysis of Enlightenment ideas and their
influence on the democratic intellect, it is useful to survey the basic elements of his
account of democratic intellectual habits simply. Again, Tocqueville begins his survey of
American intellectual life by telling his readers that America is a country where “the
precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed” (DA II 1.1; 403). This claim
follows from his observations that Americans are leery of intellectual authority,
suspicious of hierarchy, and dismissive of familial tradition—in short, that they are
characteristically skeptical (DA II 1.1; 403). The consequence of this skepticism,
according to Tocqueville, is that Americans “take tradition only as information,” and
“seek reasons for things by themselves and in themselves alone” (DA II 1.1; 403).
Without reading Descartes’ works, they adopt the intellectual stance that he advocates in
his Discourse on Method. That is, they doubt things for which they lack direct material evidence, and attempt to assess their experience solely by means of their own reason. It is for their skepticism and confidence in individual reason, as well as their unfamiliarity with Cartesian skepticism as a doctrine that Tocqueville labels Americans unconscious Cartesians.

Tocqueville goes on to assess the intellectual implications of the Cartesian character of American thought by drawing attention to two particular problems. First, he charges that Cartesian skepticism ultimately leads to a rise in the status of majority opinion and has the potential to foment tyranny of the majority over the intellect. Tocqueville acknowledges that, initially, democratic skepticism can generate independence of thought and may have a liberating effect on the mind; yet eventually, he also argues, the intellect is overwhelmed at the task of interpreting all of human experience on its own and seeks out alternative authorities (DA II 1.1; 406). It is this turn that permits a rise in the status of majority opinion. That is, because democratic peoples tend to reject traditional intellectual authority (familial authority or the conventions of the monarchy, for instance), and because they typically lack the time and intellectual wherewithal to sort through experiences on their own, they turn to the judgment of the majority for guidance. The judgment of the majority is invested with even greater authority in democracy than in other regimes because its status is helped by democratic

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egalitarianism. Egalitarian peoples often find it plausible “that when all have the same enlightenment, truth [is] found on the side of the greatest number” (DA II 1.2; 409). Popular opinion quickly becomes a dominant intellectual authority.

A second problem that Tocqueville notes with respect to Cartesian skepticism is that it fosters a prejudice in favor of explanations that can be demonstrated materially. As Tocqueville explains, when Americans turn from traditional authority to their own experience, they begin with what they can observe with their eyes: “they like to see the object that occupies them very clearly; so they take off its wrappings as far as they can; they put to the side all that separates them from it and remove all that hides it from their regard in order to see it more closely and in broad daylight” (DA II 1.1; 404). Often, Tocqueville suggests, when democratic peoples seek out explanations, they prefer visible or material explanations even when immaterial explanations are equally plausible or even superior.

A primary manifestation of this materialist stance is a preference for materially grounded scientific explanation: as Tocqueville depicts it, the democratic mind prefers experiment to metaphor. Tocqueville is not an enemy of scientific explanation, but he recognizes that the prejudice toward materialistic explanation can lead to a preference for materialistic pseudo science (e.g., phrenology, as a measure of intelligence and character, for instance), over immaterial explanations (e.g., virtue as standard for judging intelligence and character). In addition to the problem of the majority as a new intellectual authority, the democratic mind is also more vulnerable to pseudo science that is cast in materialist terms.
The Love of Generalization and Unity

As I discuss in Chapter 1, another dominant characteristic of the democratic intellect is the love of general concepts. Again, as Tocqueville depicts them, general concepts are sweeping ideas that explain a vast expanse of phenomena or a broad set of ideas at a stroke. In addition to being helpful for ordering the flux of experience in democracy, the intellect is receptive to general concepts there because the democratic mind is disposed to seeing equality and similarity more than hierarchy and difference, and general concepts capture equality and similarity. Democratic life, based as it is on the recognition of similarity across human beings, inculcates a habit of seeing similarity across all things (DA II 1.3; 416). This makes the mind more receptive to general concepts: “The very universality of democracy and the sameness of man presupposed by it encourages this tendency and make the mind’s eye less sensitive to differences.”61 The rejection of traditional opinion, the longing for an ordered account of experience, and the receptiveness to similarity, makes the general concept the democratic mind’s favored mode of explanation.

Like the preference for material explanation, the love of generalization also makes individuals particularly receptive to the kinds of explanations that popular science offers. Yet also like the preference for material explanation, a central problem with the generalizing inclination on the part of democratic publics is rooted in the fact that, on the whole, they are particularly bad at judging the accuracy of their favored generalizations.

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As Tocqueville explains,

Men who live in centuries of equality have much curiosity and little leisure; their life is so practical, so complicated, so agitated, so active that little time remains to them for thinking. Men of democratic centuries like general ideas because they exempt them from examining particular cases; they contain, if I can express myself so, many things in a small volume and give out a large product in a little time. When, therefore, after an inattentive and brief examination, they believe they perceive a common relation among certain objects, they do not push their research further, and without examining in detail how these various objects resemble each other or differ, they hasten to arrange them under the same formula in order to get past them. (DA II 1.3; 414)

In other words, out of a longing for a quick and easy means to order the flux, the democratic mind typically fails to discriminate between specious and true generalizations, or between good science and bad science.

A similar tendency to the penchant for generalization is receptiveness to the idea of unity. According to Tocqueville, in democracy, “the idea of unity obsesses the mind, and when it believes it has found it, it willingly wraps it in its bosom and rests with it” (DA II 1.8; 426). Tocqueville suggests that this tendency to seek unity of the whole manifests itself primarily in matters of religion or metaphysics. The democratic mind seeks out a single Creator and tries to form an idea of the wholeness of what is created. To this claim Tocqueville adds that the democratic mind even seeks to develop its idea of unity by collapsing the distinction between Creator and created, or between becoming and being. As he says, the democratic mind “willingly seeks to enlarge and simplify its thought by enclosing God and the universe within a single whole” (DA II 1.8; 426). For Tocqueville, this tendency has been given philosophic expression through the doctrine of pantheism. His general concern with pantheism is that it obscures individual autonomy and action: “As conditions become more equal and each man in particular becomes more
like all the others, weaker and smaller, one gets used to no longer viewing citizens so as to consider only the people; one forgets individuals so as to think only of the species” (DA II 1.8; 426). Believing that all things can be encompassed in a divine unity is to deny the concept of individual freedom—a concept, which, for Tocqueville, is essential to the preservation of democratic liberty.

*Progress and Perfectibility*

Aside from their skepticism, turn to majority opinion, preference for material explanation, receptiveness to pantheism, and penchant for generalizations, Tocqueville highlights a final propensity of the democratic mind: the faith in progress and human perfectibility. According to Tocqueville, in democracy, constant change in the fortunes of individuals fuels the idea of “the indefinite perfectibility of mankind.” The ubiquitous improvement in material prosperity and apparently limitless potential in this regard, leads individuals to the idea of an infinite potential for their improvement (DA II 1.8, 1.17; 427, 460-461).

The idea of the indefinite perfectibility of humanity also manifests itself in a confidence in technological progress. Tocqueville illustrates this point with the following example and comment:

I meet an American sailor and I ask him why his country’s vessels are built to last a short time, and he replies to me without hesitation that the art of navigation makes such rapid progress daily that the most beautiful ship would soon become almost useless if its existence were prolonged beyond a few years. In these words pronounced at random by a coarse man concerning a particular fact I perceive the general and systematic idea according to which a great people conducts all things. (DA II 1.8; 428)
As Tocqueville suggests, technological advancement alongside the rise in material prosperity furthers the belief in human perfectibility. When democratic citizens witness their ability to advance materially and to overcome nature, they take it as proof that the human condition can improve indefinitely (cf. also, DA II 1.17; 461).

Tocqueville is cautious of the belief in progress for a number of reasons with which we are familiar. He is wary of confidence in political innovation, for instance: he has been witness to the extreme political consequences of progressive optimism in France. He is also wary of the combination of progressive optimism and modern science. He recognizes that optimism in the progress of modern science and the perfectibility of the species can lead to unprecedented technological and human monstrosities (DA II 1.18; 464 cf. also II 2.20).

Yet at the same time, Tocqueville is cognizant of the need to correct and refine optimism about the prospects of progress rather than to attempt to eradicate it. In light of the future orientation of the democratic mind, Tocqueville acknowledges that some degree of faith in progress is an intellectual inevitability: men who turn away from the past and enlist science in advancing their material prosperity will inevitably adopt a progressive understanding of themselves to some degree (DA II 1.17; 461). For this reason, Tocqueville suggests that his task is not simply to disparage democratic confidence in material advancement and technological progress, but to encourage a more refined understanding of the prospects for political and scientific advancement, while moderating the idea of the perfectibility of the species itself.
Tocqueville offers his account of the habits of the democratic mind in order to help his readers become conscious of their intellectual leanings and in so doing to begin to correct them. Yet he also recognizes that his European readership is in need of a number of specific correctives if they are to adopt his advice. As he offers his suggestions on the general tendencies of the democratic mind, he also makes a number of specific comments that pertain to intellectual doctrines in Europe that he suggests are particularly pernicious to the democratic intellect. By looking at the intellectual doctrines to which Tocqueville refers in his analysis, we can better understand Tocqueville’s teaching on the democratic mind. In what follows from here, I reconsider the intellectual tendencies outlined above in light of the doctrines that Tocqueville indicates have augmented their influence in Europe.

*Cartesian Doctrine*

Tocqueville’s first teaching on the liabilities of intellectual doctrine for the mind in democracy appears when he takes up Descartes while discussing Americans as unconscious Cartesians. After he explains how American skepticism is the consequence of the democratic turn from intellectual tradition, Tocqueville goes on to suggest that this same democratic turn took on a particular zeal in Europe when Descartes gave it philosophic expression.
Tocqueville tells his readers that France was receptive to Cartesian skepticism because it provided a means for expressing an inclination already active in the French mind: “It was not because the French changed their beliefs and mores that they turned the world upside down; it is because they were the first to generalize and to bring to light a philosophic method with whose aid one could readily attack all ancient things and open the way to all new ones” (DA II 1.1; 405). By stressing that it was the social situation and not philosophic insight that made Cartesian skepticism emerge, Tocqueville denies the novelty of Descartes’ method, and suggests to his audience that Descartes’ thought merely reflects the democratic political climate of his time. Both suggestions would be read by intellectuals in Tocqueville’s audience as a slight to Descartes. It is in this way that Tocqueville indicates his disapproval of the influence of Descartes in French intellectual life.

Tocqueville’s objection to Descartes is rooted in his view that, at least as France took it up, the Cartesian method fueled a revolution that destroyed many traditional sources of guidance that might otherwise have been good for democratic politics (DA II 1.1; 404-405). According to Tocqueville, Descartes originally applied his scrutinizing method to philosophy alone, and not to politics or religion, but his method was later taken up by eighteenth century thinkers and extended into the other realms with harmful consequences. For this reason, Tocqueville appears to be critical of both the manner in which Descartes was taken up in Europe, and of Descartes himself for leaving himself open to (or perhaps even subversively welcoming) co-optation by eighteenth century revolutionaries.
Tocqueville’s first criticism of Descartes and those who co-opted the Cartesian method in the eighteenth century is rooted primarily in his objection to their adoption of the first rule of Descartes’ method: to take nothing as true that one does not know certainly—a principle of radical doubt. Descartes advocates the rejection of all intellectual authority whose truth one has not demonstrated for one’s self.

Tocqueville suggests that this is an impossible principle by which to live. He also argues that it is pernicious to both the individual and society. Tocqueville stresses instead that dogmatic beliefs are natural and essential, both to individuals and to people acting in common (DA II 1.2; 407). In response to those who would adopt Cartesian doubt wholeheartedly Tocqueville says the following:

There is no philosopher in the world so great that he does not believe a million things on faith in others or does not suppose many more truths than he establishes.

This is not only necessary, but desirable. A man who would undertake to examine everything by himself could afford but little time and attention to each thing; this work would keep his mind in a perpetual agitation that would prevent him from penetrating any truth deeply and from settling solidly on any certitude…

It is therefore necessary, however it happens, that we encounter authority somewhere in the intellectual and moral world. Its place is variable, but it necessarily has a place. Individual independence can be more or less great; it cannot be boundless. Thus, the question is not that of knowing whether an intellectual authority exists in democratic centuries, but only where it is deposited and what its extent will be. (DA II 1.2; 408)

For Tocqueville, then, the human mind necessarily relies on beliefs for which it lacks proof. To deny this fact is to encourage paralyzing skepticism, which in democracy, ultimately leads to a turn toward majority opinion. Descartes, Tocqueville charges, has neglected to recognize the extent to which beliefs and dogmas cannot simply be

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62 Descartes, Discourse on the Method, 35.
jettisoned in favor of certain reason, and has fueled the tyranny of majority opinion in France.

Nonetheless, Descartes himself was doubtless cognizant of this potential charge, and for this reason he espoused a provisional morality that concedes the need to act in accordance with conventional opinion while undertaking a radical examination of it. Presumably, Tocqueville was aware of this escape clause in Descartes’ thought. At the same time, however, Tocqueville suggests that at least as he has been taken up in Europe, Descartes’ radical doubt was embraced with little regard for the need to maintain traditional opinion, and this was ultimately to the detriment of French democracy. Tocqueville appears to criticize Descartes for advancing what, in the end, is a thinly veiled subversive teaching. Descartes, Tocqueville implies, downplayed the applicability of his method to the realm of politics and religion only because the political circumstances would have been hostile to it. As circumstances changed, his method, was all pervasive (DA II 1.1; 405).

By placing Descartes in his discussion of the habits of the democratic mind, Tocqueville points his readers to the implications of a wholehearted adoption of Cartesian skepticism, particularly, the tyranny of majority opinion, and the dominance of material explanation. While Americans exhibit intellectual leanings in this direction, Tocqueville also suggests that they possess a number of political and cultural correctives abandoned by the French, the most important of which is religion. Embracing Descartes to the extreme, Tocqueville suggests, his European audience also abandoned the religious helps

63Descartes, Discourse on the Method, 41-50.
to both political life and the intellect.

Again, according to Tocqueville, the demand of skeptics for demonstrable proof ultimately leads to materialism, or a belief that the most fundamental explanations are those of material cause and effect. As I note in Chapter 1, Tocqueville also suggests that in fostering a turn toward materialism, Cartesian skepticism leads to a turn away from exalted ideas of the human psyche. Tocqueville is particularly concerned with the loss of the idea of the immaterial soul (DA II 2.15; 519). In emphasizing the physical characteristics of human beings, it closes the mind to spiritual and psychological alternatives present in both the religious and the philosophical traditions (DA II 2.15; 517-518).

Because Americans have retained a religious tradition that contains the idea of an immaterial soul, they have moderated their materialism. They have also remained open to alternative depictions of the human psyche and the ends of human life—specifically those present in Plato and the philosophy of the Western tradition (DA II 2.15; 517-518). In embracing Descartes, and accepting as true only what they can understand with their reason and observation alone, the French have closed themselves off to an entire realm of spiritual and philosophic alternatives.

The Generalizing Impulse in the French

A second point of Tocqueville’s critique of the ideas advanced by his European contemporaries concerns the manner in which the French have been overzealous in espousing generalizations. Tocqueville offers this critique of the French by means of a
contrast with the English. When describing the French, Tocqueville makes the following observation:

Each morning on awakening I learn that someone has just discovered some general and eternal law that I had never heard spoken of until then. There is no writer so mediocre that it is enough for him to discover truths applicable to a great realm in his first attempt, and who does not remain discontented with himself if he has been unable to enclose the human race in the subject of his discourse.

(DA II 1.3; 412)

As Tocqueville also explains, while the French embrace new generalizations at every turn, the English are resistant to them (DA II 1.3; 414). Although both countries have similar kinds of intellectual heritage, the French are less able to discriminate between true and spurious general accounts than the English, because the English have retained traditions that discourage them from embracing sweeping abstraction.

Here, Tocqueville develops his analysis of the French habit of generalization further by explaining his claim that while the English have the same degree of enlightenment as the French, the English are hostile to generalizations (DA II 1.3; 414). To understand Tocqueville’s teaching on this intellectual habit to its fullest, it is helpful to explore what Tocqueville means by enlightenment. As Tocqueville uses the term elsewhere and in this context, enlightenment refers to a gradual intellectual opening that is the result of exposure to many ways of life. Such exposure, he suggests, leads the mind to recognize similarities across peoples. Tocqueville juxtaposes enlightenment with aristocracy and civilization, both of which restrain the intellectual inclination toward likeness. Because enlightenment is attended by an intellectual opening to similarity, it is a source of the receptiveness to both democratic egalitarianism and general explanation.
Thus, one expects that in Tocqueville’s sense of the word, peoples with the same degree of enlightenment will be similarly receptive to generalizations.

Again, according to Tocqueville, while the English and the French are similarly enlightened, they are not similarly receptive to generalization. Recognizing this difference, Tocqueville claims that “the more or less advanced stage of enlightenment alone is not enough to explain what suggests the love of general ideas to the human mind or adverts it from them” (DA II 1.3; 412, emphasis my own). Instead, he says, the love of general ideas increases as the “ancient constitution of the country weakens” (DA II 1.3; 412) or as aristocratic political life begins to give way to democracy. According to Tocqueville, “the English have long been a very enlightened people and at the same time very aristocratic; their enlightenment [makes] them tend constantly toward very general ideas; and their aristocratic habits held them to very particular ideas” (DA II 1.3; 414). Because the English have not dismantled the aristocratic elements of their constitution, their minds are turned to differences between themselves, and between themselves and other peoples. The movement of their minds toward difference restrains them from embracing generalizations indiscriminately.

In drawing attention to the difference between the English and the French on this point, Tocqueville criticizes his French contemporaries who are led blindly by the generalizing impulse. Tocqueville suggests that because the French have abandoned their own ancient constitution, they fail to scrutinize the new general ideas that are put forth by intellectuals to order the regime. According to Tocqueville, “there are those [kinds of general ideas] that are products of slow, detailed, conscientious work of intelligence; and
they enlarge the sphere of human knowledge…there are others that are readily born of a first rapid effort of the mind and lead only to very superficial and very uncertain notions” (DA II 1.3; 414). The French fail to discriminate between these types of generalizations.

In suggesting the indiscriminate character of the generalizing impulse in the French, Tocqueville also appears to express a preference not only for English politics but also for English science. In particular, he appears to indicate his preference for Francis Bacon’s scientific method over Descartes’ method. One recognizes this possibility when one notices that Tocqueville closely echoes Bacon when he speaks of the difference between generalizations that are the result of long rigorous tests of reason, and those that are advanced by leaps. Bacon had called for an inductive science that yields only the former kinds of generalizations and avoids the latter. Tocqueville suggests also that the Baconian method may be both politically and scientifically preferable because it encourages a more deliberate investigation of nature and acknowledges the importance of understanding and retaining political tradition as opposed to encouraging a rush from radical doubt to abstract generalization and paralyzing skepticism (cf. DA II 1.1; 404).

In drawing attention to the moderating force of English politics and the comparatively slow and deliberate method of Baconian science, Tocqueville suggests that the democratic penchant for generalization is better refined by regimes that retain something of their traditional or aristocratic spirit. It is aristocratic tradition that both prevents the mind from indiscriminate grasping, and allows for a scrutinizing dialectic

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between particulars and difference, or between generality and similarity. French intellectuals, then, are advised to look at the English and Baconian ways of proceeding as models for the proper place of the aristocratic tradition in cultivating the generalizing democratic mind.

Pantheism

The third doctrine that Tocqueville critiques as augmenting poor intellectual habits in democracy is pantheism. Again, pantheism is the doctrine that gives philosophic expression to the tendency to seek unity of the whole. According to Tocqueville, pantheism is a doctrine that intellectuals have developed, and it is the most compelling general idea in the realm of philosophy that democracy has produced (DA II 1.7; 425). He notes in particular that the Germans developed the idea in philosophy, while the French adopted it literature. Again, broadly understood, pantheism is a doctrine that reflects the democratic mind’s inclination to collapses the distinction between the divine and material realms, and it understands the divine to be manifest in all of material order. Intellectuals who have developed the doctrine in France—Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop list Alphonse de Lamartine and Edgar Quinet, also known as “New Hegelians” (DA II.7; 425)—have advanced a system of pantheism that draws on Hegel’s dialectical materialism. Basically, they have adopted an understanding of the human condition that suggests that the divine is imminent in the unfolding order of nature and the world. The task of the pantheistic theorist is to articulate the systemic unfolding of divine order in nature and the world.
Tocqueville’s central problem with the pantheists’ ideas is that they downplay the actions of individuals. Instead of suggesting that individual actions and idiosyncrasy are significant in the course of human events, pantheists speak of nature and the world as divine, and hence always unfolding in accordance with a plan. Instead of contributing to broader enlightenment with respect to nature, God, and the human condition, as their doctrines are typically intended to do, Tocqueville charges the pantheists with contributing to a lazy form of historical determinism to which the democratic mind is already receptive.

Hence, Tocqueville is emphatic that pantheism be corrected; as he says, “among the different systems with whose aid philosophy seeks to explain the universe, pantheism appears to me one of the most appropriate to seduce the human mind in democratic centuries; all who remain enamored of the genuine greatness of man should unite and do combat against it” (DA II 1.7; 426). Tocqueville thus warns that pantheism will seduce the mind into turning away from examining the actions of individual men that are most significant for the course of human events in the new world. The doctrine runs counter to the essence of Tocqueville’s own teaching on the need to channel democracy, and typically, counter to the pantheists own hopes for the emergence of a liberal democratic order. Thus Tocqueville criticizes pantheists for espousing a doctrine prejudicial to political actions essential to a world that they simply presuppose.

Progressivism and Perfectibility

The final point of Tocqueville’s critique of the liabilities of European intellectual
doctrine for the democratic mind concerns the faith in progress. As I have discussed, the democratic mind—seeing the potential for citizens to rise and change their fortunes and to develop technology—comes to believe that human possibilities are endless and that human progress is inevitable. According to Tocqueville, faith in progress is rooted in the manner in which the democratic mind takes up the idea of human perfectibility. As he says, perfectibility is a perennial idea for human beings: the recognition of the possibility of self-improvement is the characteristic that distinguishes human beings from animals. As such, he claims, all human beings always hold this idea in their minds.

In modern democracy, however, perfectibility takes on a distinct character (DA II 1.8; 426). Aside from the American belief in the progress of politics and technology, another manifestation of the idea of perfectibility has emerged: the idea of perfectibility in terms of the evolutionary progress of the species itself (DA II 1.8, 1.17; 427, 460). Although the idea figures throughout French thought, in his critique of the democratic idea of perfectibility Tocqueville appears to have Rousseau’s thought in mind. In particular, Tocqueville appears to be responding to Rousseau’s account of human perfectibility as it appears in his Second Discourse—one of the most systematic accounts of the idea of human perfectibility in French thought—and to the manner in which Rousseau’s idea has been taken up in Europe.65

65 Oliver Zunz and Alan S. Kahan, The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics, (Oxford: Blackwell Press), 2002, p. 8. Zunz and Kahan note that traces of Rousseau’s thought and of the Second Discourse in particular, run throughout Tocqueville’s works. They argue that references to Rousseau are unacknowledged because Tocqueville did not wish to be associated with the radical left, for whom Rousseau was a prominent figurehead. Cf. also I 2.10; 328 for another instance of Tocqueville alluding to material from the Second Discourse.
Tocqueville joins Rousseau when he claims that perfectibility is what distinguishes men from animals, but his discussion of perfectibility has a notable addition. Like Rousseau, Tocqueville regards perfectibility as an innate sense of the human potential for self-improvement that takes on a different character in aristocracy and in democracy. In addition, Tocqueville takes up the idea of perfectibility as a philosophic concept that has influenced intellectual life and our self-understanding since Rousseau articulated it. Rousseau’s articulation of the idea of perfectibility was a highly innovative step in the history of political thought; for it gave voice to a new understanding of human nature which departed from both the biblical understanding and the teleological or classical understanding. In brief, Rousseau replaced the biblical account of human perfection and original sin with a proto-evolutionary, and non-teleological, account of human nature.

In accepting perfectibility as innate to human nature while alluding to Rousseau, Tocqueville acknowledges his acceptance of Rousseau’s innovation in our self-understanding. At the same time, Tocqueville is cognizant of the fact that in French thought, perfectibility has been taken up in a number of potentially problematic ways. In his exploration of the democratic variant of perfectibility, Tocqueville may also have Benjamin Constant in mind who took up perfectibility as the necessary historical motion

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of the species toward equality. In this vein, Tocqueville is concerned that the idea of perfectibility as the progress of the species leads to a belief in political determinism inimical to the preservation of liberty in democracy.

Tocqueville also warns against taking human perfectibility to imply the infinite progress of the species. In this light, Tocqueville warns that the idea of perfectibility understood as the unlimited malleability of the species mutates into the faith in the unlimited physical progress of the species (DA II 1.8; 428). Tocqueville suggests that in taking up perfectibility in this way, the democratic mind fails to recognize limitations to human malleability, and is more likely to abandon restraint and moderation in its hopes for political change. If the species itself is malleable and progressive, then improvement through political change appears always possible. Tocqueville thus suggests to his French audience that they ought to be wary of the vision of evolutionary human prospects that has been taken from Rousseau’s depiction of human nature.

Conclusion

By illuminating the nature of the democratic mind and showing how it has been influenced by Enlightenment ideas circulating throughout Europe, Tocqueville offers a caution to his intellectually inclined readers. He suggests that, contrary to Enlightenment hopes, radical doubt and rejection of tradition do not lead to general enlightenment, but

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rather to tyranny over the intellect, materialism, and a turn away from religious and philosophical alternatives. Intellectuals, promoting Cartesian doubt and abstract ideals, are encouraged to examine the manner in which their ideas have influenced political action in the emerging democratic world. Tocqueville suggests that the new task of intellectuals is one of moderation rather than revolution, of scrutinizing public ideals and supporting thought that restrains certain forms of idealism.
CHAPTER 4

TOCQUEVILLE’S TEACHING ON CRAFTING DEMOCRATIC LITERATURE

After he has offered his survey of the democratic mind and the intellectual climate of democracy, Tocqueville turns to the state of language and letters in democracy. At the heart of this part of his analysis lie his lessons on the art of writing for democratic audiences. He begins with an assessment of the state of literature in America. Provocatively, he tells his readers that because the literate classes of America draw on the model of British literature, and because this literature does not speak to the American people, the inhabitants of the United States “still do not have a literature, properly speaking” (DA II 1.13; 446). For American readers, the American writers who draw on the English literary tradition are strangers: “They are for the Americans what the imitators of the Greeks and Romans in the period of the renaissance were for [the French], an object of curiosity, not of general sympathy. They amuse the mind and do not act on mores” (DA II 1.13; 446). Nonetheless, Tocqueville also contends that eventually, America will come to have its own literature, and he therefore concludes his opening description with a prophetic account of the development of the American literary industry.

Innovative writers, Tocqueville foresees, will cater to the intellectual longings of democratic audiences and will take advantage of the market for books that speak to them. Because the literary market, as he foresees it, is one driven by the democratic majority,
Tocqueville’s account of democratic literature is not particularly flattering. The problem Tocqueville sees with this new market is that literature that appeals to democratic audiences will have the potential liability of reinforcing the undesirable intellectual leanings of democratic peoples. By speaking in the language of democratic peoples and catering to the intellectual prejudices of democratic audiences, democratic writers risk contributing to the tightening hold of majority opinion on the mind.

At the same time, in order to survive in democracy, writers have little choice but to speak to in the language of democratic peoples. Recognizing this necessity, Tocqueville takes up the task of showing hopeful writers in his audience how they might write well using the modes of democratic language. To this end, Tocqueville discusses the liabilities of both the literary industry and language as it is shaped by democracy. As he reveals the potential liabilities of democratic language, he also demonstrates—by drawing attention to his own example—how democratic writing can be crafted in a manner that contributes to the cultivation of the democratic mind. As we saw in Chapter 2, Tocqueville argues that if classical or aristocratic works can serve to correct the political ambitions of intellectuals, they will not be able to correct many of the new intellectual habits that are fostered through changes in democratic language because most democratic citizens will not read them. New works will need to attend to the patterns of thought that democracy fosters, and Tocqueville demonstrates how these works are best crafted.
Assessing the Democratic Literary Industry

Tocqueville begins his teaching on crafting literature for democratic readers with a sobering lesson: the kinds of books that democratic audiences tend to prefer suggest that the democratic book industry will not generate aristocratic literature. Because the primary readership will consist of individuals engaged in politics and business, democratic literature will accommodate to the lifestyle of a busy readership. As Tocqueville explains, democratic readers like books,

...that are procured without trouble, that are quickly read, that do not require learned research to be understood. They demand facile beauties that deliver themselves and that one can enjoy at that instant; above all the unexpected and new are necessary to them. Habituated to an existence that is practical, contested, and monotonous, they need lively and rapid emotions, sudden clarity, brilliant truths or errors that instantly pull them from themselves and introduce them suddenly, almost violently, into the midst of the subject. (DA II 1.13; 448)

In short, democratic literature will abandon the more subtle ordered forms of aristocracy in favor of the democratic taste for the novel, bold, and gaudy. Additionally, the literary industry will almost simply be that: an industry (DA II 1.13; 450). If great writers can in fact emerge, they will have to contend with thousands of other writers who look to the literary industry as a means for making money and acquiring honor. An abundance of bad books will surround only a few good ones. Writers aspiring to the precision, perfection, and heroism of aristocratic literary forms will not fare well.

After offering this discouraging description of what democratic literature will look like, Tocqueville insists that even those writers of superior merit who wish “to take another path” will succeed only if they appeal in some manner to common taste (DA II
1.13; 449). Nevertheless, Tocqueville concludes on a somewhat more optimistic note. He suggests that while the character of literature is primarily influenced by the social state and the political constitution of a nation, the relationship between the two is such that the genius of some writers can, in turn, influence the social and political reception of written works. As he provocatively concludes: “The relations existing between the social and political state of a people and the genius of its writers are always very numerous; he who knows the one is never completely ignorant of the other” (DA II 1.13; 449). In making this statement, Tocqueville offers a consolation to those with literary ambitions who are discouraged in the face of the new state of letters.

In offering this consolation, Tocqueville casts new light for the writers in his audience over his unflattering discussion of literature in America and in democracy. They are to take a number of lessons from his analysis. He teaches, first, that to succeed in democratic times, writers must speak in the language of the people—they can’t simply import the linguistic conventions of great English writers or aristocratic intellectuals (DA II I.13; 446). Like European writers who opted to write in the vernacular instead of Latin, Tocqueville indicates that to speak to the American people, one cannot write in the mode of the British. Second, to succeed in democratic times writers must speak to the intellectual needs of the people. The people are a busy lot and they are ignorant of the Western tradition. They turn to short books that are quick to inspire and easy to digest (cf. DA II .1.13; 448). To be received by them one may need to craft short works that contain much matter in few pages, like Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography or Machiavelli’s Prince, for instance. Third, it may be possible, if difficult, to succeed as a great writer and
follow these models: the great writer of democratic times need not be utterly suppressed by the majority’s taste; he can carve out a special role for himself, and perhaps even influence the taste of some. As Tocqueville turns to the craft of writing in democratic centuries he fills out more clearly what he only hints at here.

The Characteristics and Liabilities of Democratic Language

Before he fills out his model of democratic writing for his readers, Tocqueville offers an account of the liabilities of democratic language. Language, as Tocqueville reminds his reader, is “the first instrument of thought”; so understanding the characteristics of democratic language is essential to understanding the potential for the literary arts to shape habits of thought (DA II 1.16; 452). In democracy, language takes on a unique character. This character both reflects the intellectual leanings of democratic citizenries and reinforces and shapes their intellectual habits in turn.

To understand the potential liabilities of democratic language it is useful to begin by reviewing Tocqueville’s account of how it gets its character. As Tocqueville explains, when men no longer live in distinct and separate classes their modes of speech mix together. With no authoritative intellectual class—no class of men whose “education, enlightenment, and leisure dispose[s] them in a permanent manner to study the natural laws of language and who make them respected by observing them themselves”—aristocratic literary forms begin to disappear (DA II 1.16; 456). Those words “that cannot suit the greatest number perish” (DA II 1.16; 456). For this reason, “the majority make
the law in the matter of language just as in everything else” (DA II 1.16; 454). In effect, democracy has a homogenizing effect on speech and in this homogenizing process speech comes to reflect the intellectual leanings of the majority.

Tocqueville outlines a number of features of language that result from the majority’s influence on it. As he explains,

The majority are more occupied with business than with studies, with political and commercial interests than with philosophical speculations or belles-lettres. Most of the words created or accepted by them will bear the imprint of these habits; they will serve mainly to express the needs of industry, the passions of parties, or the details of public administration. The language will constantly stretch in that direction, whereas on the contrary it will abandon little by little the terrain of metaphysics and theology. (DA II 1.16; 454)

In other words, it is due to the influence of democratic tastes and habits that metaphysics and theology come to be relegated to a small shelf beside the plethora of books on successful business, electoral politics, and “do it yourself” manuals. Where theology and philosophy are present, they appear in democratized forms: books on spirituality or ten minute guides to existentialism dominate the shelves where Aquinas’s Summa and Aristotle’s Metaphysics might otherwise appear.

In addition to the shift toward utilitarian terms, democratic language is also characterized by innovation. The experience of constant change and development combined with the absence of a static intellectual authority, gives rise to language that is riddled with new terms and expressions. As science and industry shed light on new processes and possibilities, democratic citizens constantly strive to articulate their experiences by means of new terminology.
Wary of the innovative character of democratic language, Tocqueville scrutinizes the linguistic innovations that he observes. After noting that commerce, science, and industry generate a host of new words, he explores the manner in which new phenomena are named in democracy. As he explains, when democratic peoples find themselves in need of new terms, they tend to craft new words haphazardly. Unlike aristocrats, who develop new words rarely, and who do so with great concern for the integrity of etymologies and linguistic conventions, democratic peoples tend to craft new words quickly, drawing from dead languages and changing living ones as they please.

Tocqueville’s comments on the democratic willingness to draw on Greek and Latin words to embellish professions could not have been written with greater foresight. As Tocqueville argues, “men who live in democratic countries scarcely know the language that was spoken in Rome or Athens, and they do not care about going back to antiquity to find the expression they lack;” at the same time, and without knowledge of antiquity, they are keen to embellish any profession with a Greek or Latin name (DA II 1.16; 454). To illustrate his point, Tocqueville observes that for this reason “rope dancers are transformed into acrobats and funambulists” (DA II 1.16; 454). We might observe a similar phenomenon in the adoption of Greek terms to embellish the computer technology industry: to a computer tech Delphi is a programming language.

In addition to adopting ancient terms ignorantly, democratic men manufacture words in a number of familiar ways: they draw on foreign languages freely (e.g., bourgeoisie); they turn nouns into verbs (e.g., democratize) and verbs and adjectives into nouns (e.g., access; eventuality); they adopt terms from specialized fields (e.g.,
paradigm); and they adopt terms that apply typically to certain classes of the population (e.g., radical). Above all of these methods, the primary means by which democracies innovate in language is by “giving to an expression already in use as sense not in use” (e.g., revolution): democratic peoples love to give all words new meaning. It is this latter mode of innovation that is of greatest concern to Tocqueville.

As Tocqueville notes, the inclination to apply new meanings to old words hampers communication. Without clarity in speech, the double meaning of words can render uncertain an interlocutor’s intention. In writing, the problem is compounded. Without an intellectual arbiter of word use, one author “begins by turning a known expression away from its primary meaning”; “another comes up who pulls the meaning from another direction” (DA II 1.16; 455). When one speaks of war, for instance, it is no longer clear what one means.

One suspects that Tocqueville would have been particularly wary of the emergence of online dictionaries—the current harbingers of linguistic innovation. The power to spread new words rapidly, and to list multiple meanings (the most preferred of which is often determined by solicited popular vote) extends the possibilities of linguistic innovation exponentially. In addition, younger generations often adopt new terms precisely because of their novelty and incomprehensibility to older generations. The ultimate consequence of linguistic innovation is uncertainty and confusion. According to Tocqueville, “writers almost never look as though they apply themselves to a single thought; they always seem to aim at a group of ideas, leaving the reader the care of judging which of them is hit” (DA II. 16; 455).
Because of the multiplicity of meanings for words in democracy, language becomes characteristically abstract. That is, when single words encompass a wide variety of meaning, they become further removed from the subject or idea to which they refer. For this reason, in his discussion of language, Tocqueville returns to general terms and develops his account of their liabilities further. After recalling this central feature of democratic thought in the context of his discussion of language, Tocqueville goes on to discuss how writers in democracy tend to cater to the democratic love of general terms. Democratic writers as we have seen, draw on general terms to explain far reaching phenomena, and tend not to draw on particulars to illustrate their insights. They also tend to personify general terms, and speak as if these terms are active causes in the course of human affairs.

On the one hand, Tocqueville regards the willingness of writers to cater to democratic audiences’ love of generalizations as somewhat precarious. As he notes, “an abstract word is like a box with a false bottom: one puts in it the ideas one desires and one takes them out without anyone’s seeing it” (DA II 1.16; 457). Abstraction allows inconsistency and exceptions to be masked, and thus can contribute to the general state of intellectual confusion. On the other hand—and in accordance with his contention that democratic writers must write in the language of democratic peoples to survive—Tocqueville suggests that writers will need to make use of general terms if they are to appeal to democratic audiences. As he says, abstract words are both the “great merit and great weakness” of democratic languages (DA II 1.16; 456). Insofar as general terms are a
primary means through which authors can appeal to democratic audiences, it is essential that they learn sound ways of using these terms.

Tocqueville’s Literary Model

In order to show how general terms can be well used, Tocqueville draws attention to his own writing style, and in particular, to his use of the general term at the core of *Democracy in America*: equality. Like other democratic writers, Tocqueville acknowledges that he too has “often personified equality,” and has said that “equality does certain things or abstains from certain others” (*DA* II 1.16; 457). He acknowledges that he deliberately uses the general term for the sake of speaking to his democratic readership. As to his purpose with this use, Tocqueville then tells his readers that general terms “enlarge and veil a thought; they render the expression more rapid and the idea less clear.” Generalizations thus provide quick and ready explanations, while at the same time obscuring details.

As we have seen in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, because democratic audiences generally consist of busy industrious patrons, patrons with little time to sort through the mass of particulars that their favored generalizations purport to explain, they are often ill equipped to judge the quality of generalizations about which they lack particular experience. Thus, writers can easily (and unwittingly) offer generalizations that are spurious and have them be well received.
At the same time, democratic writers can also use general terms to apprise democratic peoples of the orders of true general phenomena. This latter mode of using general terms is reflective of Tocqueville’s own use. His use of ‘equality’ is based on his extensive experiential observations of particular political phenomena. He recognizes that a general movement toward equality is occurring that has been largely successful and that has a whole host of particular political consequences which his book surveys. Without requiring that his readers delve into the puzzling questions surrounding the particular historical details that set the new politics in motion, Tocqueville leaves his general readership with the idea that the shape of the political world is largely governed by equality and that it is particularly important to understand the political consequences of this fact. Armed with Tocqueville’s conception of equality, Tocqueville’s busy readers are made to see the main phenomenon that orders their regime and put on guard against the detrimental consequences of it.

While Tocqueville provides this teaching to his general readership and thereby “enlarges” their thought, he also “veils” particular details—posing a challenge to readers more inclined to probe his claims. As he places the general public on guard against the dangers of equality, he leaves his more leisurely readers to sort through some of the questions that his generalizations obscure. For instance, one can ask: what are Tocqueville’s reasons for depicting the movement toward greater equality as inevitable (DA Introduction; 6, but cf. II 1.20; 472)? Is Tocqueville’s use of providence rhetorical (cf. DA Introduction; 6, but cf. II 1.20; 471-472)? In what ways can the movement of

68 Mansfield and Winthrop, “Introduction,” xli-xlii
democracy be directed (cf. DA II Notice; 400, and II 1.20; 471)? These questions point to the depth of thought that is veiled beneath Tocqueville’s more democratic veneer.

Perhaps the most important thought that lurks behind Tocqueville’s use of equality—and a thought that must be addressed to understand his writing as a model—concerns his suggestion that the general motion of equality will not yield the benefits of democracy without the efforts of individual men. While his use of the concept ‘equality’ helps his readership gain traction on the general shape of the newly emerging politics, equality alone does not necessarily give rise to the best form of democratic politics, and in fact can give rise to a new kind of despotism (e.g. DA II 2.2, 2.9; 10, 410, 430, 438-439).

The danger of the use of the term ‘equality’ for a democratic audience is that democratic peoples tend to assume that equality, as the thing that causes the inevitable motion of their present state, will guarantee a good regime. They will take the generalization too far, and assume that all regimes founded on equality yield the same benefits. As Tocqueville indicates, however, if the motions of equality are to yield the benefits of liberal democracy, they must be channeled toward it. Thus Tocqueville presents his readers with equality as a force that they must reckon with rather than one that they are simply subject to. Tocqueville caters to his democratic readership’s longing for general terms by drawing attention to its own most general urge, and enlists his readership in a self-correcting mission with respect to this urge.
Equality versus Liberty

In this light, it is useful to examine further how Tocqueville attempts to enlist his audience in scrutinizing equality, and its compliment liberty, and to explore why it is that equality and liberty are the general terms most fundamental to his teaching. Tocqueville’s chapter “Why Democratic Peoples Show a More Lasting Love for Equality than for Freedom,” provides a helpful starting point in this regard (DA II 2.1; 479-482). The chapter is dedicated to explaining its title’s claim and helps us to understand how the idea of liberty serves to correct the love of equality.

Tocqueville begins by explaining that democratic peoples’ love of equality can be attributed in large part to their equality of conditions. That equality of condition is the most distinctive feature of their existence, he says, is “enough to explain why they prefer it to all the [other goods that society presents to them]” (DA II 2.1; 480). The love of one’s own condition is a basic explanation for why democratic peoples prefer equality to other social and political goods. At the same time, Tocqueville supplements his explanation of the love of equality further and adds that there are several other causes of the democratic preference for equality—these causes explain his focus on equality most fully.

Tocqueville’s understanding of equality has a number of important dimensions, several of which we have explored. The most significant of these is that just mentioned: equality of condition. The basic teaching of Democracy in America is that experience living in a society of equal condition generates a host of mores, habits, and institutions
that give new shape to human life. The second dimension of Tocqueville’s account of equality is equality as likeness. Equality of conditions helps to bring to the fore the extent to which people are alike and in this sense equal. As we have seen, it is equality as likeness that generates the demand for equal participation in political rule.

Liberty is more complex in Tocqueville’s thought. The core of his account of liberty, however, is freedom for self-rule. This applies to both the public and private realms. For Tocqueville, freedom for self-government contributes to our development as moral, rational, and political beings. As we saw in Chapter 1, the experience of self-rule helps individuals understand how to reason toward the common good. Liberty also helps individuals develop moderation that allows for individual self-rule. Confronted with limitations on their wants, as well as the need to compromise and negotiate in politics, politically free individuals are better able to moderate their individual desires and to rule themselves privately. Tocqueville shares the classical understanding of liberty as rational self-rule.

Perhaps the most essential function of liberty in Tocqueville’s account is that it allows individuals to rise and succeed in accordance with their merit. Tocqueville argues that, ultimately, democracies strive toward an ideal form of government in which all are perfectly free because all are equal, and all are equal because all are perfectly free (DA II 2.1; 479). A society of men who are both truly equal and truly free is a society of rational men who are free from impediment and irrationality, and who rule with one another in common—presumably, a society of philosophers.
Of course, all regimes fall short of the democracy of philosophers or perfectly rational equals. Tocqueville’s primary concern is that democratic regimes are more likely to fall short with respect to liberty than equality. In his account, a regime of equals is possible without liberty. As he says, “one can have the right to indulge in the same pleasures, to enter the same professions, to meet in the same places, in a word, to live in the same manner and pursue wealth by the same means, without having all take the same part in government” (DA II 2.1; 479). Yet it is the freedom to partake in government that helps to hone the mind, and it is the freedom to pursue one’s life free from majority tyranny and legal oppression that allows for individual flourishing. Hence, it is freedom that allows for natural meritocracy—the ultimate benefit of democracy. Equality is the necessary condition for the emergence of natural meritocracy; liberty is the condition that sustains it. Tocqueville is concerned that the preference for equality over freedom in the democratic world will close off the political and societal freedom essential to individual development and hence natural meritocracy.

As mentioned, in his further discussion of the preference for equality over liberty, Tocqueville lists a number of reasons that lend strength to the side of equality over liberty (DA II 2.1; 480-481). First, he notes that whereas the condition of equality establishes egalitarian mores firmly, freedom is less entrenched, more amorphous, less visible, less a part of the egalitarian condition, and so it is more fragile. Second, whereas equality bestows its benefits on all, liberty tends to benefit the few that distinguish themselves. Third, insofar as it allows for individuals to rise and distinguish themselves, liberty is in tension with equality: liberty allows for certain kinds of inequalities. Fourth, while the
benefits of equality are felt by all with little effort, the benefits of freedom are felt primarily by those who actively make use of their freedom. Hence, the citizenry as a whole is more likely resist violations of equality than violations of liberty.

Ultimately, for Tocqueville, it is because liberty benefits the few and because it can generate hierarchy that in democracy, its defenses are more limited than those of equality. Insofar as liberty can allow for anything resembling aristocracy, it can also provoke egalitarian hostility. It is perhaps for this reason that Tocqueville closes his discussion with the following statement, a statement that begins to show the connection between liberty and aristocracy:

I think that democratic peoples have a natural taste for freedom; left to themselves they seek it, they love it, and they will see themselves parted from it only with sorrow. But for equality they have an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion; they want equality in freedom, and, if they cannot get it, they still want it in slavery. They will tolerate poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not tolerate aristocracy. (DA II 2.1; 482)

What one can begin to see, then, is that through his account of liberty, Tocqueville wishes to educate his readers on the distinction between liberty, as the condition for natural meritocracy, and institutionalized aristocracy. By conflating the two, and becoming hostile to the hierarchy of liberty, democratic peoples lose hold of the condition for the meritocracy that is most appropriate to democracy.

It is also in his discussion of the opposition between liberty and equality that we see how Tocqueville uses another general term to capture a broad phenomenon and to refine how it is understood and defended in political life. In addition to the general term equality, Tocqueville uses the term liberty to help his readers acquire an idea that when properly understood—as the freedom for individual flourishing through political and
individual experience—can help to cultivate the kind of democracy that he envisions: meritocracy in democracy as opposed to an oppressive egalitarian state. The opposition between liberty and equality is most fundamental to Tocqueville’s account because he regards meritocracy in democracy as the only possible corrective to egalitarian tyranny once institutional aristocracy is no longer a viable political alternative.

A Few Additional General Terms

In addition to the general terms equality and liberty, Tocqueville also uses a number of other general terms for pedagogical purposes, a few of which it is helpful to highlight in this context. We have examined some of these. We have looked, for instance, at the paradoxical character of Tocqueville’s account of providence. There, we saw that Tocqueville chooses to describe democracy using the general term providence for the sake of emphasizing the irreversibility of the democratic movement and to help him explore its ostensible goodness. By describing democracy as providential, Tocqueville bestows a divine character on it while provocatively addressing democratic skeptics and pointing to the philosophic questions underlying its movement. He uses providence to encourage both faith in democratic justice and philosophical humility toward the emergence of the new world.

We also saw that Tocqueville uses the term enlightenment to describe a general intellectual opening toward commonality of ways of life, and to true similarities across natural phenomenon (in the sciences) and human life (in politics). By speaking of the
similar degree of enlightenment in the French and the English, Tocqueville helps his readers see that the receptiveness of the democratic mind to the ubiquity of general terms in the intellectual world is not the same as true enlightenment. Hence, he helps his readers recognize the need to discriminate between different kinds of generalities and theories that surface once the mind is turned toward likeness.

Lastly, we saw that Tocqueville takes up the Rousseauean general term perfectibility to refine ideas about both the progress of politics and the species. In recognition of the future oriented optimism of democratic peoples and the experience of political and technological advancement, Tocqueville helps to show both intellectuals and citizens that the concepts of perfectibility and progress must be refined to acknowledge that the advancement of human life is not historically determinate, that the advancement of technology does not imply general human progress, that political innovation and change is not always for the better, and that there is no historical movement that will ensure that democracy will be liberal democracy without individual vigilance and political prudence.

Perhaps the most significant general term that has been present throughout the preceding, but which I have not discussed systematically, is aristocracy. Aristocracy, of course, is Tocqueville’s counterpoint to democracy. As mentioned, aristocracy is the institutionalization of hierarchy and difference while democracy is a regime based on the recognition of equality and sameness. It is by opposing aristocracy and democracy that Tocqueville brings the nature of democracy most vividly into relief. As Tocqueville reveals what is lost to the human condition in the shift from the aristocratic world to the
democratic one, he strives to show his readers both how aristocratic politics are irretrievable and how aristocracy forms a helpful counterpoint for scrutinizing the movement of democracy. By adding a second opposition, the term liberty, Tocqueville helps to show how certain kinds of aristocratic hierarchy—namely natural hierarchy—can be an ideal compatible with democracy. By distinguishing between liberty and aristocracy and opposing them to a simple egalitarian world, Tocqueville also helps his democratic readers distinguish between the kinds of hierarchy that are in accordance with democracy and those that are not.

Conclusion

Returning to Tocqueville’s literary efforts as a model for other democratic writers, particularly writers of political thought, Tocqueville shows, through his reflexive use of general terms, that in democratic centuries, it is the task of writers to give voice to ideas in a manner that appeals to democratic ears, but also that it is possible to do so while bolstering liberal democratic mores. Out of his sobering account of the state of language and letters in democracy, a positive model for the literary arts in liberal democracy emerges. In the chapters that follow his introduction to the art of democratic writing, Tocqueville discusses a series of particular literary forms, including poetry, public oration, theater, history, and political rhetoric. These chapters, too, contain a critique of the unique democratic intellectual habits that they tend to reinforce and that they can also harness and direct. In a similar manner, each chapter contains an antidote for their
liabilities, and tacit suggestions on the unique character that they ought to take within democracy. Since Tocqueville’s own model applies primarily to the craft of writing political theory, in what follows, one can examine what he teaches about the art of crafting literary fiction, theater, history, journalism, and political speeches for the democratic age.
CHAPTER 5

DEMOCRATIC POETICS

As I mention in the Introduction, Tocqueville’s further analyses of the literary sphere can be divided broadly into two types. On the one hand, there are genres that we associate more commonly with literature, like poetry, fiction, and theater; on the other hand, there are overtly political kinds of writings, which include political speeches, history, and journalism. In the following two chapters, we will look at Tocqueville’s comments on these two types of genres respectively. For the purposes of distinguishing between the two, I will refer to the former as poetic writing and to the latter as political literature.

Tocqueville’s account of poetic writing begins with a definition:

Poetry in my eyes is the search for and depiction of the ideal.
The one who, by cutting out a part from what exists, by adding some imaginary features to the picture, and by combining certain circumstances that are real but are not found together in conjunction, completes and enlarges nature—that is the poet. Thus poetry will not have for its goal to represent the true, but to adorn it, and to offer a superior image to the mind.

( DA II 1.17; 458)

In short, poets provide imaginative ideals for audiences. What one can also note from Tocqueville’s introductory definition of poetry is that when he speaks of poetry he does not speak simply of works of meter and verse, but also of literary fiction more generally. His chapter on poetry, then, encompasses both poetry, as it is commonly understood, and fiction.
Tocqueville’s account of poetry is also the orientation point for his discussion of the other poetic genres in his analysis: oration and theater. Tocqueville distinguishes oration from political rhetoric, which he discusses later. Oration in this section includes public speeches that are not directed to an electoral body—they range from speeches in salons to speeches at social occasions like weddings and funerals. While his discussion of poetry encompasses both poetry as it is commonly understood (i.e., as verse) as well as literary fiction, he also opts to discuss oration and theater in separate chapters. In this way Tocqueville differentiates between three poetic modes: the written form, the oral expression, and the dramatic form. In dividing the poetic arts up in this way, and discussing the unique nature of their influences, Tocqueville recalls aspects of both Plato’s account of music in the *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

His goal in exploring these poetic modes is to examine their capacity to guide the imagination in democracy. To understand the powers of the poetic arts in democracy, he begins by examining the influence of democracy on the imagination—the mental capacity to which the poets appeal and give expression. To this end, Tocqueville begins by constructing a genealogy of the changes in imaginative inclinations that follow the shift from aristocracy to democracy.

The first thing that Tocqueville explains is that in democracy, as opposed to aristocracy, the powers of the poets will be significantly diminished. In aristocracy, the immobility of individuals leads them to turn to the realm of the imagination and to reach for ideals there; in democracy, the prospect of material advancement draws the imagination toward overcoming practical obstacles rather than toward poetic ideals. As a
result of the practical orientation of the democratic mind, Tocqueville argues, “the imagination is not extinguished, but it is given over almost exclusively to conceiving the useful and representing the real” (DA II 1.17; 459). In democracy, the poet’s power to draw the imagination toward ideals is more limited than in aristocracy.

In addition to arguing that the power of the poets will be diminished and limited, Tocqueville also tells his readers that democracy “dries up most of the old sources of poetry” (II 1.17; 460). That is, as he depicts them, democratic citizenries are less inclined toward the traditional sources of poetry that appear in aristocracy: gods and demigods, golden ages of the past, and great aristocratic exemplars. Nonetheless, while he argues that the old sources of poetry will lose their hold on the imagination, he also argues that democratic experience generates new matter for poetic ideals. For instance, as democratic citizens turn away from the past as a source of poetic idealism, they turn toward the future; and as they turn from aristocratic heroes, they come to embrace stories that explore the plight of the human race as a whole (DA II 1.17; 460-462). Because of its new imaginative subjects, democratic poetry takes on a strikingly different character.

As Tocqueville examines this new character, he assesses the implications of a number of particular trends. Among these are those just mentioned—the turn toward the future, and the idealization of the human race as a whole—as well as the incorporation of scientific ideas into poetry, and a focus on psychology as opposed to action. As he looks at these trends, Tocqueville helps hopeful poets see the kinds of imaginative subjects to which their audiences will be receptive.
As he had done with his discussion of language, he also shows his readers some of the liabilities of the new leanings of the democratic imagination and makes some suggestions on how democratic poets ought to write with the imaginative needs of their audience in mind. What follows here, then, is an exploration of Tocqueville’s analysis of the democratic imagination and his lessons on the new face of poetics in democracy. We will look, first, at Tocqueville’s account of the early stages of democratic poetry, in which he explores the rise of nature writing. We will then turn to his analysis of the turn toward human things as a subject of poetry and his account of the progressive, futuristic, and scientific orientation of democratic poetry and oration. Lastly, we will look to his exploration of the psyche and the sensational character of democratic drama.

Nature Writing: The First Stage of Democratic Poetics

One of Tocqueville’s first observations on the new face of poetic writing in democracy is that when democratic writers turn away from aristocratic subjects for poetry, they initially turn to nature for subject matter. As he explains, when writers had abandoned the great heroes and gods that were “fleeing with aristocracy” they scrambled for subjects to replace these “great objects” and to this end, they wrote poetry about the grandeur of nature (DA II 1.17; 460).

In making this observation, Tocqueville anticipates the writings of authors like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, writers who had aimed to develop a distinctly American and democratic mode of writing and who also turned to nature frequently for
subject matter. Emerson’s essay “Nature” depicts this tendency well. Consider the following passage, where Emerson speaks of the grandeur of the woods and of nature as a worthy rival to the subjects of civilization:

The tempered light of the woods is like a perpetual morning, and is stimulating and heroic…The incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them, and quit our life of solemn trifles. Here no history, or church, or state, is interpolated on the divine sky and the immortal year. How easily we might walk onward into the opening landscape, absorbed by new pictures, and by thoughts fast succeeding each other, until by degrees the recollection of home was crowded out of the mind, all memory obliterated by the tyranny of the present, and we were led in triumph by nature.\(^{69}\)

Emerson’s praise for nature as free from history, church, and state illustrates the inclination on the part of American writers working to carve out a new democratic tradition, to use the image of nature to give voice to the democratic rejection of tradition and the aristocratic world.

In recognizing the turn to nature as an initial inclination of democratic writers, Tocqueville also anticipates transcendentalism, the American variant of pantheism. Like pantheists, transcendentalists emphasize the unity of nature and the idea that all things in nature (including material and immaterial things) are infused with a single unifying divinity (\(DA\) II 1.7; 425-426).\(^{70}\) One of the lessons Tocqueville offers to democratic poets stems from his wariness of this idea in the literary realm. As we saw in Chapter 2, Tocqueville argues that this abstraction, which he views as a form of intellectual laziness, masks the distinctiveness of human beings both as a species and as individuals. For this


reason, he contends, pantheistic ideas can lend credence to ideologies that oppress individuals (DA II 1.7; 426). The idea that all men and things are part of a larger divinity ruling over the universe undercuts the value of individuals and individual actions. For this reason Tocqueville echoes his comments on the seductions of pantheism in his discussion of nature writing (DA II 1.17; 461-463).

While he is wary of the pantheistic doctrine and of nature writing as a vehicle for it, Tocqueville also acknowledges that the appeal of nature writing ultimately will be limited. Experience with the hostility of nature limits the extent to which nature and the forces behind it can be romanticized and rendered as a manifestation of divine beneficence. According to Tocqueville, as democratic man struggles with nature, he turns his imagination away from nature and toward himself; in his words, eventually, democracy “turns the imagination away from all that is external to fix it only on man” (DA II 1.17; 460). Rather than idolizing nature, democratic citizens develop a taste for poetry that helps them understand their new human condition. If democratic pantheism is a danger as a doctrine in general, its power is somewhat limited when it is taken up in nature writing.

The Democratic Turn from Divine Mythos to the Struggles of the Human Race

When Tocqueville claims that man will be the primary subject of the poetic imagination in democracy, he also argues that the subject of man will be taken up by poets in a manner distinct from that of aristocracy. In democracy, the human subject will not be taken up as the great man conducting monumental actions (a frequent subject of
aristocratic literature) but instead will be taken up in one of two forms: as the plight of the human race as a whole or as an abstract account of the human psyche.

Tocqueville begins his account of the human subject of poetry by arguing that “poets who live in democratic centuries can…never take one man in particular for the subject of their picture” (DA II 1.17; 460). Because individuals are “very much alike,” Tocqueville explains, “each one, while viewing himself, sees all the others at an instant”; therefore, he claims, “poetry cannot apply itself to any one of them” (DA II 1.17; 460). To this he adds that the life of individual democratic citizens is generally uninspiring: “one can conceive of nothing so small, so dull, so filled with miserable interests, in a word, so antipoetic, as the life of a man in the United States” (DA II 1.17; 461). Insofar as individuals look for something distinct and larger than themselves in a story, democratic citizens do not generally idealize the actions of their fellow citizens. As Tocqueville sees it, the lives of other citizens are not typically distinguished enough to provide the basis for a compelling work.

The similarity of individuals nonetheless generates a subject of poetry unique to democracy: the striving of democratic peoples as a whole. As Tocqueville says, “all that relates to the existence of the human race taken as a whole, its vicissitudes, its future, becomes a very rich mine for poetry” (DA II 1.17; 461). According to Tocqueville, “the similarity of individuals that renders each of them separately unsuitable to become the object of poetry permits poets to include all of them in the same image and finally to consider the people itself” (DA II 1.17; 460-461). As he explains, because of the similarity of men in democracy, democratic audiences are better able to imagine the
inclinations of their fellow men in a group, and as a result, “democratic nations perceive more clearly than all others their own shape” (DA II 1.17; 461). Because they wish for human subjects of poetry as well as something larger than each individual alone, and because they are able to perceive the character and direction of collective striving more easily than aristocratic peoples, democratic peoples discover themselves to be a new subject for poetry.

It may be difficult to understand exactly what Tocqueville means when he speaks of a poetry that is oriented around the struggles and striving of democratic peoples as a whole. One place to look for this is Walt Whitman’s poems, which epitomize what Tocqueville describes. For instance, Whitman illustrates the tendency that Tocqueville depicts in the opening lines of his *Leaves of Grass*, in the poem “One’s-Self I Sing,” and in “Song of Myself.” Consider the following passages:

One’s Self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse

(From “One’s Self I Sing”) 71

I celebrate myself, and sing myself;
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

…
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin…

(From “Song of Myself, 1”) 72

Whitman’s lines point to the urge to subsume particular individuals into a broader vision of the common experience of democratic peoples. He strives to show the spiritual interconnectedness and commonality of their efforts.

Emerson offers another example of this phenomenon in comments that he makes in “The American Scholar.” There, Emerson speaks of a doctrine “ever new and sublime” that recognizes that there is

One man—present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty…you must take the whole society to find the whole man. Man is not a farmer, or a professor or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the dividend or social state, these functions are parceled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, whilst each other performs his.  

Emerson stresses that it is the social state where all men in their individual functions come together to form a whole. He also stresses that the inability to acknowledge and understand this unity leads to societal fragmentation and isolation. Thus Emerson calls for intellectuals who strive for a more unified understanding of democratic peoples as a whole. Whitman is one writer who heeded this call.

In calling for this kind of unified understanding Emerson and Whitman emphasize not only the identification of individual men with man but also the struggles of democratic peoples as a whole. While Emerson and Whitman write in the transcendentalist and naturalist spirit and celebrate nature as divine, they also recognize the struggles in American democracy to overcome, through labor and work, the


impediments presented by nature. This dimension of their writings mirrors Tocqueville’s prediction that democratic writing eventually turns its attention from the beauty of nature to the struggles of democratic man to cultivate it and find his place within it.

In addition to foreseeing democratic peoples as a new subject for poetry, Tocqueville also adds that democratic poetry will turn to an abstract vision of the human psyche. This claim may appear at odds with Tocqueville’s earlier claim that individual men will not be a subject of democratic poetry. Yet what Tocqueville refers to is neither the actions of great men nor the actions of particular democratic men, but rather an abstract account of the human psyche in general: democratic audiences like to see what psychological struggles they share in common as human beings.

Tocqueville explains his claim that democratic poets and democratic readers will turn toward works that explore the psyche with the following observation:

The language, customs, and daily actions of men in democracies reject the imagination of the ideal. These things are not poetic in themselves, and besides, they would cease to be so for the reason that they are too well known by all those to whom one would undertake to speak of them. That forces poets constantly to pierce beneath the exterior surface disclosed by the senses in order to catch a glimpse of the soul itself. For there is nothing that lends itself more to the depiction of the ideal than man so viewed in the depths of his immaterial nature. (DA II 1.17; 462)

Finding everyday actions bland, if they do not reach to the idea of the human race as a whole, democratic poets delve into the depths of the human psyche.

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Tocqueville refers to three examples to illustrate precisely what he has in mind in speaking of the poetic turn toward the human psyche: Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Chateaubriand’s *René*, and Lamartine’s *Jocelyn*. What these works share in common is that they explore the psychological struggles of their protagonists with a democratizing world. When Tocqueville suggests that the human psyche will be a new subject of poetry, then, he implies that he expects the focus to be on the psychological responses to life in modern democracy or life in a world that turns away from political, cultural, and religious tradition. In short, Tocqueville predicts that the new poetry will explore the psychology of modernity. It will illuminate both the struggles against modernity, which are necessarily tragic in his account, and the psychological efforts to come to terms with it.

While Tocqueville certainly seems correct in foreseeing the turn toward a poetics that takes up the subject of the human psyche under the pressures of modernity, one might be inclined to question his claim that the actions of everyday man will not be a subject of poetry. What would Tocqueville have made of Willy Loman, or of the paintings of Norman Rockwell in the plastic arts? One might argue that Willy Loman is an illustration of the psychological kind of democratic writing that Tocqueville describes: he manifests the longings of the psyche that are tragically unfulfilled by the salesman’s life. Yet at the same time, in the case of Norman Rockwell, it appears that Tocqueville may have neglected branches of the poetic and plastic arts that celebrate the particular actions and labors of individual men.
In this vein, Tocqueville’s analysis also appears to be countered by Whitman and Emerson who themselves call for the working man as a new subject of poetry. In “Song of Myself,” for instance, Whitman presents lists upon lists of poetic images of particular men at work, and in “The American Scholar” Emerson praises as auspicious the emergence of a literature that celebrates common man. In describing the democratization of literature, Emerson observes happily that

…the same movement which effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state, assumed in literature a very marked and as benign an aspect. Instead of the sublime and beautiful; the near, the low, the common, was explored and poeticized…the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life are the topics of the time. It is a great stride.

It appears, then, that Tocqueville may not entirely have recognized the turn toward particular illustrations of the common man’s activity (as opposed to his psychological struggles with modernity) that were the subjects of poems and stories immediately following the time of his visit to the United States. If, in the spirit of Tocqueville, the human psyche is revealed through explorations of mundane things, Emerson and Whitman have opted for very particularistic concrete and active depictions of it, rather than simply the abstractions that Tocqueville describes.

To the extent that Tocqueville did not recognize the particularistic character of Whitman and Emerson’s writings, one might say that his account of democratic literature is not a complete one. A complete analysis of democratic literature would have to

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75 Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 104-106.
76 Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 67-68.
account for the popularity of works that idealize the everyday and relatively common activities of democratic men. It seems that democratic citizens do not simply long for deep psychological analyses or accounts of themselves as a part of a democratic mass. They like mirrors of themselves and romantic or ideal depictions of the active working life.

One might wonder, then, what Tocqueville would have made of this phenomenon. Judging by his comments on the un-poetic character of common man, and his praise of works that explore the psychological battles with modernity and democratic life, one suspects that Tocqueville would have been somewhat disapproving of such works: he may have regarded the poetics of the common man to be reflective of the equalizing tendency of democracy.

At the same time, and as we shall see in Tocqueville’s discussion of democratic history, one of Tocqueville’s other objectives was to encourage writers to help readers recognize the importance of individual actions in the midst of people who do not enjoy a great difference in political power. Hence, if Tocqueville here does not fully account for or assess the common man as protagonist, he takes up the topic later in his account of history: he shows the need to celebrate significant, if subtle and incremental, actions of democratic men.
If human life were the only subject of the democratic imagination, and if the imagination were at risk of being drawn to a lower plane, Tocqueville might have offered more of a commentary on the all too human orientation of democratic literature and the poetic limitations of it. As he also observed, however, the democratic imagination is not doomed to the poeticization of the mundane. Another subject toward which the democratic imagination is drawn, he explains, is the subject of technological advancement. It is in light of the imagination of future technological societies that Tocqueville offers his next set of lessons on poetic writing in democracy.

As we saw in Chapter 3, it is the inclination of the democratic mind to take up the perennial idea of human perfectibility in terms of the progress of modern life. When the democratic mind turns away from the past and toward the future, when democratic men recognize the ostensibly limitless prospects for material advancement in democracy, their minds reach for ideas and images of an idealized future in which they overcome their weaknesses as individuals and rise above their material and natural circumstances.

As we also saw, the idea of perfectibility manifests itself in the faith in technological progress. This inclination is captured in democratic poetry. As Tocqueville explains, democratic men like images of themselves not merely struggling with and cultivating nature, but also overcoming it. As he says, Americans like to see representations of themselves, “advance[ing] across [the] wilderness, draining swamps,
straightening rivers, peopling the solitude, and subduing nature” (DA II 1.17; 461).

Democracy holds forth the technological conquest of nature as a new subject for poetic representation.

Tocqueville’s observation that poets will have technological progress and potential as a new subject for representation is expressed in an optimistic manner. Despite his wariness about the utilitarian nature of technology, Tocqueville regards it as necessary to cast a positive light on the prospect of scientific advancement. As I explained in Chapter 2, Tocqueville argues that the new instincts of democracy necessitate that “all effort of the social power...be brought to sustain advanced studies and create scientific passions” (DA II 1.10; 438). Tocqueville’s suggestion that poets encourage the depiction of technological progress also squares with his assertion that the education of the majority ought to be scientific (DA II 1.15; 451). For Tocqueville, technological advancement appears to be necessary to modern democratic flourishing. Thus, Tocqueville endorses or accepts the modern scientific project alongside his support of democracy.

While he speaks of man’s technological advancement with rhetorical flourish, and holds forth this advancement as a worthy subject of poetic ideals, Tocqueville also sees the need to alert poets of the dangers of disproportionate representations of democracy’s scientific prospects. Because man’s scientific progress is a new topic for poets, and because, to the democratic mind, technological progress appears to be boundless, poets have the power to posit the prospective ends or goals of scientific advancement: they have the power to orient man in his new relation to nature, to help guide and direct
scientific hopes and ambitions, and to present models and warnings. They can create Frankenstein or Superman, and they can point men toward the moon, beneath the sea, or beyond our solar system. In short, they possess some power in piloting the scientific ship of state. In the poetic depictions of the sciences, then, Tocqueville also shows that the poets have the power to reorient the materialism of the sciences toward higher ends of man.

Although the poets have this higher interpretive potential, their depictions of scientific ends and goals can likewise be flawed. While he appears generally optimistic about the prospects for scientific progress and the poetic depictions of it, Tocqueville also offers a subtle caution to democratic poets concerning their depictions of man’s new advancement. Thus, in the chapter following his discussion of poetry, a chapter on democratic oration, Tocqueville indicates that poets do well to keep the imagination within certain limits by resisting the temptation toward gross distortions of the future, many of which explore the potential of science and technology.

Democratic Oration

In his discussion of poetic oration, Tocqueville turns to the oral manifestations of democratic poetics and addresses the bombastic character of democratic speech. As mentioned above, when Tocqueville speaks of oration in this section of the text the speeches he refers to are different from those of political rhetoric, which he reserves for a later section on political speaking entitled “On Parliamentary Eloquence in the United
States.” Again, it is in his discussion of oration that Tocqueville explores the kinds of speeches that are made at public ceremonies, business events, graduations, or weddings.

Tocqueville’s main observation concerning the character of democratic oration is that orators tend to distort their subjects. Tocqueville explains his claim by suggesting that in order to be heard, democratic speakers must tear their audiences from their private and practical lives. Tocqueville says that for a democratic man to be drawn outside of his private concerns, he expects “to be offered some enormous object to look at, and it is only at this price that he consents to tear himself for a moment from the small, complicated cares that agitate and charm his life” (DA II 1. 18; 464). For this reason, in order to vie for democratic audiences’ attention, democratic orators tend to exaggerate. One can recognize what Tocqueville speaks of in a number of different ways—in sales pitches for household products (revolutionary vacuum cleaners), in encomiums at weddings, funerals, and retirement parties (where heroic images of great sacrifice in otherwise mundane actions appear), and in advertisements for community events (community carnivals, for example).

Although exaggeration is not pernicious in and of itself, Tocqueville nonetheless expresses some comments on the liabilities about its incessant use. One of the realms in which these liabilities appear most clearly is in the progressive promises of technological innovation. One of the problems that Tocqueville sees is that when orators offer visions of technological progress, they offer trajectories of technology that reach beyond what is possible in the foreseeable future, and in so doing, conjure false hope and overreaching idealism. Consider ideas about artificial intelligence, neuroscience, and the automation of
human labor. In exaggerating the possibilities of the future, Tocqueville argues, orators often make their audiences “reach for the gigantic, for which they forsake the great” (*DA* II 1.18; 464). While orators and spokesmen for science have the power to draw attention and direct thought on the ends of technological potential, they squander this potential in attempting to secure the attention of their audiences. In Tocqueville’s words, “the author and the public corrupt one another at the same time” (*DA* II 1.18; 464).

In offering his cautions against exaggeration, it is somewhat difficult to see exactly what kinds of narratives, scientific or otherwise, that Tocqueville would resist. In general, Tocqueville suggests that when orators speak and appeal to the imagination, passions, and minds of their audience members, they ought to be cognizant of the true magnitude of their subjects. His central emphasis is on the need for orators to offer speeches that are somehow proportional to their subject; for as he says, a democratic audience “does not have the time to measure exactly the proportions of all the objects presented to it, nor a taste sure enough to perceive easily how they are disproportionate” (*DA* II 1.18; 464). From this comment, one can infer that Tocqueville would resist fantastical visions of science that are removed entirely from real possibilities. In this sense, Tocqueville is something of a literary realist. If writers and orators use fantastical beings at all, they are to serve as poetic analogues for political and social reality.

Tocqueville’s reasons for upholding this principle appears in his closing remarks on democratic oration. There, he says that when the limited sources of poetry in democracy are exhausted, orators turn to the fantastical: “to immense and incoherent images, overloaded depictions, and bizarre composites” (*DA* II 1.18; 464). One might
consider contemporary narratives on alternate realities or time travel to envision the kind of incoherence of thought to which Tocqueville alludes. His suggestion is that the pedagogical function of poetic oration is lost when authors become too far removed from the architecture of reality. If science fiction or public speeches use exaggeration and the fantastical without regard for the realities to which they draw attention, they fail to help us think about features of modern experience worthy of our imagination.

The Motions of Democratic Theater

Turning from oration to theater, Tocqueville tells his reader that theater is the literary genre that is most closely connected to the taste of any people, and so it is the clearest reflection of their literary inclinations (DA II 1.19; 467). Theater reveals literary inclinations in this way because it is crafted to provoke a direct response from the audience. When a substantial portion of the audience is democratic, theatre reflects democratic inclinations. Plays, therefore, provide the most vivid model of the character of democratic literature.

Tocqueville also tells his reader that theater is the literary form most natural to democratic peoples because it appeals most strongly to their literary preferences (DA II 1.19; 467). Recalling his discussion of democratic literature generally, Tocqueville explains here that democratic audiences have an inclination toward theater because they are fond of the rapid pace at which theater moves them and the minimal intellectual labor that theater requires of them (DA II 1.19; 465 and 467) Theater thus provides the clearest
illustration of the limitations, according to Tocqueville, of literature that is designed primarily to appeal to democratic tastes.

In the United States, Tocqueville notes, the influence of theater is not particularly prominent because it is not felt. Although he observes that dramatic spectacles are on the rise in the United States at the time of his visit, he also points out that Americans frequently avoid the theater on account of their Puritan mores (DA II 1.19; 468-469). In light of this fact, Tocqueville’s account of democratic theater, much like his account of Cartesian doctrine, appears to be directed toward his French audience. While Americans are not as receptive to the influence of democratic theater because they are not as frequently exposed to it, the French are particularly receptive to its influence because they are both lovers of theater and their theater is increasingly democratic. Tocqueville’s comments, which are the most critical of his comments on the literary arts, are aimed at helping his readers become conscious of the pitfalls of theater attendance and at moderating their taste for theater.

Tocqueville begins his critical assessment of the theater by noting that in democracy, theater reflects the diversity and cacophony of democratic literature. Democratic audiences typically find any number of styles and subjects appealing: “they like to find on the stage the confused mixture of conditions, sentiments, and ideas that they encounter before their eyes” (II 1.19; 467). A cursory examination of American theater, and its contemporary variant, film, confirms Tocqueville’s assessment. Tocqueville goes on to explain that the consequence of the chaos of democratic dramatic convention is that it moves the mind and the sentiments in a multitude of directions; for
instance, it often moves citizens to laugh and to cry at the same subjects. Rather than ordering the imagination and presenting models of action, theater pulls the psyche in conflicting directions. In general, then, the pedagogical function of theater is extremely limited.

In addition to moving the mind in different directions, Tocqueville also points out that democratic theater thrives on works that lack coherence. According to Tocqueville, democratic audiences do not require that they be presented with coherent actions but only that they be moved (DA II 1.19; 467-468). In this discussion, Tocqueville reminds his readers that it is a notable difference between aristocratic peoples and democratic peoples that the former read their works of theater while the latter do not. In reading plays, aristocratic audience members demand that the words on the page ultimately hang together in a rationally consistent manner. They examine whether they can find a coherent account behind the pathos that they experience and they demand that the works they embrace have a logographic or rational core. Because democratic peoples tend to wish simply to be moved, on the other hand, they do not demand rational consistency; instead, they respond more favorably to sensational works that distort and exaggerate.

Like orators and poets, democratic playwrights also have the power to project images of democracy’s future. Because of the abandonment of tradition in democratic audiences, the playwright has the most leeway in presenting fantastical and outlandish visions of the future. One might expect that the power of the democratic playwright is most dangerous, then, on account of his freedom; yet at the same time, considering that democratic playwrights have the power to pull hearts and minds in a multitude of
conflicting directions, some of their power may be muted by diversity. Tocqueville thus denies the pedagogical or moral value of theater. Democratic theater on the whole amounts to little more than entertainment.

Tocqueville’s rather critical analysis of the theater follows Rousseau’s critique of theater that appears in the latter’s “Letter to D’Alambert.” Like Rousseau, Tocqueville suggests that the central problem of democratic plays is their ability to provoke the passions without educating them (DA II 1.19; 467). Thus, both deny their pedagogical or moral value. Their common task appears almost simply to be that of encouraging a turn away from theater. Given Tocqueville’s pessimistic account of the theater, one might wonder what Tocqueville would make of the possibility of plays that work on multiple levels at once, plays that are at once entertaining, salutary, and possess a coherent or even logographic core. Could such a play appeal to a democratic audience and have a lasting influence? One cannot help but wonder what Tocqueville makes of the performances of Shakespeare, whose works he mentions as a staple, second only to bibles and religious pamphlets, of American home libraries (DA II 1.13; 445). Does not Shakespeare appear a worthy challenger to Tocqueville’s Rousseauian pessimism on the theater?

Perhaps Tocqueville’s closing remarks on democratic theater, which are closely akin to Rousseau’s core criticism of the theater, might help us in this regard. Again, one of Tocqueville’s most striking claims about democratic theater is that democratic audiences do not scrutinize scripts by reading them. They do not seek the rational

coherence behind the pathos of plays that their aristocratic predecessors had demanded. Tocqueville also adds that once a revolution has changed mores and laws, the theater of the pre-revolutionary generation no longer speaks to the present. For this reason, old aristocratic plays are not felt in performance, only read as texts. For Tocqueville, however, reading plays in general allows readers to place them under rational scrutiny and reading aristocratic plays helps to reveal the highest standard of playwriting. Once the inclination to read both contemporary and aristocratic plays is lost, the potential for improvement either through criticism or through the resurrection of great works is lost.

Like Rousseau, Tocqueville thus suggests that plays are perhaps the most limited literary form for pedagogical purposes. For this reason, one suspects that Tocqueville would also follow Rousseau in preferring the novel form to the theater for the sake of public literary education. Nevertheless, in recollecting the aristocratic standard for literature in this context, and offering his criticism of the nature of democratic theater, Tocqueville also encourages the activity of the critic. Insofar as theater can renew aristocratic works in democratic times by enacting them in entertaining ways, and insofar as democratic works can be scrutinized for their rational coherence, they may appear at times in an improved manner. Shakespeare may persist. Aside from this unparalleled exception, however, Tocqueville follows Rousseau’s conservatism toward the theater and places most of his optimism in written works that are more amenable to rational critique.

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78 Christopher Kelly, “Taking Readers as They Are: Rousseau’s Turn from Discourses to Novels,” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 33, no.1, (1999):.85-101. I am indebted to Laura Field for this insight.
Conclusion

In his critique of democratic theater and democratic poetics in general, Tocqueville continues to carve a middle way between being a critic of democracy and being a friend to democracy. He accepts the inevitability of democratic literature that follows from the emergence of democratic political life, while at the same time critiquing it so as to refine it. Tocqueville reveals to writers in his audience that they will have new freedoms and new powers in form and substance, but also that these new powers have liabilities when they are used to harness and guide the democratic imagination. To succeed democratic writers will exaggerate and draw the imagination toward a fantastical future, but as Tocqueville suggests, they will also do well to focus on crafting written works that retain a logographic core.
CHAPTER 6

POLITICAL LITERATURE

As with his account of poetic writings, with political literature Tocqueville also offers predictions and corrective criticisms. His turn from the theater to history marks the turn from poetic writings to political literature, the latter of which spans three genres: history, the literary representation of past events; parliamentary oration, the political speeches of democratically elected legislators; and newspaper journalism, the forum for mobilizing free associations. Surveying Tocqueville’s comments on these literary forms helps us to understand the role that he envisions for political literature in shaping political action in the democratic age. As we saw in Tocqueville’s discussions of democratic language and democratic poetics, the democratic imagination tends toward a vision of human affairs that overlooks politically significant actions of individuals for preserving individual liberty. In his discussion of political literature, Tocqueville returns to this problem and expands on this lesson.

His primary concern is that political literature and speech will neglect the important task of illuminating the actions of individuals and groups that contribute to the preservation of liberty within democracy. His discussion of political literature, therefore, is dedicated to offering lessons to historians, journalists, and orators on how their respective genres can be better crafted to this end. In his assessment of democratic history, Tocqueville warns historians against their tendency to favor a deterministic
understanding of human affairs. In his account of journalism, Tocqueville teaches that by mobilizing associations and drawing attention to their efforts, newspapers provide insight into the actions of groups that preserve freedom in the wider egalitarian landscape. In his account of political speeches, Tocqueville suggests that political oration gives the most elevated expression to liberal political principles in the democratic world. Proceeding through his account of history, newspaper journalism, and political rhetoric, then, I now turn to the final set of lessons that Tocqueville offers to hopeful writers and public leaders on how they can craft their works for the preservation of liberty within democracy.

The Difficulty with Democratic History

One of the first topics that Tocqueville covers when he turns to democratic history concerns the extent to which democratic historians tend to favor general accounts of human events (DA II 1.20; 469). As he says, democratic historians prefer to speak of “the nature of races, the physical constitution of the country, or the spirit of the civilization” over great individuals or particular events (DA II 1.20; 470). Aristocratic history, in contrast, is concerned primarily with elite figures. It focuses on individual actions rather than historical processes, on heroes rather than peoples. Whereas peoples’ histories epitomize democratic history, heroic histories epitomize aristocratic history.

Tocqueville recognizes that the tendency to turn toward processes and peoples in democratic historians is due in part to the nature of democratic political life: in
democracy, individuals are less powerful and therefore less visible in the realm of action than in aristocracy (DA II 1.20; 470). Yet at the same time, Tocqueville warns historians that the ubiquity of mass, general, and abstract history is due also to laziness on the part of historians (DA II 1.20; 470). The difficulty of recognizing the power and significance of individual actors in an egalitarian world leads many historians to neglect the role of individuals in democratic politics. In Tocqueville’s words, because it is difficult for the historian of democracy “to perceive individual influences clearly and bring them sufficiently to light, he denies them” (DA II 1.20; 470).

Tocqueville is concerned with histories that emphasize general causes over individual actions because they tend toward systems of history: “Not only are historians who live in democratic centuries drawn to assign a great cause to each fact, but they are also brought to link the facts among themselves and make a system issue from them” (DA II 1.20; 471). The consequence of the systematization of history is that history becomes understood as a matter of cause and effect and this turn lends credence to a deterministic understanding of the political world. Tocqueville is wary of systemic, causal history not only because it masks the actions of individual actors, but also because it fosters a belief in the impotence of political actors. Systemic history suggests that individuals are powerless against higher causes that guide them.

Tocqueville’s first lesson to historians, then, is that they take on the difficult task of bringing into relief the significant but subtle actions of democratic citizens, and that they resist the temptation to present history as an omnipotent system governing over human affairs. In this vein, historians do well to emphasize small actions that point to the
principles underlying democracy—the actions of a lady who refused to relinquish her seat on the bus, for instance. Historians will also do well to resist accounts of human affairs that are rooted in the idea that humans are impotent against nature and history—that climate or soil determines a nation’s lot in life, or that the end of history is imminent. In short, Tocqueville warns that so far, historians have tended to offer the latter kind of history and as a consequence their works have not only failed to hold a mirror to democracy, but have also been pernicious to it.

To the ears of those who favor systemic accounts of history, Tocqueville’s criticism are highly provocative, and it is worth considering the criticisms that emerge from this group to tap Tocqueville’s teaching to its fullest extent. One criticism that arises out of Tocqueville’s charges against systemic and deterministic history concerns the extent to which democratic historians recognize certain patterns in history that do not come to the foreground as clearly in aristocratic times where individuals are more significant and historians typically treat the actions of great figures as isolated phenomena that arise by chance. Seeking out general patterns, democratic historians are more likely to ask questions like “What caused the Renaissance?” and to construct causal explanations of why this real, general phenomenon occurred. While Tocqueville has reservations about the inclination toward systems, it also seems to be the case that democratic writers, because of their focus on patterns and generalizations, might reveal relations between historical epochs that are true, but that are not seen by aristocratic writers. In much the same way that democratic writers can and do access true
generalizations about politics, their general accounts of history can unveil important general truths.

Insofar as they seek general patterns, however, Tocqueville suggests that democratic historians ought to work to reveal the role of individuals in shaping human events. Drawing on the example of the Renaissance, for instance, Tocqueville might say that if the spread of classical works through Europe emerges as a general cause of the Renaissance, writers who chronicle it would do well to emphasize the actions of Petrarch, the Medici, Machiavelli, and Leonardo de Vinci, in explaining the cultural phenomenon. The most sweeping general movements, Tocqueville suggests, are always sustained by the actions of individual actors.

Despite his emphasis on individual actors, another puzzle that arises out of Tocqueville’s charges against deterministic history concerns the apparent determinism at the heart of his own account. As we saw in Chapter 2, Tocqueville has been criticized for this ostensible determinism. As we also have seen, Tocqueville makes the case for the inevitability of democracy and he proceeds to show the stages of this motion historically (DA Introduction; 3-15). He also speaks of equality as a determinative cause of the action of human affairs (DA II 1.16; 457). Is Tocqueville guilty of own charges? It is worth recalling the problem in the context of his discussion of history.

As we saw in Chapter 4, Tocqueville’s recourse to the idea of equality as driving the motion of modern political life is intended both to appeal to his audience and to correct the political liabilities of their taste for generalization. Again, his account of

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equality as a driving force behind modern political life appears to be the result of rigorous research on the nature of modern politics: he recognizes a real pattern in human affairs. As we saw in Chapter 2, he also acknowledges his uncertainty about the apparent irreversibility of this pattern. Ultimately, his account is intended to make his readers conscious of the character of modern democracy, while at the same time revealing the subtle ways in which individuals shape and direct its path. In the sense that Tocqueville’s own history of democracy reflects what is true, and at the same time emphasizes the need for individual actions that support democratic liberty, his history does not foster the impression that individuals are impotent within the movement of democratic politics.

Tocqueville says that the central liability of systematic accounts of politics is that they suggest that politics cannot be changed in any way or that the direction of politics is absolute: in this kind of history “each nation is invincibly attached, by its position, its origin, its antecedents, its nature, to a certain destiny that all its efforts cannot change” (DA II 1.20; 471). While Tocqueville himself suggests that the motion of equality in general appears to be overwhelming, he also stresses, as we have seen, that egalitarian regimes can take many shapes. His argument is that the compulsion of equality itself ultimately appears to be too strong for individuals to resist in general, but the shape of democratic politics that is based on that urge is itself malleable and in need of direction and cultivation.

Insofar as his account is intended to persuade reactionaries against attempts at a return to aristocracy, it is also something of a rhetorical overstatement regarding his certainty on the irreversibility of the movement of equality. Although Tocqueville is most
persuaded that equality is an overwhelming movement, he offers qualifications that lead
more probing readers to question the extent of his convictions. The rhetorical nature of
his account and the subtle acknowledgment of his uncertainty lend further weight to his
defense against the charge of determinism.

Having addressed the charge that Tocqueville does injustice to systemic histories,
we are left with a charge from the opposite side, which stresses that Tocqueville fails to
acknowledge the significance of the great man for democratic history. One difficulty that
emerges in this light is that Tocqueville does not appear to account accurately for the
extent to which historians in democracy do, in fact, base their stories on the actions of
powerful and heroic individuals. What would Tocqueville have made of the plethora of
works on the American Founders, for example? What also do we make of Tocqueville’s
near silence on Napoleon? And what would Tocqueville have made of the rise of
Lincoln? Tocqueville appears to have neglected the extent to which individuals can and
do become powerful heroic figures in the democratic age. He also appears to have
neglected a core audience that longs for representations of heroic actions. Is this omission
sound?

Tocqueville’s avoidance of the figure of the great man in democratic political
history might be explained in part by his assessment of the limited number of political
outlets for such figures. He explains this in his chapter entitled “Why One Finds So Many
Ambitious Men in the United States and So Few Great Ambitions” where he argues that

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80 James Poulos, “Usurpation Privatized? Constant and Tocqueville on the Napoleonic Soul,”
while democratic equality makes many individuals eager to rise, the equality of resources makes for very few outlets for great ambition, and hence, stifles great ambitions (DA II 3.18; 599-600). A figure like Abraham Lincoln emerges only by chance. A figure like Napoleon is a possibility that passes once aristocracy has given way to democracy. In part, then, Tocqueville’s avoidance of great figures in democratic history might be explained by his understanding of their unlikely appearance in democratic politics. The most urgent task of democratic historians is to emphasize the more subtle actions of individuals, rather than speculate on great figures that cannot usually be imitated politically.

Yet again, Tocqueville’s silence on the chance emergence of great figures indicates that his lessons on history may be somewhat incomplete. Even if these figures appear in democracy only by chance, their histories are perhaps most important for the times when they do arise. While his account of history may be lacking in this regard, however, there is some evidence that Tocqueville sees the need to educate powerful figures on their conduct in democratic affairs. While he does not advise historians on taking up this task, he does offer some of his own lessons on how such men might conduct themselves as statesmen. As we shall see in the discussion of parliamentary oration below, Tocqueville recognizes something of the power of great orators in the democratic political landscape and the significance of their speeches for guiding the democratic ship of state. If he does not emphasize the need for representing their political

actions as models in history, he does stress the need to understand the influence of their words.

With respect to the need for histories of great political men in democracy, a supplementary account might include lessons like those offered by Machiavelli and Nietzsche, for instance, when they point to the need to write histories for the sake of political imitation. For the times when great or powerful men do arise in democratic history, or when democratic citizens of ambition feel the longing to learn and emulate men like them, Tocqueville’s historians might also do well to learn the art of crafting histories that help to educate the ambitious on the differences between men like Napoleon and men like Lincoln, on the ways in which great historical exemplars can be imitated prudently in democracy, and on the way to direct ambition in democracy.

For what his account lacks in attending to the importance of great figures in democratic history, it nonetheless presents an important teaching on a subtle middle ground of political action—the ground between the motions of mass politics and the orchestrations of great and powerful men. Given the increasingly rare appearance of the great figure in democracy and the temptations of mass history on the part of historians, Tocqueville offers an essential insight into the importance of the small but significant actions of free citizens.

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Newspapers and Free Associations

As Tocqueville emphasizes the importance of retaining a place for individual actions in historical narratives, he also shows how historians who follow his advice might find allies for this task in journalists. As Tocqueville describes it, newspaper journalism gives expression and purpose to civic associations—groups that Tocqueville regards as the bulwarks of democratic freedom (DA II 2.6; 493-494). If individuals are weak and their actions are obscure, and if democratic readers favor mass abstract histories over heroic men, then journalism provides another alternative to both heroic history and mass history that helps to bring into relief the actions of groups and individuals who maintain freedom within democracy.

Again, newspapers hold a special place in the literary sphere in Tocqueville’s view because it is newspaper journalists who are most powerful in moving democratic peoples. As I discuss in the Introduction, Tocqueville does not generally regard journalism as part of the literary sphere proper, but he admits that journalism does have a place in the American literary sphere. When Tocqueville first discusses the absence of a truly American brand of literature, for example, he quickly qualifies his statement by adding: “the only authors I recognize as American are journalists. These are not great writers, but they speak the language of the country and make themselves understood by it” (DA II 1.13; 446). He continues on to say that the literature of early American

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democracy is the literature of parties and that it was Franklin with his pamphlets and printing press who first gave expression to American literature. The writings of journalists in early America help to shape and direct the frenzied motions of the new participatory regime.

Newspapers are essential for maintaining liberty in democracy and, according to Tocqueville, they do this in two ways: first, they provide an alternative to majority opinion (DA I 2.3; 179-180). That is, while newspapers speak to common opinion and common sentiment, they also provide alternative political perspectives. They also draw the mind away from making political judgments based on what is most immediate, that is one’s material or economic circumstances. As Tocqueville says, they draw attention to other considerations than the fact that “you are rich and I am poor” (DA I 2.3; 178-180). In other words, newspapers draw the mind from the observable realm of material well-being as a means of making political distinctions, to the realm of opinions, in which individuals can dispute considerations that extend beyond what they see.

Second, they provide a stronghold for free political action against government encroachment: they provide the organizing principles for associations that use self-rule to execute common goals. According to Tocqueville, newspapers serve this function in both civic and political associations. In civic associations, they plant the seed for common action by giving expression to sentiments that point to the need for common action. They draw attention, for instance to the prospect of associating “to give fête, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to
the antipodes” (DA II 1.5; 489). In so doing, newspapers provide the impetus for organizations that help individuals become self-ruling or free citizens.

In fact, Tocqueville makes the claim that the art of association that journalists guide is the most important kind of learning for democratic self-government:

In democratic centuries the science of association is the mother science; the progress of all the others depends on the progress of that one.

Among the laws that rule human societies there is one that seems more precise and clear than all others. In order that men remain civilized or become so, the art of association must be perfected among them in the same ratio as equality of conditions increases. (DA II 1.5; 492)

Associations help to teach individuals to respect and covet self-rule because it gives them a taste for it. It compels them to learn by experience how self-government is executed effectively.

Tocqueville argues that this kind of education is essential to democratic peoples because it is a primary means of countering individualism in democracy. As discussed in Chapter 1, as individuals become equal and less able to acquire political power, they also tend to withdraw into themselves. Tocqueville suggests that this latter tendency is most dangerous for democracy because it leaves the public realm more vulnerable to the ambitious and renders individuals impotent to countering government encroachment on private affairs. Associations provide an essential realm for educating individuals on the art of resisting by showing them how to organize and mobilize resistance.

Within the science of association, Tocqueville also explains, it is political associations that go farthest in perfecting the science of self-rule. While civic associations initiate the organization of self-ruling communities, political associations, primarily as parties, help to draw individual interests beyond specific concerns, and help individuals
learn the art of political rule at the highest level: they form “almost a separate nation inside the nation, a government inside the government” (DA I 2.4; 181). While the experience of life in democracy points clearly to the need for association, it is more difficult, according to Tocqueville, for individuals to see how they can undertake great political efforts in common. First, then, smaller associations give them a taste for acting in common. When citizens undertake to associate for the sake of political rule, however, they begin to perfect the art of acting in common. For Tocqueville, civil associations “facilitate political associations; but, on the other hand, political association singularly develops and perfects civil association” (DA II 2.7; 496). In other words, political associations perfect the art of self-rule.

The importance of political association for fostering self-rule, as well as the newspapers that guide them to this end, are all the more clear when one recognizes how political associations begin to provide a national forum for education in self rule alongside regional township governments. As I discuss in Chapter 1, in Volume I of Democracy in America, Tocqueville emphasizes the role of New England townships for educating individuals in the art of self-rule. To recall his famous line: "the institutions of the township are to freedom what primary schools are to science" (DA I 1.5; 57). While Tocqueville indicates that townships will remain as institutions that serve this purpose, he also recognizes that the enlarged sphere of national politics will require other forms of association for education in political rule: cities, it seems, cannot serve as the only schools of freedom in a federal republic (cf. DA I 2.4; 181).
Not long after he discusses the value of the township for self-rule, Tocqueville explains the role of newspapers in developing national associations in 1831. Here, he draws the example of the association that formed in South Carolina to oppose federal tariff laws that favored Northern manufacturers. Motivated by a call published in newspapers, a number of delegates traveled from the states to meet at a convention in Philadelphia (DA II 2.4; 183). Although Tocqueville does not mention it, the Southern delegates claimed to have a right to nullify federal laws, and the consequence of their appearance was a compromise between the national government and the states. In drawing attention to this example, Tocqueville indicates that it is political associations rather than townships that begin to help individuals refine and perfect the art of federal rule; for it is these associations that help to clarify the art of federalism. It is also for this reason that later in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville says that political associations can be considered the “great schools, free of charge, where all citizens come to learn the general theory of association” (DA II 2.7; 497). If townships are primary schools, political associations are secondary schools for free government. In the enlarged sphere of the American republic, political associations that can turn from local to national politics become the most essential institutions in educating citizens in the art of free rule.

Newspapers, as the catalysts of associations, contribute to the political efforts toward free government because they give expression to the highest political ends and portray the kinds of actions that individuals must take to maintain liberty within a republic. As they give voice to common sentiments and provide direction for political organization, they also provide narratives regarding the actions of free individuals and
groups within democracy. In is in this sense, they can be understood as allies of historians: they help to draw the mind toward the idea of political action, and show how otherwise weak individuals to gain strength by acting in common.

In addition to offering a relatively optimistic portrait of the role of newspapers for maintaining enclaves of self-rule within democratic politics, Tocqueville closes his account with a darker note on the place of newspapers in public life. He says that the newspaper carries its readers along “the more easily as individuals are weaker” and that “the empire of newspapers should therefore grow as men become equal” (DA II 2.6; 495). If journalism mobilizes groups within democracy for freedom, it can also have a powerful hold on individuals’ minds and can lead to associations that are pernicious rather than a help to public freedom. The art of journalism can be used to mobilize and liberate, or to pacify and equalize: they can encourage actions of self-government or they can pander to majority factions.

Nevertheless, although he recognizes that journalists can mobilize groups in democracy in an undesirable way, Tocqueville ultimately concludes that the benefit of free speech and the free associations that it generates outweigh the pernicious effect of newspaper journalism in democracy (DA II 2.6; 493). For Tocqueville, the risk of individualism is far greater than the risk of associations that turn into pernicious factions. Because both civic and political associations help to teach individuals the art of self-rule and expand thought in the realm of opinion, on the whole, they foster sentiments that help to resist public encroachment on freedom. Peoples with experience in the art of association therefore possess a powerful internal corrective to associations that encroach
on public power. Private individuals, without such experience, however, are ill equipped to counter this power and do not as easily see the importance in doing so.

Tocqueville’s lesson to journalists, then, is that they follow him in understanding which kinds of efforts ought to be advocated for common action, and also for being vigilant against ill-considered common action: for every newspaper that advocates some “inconsiderate undertakings in common,” there ought, ideally, to be a vigilant public response that draws the imagination toward common counter action. As they advocate for common causes, journalists are also advised to continue to illustrate in their narratives on how particular public actions work to counter the threats to democratic freedom that reside in the majority and how political associations preserve liberty within federalism. Newspaper writing is best crafted in light of the goal of retaining healthy liberal democracy through the cultivation of self-ruling communities within it.

Great Speeches and Democratic Freedom

While democratic historians are advised to seek out the subtle actions of individuals in the midst of the motions of democratic politics, and while newspaper journalists are advised to provide narratives that help weak individuals form groups that serve to educate them in the art of free rule, political orators in democracy are advised to put their art in the service of educating democratic peoples as a whole (DA II 1.21; 476). The movement from history to journalism to parliamentary oration is the movement from the free individual, to free groups, to free peoples. The goal of the democratic orator,
then, is to elevate both political associations and private individuals toward the goals of political liberty on a national level. The orator draws individuals and groups away from their parochial interests toward the broader ends of democratic politics.

While Tocqueville’s account of democratic oration culminates in an account of its highest potential, he begins by acknowledging that democratic oration will always have its petty side. In this vein, Tocqueville explains that, typically, democratic politicians will use public speeches to try to garner attention for what are often parochial concerns in order to retain the support of their constituencies. Unlike politicians in aristocratic times, democratic politicians derive their constituencies and they aim to retain support through their speeches (DA II 1.21; 474-475). Because democratic politicians are torn between the need to appeal through speeches to their own constituencies and the wish to make elevated speeches that speak to the country as a whole, democratic oration is a strange mix of issues of general concern—addressed with typical democratic abstractness—and poorly articulated appeals to particular constituencies.

After acknowledging the pitfalls of democratic political oration, however, Tocqueville turns to a more optimistic note to close his discussion of political speeches. In this light, he says, “I see nothing more admirable or more powerful than a great orator discussing great affairs within a democratic assembly. As there is never a class that has charged its representatives with asserting its interests, it is always to the whole nation in the name of the whole nation that one speaks. That enlarges thought and elevates language” (DA II 1.21; 476). For Tocqueville, the democratic orator has the task of directing the nation in its highest pursuits. Most often, this means helping it in pursuits
that serve to ensure that democracy remains liberal democracy. It is in pointing out this elevating and enlarging aim of the democratic orator that Tocqueville offers his teaching on the great man in democracy.

Returning to a recurrent theme, Tocqueville explains that the primary challenge for democratic orators is that they must speak about the nature of men and politics in general terms. General terms are the favored mode of democratic oration because of the paucity of traditional narratives. According to Tocqueville, “as precedents have little dominion…the mind is obliged to go back to general verities drawn from human nature in order to treat the particular affair that occupies it” (DA II 1.21; 476). Thus, the democratic orator addresses “the question of man, who is at the same everywhere” (DA II 1.21; 476). In answering the question of man, the public orator paints a general portrait of human nature and politics. In painting in broad strokes the democratic orator possesses the same liabilities of the historian with respect to the significance of free actions in the wide world of democratic political life. The portrait of man in politics that the democratic orator paints, then, has the power either to illuminate or to mask the actions of self-ruling individuals. How he draws attention to the actions and nature of individual citizens relation to politics determines whether he is a great orator.

When Tocqueville describes the greatness of democratic oration, he indicates that he recognizes the potential—and indeed the need—for great orators in democracy. It is only by chance that Tocqueville was not able to draw on Lincoln’s example. In the spirit of Tocqueville’s foresight, let us conclude with an illustration of Lincoln as a democratic orator who succeeded in using his speeches for the sake of perpetuating liberal
democracy in the face of the most vulnerable times for it: after the passing of the
founding generation, during a civil war, and during reunification after a civil war. To this
end: let us turn to Lincoln’s Address to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois,
his Gettysburg Address, and his Second Inaugural Address.

Lincoln as Democratic Orator

While I will not undertake an extensive interpretation of these speeches here, I
will draw attention to a number of features of them that best illustrate Tocqueville’s
account of the democratic orator.

The Lyceum Address

In the Lyceum Address, Lincoln speaks of the perpetuation of political institutions
following the passing of the revolutionary generation. Echoing an idea of Tocqueville’s,
Lincoln suggests that the difficulty of preserving American institutions is not a matter of
protecting them from an outward enemy, but rather, of strengthening them in the face of
internal political unrest (cf. (DA II 1.10; 438). To illustrate his point, Lincoln draws
attention to particular examples: mob hangings in Mississippi and St. Louis.\textsuperscript{84} Lincoln
go on to explain that mob lynchings illustrate the danger of a certain brand of majority
tyranny, what he calls the “mobocratic spirit.” For Lincoln, the mobocratic spirit

\textsuperscript{84} Abraham Lincoln, “Address to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois,” ed. Don E.
Fehrenbacher, in \textit{Lincoln: Selected Speeches and Writings} (New York: First Vintage Books/Library of
undermines the rule of law because it weakens veneration for the laws and therefore leaves them more vulnerable to violation. As a corrective to increasing disregard for the laws, Lincoln rallies his audience to revere the laws as sacred—that is, he famously calls for the laws to form the core of a “new political religion.”

Lincoln also strives to educate his audience on the status of the laws and makes the case that even bad laws ought to be religiously observed. In the case of a bad law, Lincoln argues, it is not the law in itself that is the problem, but the particular content of the law. In making his argument, Lincoln draws his audience’s attention from a particular experience, to a general and elevated political principle essential to a constitutional regime: respect for rule of law itself. In so doing, Lincoln demonstrates Tocqueville’s lesson that the democratic orator at his best helps to elevate and enlarge the thought of his people with respect to the ideas essential to preserving liberty within democracy. In this case, Lincoln educates his listeners on ideas essential to constitutional democracy.

From here, Lincoln explains how reverence for the laws is the only protection against the ambitious. He suggests that though the institutions themselves will not allow for the rise of a Caesar or Alexander—such men are innovators: “towering genius disdains a beaten path”—without the strength of a people who are “united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent” they will not prevent the rise of such men. Lincoln also says that such men will thirst and burn for

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distinction “whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving free men.” In making this latter point, Lincoln suggests most significantly that democratic citizens ought to remain vigilant in their regard for the laws in either case: even those who burn for distinction for the cause of emancipation ought to be checked and channeled by the laws. The only preventative against the ambitious man who would enslave others is vigilance for the laws that restrain the ambitious of all kinds. Lincoln thus strives to preserve reverence for the laws rather than for particular rulers. The status of the great statesman depends not simply on whether his ambition is for just ends, but also on whether he recognizes the means for perpetuating political justice beyond his own time and can express this teaching to those over whom he rules.

In Tocqueville’s sense, Lincoln exemplifies the great orator because he educates his listeners on the means for perpetuating liberal democracy against the threat of the tyranny of the majority and the lawlessness of the ambitious. Insofar as Tocqueville does not offer an extensive teaching on the ambitious within democracy, Lincoln’s remarks on the liabilities of both just and unjust ambition can serve as a complement to Tocqueville’s thought. Lincoln shows how ambition manifests itself in democracy—that is, as a Caesar or as a Lincoln—and he demonstrates by way of his own example how ambition can be brought into the service of perpetuating free institutions. Lincoln shows how one can challenge the ambitious to work to sustain human freedom not only for a single lifetime, but for posterity.

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87 Lincoln, “Young Men’s Lyceum,” 17
Lincoln’s closing lesson of the Lyceum Address concerns the need to renew the support for political liberty following the passing of the revolutionary generation. He stresses that the older generation sustained America’s experiment in liberal democracy by means of the vengeful fervor that it had against the British and through the living histories in families that recalled directly the actions of the revolutionaries themselves. Here, Lincoln says that both the living histories of the families of the revolutionary generation and vengefulness toward the British have been lost, so these experiences are no longer effective supports for liberty. Hence, new supports for liberty must be erected. To this end, Lincoln argues that not vengeance and memories of war, but sober mindedness and cold reason are the best supports for liberty in the new generation. Cool minded and industrious people are better able to reap the benefits of the peaceful regime and fertile landscape they will shortly reacquire. Like Tocqueville, Lincoln stresses the need for private self-rule and the peaceful virtues as a foundation for democratic self-government. He strives to correct the revolutionary passions and the passions of the mob with a sober and rational love of the constitution and the rule of law. In drawing the minds of his listeners toward a reverence for the rule of law and rational self-government, again, Lincoln demonstrates how the democratic statesman uses public oration to educated and reorient his people.

The Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural

In the Gettysburg Address Lincoln turns to the task of strengthening the principles of liberal government in the face of the Civil War and emphasizes the need to return to
the country’s origins to renew the political bond that generated it. To this end, he turns back to the Declaration of Independence and recalls the common cause shared amongst the ancestors of those fighting the war. As he alludes to those who fought for independence, he also suggests that those who fight for the Union fight in particular to preserve the nation as a self-governing entity. He stresses that the prospect of preserving this self-governing entity—for preserving free government—rests on a renewal of the original principles of the Declaration. In calling for a return to original principles, Lincoln illustrates the democratic orator’s task of educating his audience on the significance of principles for sustaining liberal government.

Through the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln continues to offer his audience lessons on democratic political principles. Insofar as Lincoln’s lessons on principles in the Gettysburg Address and in the Second Inaugural pertain to the principles of the Declaration in particular, his reflections can also serve to supplement Tocqueville’s lessons on the principles requisite to liberal democracy. As I discuss in Chapter 1, while Tocqueville too emphasizes the need to retain political principles for sustaining liberal democracy (he names the concept of rights in particular), he is silent on the principles of the Declaration. Insofar as Lincoln emphasizes the importance of the principles of the Declaration for sustaining liberal democracy in the United States following the Civil War his speeches help us to fill in Tocqueville’s teaching on the principles integral to liberal democracy in the United States.

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In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln also moves from particular interests to elevated principles. He begins by acknowledging the conflicting interests of both sides of the Civil War. Specifically, he says that all knew that the interests of Southerners for maintaining slavery were “somehow, the cause of the war.” Yet he also tells his listeners that at least initially, the interests of the South could have been preserved because at the outset “the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of [slavery].” Lincoln thus suggests that to a certain point, the South could have preserved its interests within the Union and that originally the war was not one about an irresolvable conflict of principle.

From here, Lincoln acknowledges that if the war began as a struggle of interests that might have been reconciled within the bounds of the Union, it became a battle over a principle concerning slavery, and that as it became a war about principle, the two sides could not be reconciled. Somewhat surprisingly, Lincoln does not simply justify opposition to the South on the basis of the principles of the Declaration, the principles that he had invoked in the Gettysburg Address. He goes on to suggest that the conquest of the South is justified not simply for the sake of preserving free institutions, but by the Providence of God. By invoking God’s Providence as the justification of the conquest of the South, Lincoln aims to renew the Union on new footing: there is no longer room for questions or compromise regarding the principles of the Declaration. In other words, by invoking God’s Providence in his defense of the Civil War, Lincoln strives to compel

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consensus on the principles of the Declaration in order to renew American democracy on the foundation of an unquestioned principle.

In so doing, Lincoln echoes Tocqueville’s depiction of the movement toward political equality. As writers and statesmen, Lincoln and Tocqueville both saw the need to sanctify democratic political equality in order to subvert the advancement of slavery. Both also saw democratic equality as the most just political arrangement before them, and for its goodness and justice, thought it fitting to associate it with divine things. Lincoln, like Tocqueville before him, depicts democracy as providential in an effort to provide his audience with a starting point for establishing political justice in the modern world.

Conclusion

It is orators like Lincoln that Tocqueville has in mind when he claims that the great orator in democracy as a most admirable thing (DA II 1.21; 476). It is the nobility of the great orator that helps to refine and redirect democratic peoples to a self-understanding that supports self-rule. Alongside the orator, journalists and historians also redirect democratic audiences toward the political forms, group ends, and individual actions that preserve liberty on all levels of democratic political life. Tocqueville’s aim in describing the pitfalls of orators, journalists, and historians is to help to ensure that they do not stray from this end. When historians are tempted to look at broad motions and ignore the subtle actions of individuals, when journalists advance causes of self-interested groups, and when orators turn from high aims to petty concerns, Tocqueville advises
them to return to the path of clarifying the political course of liberty in democracy. As Lincoln’s vigilance against the urges of mob rule, self-interest, slavery, and vengeance attest, the task of redirection and reorientation toward the goal of liberty is perpetually necessary.
CONCLUSION

As we have seen, through his lessons on the literary sphere, it is Tocqueville’s intention to offer corrective lessons to intellectuals and democratic peoples on the new liabilities and prospects of intellectual life in democracy. Tocqueville offers his lessons both by way of critique and by way of example, and it is through both of these means that he aims to reform the state of letters for democracy. By revisiting the components of Tocqueville’s critique and offering some final considerations on how Tocqueville’s own written efforts are integral to his task, we can see the foundational outline of the new literary realm that he strives to establish for the democratic world.

As we saw in Chapter 1, one of Tocqueville’s first goals is to change the relation between intellectuals and political men. To do so he advises intellectuals on their new powers in democracy, and suggests to them that theorizing, particularly political theorizing, ought to be informed by practice. Tocqueville thus urges the opening of the political realm to intellectual ambition, and, encourages intellectuals whose ambitions tend toward the political realm to engage directly with politics. In short, Tocqueville’s first goal is to establish a new relation between intellectual life and political life wherein intellectual ambition is put in the service of politics and is moderated and refined by political experience.

This effort is a reflection of Tocqueville’s understanding of the distinctness and complementary nature of the art of rule and the craft of writing about politics. According
to Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, and as Tocqueville himself revealed in an 1852 lecture, Tocqueville identified political science with the craft of writing and distinguished it from the art of rule. As Tocqueville shows by his example, the writer of political science draws out the essence of particular political experiences and “gives birth or forms to the general ideas of society out of which emerge particular facts and laws.” Those who govern, on the other hand, deal with particular facts and laws and navigate the particular experiences that educate theoretical and political men alike. For Tocqueville, the one who is great at political science or the art of writing political theory is not necessarily great at the art of rule, but each is essential to the refinement of the other. As Mansfield and Winthrop note, “for all of the opposition between governing and writing, Tocqueville was always unusually detached for a politician, and unusually engaged for a philosopher.”

As we have seen, Tocqueville’s own political science is informed by a rigorous survey of particulars, and his generalities are intended to reshape politics on the ground. As Françoise Mélonio explains, Tocqueville intended both *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime* to “use words to influence people.” Emphasizing the French perspective, Melonio argues that Tocqueville took it as his goal to “clear a path for the future legislator—the future French legislator—whose mission is to bring the Revolution to an

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91 Tocqueville, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Democracy in America*, xxiii.
end and establish a well regulated democracy. In part, Tocqueville wished to contribute to the art of ruling in his own particular context through his writing. More broadly, and in light of his recognition of a universal political science, Tocqueville also wished for his writing to pave the way for legislators who would give political order to the emerging democratic world.

Tocqueville’s experientially grounded research thus points toward paths of political action. Looking at his written works, one sees that these paths of action focus on political and social orders, like those of which he spoke in his 1852 lecture, which help to illuminate the undesirable urges of democratic peoples and point to the need for political institutions that correct and check them. Tocqueville points to the basic need for democratic institutions by developing concepts, like ,“the tyranny of the majority,” that help to illuminate democratic ailments, and to constitutional and legal institutions, like the American Constitution, that work to correct them.

As we saw in Chapter 2, Tocqueville wrestled with the extent to which his political theory would draw on the aristocratic literary tradition and particularly on the classical tradition for understanding democracy. In addition to reformulating the relation between theory and practice for democracy, Tocqueville also suggests a new relation between traditional political thought and his new experiential political thought. On the one hand, Tocqueville recognizes the possibility that new solutions and ideas will be

required to speak to the needs of the democratic age; on the other hand, he comes to understand the unique character of modern democracy in and through his familiarity with political tradition and classical works. As he recognizes the need for new political theory to speak to the unique problems that he observes, he also sees the need to return to tradition that helps to elucidate the new political problems of democracy. Correcting the inclination to turn away from tradition, Tocqueville develops a new kind of political tradition that recalls the old tradition for understanding the novelty of the present.

As he observes the new intellectual realm that unfolds in democracy, Tocqueville also sees the need to correct both the intellectual leanings of democratic citizens and the new theories of modern intellectuals that are generated by democratic political experience. As we saw in Chapter 3, Tocqueville is cautious about the new kinds of intellectual habits that democracy fosters and with Enlightenment theories that further augment these habits. Broadly, Tocqueville seeks to refine two prominent ideas: progress and materialism. With respect to progress, Tocqueville reformulates the public understanding of the sweeping movement of democracy. Instead of conceiving democracy as an incorrigible unfolding of historical forces, Tocqueville wishes for his audience to recognize democracy as both providential and as something that needs to be refined and directed. He recognizes the overwhelming power of democratic advancement, but also wishes to render political advancement in a manner that fosters active political support for liberal institutions rather than resignation toward egalitarianism.

Aside from correcting the progressive understanding of democracy, Tocqueville sees also that scientific theories will have a formidable influence on the character of
intellectual life. As he observes the influence of enlightenment theories in Europe and the character of thought in America, he also presents an important teaching on the new liabilities of popular science in democracy. Specifically, Tocqueville aims also to refine the understanding of scientific progress and materialism. Like his stance toward democratic progress, Tocqueville embraces science and urges his audience not to take its advancement for granted. He also strives to show those hostile to science how it is instrumental to modern prosperity, and enlists them in the task of critiquing and directing it rather than rejecting or resisting it. Tocqueville cautions in particular against the potential for materialistic ideas to overshadow immaterial and metaphysical alternatives. He thus stresses the importance of retaining philosophical and religious ideas that draw the mind beyond materialism. Tocqueville’s new intellectual tradition emphasizes the need for corrective oppositions: between spiritualism and materialism; progressivism and tradition; liberty and equality; and democracy and aristocracy.

The primary means by which he delivers these oppositions is, of course, his written work. As we saw in Chapter 4, Tocqueville also makes use of a number of specific general concepts that capture the most dominant urges of modern democracy. Through his critique of general concepts and his own illustrative use of them, Tocqueville helps his readers become conscious of their egalitarian tendencies and enlists them in the project of refining them. He reveals to his democratic readers their inclination to become resigned to the compelling motion of democracy without discriminating between alternative egalitarian regimes, and he helps them to see that if democracy and aristocracy are in opposition, democracy and natural meritocracy are not. By drawing attention to
both the character of the democratic movement and the potential pitfalls of it, he helps his readers develop ideas for understanding the political requisites to liberal democracy.

In Chapter 5 we saw that Tocqueville extends his literary lessons by offering a critique of some of the most prominent images of democratic life as they appear in poetic works. There, Tocqueville cautions his readers against the loss of the individual in pantheistic accounts of democratic peoples. While Tocqueville appears to neglect some of the early American literature that focuses on the actions of individuals, he nonetheless helps us to see one of the greatest pitfalls of democratic literature: its emphasis on the commonality of peoples without regard for their distinct characters, experiences, and—most importantly—their social and political actions. Recognizing that the hero of aristocratic literature will fade, Tocqueville challenges writers to develop characters that demonstrate the nobility of the individual in democracy without relying exclusively on the model of the aristocratic hero.

He also offers a caution against works that seek simply to move the passions and fail to appeal to reason. Tocqueville recognizes that democratic drama in particular appeals to the passions and tends to distort and exaggerate human experience. In this, Tocqueville agrees with Rousseau, who also argued that playwrights are most guilty of favoring passion over logos. As a result of his stance toward theatre, Tocqueville offers his most constructive criticism in his discussions of works that are read, and are therefore more likely to be placed under the scrutiny of reason. In general, Tocqueville encourages critics who stress rational coherence and literary realism, and favors works that lend themselves to rational critique.
In his final lessons on the literary arts in democracy, Tocqueville turns to political writing that addresses the challenges of political action. In his lessons on history, newspaper journalism, and parliamentary oration, his overwhelming emphasis is on the need to establish a concrete vision of actions that sustain liberty—liberty of individuals, groups, and the political body as a whole—in democracy. Following his argument on poetic writing, Tocqueville emphasizes the need for historians and journalists to rise to the challenge of displaying the politically significant actions of individuals that appear between the realms of the great aristocratic hero and the democratic mass. The new democratic heroes of liberty are less powerful and illustrious than the aristocratic hero, but such figures are most essential to fostering a regime that generates self-ruling individuals and communities who balance the justice of equality with the justice of merit.

In his closing remarks on the literary sphere, Tocqueville reveals how the political orator in democracy, in his highest capacity, has the task of educating citizens on the idea of liberty and the institutions that sustain it. This figure—a figure who draws on all of Tocqueville’s literary lessons—offers to his listeners an appropriate interpretation of the idea of liberty, while at the same time bringing into relief the most needful interpretation of this idea for the circumstances of his time. As we saw with the example of Lincoln, the great democratic orator bridges the gap between democratic theory and democratic statesmanship by expanding the minds of his listeners and helping them to see the particular actions necessary for resisting threats to liberal institutions. In a Tocquevillean spirit, Lincoln strives to inculcate in his audience a new reverence for liberal institutions.
Buttressing the principles of liberty and equality with the narrative of Providence, 
Lincoln demonstrates the literary statesmanship that Tocqueville envisions.

Indeed, perhaps as much as the words of Lincoln, the words of Tocqueville
resonate in our ears. His concepts make frequent appearances in our political speeches
and written works, and appear ubiquitously in our classrooms. It has been my intention to
show that through his literary efforts Tocqueville aims not only to guide the institutions
of democracy, but also to shape the realm of ideas. In his analysis of this realm,
Tocqueville helps us to understand that our literary traditions and intellectual activities do
as much to shape our self-understanding as do our political institutions. Through his
critique of the literary sphere and through his conceptual contributions to it, Tocqueville
helps us to develop our ability to reason about liberal democratic politics. In so doing, he
provides us with the means for sustaining a regime of self-ruling, that is, truly free
people.
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