

5: Tocqueville's Religious Dread: Political Grandeur and the Democratic Empire of Utility

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When I conceive a democratic society of this kind, I fancy myself in one of those low, close, and gloomy abodes where the light which breaks in from without soon faints and fades away. A sudden heaviness overpowers me, and I grope through the surrounding darkness to find an opening that will restore me to the air and the light of day.

—Alexis de Tocqueville

The world, it is true, appears to me to march less and less toward the greatness I had imagined.

—Alexis de Tocqueville

Alexis de Tocqueville had a very broad understanding of “poetry,” which he described as “the search for and depiction of the ideal.”¹ Poetry, on his view, was antithetical to the mere “representation of reality,” because it transcends the empirically given and aims to depict an elevated and enhanced spiritual significance. In democratic ages traditional poetic devotion to transcendental ideals undergoes a radical change. In these contexts, with their pervasive “love of physical pleasure, self-improvement, [and] competition,” individuals become enthralled by the practical and profane needs of daily life. The imagination is “not snuffed out,” Tocqueville writes, but “it devotes itself almost entirely to the idea of what is useful and to the portrayal of reality.”² Rather than look to the heavens or to the ancient past, “the traditional springs of poetry,” democracy draws the imagination to “man himself,” but man stripped of personal qualities and characteristics. Democracies

focus the imagination on impersonal masses of people working to improve their material well being—“draining marshes, diverting rivers, peopling open spaces, and taming nature.” Such “magnificent images” of social improvement—which, Tocqueville observes, “ever float before the minds” of nineteenth-century American democrats—have distinctive advantages.³ Through them, democracies may come to “have a clearer perception of themselves” because in such images “for the first time in broad daylight the features of humankind are revealed.” “I have no need to traverse heaven and earth,” Tocqueville proclaimed, “to uncover a wondrous object full of contrast, of infinite greatness and smallness, of intense gloom and astounding light, capable at the same time of exciting piety, admiration, scorn and terror. I need only contemplate myself.” The aesthetic orientation of democracy, Tocqueville argues, leads the popular imagination to seek out immanent sources of sublime experience. Even though preoccupied with utility and material reality, democratic poetry does not lead to a knowing transparency, but to ongoing encounters with inner obscurity, “buried in impenetrable darkness,” that propel democratic peoples onward toward the ever-receding horizon of self-knowledge.⁴

Tocqueville’s reflections on the democratic sources of poetry are part of his larger search for immanent and worldly sources of sublime experience, and of his extended argument concerning the importance of the elevating aesthetic experiences they engender for helping offset what he perceived to be the most dangerous tendencies of democratic politics.⁵ Another important part of that search and extended argument can be found in his frequent invocation of “grandeur” and his diagnosis of its disappearance in the pervasive materialism and

utilitarianism of the democratic age. “In the modern era,” Tocqueville wrote in a letter to Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, “it seems as though the imagination of grandeur is dying out.”⁶ Without a sense of elevated grandeur, Tocqueville argued, political life would be overwhelmed by social interest, individuals would be drawn into the increasingly narrow purview of their material needs, and the people, “properly so-called,” would become a mere population. Tocqueville’s embrace of political grandeur, heroic agency, and “true political passions” distinguished him from many other prominent French liberals of the nineteenth century—perhaps most obviously from François Guizot and the Doctrinaires. This embrace illuminates some of the most distinctive aspects of his political thought, shedding light on what Roger Boesche calls Tocqueville’s “strange” and even “anti-bourgeois” liberalism.⁷ As French liberalism emerged in response to both the Jacobin Terror and Napoleonic dictatorship, it sought in various ways to desubliminate and disenchant the political realm, to free it from its logic of sacrifice and its sense of the sacred and sublime.⁸ Despite the many differences between them, such prominent figures as Benjamin Constant and Germaine de Staël, François Guizot and Jean-Baptiste Say, all agreed that post-Revolutionary France should at last disenthral itself of the grandiosity of Rome and turn its attention to the more prosaic aspects of good governance, public policy, and sound administration. Tocqueville, by contrast, argued that an elevated aesthetic sensibility was as essential for democratic politics as it had been for the absolute monarchy he disdained (while also being terrified by the radical democratic sublime unleashed by the Revolution). This chapter focuses on Tocqueville’s efforts to wrestle with these issues.

Tocqueville's affirmation of political grandeur is conceptually linked to his understanding of political freedom and of the threats posed to freedom in the democratic age. Tocqueville's theory of political freedom, widely acknowledged to be at the center of his political thought, is entangled, in other words, with his less-frequently examined political aesthetics.⁹ It is a mistake to reduce Tocqueville's commitment to political grandeur to a mere aristocratic preference or personal whim.¹⁰ It did not merely spring from his "taste for the aristocratic way of life."¹¹ The grandeur of free action, properly understood, plays a structural role in Tocqueville's political thought, and may bring into order and coherence some troubling aspects of his political theory that have been too quickly dismissed by some admiring liberal readers as unfortunate inconsistencies or anachronistic commitments to the values of a lost aristocratic age. Tocqueville's commitment to political grandeur is not a sad "remnant of his almost dead aristocratic sensibilities," but a central aspect of his political thinking, which, far from being merely an illiberal embarrassment, may help confirm the depth of his much-celebrated political analysis of democracy.¹² These troubling aspects of Tocqueville's political thought bring his work into productive conversation with some contemporary critics of democratic liberalism—on both the Frankfurt School left, for example, and the Straussian right—who worry about liberalism's low-sighted politics: its focus on interests, negative liberties, instrumental rationality, security, and the preservation of "mere life." As we saw with Burke in Chapter Two, Tocqueville feared the political consequences of a world without enchantment, and hoped to restore

something of the *mysterium tremendum* to political life.¹³ Grandeur was one of his key idioms for invoking that restoration.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first I outline Tocqueville's understanding of the threat democracy poses to freedom in the modern age. I will emphasize, in particular, the "religious dread" (*terreur religieuse*) Tocqueville experienced when confronted with democracy's irresistible subsumption of meaningful action into the undirected tendencies of oceanic mass aggregates. As with many other nineteenth-century political and social theorists, Tocqueville's preoccupation with the decline of the heroic actor is symptomatic of a larger concern with the fate of human agency in the modern age. One of the central ironies animating Tocqueville's social and political thought was that the very age that promised to finally empower the people as makers of their own history, and to bring the vicissitudes of social life under democratic control, ultimately engendered pervasive anxiety about the weakness, isolation, and political incapacity of human beings. For Tocqueville, the Promethean hubris of the Age of Democratic Revolution ultimately collapsed into a pervasive sense of deadening ennui and paralyzing enervation.¹⁴

In the second section I elaborate on this the relationship between Tocqueville's anxieties concerning agency and what Susan Buck-Morss, following Walter Benjamin, describes as the "anaesthetics" of political modernity.¹⁵ Tocqueville was disgusted by what he described as the "apoplectic torper" and "grievous numbness" of his age. He argued that the liberal democratic politics of interest and utility, with their all-consuming "passion for material well-being,"

threatened to drain the political realm of its vitality and significance, thereby creating the conditions for unprecedented forms of centralized state despotism. These are familiar themes in the political theory scholarship on Tocqueville. However, rather than focus primarily on Tocqueville's concerns with individualism and the emergence of the tutelary state in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, I will turn to Tocqueville's correspondence during the July Monarchy and his writing on French colonialism. These texts emphasize Tocqueville's commitment to combatting the "grievous numbness" of political modernity through a bracing restoration of political vitality and grandeur. This section examines Tocqueville's efforts to sustain a heroic vision of the political sublime in the face of what he perceived to be the decadence and leveling mediocrity of democratic liberalism. Many commentators have focused on the elevating role of religion in Tocqueville's work, but alongside his insistence on the moral elevation that comes with a commitment to the sacred is a consistent insistence on the political importance of the elevating grandeur of public acts.¹⁶ Indeed, Tocqueville's tendency to invoke grandeur rather than glory, arguably suggests not only his ambivalence in the face of the more exclusively martial associations of the latter, but perhaps also a wariness of glory's theological and liturgical entanglements.¹⁷ These aspects of Tocqueville's work are in obvious tension with his liberal constitutionalism, and they bring his political thought within the orbit of some of the radical and reactionary critics of nineteenth century democratic liberalism with whom he is otherwise rightly opposed.¹⁸ Pierre Manent has argued that Tocqueville's political philosophy is structured by the tension between justice (rule

of law, separation of powers, constitutionalism) and grandeur (heroic agency, distinction, glory).¹⁹ The second section examines some of the textures of this animating tension.

In the final section I turn to Tocqueville's *Recollections* on the revolution of 1848. At the center of this discussion is an evaluation of Sheldon Wolin's claim that, in his writing on 1848, Tocqueville denied the people's collective acts of any grandeur, and, therefore, of any sense of heroic agency.²⁰ The claim, simply put, is that there are no collective heroes in Tocqueville's political theory. The hardening of Tocqueville's political conservatism after the June Days—which he infamously described as a “slave's war”—is widely recognized.²¹ However, unlike Wolin, who argues that in the *Recollections* Tocqueville's political ideology trumps his own theoretical consistency, I will argue that Tocqueville's “denial of the deed” to a mobilized collective actor is wholly consistent when read alongside his aesthetic concerns regarding liberal democracy's empire of utility. Tocqueville denies the collective actor of 1848—the revolutionary people—any sense of sublime grandeur because he understands the revolution to be the collective expression of the very passion for material well being that he invoked grandeur to combat in the first place (in this, his analysis of the June insurrection, in particular, has surprising parallels with that of Marx). The people are denied the sublimity of their heroic acts for the same reason they are denied agency; they act out of all-consuming need and material interest, and therefore, in Tocqueville's strong sense, could be said to not *act* at all.

The chapter ends with a conclusion—unfinished in this draft—which traces continuities between, first, Tocqueville’s analysis of democratic liberalism’s empire of utility and Hannah Arendt’s account of “the rise of the social,” and, second, between his responding affirmation of political grandeur and Arendt’s efforts to aestheticize action in order to restore dignity to the public realm overwhelmed by instrumental rationality anchored to incessant demands of the laboring body. Tocqueville and Arendt offer parallel aesthetic arguments, I want to ultimately claim, about the need for immanent sources of sublime experience to salvage the dignity of the political and to restore the lost “splendour of the public realm.”²²

I.

Tocqueville’s political theory is addressed to what he once described as “the great democratic revolution” of his time.²³ He shared a widespread belief that an entirely new form of democratic politics emerged in the nineteenth century, and that, therefore, “a new political science is needed for a totally new world.”²⁴ While Tocqueville shared the century’s pervasive sense of political novelty, he rejected the revolutionary self-understanding of that novelty. The French people may have undertaken an “unprecedented effort” in 1789 “to divorce themselves from their past and to put an abyss between what they were and what they were to become,” but they profoundly misrecognized the nature of the change that was enacted over those years.²⁵ As François Furet has emphasized, Tocqueville denied the revolutionaries the validity of their most cherished belief: the faith in their own collective capacity to make the world anew. “No consciousness is more ideological,” Furet asserts, “than that of the revolutionaries,” and for him it was Tocqueville who

most clearly recognized that the history of the Revolution must break first and foremost with “the conscious experience of the actors of the Revolution.”²⁶

By rejecting the revolutionaries’ inflated understanding of their own agency Tocqueville punctured the hegemonic “discourse of the radical break” with its related idea that “democratic politics had come to decide the fate of individuals and peoples.”²⁷ Tocqueville sought to disenchant his contemporaries of what Furet called the “revolutionary catechism,” which Pierre Rosanvallon has more recently described as “the radical project of a self-instituted society,” the “guiding light of a certain radicalism” that reverberates across the nineteenth century and views “politics as pure action, the unmediated expression of a directly perceptible will.”²⁸ It was the spectacle of this “radical project of a self-instituted society” that engendered the immanent sense of the democratic sublime discussed in the previous chapter. Furet and Rosanvallon are right that Tocqueville took a dim view of the “wholly new” idea that “man was not only conscious of the history he was making, but also knew that he was saved or condemned in and by that history.”²⁹

Tocqueville recoiled at the Jacobin’s effort to make political action “totally encompass the world of value and become the meaning of life,” but the Jacobin attempt to absorb the sacred into the immanent realm of human action was not as wholly antithetical to Tocqueville’s political thought as some of his admirers claim. To properly understand Tocqueville’s rejection of the world-making capacities of the popular will we must also attend to his central preoccupation with the disappearance of political agency in the democratic age. In *Metahistory* Hayden White argued that Tocqueville’s historical writing was structured by the trope of

irony, and surely one of the most central ironies of his political thought was that the very era that promised to at last bring human agency and autonomy to an equal mankind, freeing man from the bondage to tradition and submission to the sacred, actually threatened individuals with the eradication of meaningful agency and unprecedented forms of domination.³⁰ In a late letter to Arthur de Gobineau, whose very different views on these matters often provoked Tocqueville to succinct and clarifying formulations, Tocqueville wrote of the enervated exhaustion that followed in the wake of the Revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848: “After having felt ...capable of transforming ourselves, we now feel incapable of reforming ourselves; after having excessive pride, we have fallen into excessive self-pity; we thought we could do everything, and now we think we can do nothing; we like to think that struggle and effort are henceforth useless and that our blood muscles and nerves will always be stronger than our will power and courage. This,” he concluded, “is really the great sickness of our age.”³¹

Tocqueville’s concern with the “accelerating sensation of human powerlessness” is expressed in myriad ways across his work, from the notes taken during his trip to America in 1831 to his extensive correspondence with Gobineau in the years before his death, and in all of his great works of social and political theory written in between.³² Tocqueville’s fear that democracy and the emerging equality of social conditions threatened “to banish men from the history of the human race” frames the introduction to the first volume of *Democracy in America*, and is the theme Tocqueville returns to in the conclusion of the second.³³ “The whole book in front of the reader,” he famously writes, “has been written under the pressure of a

kind of religious dread exercised upon the soul of the author by the sight of this irresistible revolution which has progressed over so many centuries, surmounting all obstacles, and which is still advancing today amid the ruins it has caused.”³⁴ Tocqueville’s sense of “religious dread” is engendered from the historical spectacle of evacuated agency, of everyone being “driven willy nilly along the same road, everyone joining the common cause, some despite themselves others unwittingly, all of them like blind instruments in the hands of God.”³⁵ For Tocqueville, it was the spectacle of democracy’s “irresistible” movement toward equality—indicated by such historically disparate events as the Crusades, the invention of firearms and the printing press, the Reformation and the discovery of America—that provoked his sense of religious dread, his sense of an overpowering force in history akin to Providence but without plan and proceeding without the conscious intent or deliberation of actors human or divine. As the “most sustained longstanding and permanent development ever found in history,” Tocqueville’s response to democracy’s emergence turns on the fact that even as democracy “highlights the natural grandeur of man,” it overwhelms entirely the grandeur of men.³⁶

Religious dread is a political affect that resonates broadly in Tocqueville’s work.³⁷ If the democratic sublime was engendered by the spectacle of the people taking history collectively into their own hands, and especially through the manifestation of will in popular assembly, Tocqueville invoked religious dread to describe the experience of massive historical change unfolding inexorably without a deliberate agent, plan, or intention. What fills Tocqueville with religious dread is not the radical *rupture* proclaimed by the Revolution—he is not overcome by what

Frank Ankersmit describes as the sublime spectacle of an event that “irrevocably breaks the continuity of identity”—but by the disappearance of human agency and “the event” from history all together, by the sublimation of the qualitative act into a mass aggregate of quantitative effects.³⁸ Tocqueville’s religious dread is linked to the oceanic feeling associated with the sublime, and in his letters he likened the political experience of his century as being lost on a “stormy sea without a shore.”³⁹ In contrast with the revolutionary myth of a self-creating sovereign people, Tocqueville argued that democracy was, in Wolin’s words, “threatening to squelch what is rare, unique and different...and creating a world of ‘silent empty spaces.’”⁴⁰ “The unbroken aspect” and “uniformity” of these scenes of inexorable democratic advance, Tocqueville observed, “surprise and overwhelm the imagination.”⁴¹

For Tocqueville, democracy did not threaten contemporary politics with the specter of permanent revolution, as so many of his fellow aristocrats feared, but rather with deadening stasis. He rejected the classical critique of democratic polities, with its emphasis on tumultuous change and political inconsistency, a regime lurching violently between political extremes and never able to establish the procedural regularities necessary for establishing the rule of law. Tocqueville’s fear, to the contrary, was that democracies “will end up being too unalterably fixed in the same institutions, the same prejudices, the same customs...that the mind of man may stop moving forward and grind to a halt, that man will wear himself out in lonely futile triviality, and that humanity will cease to progress despite its ceaseless motion.”⁴²

Tocqueville's understanding of the simultaneity of "ceaseless motion" and paralyzing inaction reflects his concern with the disappearance of the hero in democratic contexts, a concern he shares with many other nineteenth-century political thinkers, from Carlyle and Emerson to Burckhardt and Nietzsche. As Richard Boyd has argued, Tocqueville had a much more ambivalent relationship to the Napoleonic myth of the hero than did other prominent nineteenth-century French liberals, and was drawn to the "ideals of grandeur, heroism, power, conquest, and national greatness represented by the First Empire."⁴³ Perhaps Tocqueville's most elaborate reflection on the dangers of evacuated heroic agency is the chapter from *Democracy* on the "Characteristic Peculiar to Historians in Democratic Ages." Tocqueville makes a distinction there between the writing of history in aristocratic ages, which emphasizes the agency of heroic individuals, "individualized influences," and "special actions," and the writing of history in democratic ages which emphasizes the impersonal "interconnection of events" and "general causes." "When the historians of aristocratic times cast their gaze upon the world stage," Tocqueville writes, "they observe, in the first instance, a very small number of principal players who control the whole drama." In democratic ages, by contrast, no single individual appears powerful enough to exert a lasting "influence over the mass of citizens," society seems propelled by the free and spontaneous agreement of all its members."⁴⁴ In these democratic contexts, the historian is inspired to "seek out the general reason which may have struck so many minds and simultaneously directed them along the same path." Tocqueville sought out such "general reasons" in *Democracy* and *The Old Regime*, while also being attentive to its

principle danger: that its history too quickly moves beyond particular changes to present “a world in motion without any sign of an engine,” the idea that “movement is involuntary and that societies are acting unconsciously in obedience to some superior dominating force.”⁴⁵

Tocqueville believed the “doctrine of fatality” afflicting the historians of his time capitulates too quickly to the general tendency of the age to think only of aggregates, impersonal forces, and to thereby amplify the experience of individual and political weakness and inefficacy. Such histories are at once diagnoses and symptoms of this change. Tocqueville would reject throughout his life—most notably in his extended correspondence with Gobineau— histories based on all-encompassing determinations of race, language, soil, or climate. His concerns were focused on the consequences of such doctrines—their “effectual truth,” as Machiavelli would write in *The Prince*—more than their veracity. A historical writing that would “raise men’s spirits” rather than “complete their collapse” must draw attention to the realities of structural constraints and social depth patterns so as to reveal the spaces of agency they make possible rather than submitting to fatalism or nostalgically longing for the return of an unbridled aristocratic heroism. Agents in democratic periods are “infinitely more diverse, more concealed, more complex, less powerful, and thus less easy to unravel or trace.”⁴⁶ Tocqueville does not treat this problem as merely one of historical description, but as a historical change in the nature of human agency itself. While he argues there is always a balance between “general causes” and “special influences” in history, in the democratic era “general facts explain more...and individual influences explain

less.”⁴⁷ Tocqueville’s focus is continually on the “hidden springs” of behavior and their far-reaching indirect and largely unrecognized consequences...taken probabilistically in vast aggregates and over time.

Tocqueville’s “politically inspired blending of theory and history,” as Wolin describes it, aimed to identify and amplify the spaces of human agency still available in democratic ages, especially “the strength and independence of men when united in social groups.”⁴⁸ Tocqueville’s reflections on these issues built upon other writers of “the new history”—for example, François Guizot, Augustin Thierry, and Jules Michelet—who were all concerned with writing history that looked beyond the “history of kings and courts, wars and gallantry.” “It was the task of the historian of the nineteenth century,” Douglas Johnson writes, “when the people had come to prominence and had emerged on the stage of history, to write about the people.” “The ambition of the new historians,” he continues, “was to write a history of France which would give its rightful place to the ordinary people of France.”⁴⁹ It would be, in Linda Orr’s words, a “headless history.”⁵⁰ The Revolution had powerfully posed the question of historical change and collective agency to the nineteenth-century historians who wrote in its wake.

Tocqueville’s claim that heroic agency could no longer explain historical change was coupled with a pervasive sense of individual and collective paralysis that he also shared with many historians and political and social theorists of the nineteenth century, who worried human beings were becoming mere playthings to what Honoré de Balzac called “some unknown and Machiavellian power.”⁵¹ Even Michelet, whose revolutionary and romantic identification with the expressive

agency of the nation—“La France est une personne”—differed so dramatically from Tocqueville’s, worried about the enslaving “machinic” tendencies of his time.⁵² “Practically every major social and political theory of the nineteenth century,” Wolin writes, “from anarchism to organizationalism, from liberalism to socialism, was tinged by the desperate knowledge that Western societies were being pushed, shaped, and compelled in ways that both fascinated and appalled.”⁵³ This sense of being captive to your own creations, the Frankenstein logic, has been succinctly captured by Eyal Chowder as the “entrapment imagination” that shapes so much nineteenth- and twentieth-century social and political thought.⁵⁴ Tocqueville was one of the most acute analysts of this imagination, and, as I will argue in the next section, his explanations of its causes and dangerous effects often parallel those of more radical critics of liberal democracy to whose work his is otherwise so frequently and rightly opposed.

II.

Tocqueville argued that democracy elevates the role of individual interest in public life as social equality destroys a politics organized around a fixed hierarchy of goods. “Our century,” as Constant had written, “values everything according to its utility.”⁵⁵ Tocqueville agreed and they were not alone in associating modern politics with an empire of utility directed by the overwhelming quest for happiness and material well-being. This had been an important feature of the stadial histories of the Scottish and French Enlightenment, the “virtue” and “commerce” rubric investigated by J.G.A. Pocock, and the “doux-commerce thesis” explored by Albert O. Hirschman.⁵⁶ Tocqueville was also not alone in attending to its dangers. Romantic

critics of Enlightenment materialism and sensationalism often rejected utility as the supreme criteria of evaluation, and diminished utility from the perspective of aesthetic forms of evaluations that transcend its logic (whether philosophically articulated in Friedrich Schiller's conception of "play," for example, or more popularly conveyed in the literary hatred of the bourgeoisie).⁵⁷ However, even so unromantic a figure as Adam Smith openly worried about "the disadvantages of the commercial spirit: The minds of men are contracted and rendered incapable of elevation. Education is despised, or at least neglected and the heroic spirit is almost utterly extinguished." "To remedy these defects," Smith continued, "would be an object worthy of serious attention."⁵⁸ Tocqueville frequently returned to this worthy object in his work. His critique of political modernity, as many of his Straussian admirers have emphasized, was centered on his identification of the dangers attending a politics organized around security, happiness, and the preservation of mere life. "The craving for well being," he wrote in the *Old Regime*, necessarily "leads the way to servitude," and destroys higher aspirations and ambitions.⁵⁹ Tocqueville's fear of the political consequences of liberal democracy's craving for comfort at once echoed classical republican critiques of the corruption of virtue, and anticipated later radical aesthetic critiques of bourgeois mediocrity, decadence, and overcivilization. Tocqueville is a transitional and mediating figure between these two political discourses, the one pointing back to the civic idealism and *virtù* of Renaissance Florence, the other toward the regenerating aestheticization of action and will associated with Nietzsche and Sorel.⁶⁰

As the discussion of interest and the politics of happiness in *Democracy* makes clear, however, Tocqueville also emphasized the unrecognized advantages of an interest-oriented politics when viewed from the broader perspective of its aggregate consequences and unintended effects. There are losses to be sure, but Tocqueville, at least in this early work, also argues that these are mitigated by unseen advantages accrued over time—if not “heroic virtues” then “peaceful habits,” if not “brilliant society” then a “prosperous one,” if not “strength and glory” then “well-being,” and so on.⁶¹ When the more dangerous tendencies of politics organized around interest are mitigated, as they were in the United States on his account, by such offsetting factors as religion, the experience of political freedom, federalism, the art of association, and the doctrine of self-interest rightly understood, the benefits for Tocqueville came more clearly into view. Interest-oriented politics when so modified and enlightened do “not make a man virtuous,” he writes, “but it does shape a host of law-abiding, sober, moderate, careful and self-controlled citizens. If it does not lead the will directly to virtue it moves it closer through the imperceptible influence of habit.”⁶² Of course, even this admiring gloss from the first volume of *Democracy* anticipates the darker passages in the second volume where a kindly disposed and benevolent power works not by tyrannizing over its subjected population but by inhibiting, draining, and snuffing out action, reducing people to a “flock of timid hard working animals.”⁶³

Wolin argues that the “question of how to come to terms with banality nagged at [Tocqueville] from his earliest political awakening to the end of his life. It arose because of his conviction that for politics to be authentic it had to be heroic,

larger than ordinary life.”⁶⁴ The “lifetime task” Tocqueville set himself, Wolin claims, was to “redeem politics from the triviality and baseness of an interest-oriented age.”⁶⁵ Tocqueville worried that “what is most to be feared is that in the midst of the small incessant occupations of private life, ambition will lose its spark and its greatness; that human passion will be appeased and debased at the same time.”⁶⁶ The politics that emerges around such “appeased” and “debased” passions would be similarly degraded. In Tocqueville’s discussion of the decline of “great parties,” for example, he argues that while great parties brought instability to society, they also animated it with “real political passions” and a sense of moral purpose. He predicted the interest-based parties that would emerge in their wake would be preoccupied with “trifling issues,” with “incomprehensible or childish” disputes, and thereby rob political life of its stature and significance.⁶⁷ Similarly, in his chapter from *Democracy* on “Why Great Revolutions Will Become Rare,” Tocqueville writes that “individuals will allow themselves to be so overtaken by a craven love of immediate pleasures that concern for their own future and that of their descendants may vanish, and that they will prefer to follow tamely the course of their own destiny rather than make a sudden and energetic effort to set things right when the need arises.”⁶⁸ At stake in both examples is the disappearance of those “real political passions” which Tocqueville consistently associates with “religious passions,” opposing both to the narrow but seductive “passion for well being.” In an 1847 letter to Louis de Kergolay, Tocqueville makes this distinction clear. “As a general thesis,” he writes, “religious passions and political passions are compatible and mutually reinforcing. In both cases what they share is concern for general and to

some degree immaterial interests.” On both sides a poetic “ideal of human society” is in view. Both offer a “picture which raises our souls above the contemplation of minor private interests and carries them away.” He concludes by saying that “political passion and the passion for well being cannot exist in the same soul.”⁶⁹

Tocqueville’s critical engagement with liberal democracy’s lowly empire of utility is more radical—and perhaps also more philosophically rich—than it is often taken to be. The reduction of action and judgment to interest not only establishes the conditions for his analysis of the tutelary despotism described in the second volume of *Democracy*, but is also the basis for a broad critique of instrumental reason and the leeching out of meaning and significance from public life. This aspect of Tocqueville’s argument becomes most clear in his writings on the July Monarchy and in his correspondence from 1840s while he served in the Chamber of Deputies as a representative from Valognes. In these letters, interest changes from being an example of aggregated agency, the dangers of which could be mitigated by strategies like those mentioned above, to something more reminiscent of Hannah Arendt’s social blob enveloping political life and draining it of significance and overwhelming the possibilities for political action (a point I will return to in the conclusion).⁷⁰ “The universal calming down and leveling off that followed the July Revolution [of 1830]” Tocqueville would write, left him thinking he was “destined to live his life in an enervated tranquil society.”⁷¹ King Louis Phillippe had attempted to drown the “revolutionary passions” that returned in 1830, he proclaimed, with “the love of material pleasures.”⁷² Tocqueville’s letters from this period return time and again to the “apoplectic torper” and “grievous numbness” of social and political life. In an

1838 letter to Beaumont, Tocqueville writes, “my mind is completely crammed with a heroism that is hardly of our time, and I fall very flat when I come out of these dreams and find myself face to face with reality.”⁷³ Tocqueville’s expressions of disgust with the “illness of bourgeois mediocrity” and the “universal pettiness that reigns over our history” anticipates more radical nineteenth-century “critics of malaise, decline and decadence,” and Richard Boyd is probably right to describe him as a “progenitor of nineteenth-century radical anxieties about bourgeois malaise.”⁷⁴ However, unlike Baudelaire, say, or Balzac, Tocqueville’s analysis is always focused on the political causes and consequences of this “apoplectic torper,” and on seeking out political solutions to the crisis it has created.

Tocqueville worried that a “fatal indifference” to public life arose especially from what he called the “political atheism” of his contemporaries, their “tendency to treat with indifference all the ideas that can stir society,” draining public life of “real political passions” that could engender significant public acts. “What we most need in our day are passions,” Tocqueville declared, “true and solid passions that bind up and lead life.” “We no longer know how to want, or love, or hate.” “We flutter heavily around a multitude of small objects, none of which either attracts us, or strongly repels us, or holds us.”⁷⁵ If in his American writings, Tocqueville’s antidote to the dangers of the politics of utility had been those familiar factors mentioned above – the “social function of religion” and America’s longstanding habituation into the difficult “arts of freedom” – where these resources could not be relied upon—namely, France—he turned instead to the important role of extraordinary and heroic political action to offset these dangers and return a sense of grandeur to a

degraded public life. Tocqueville invoked the importance of greatness, heroism, glory, and political grandeur at many points in his writings, but, as Jennifer Pitts and others have stressed, Tocqueville's preoccupation with political grandeur is particularly notable in his writings on French colonialism, and in his celebration of imperial conquest and as a way of rousing the public from their "grievous numbness" and restoring a regenerative vitality into public life.

In a well-known letter sent to John Stuart Mill in 1841 Tocqueville offered a clear—and to Mill, deeply troubling—articulation of the connection between the debasement of modern democratic politics and the importance of glorious action in combatting it. "The greatest malady that threatens a people organized as we are," Tocqueville writes, "is the gradual softening of the mores, the abasement of the mind, and the mediocrity of taste; that is where the great dangers of the future lie."⁷⁶ Tocqueville then affirms the possibility of war—the context is a conflict over Syria between England's ally Turkey and France's ally Egypt—as a way of mitigating these dangers and affirming the nation's will to sacrifice for a higher cause.⁷⁷ "One cannot let this nation take up easily the habit of sacrificing what it believes to be its grandeur to its repose, great matters to petty ones; it is not healthy to allow such a nation to believe that its place in the world is smaller, that is it fallen from the level on which its ancestors had put it, but that it must console itself by building railroads and by making the well-being of each private individual prosper amidst peace, under whatever conditions the peace is obtained."⁷⁸

Tocqueville's confessed love for "great events" and his weariness with what he once called "our little democratic and bourgeois pot of soup," are often expressed

in the context of imperial conquest and its ability to prevent “internal political and moral decay.”⁷⁹ In making these arguments, Tocqueville was breaking not only with Mill—Mill noted the “simple puerility” of Tocqueville’s appeal to grandeur in his responding letter, effectively ending their friendship—but quite explicitly with the works of other prominent French liberals, who had otherwise profoundly influenced him. Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* and *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, and Constant’s *Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation*, also emphasized, for example, the modern disappearance of the heroic love of glory, and the replacement of honorable ambition with the lure of profit. They turned the fading status of political grandeur into a defining condition of political modernity. Constant, for example, wrote that “the sole aim of modern nations is repose, and with repose comfort and, as a source of comfort, industry.”⁸⁰ Neither Montesquieu nor Constant, however, valorized a heroic restoration of grandeur as a viable response. Indeed, writing in the context of the First Empire and the emergence of the Napoleonic myth, Constant, along with Germaine de Staël, diagnosed such calls for heroic restoration as little more than a mask for a return to the brutality and domination characteristic of an earlier, less-civilized age.⁸¹ In the *Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation* Constant writes,

I have sometimes wondered what these men who wish to repeat the deeds of Cambyses, Alexander, or Attila would reply if his people were to say to him: Nature has given you a quick eye, boundless energy...and an inexhaustible thirst for confronting and surmounting danger...But why should we pay the price for them? Are we here only to build, with our dying bodies, your road to fame? You have a genius for fighting: what good is it to us? ...Like the leopard, you belong to another climate, another land, another species from ours. Learn to be civilized, if you wish to reign in a civilized age. Learn peace, if you wish to rule over peaceful people...Man from another world, stop despoiling this one.⁸²

Constant was acutely aware of how appeals to grandeur could become false rationalizations for personal ambition and the brutal exercise of power and exploitation in colonial contexts. Tocqueville, by contrast, argued that that obstacles and dangers of the colonial enterprise were occasions for the heroic will and the assertion of national greatness. His estimation of Napoleon was much more ambivalent than Constant's, as already suggested, since Tocqueville objected not primarily to Napoleon's extraordinary heroism and valor, as such, but to the fact that in Napoleon's case it was put to the service of his own personal aggrandizement rather than representing the grandeur of the nation as a whole. "All that seems to distinguish Tocqueville from the Napoleonic vision of the First Empire," Boyd writes, "is his conviction that in order for this glory to be meaningful as therapeutic for French civil life, imperial grandeur needs to become the authentic representation of the will of the whole French nation."⁸³ Imperial conquest could, for Tocqueville, unify the heroic act with the general national purpose in the way required to engender the political grandeur he thought so crucial for responding to the "apoplectic torper" of his time.

In this, as in so much else, Tocqueville believed France had something to learn from England. Expressing his deep admiration for the colonization of India, Tocqueville described it as a "flash of brilliance that reflects back on the entire nation." He admired the "sense of greatness and power which it gives a whole people," and concluded "financial and commercial considerations are not the only things by which a nation should judge the value of a conquest."⁸⁴ Tocqueville invoked similar non-economic criteria for imperial conquest when making his

argument on behalf of the French colonization of Algeria. To abandon our colony, Tocqueville asserts, “would be a clear indication of our decadence.”⁸⁵ “Any people that easily gives up what it has taken and chooses to retire peacefully to its original borders proclaims that its age of greatness is over. It visibly enters the period of its decline.”⁸⁶ Pitts has shown that Tocqueville’s embrace of the rejuvenating power of colonial conquest is not a mere inconsistency in his work, or an example of his unfortunate racial prejudices, but an integral part of his political thinking. “Tocqueville,” she writes, “believed that France needed a grand undertaking to convince the people that their collective political project was worthwhile, something to raise French politics above its usual pettiness, an antidote to stagnation.”⁸⁷ “Tocqueville’s defense of empire is inseparable from his critical diagnosis of languor, impotence, boredom, privatization, and commercialization under the July Monarchy.”⁸⁸

While this line of argument is especially pronounced in his writing on French colonialism, it does have precedent in his earlier work, for example the claim in *Democracy* that “war almost always enlarges the mind of a people and raises their character.”⁸⁹ Corey Robin has noted this continuity of preoccupation in Tocqueville’s work, and placed it within a larger distinctive “conservative” tradition of political thought built around the idea that “if the self is to thrive and flourish it must be aroused by an experience more vital and bracing than pleasure or enjoyment.”⁹⁰ I agree with the importance of this distinctive tradition, but disagree with Robin’s efforts to ideologically confine it to conservatism. It is a more widespread and ideologically promiscuous argument in the nineteenth (and

twentieth) century. Many of the radical republicans of the 1840s also believed, in the words of Jules Barni, that one “enslaved by pleasure and ostentation” would also be “enslaved by his Caesar,” and many attributed such regenerative political vitality to the revolutionary acts of the people themselves, especially as manifest through the mythos of insurrection and the “poetics of the barricades” which reached its apotheosis in 1848.⁹¹ Rosanvallon has traced the persistence of this idea.

“Throughout the nineteenth century,” he writes, “many radicals saw insurrection—formless power’s living shadow—as the manifestation of pure democracy,” capable of converting “‘the people’ from a formal abstraction into a regenerative, concrete, palpable reality: a living creative power. From 1830 on a whole poetics of the barricade amplified this political and moral exaltation of insurrection.”⁹²

While Tocqueville was happy to see France rid of the July Monarchy in February of 1848, and had a brief hope that “we are going to begin a new political life again,” he quickly came to see nothing grand or sublime in it. He quickly came to view 1848 as a grotesque extension of the debased interest-oriented politics of the July Monarchy, a “slave’s war” now threatening the privilege of property itself. In a speech delivered a speech before the Chamber of Deputies less than a month before the February revolution, Tocqueville argued that the “egoism and self interest and corruption” which had originated in the July Monarchy’s bourgeois leadership had now thoroughly infected the workers. He warned his colleagues that the workers were now driven to achieve their own social interest, and that pursuing this interest could only “lead to revolution.” And so it did.

“The great and real cause of the revolution [of 1848],” he would write in a letter from April of that year, “was the detestable spirit which animated the government during its long reign; a spirit of trickery, of baseness, and of bribery, which has enervated and degraded the middle classes, destroyed their public spirit, and filled them with a selfishness so blind as to induce them to separate their interests entirely from those of the lower class from whence they sprang.”⁹³ As an expression of this “detestable spirit” the revolutionary acts of 1848 could never be sublime, and their collective actor could never be capable of heroism. It was an idea that echoed in many conservative critics of the revolution, and well as by some radicals (most notably Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*). In his depiction of the February revolution in *Sentimental Education*, Gustave Flaubert follows Tocqueville in emphasizing the staged ridiculousness of the whole tawdry affair. “Pushed along in spite of themselves,” Flaubert writes, the people “entered a room where a red velvet canopy was stretched across the ceiling. On the throne beneath, there sat a proletarian with a black beard, his shirt half opened, grinning like a stupid ape. Others clambered up on to the platform to sit in his place.” “There’s the sovereign people for you!” Hussonet declares. “What a myth!” “I don’t care what you think,” replies Frédéric. “I think the people are sublime.”⁹⁴

III.

“I do not think in France there is a man who is less revolutionary than I,” Tocqueville once wrote, “nor one who has more profound hatred for what is called the revolutionary spirit.”⁹⁵ Aurelian Craiutu argues this is perhaps “the best expression of Tocqueville’s political credo,” and the clearest sign of his exemplary

praise of political moderation.⁹⁶ This credo, however, obscures from view Tocqueville's occasional praise of the elevating grandeur of revolutionary events, with their intermingling of the religious and political passions. In the midst of his despair over the "apoplectic toper" of the July Monarchy, for example, Tocqueville confessed to Beaumont that he "would have preferred a revolutionary condition a thousand times more than our present misery." He worried that we "will we never again see a fresh breeze of true political passions...of violent passions, hard though sometimes cruel, yet grand, disinterested, fruitful, those passions which are the soul of the only parties that I understand and to which I would gladly give my time, my fortune, and my life."⁹⁷ Tocqueville considered 1789 to initially be an expression of such "true political passions," and therefore a "spectacle of incomparable beauty." "It will never leave the memory of men. All foreign nations saw it, all applaud it, all were moved by it."⁹⁸ Despite Tocqueville's critique of the "revolutionary catechism," he remained intermittently enthralled by the revolutionary promise of political and moral regeneration. "A nation that asks no more of its government than the maintenance of order," he would write, "is already a slave at the bottom of its heart. It is a slave to its well-being, ready for the man who will put it in chains." Boesche may be right that, more than in his affirmation of the grandeur of colonial conquest, Tocqueville is "nowhere more antithetical to nineteenth-century liberalism than in his occasional celebration of popular turmoil."⁹⁹

Tocqueville indicated this ambivalence in his *Recollections*: "when I came to search carefully into the depths of my own heart, I discovered, with some surprise, a certain sense of relief, a sort of gladness mingled with all the grief and fear to which

the Revolution [of 1848] had given rise. I suffered from this terrible event for my country, but clearly not for myself, I seemed to breath more freely than before the catastrophe.”¹⁰⁰ Tocqueville, in the end, did not consider 1848 a vitalizing return of “great political passions,” but a monstrous extension of the low-sighted politics of social need and material well-being that he detested. “A new and terrible thing has come into the world,” he would write in his notes, “an immense new sort of revolution whose toughest agents are the least literate and the most vulgar classes.”¹⁰¹ What horrified Tocqueville most about 1848 was “the omnipotence it had given to the so-called people, that is the classes who work with their hands, over all other classes.”¹⁰² Tocqueville contrasted this “so-called people” to the “people properly so-called.” If the former were the dangerous classes of Paris, the latter were an abstraction in which Tocqueville placed a great deal of hope: “They lack enlightenment, but they have instincts I find worthy of admiration; one encounters in them, to a degree that astonishes me and which would by its nature surprise foreigners, the sentiments of order, true love of country, and a very great sense in things about which they can judge by themselves.”¹⁰³ Tocqueville had long admitted to “hate the disorderly action of the masses, their violent and muddled intervention in affairs, the envious passions of the lower classes, their irreligious tendencies,” but this counterrevolutionary sentiment hardened in the wake of 1848 with its eventual emphasis on “the social question.”¹⁰⁴ Tocqueville had come to more keenly appreciate and fear that “what are called necessary institutions are only institutions to which one is accustomed, and that in matters of social constitution the field of possibilities is much wider than people living within each society imagine.”¹⁰⁵

Tocqueville's *Recollections*, which he wrote two years after the events of 1848, and which was not published until 1893, does not elaborate at great length on the causes of the revolution—it is not the treasure trove of causal mechanisms and explanatory hypothesis that Jon Elster admires in *Democracy in America* and the *Old Regime*—but it does indicate the complexly layered conception of social and political causality that many readers admire in Tocqueville's work, a conception that leaves a great deal of room for contingency and chance. Tocqueville consistently rejected “those absolute systems that make all the events of history depend on the great first causes linked together by the chain of fate.”¹⁰⁶ For the most part, however, the *Recollections*, like Burke's *Reflections*, are focused on Tocqueville's responses—political, moral, and aesthetic—to the spectacle of the 1848 events themselves. Like other prominent commentators on 1848—Marx, for example, and Flaubert—Tocqueville continually evaluated the revolutionary events as if they were theatrical scenes. “The whole day,” he wrote of the initial February revolt, “I had the feeling that we had staged a play about the French Revolution, rather than that we were continuing it.”¹⁰⁷ It was a “tragedy” played poorly by a “provincial troupe.” Tocqueville is focused—and especially in the chapters devoted to understanding the insurrections of February, May, and June—on revealing both the vulnerability of the basic institutions of French society—“property, family, and civilization”—while also emphasizing the grotesquery of the collective challenge to those institutions.

If one of the central concerns animating Tocqueville's work was the disappearance of agency in the democratic age, the *Recollections* seems intent on

framing the 1848 revolution as a continuation of, rather than exception to, that broader tendency. In order to frame events in this way, Tocqueville systematically denies agency to its central actors, and especially to anything that might be construed as a collective actor. In the *Recollections* Tocqueville sets out to further demystify the revolutionary mythos of the popular will. Wolin has emphasized this aspect of Tocqueville's analysis, arguing that in the *Recollections* "collective action would be denied the deed."¹⁰⁸ According to Wolin, Tocqueville "refuses to allow that the revolutionaries were, in any sense, heroic actors, even though they might be said not only to have fulfilled the relevant criteria but to have gone further: their actions were contesting the limits of the political and attempting to extend its boundaries, certainly an objective not devoid of grandeur."¹⁰⁹

Examples of Tocqueville's refusal of popular agency can be found throughout the text. The revolutionaries "did not overthrow the government," he writes, but rather "let it collapse"; revolutionary leaders are not leaders properly understood, because they merely "set up sails in the wind," and so on.¹¹⁰ Tocqueville's emphasis on agency denied is most explicit, however, in his description and analysis of the revolutionary crowds of February, May and June. In these accounts, Tocqueville employs longstanding tropes that figure the people as a form of natural phenomenon, as surging floods and rivers, volcanoes and earthquakes.¹¹¹ These "tumults," as Tocqueville writes of the uprisings of May, "engender themselves," but the people are in such instances "no longer masters of themselves."¹¹² Tocqueville also returns to the parallel between the sublimity of the unbounded sea and the spectacle of democratic history in his *Recollections* when he writes "great masses of

men move for reasons almost as unknown to mortal men as the reasons that regulate the movements of the sea. In both cases the reasons are in a sense hidden and lost in the sheer immensity of the phenomenon.”¹¹³ Invoking the mysteriously ineffable springs of collective political action during the French Revolution, Tocqueville would write in a letter to Louis de Kergolay: “I can sense the presence of this unknown object, but despite all my efforts I cannot lift the veil that covers it. I can palpate it as through a foreign body that prevents me from grasping it or even seeing it.”¹¹⁴

While Tocqueville argued that collective action was initiated and sustained by an element that escaped explanation or representation, this did not necessarily lend it dignity or grandeur. “I despise and fear the crowd,” Tocqueville wrote bluntly in 1841, and his depictions of the mobilized crowds of 1848, and of the individuals that comprised them, while often stunning in detail, are filled with dread and disgust.¹¹⁵ Occasionally, however, Tocqueville’s critical depictions suggest alternative interpretations to those he himself provides. Consider his depiction of the appearance of the barricades in February. As he makes his way to the Hôtel de Ville, Tocqueville spots a group assiduously felling trees to begin the construction of the first barricades. “It looked exactly like some industrial undertaking,” Tocqueville writes, “which is just what it was for most of those taking part; an instinct for disorder had given them the taste for it; and experience of past revolutions had taught them the theory. Nothing that I saw later that day impressed me so much as that solitude in which one could, so to speak, see all the most evil

passions of humanity at work, and none of the good ones. I would rather have encountered a furious mob there.”¹¹⁶

There is nothing in Tocqueville’s actual description of this scene that seems to warrant that surprising interpretation. Rather than witness a spontaneous solidarity and inclination to association, practices Tocqueville greatly admires in other contexts, he identifies isolated individuals motivated by the “most evil passions of humanity.” This passage recalls a famous one from *Democracy in America*, where Tocqueville admires the self-created authority of people acting in common through “improvised assembly”: “Should an obstacle appear on the public highway and traffic be halted,” Tocqueville observes, “neighbors at once form a group to consider the matter; from this improvised assembly an executive authority appears to remedy the common inconvenience before anyone has thought of the possibility of some other authority already in existence before the one they have just formed...There is nothing the human will despairs of obtaining through the free use of the combined power of individuals.”¹¹⁷ In the 1848 barricade scene the obstacle is being created to defend the association, in the American instance it is being removed to achieve a common goal. In both cases we see a collectivity spontaneously taking shape around matters of common concern that broadly defines Tocqueville’s conception of the political.

Tocqueville emphasizes that the radical “clubs and assemblies” of 1848 were “constantly manufacturing principles that could later justify acts of violence,” especially in their recurrent appeal to the principle of popular constituent power. “It was maintained that the people, always superior to their representatives, never

completely hand over their will to their representatives, a true principle from which they derived the utterly false conclusion that the Parisian workers were the people of France.”¹¹⁸ Tocqueville’s critique of the “so-called people of France”—the radical workers of Paris—claiming to speak and act on behalf of the people “properly so-called”—and his rhetorical efforts to sustain this distinction—reaches its greatest intensity in his discussion of the worker rebellion of June. Tocqueville presents the June uprising as a “slave’s war” fueled by the desperate needs of the working class poor of Paris, but as interpreted or framed by the theoretical “systemizers” so dangerously proliferating in the middle of the nineteenth century. The revolution itself was not a simple expression of need, Tocqueville argued, but need as framed through dangerous ideas. In “the insurrection of June there was something other than bad propensities; there were false ideas,” he writes. “Many of these men were led by a sort of erroneous notion of right. They sincerely believed society itself was founded on injustice.”¹¹⁹ The most potent of these “erroneous notions of right,” Tocqueville argued, was the distinctly modern idea that the social condition of the working class could be improved and alleviated through political action. In his uncompleted history of modern morality on which he had collaborated with Gobineau prior to 1848, Tocqueville proposed they focus their attention on an entirely “new kind of social and political morality” that “compelled governments to redress certain inequalities, to mollify hardships, to offer support to the luckless and helpless.”¹²⁰ It was the commitment to political solutions to social and economic problems that Tocqueville found most distinctive about modern “social and political morality,” and that the worker uprising of June then most clearly expressed.

It was this collective expression of social need that deprived the events of 1848, for Tocqueville, of any “grandeur,” because grandeur conceptually entailed an elevated disinterestedness on the part of the actor. The worker uprisings of June, for example, did not have a political aim, Tocqueville argued, but rather sought to “alter the organization of society” through politics. In a letter written during the June events, Tocqueville declared, “it is not a political form that is at issue here, it is property, family, and civilization, everything in a word that attaches us to life.”¹²¹ Tocqueville described the June days as “the strangest insurrection,” but also the “greatest in French history.” He concedes that its actors displayed “wonderful powers of coordination,” but this coordination was on his account produced by the event’s resonant articulation of deeply felt class resentments and material needs. “It was not, strictly speaking, a political struggle, in the sense which until then we had given to that word, but a combat of class against class...We behold in it nothing more than blind and rude, but powerful, effort on the part of workmen to escape from the necessities of their condition, which had been depicted to them as one of unlawful oppression, and to open up by main force a road towards that imaginary comfort with which they had been deluded.”¹²²

The most condensed symbol of the uprising for Tocqueville is the “hideous and frightful” face of the old woman he encounters in the street, who deliberately blocks his way and then attacks him when he “curtly” orders her aside. This incident was, he writes, an “important symptom” of “the general state of mind” guiding the insurrection. Like the other woman combatants Tocqueville emphasizes in his account of June, who take the same pleasure in combat as they would in

“winning a lottery,” there is nothing noble or courageous in the woman’s confrontation with Tocqueville, or in her refusal to play her expected role in the choreography of hierarchical social relations. She is again, for Tocqueville, merely the brutal manifestation of need.¹²³

Tocqueville’s reduction of the aspirations of collective actors to expressions of social interest is not limited to his writings on 1848. In an 1843 article on the abolition of slavery in England Tocqueville offered another example of this association of grandeur with disinterestedness, and his use of that association to reject the heroism of collective actors. Tocqueville declared that abolition offered an unprecedented and extraordinary spectacle to his contemporaries that compared with the astonishing deeds of their revolutionary forefathers. The modern emancipation of slaves, he suggested, was a spectacle of unprecedented grandeur and should be appreciated as such by his contemporaries. Tocqueville urged his readers to disenthral themselves of their weary distractions and trivial concerns and recognize the elevating significance of this extraordinary event unfolding in their time. An important part of what made European abolition so extraordinary was its suddenness, that it did “not happen gradually, slowly, over the course of long successive transformations,” but rather that it had the abruptness of an unforeseen event: that in an “instant almost a million men together went from extreme servitude to total freedom.”¹²⁴ The other element that lent abolition such extraordinary grandeur for Tocqueville was that it was not undertaken “by the desperate effort of the slave, but by the enlightened will of the master.”¹²⁵ What endowed the nineteenth century abolition of slavery with grandeur for Tocqueville

is that it did not come from the interested action of enslaved Africans fighting for their freedom, most obviously in Haiti, but from the disinterested acts of heroic white benefactors.

Tocqueville's effort to both restore a sense of grandeur to a public realm that had been degraded by the empire of utility, and yet deny that grandeur to collective agents acting out of material interests or need is echoed in the work of Hannah Arendt. I will conclude this chapter with some very preliminary thoughts on that connection.

Conclusion

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt invoked the *petit bonheur* of the French as an example of the "modern enchantment with 'small things.'" "Since the decay of their once great and glorious public realm," Arendt writes, "the French have become masters in the art of being happy among 'small things,' within the space of their own four walls, between chest and bed, table and chair, dog and cat and flowerpot." This "enlargement of the private," she writes, "the enchantment, as it were, of a whole people, does not make it public, does not constitute a public realm, but, on the contrary, means only that the public realm has almost receded, so that greatness has given way to charm everywhere; for while the public realm may be great it cannot be charming precisely because it is unable to harbor the irrelevant."

We can hear Tocquevillean echoes in Arendt's ridicule of the "small enchantments" of private life that have filled the void of "a once great and glorious public realm," as well as in her distinction between public "greatness" and private "charm." Like Tocqueville, Arendt was concerned with the disappearance of

grandeur from public life, and with restoring “the esteem and dignity of politics.”

Peg Birmingham may be exaggerating slightly when she writes that “Hannah Arendt is alone among contemporary political thinkers in taking up the modern problem of glory,” but she is right to emphasize Arendt’s continuous preoccupation with the loss and recovery of political grandeur in the context of democratic politics.

Arendt’s writing on the aesthetic orientation toward public things, and the “love of the world,” is a contemporary extension of Tocqueville’s critique of the empire of utility that does not seek solutions in the realm of political theology. Like Tocqueville, Arendt sought immanent sources of sublime transcendence, more consistently than Tocqueville she sought grandeur solely in the fragile, interdependent, and plural realm of human action itself. Most importantly for Arendt, grandeur could not longer be associated with the heroic sovereignty of statesman and leaders, but with pluralities of equals engaged in action in concert.

While Arendt acknowledged Tocqueville’s “great influence” on her in a 1959 letter, and in *On Revolution* she describes him as “the keenest and most thoughtful observer” of revolution, the full extent of that influence has yet to be fully excavated in the scholarship. Hanna Pitkin describes Tocqueville as an “absent authority” standing behind Arendt’s concept of the “rise of the social” as it is developed in both *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*. For Pitkin, Arendt adapted and extended Tocqueville’s analysis of social entropy in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, where a multitude of disconnected individuals are drawn into the myopia of their private and material needs, drifting in the “trivial, lonely, and futile” scope of their private lives, and vacating the public realm to the administrative despotism of

an “immense tutelary power.” When Arendt describes the social as expressing the “mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else” and worries about the political consequences of “activities connected with sheer survival” overwhelming the public realm, there seem to be connections with Tocqueville’s disdain for the empire of utility in his own time. This apparent connection is demonstrated, in fact, by the lectures that Arendt presented on Tocqueville at the University of California, Berkeley in 1955, which emphasize the appearance of “society” in his work as the initiator of a historical process that displaces the actor. “Society,” Arendt writes, “when it first entered the public realm, assumed the disguise of an organization of property owners who, instead of claiming access to the public realm because of their wealth, demanded protection from it for the accumulation of more wealth.” Liberalism, on her reading, thus furthered “the degradation of politics into a means for something else,” focused on routinized forms of “uniform behavior” that “excludes spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.” This contrast leads to one of the more infamous arguments of *The Human Condition*, constantly appealed to by critics of Arendt’s aestheticism:

Unlike human behavior—which for the Greeks, like all civilized people, judged according to “moral standards,” taking into account motives and intentions, on the one hand, and aims and consequences on the other—action can only be judged by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and sui generis. (205)

In *On Revolution* this contrast between behavior and action becomes one of the conceptual discontinuities separating the American from the French Revolution. In both events, Arendt writes, there was the “ever-repeated insistence that nothing

comparable in grandeur and significance had ever happened in the whole recorded history of humankind,” but in the American case that grandeur was associated with action and mutual compact, while in the French it came to be associated with the sublimity of “History.” This distinction also seems to correspond closely with the one elaborated above in Tocqueville’s work: between the “religious dread” of historical determination and the fading grandeur of disinterested heroic action.

Arendt described the French revolutionary crowds of 1789 as a “multitude, appearing for the first time in broad daylight...the multitude of the poor and downtrodden, who every century before had hidden in darkness and shame.” This dangerous multitude flooding the public realm brought the concerns of “life’s necessities” into a realm of freedom, overwhelming it with demands “driven by daily needs.” Just as revolutionary leaders had initiated actions to “assert their grandeur and vindicate their honor,” the crushing social demands of the poor submerged their initially political goals with social objectives. As revolutionary leaders lost control of the collective demands of the crowds they themselves had incited, Arendt claims, it seemed to them that revolutionary actors were no longer capable of initiating or taking control of events, but were merely superficial expressions of larger historical forces. In France, she writes, this confrontation with the forces of History “transformed itself almost immediately into a feeling of awe and wonder at the power of history itself.” In Arendt’s analysis, as in Tocqueville’s, the Revolution’s grandeur of action was replaced by the terrible spectacle of masses being “driven willy nilly along the same road, everyone joining the common cause, some despite

themselves others unwittingly, all of them like blind instruments in the hands of God.”

Tocqueville’s influence on Arendt’s account of “the rise of the social” has been persuasively argued by Pitkin and others, but perhaps even more striking (or at least suggestive) is his possible influence on her positive response to this condition. Like Tocqueville, Arendt sought sources of wonder and inspiration—even “miracles”—in the secular realm of human action itself, and much more than him she distrusted political theology and renewed efforts to retranscendentalize the political realm by appeal to what she referred to as “the Absolute.” Arendt rejected the dangerous post-Revolutionary search for the “transcendental sanction for the political realm,” yet affirmed the importance of an elevated grandeur to politics, as a way of sustaining “the esteem and dignity of politics” on the basis of human action in concert. This is probably most clear in her famous discussion of the Greek longing for “earthly immortality,” without which, she writes, “no politics strictly speaking, no common world, and no public realm is possible,” but it is also an important part of her Roman discussion of the authorizing remembrance of the “act of Founding.” “Through many ages before us,” Arendt writes, “but now not any more—men entered the public realm because they wanted something of their own or something they had in common with others to be more permanent than their earthly lives.”

Arendt’s preoccupation with the love of fame and immortality may not be motivated by German nostalgia for the Greek polis, but by her a response to a problem similar to Tocqueville’s critique of liberalism’s empire of utility. Arendt was disgusted by the neo-imperial rhetoric of glory associated with the Bonapartist

myth and, like Constant and Montesquieu, rejected efforts to cloak the spectacle of modern commercial imperialism in the “old grandeur of Rome and Alexander the Great,” but her own efforts to find immanent sources for a sense of sublime transcendence within the non-sovereign conditions of human action in concert point in the direction of new ways of thinking the importance of the grandeur of politics that not only move beyond Tocqueville’s imperial liberalism, but also potentially beyond the egalitarian limitations of her own political vision.

Notes

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1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America*, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 559.
 2. *Ibid.*, 560.
 3. *Ibid.*, 563.
 4. *Ibid.*, 565.
 5. Tocqueville’s arguments concerning the political importance of a sense of the sublime have some surprising affinities with contemporary psychological research. Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner, for example, have detailed how a sense of awe—which they describe as “that often-positive feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends our understanding of the world”—helps individuals overcome the narrow purview of their own interests, binds them to others, and facilitates collaborative action with others. See Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner, “Why do we experience awe?” *New York Times* May 22, 2015
 6. Cited in Dana Jalbert Stauffer, “Tocqueville on the Modern Moral Situation: Democracy and the Decline of Devotion,” *American Political Science Review* 108:4 (November 2014), 772-782, 776.
 7. See Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987). Alan Kahan pursues a similar theme in *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burkhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford University Press, 1992).
 8. Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).
 9. But see Mathew W. Maguire, *The Conversion of Imagination: From Pascal through Rousseau to Tocqueville* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).
 10. This is so, even though Tocqueville himself occasionally suggests the contrary, as when he writes to his brother Edouard that his “devouring impatience,” and “need for lively and recurring sensations,” is a family trait he has inherited from their father. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society* Roger Boesche, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 147.

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11. François Mélonio, "Tocqueville and the French," in Cheryl B Welch, ed. *Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 337-358, 339.
 12. Roger Boesche, *Tocqueville's Road Map: Methodology, Liberalism, Revolution, and Despotism* (Lexington Books, 2007), 111.
 13. Sheldon Wolin writes that against contemporary political demythologizers like Marx and Bentham, Tocqueville was among those political theorists seeking a "re-mythologizing of the world." Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 134. For a theoretically rich and historically contextual account of these broader Romantic efforts at "re-mythologization" see Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
 14. On the political theory of these Promethean aspirations, see Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
 15. Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Autumn 1992), 3-41.
 16. See, for example, Catherine Zuckert, "Not by Preaching: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy," *Review of Politics* 43:2 (April 1981), 259-280. This emphasis on religion has been the focus of many Straussian interpretations of Tocqueville, which emphasize the importance of political theology in contrast with what they construe as the moral impoverishment of modern liberalism.
 17. See Robert Morrissey, *The Economy of Glory: From Ancien Regime France to the Fall of Napoleon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
 18. György Lukács discussed this ideologically promiscuous tradition under the useful category of "Anticapitalist Romanticism."
 19. Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).
 20. "The function of grandeur," Wolin writes, "is to affirm the possibility of enduring meaning." Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 446.
 21. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848*, trans. George Lawrence (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995).
 22. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 40.
 23. Alexis de Tocqueville to John Stuart Mill, June 1835 in Roger Boesche, ed., *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 102.
 24. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 16.
 25. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 84.
 26. François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 142.
 27. *Ibid.*, 27.
 28. Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy: Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 125.
 29. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 52.

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30. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 191-229.
31. Alexis de Tocqueville to Arthur de Gobineau, December 20, 1853 in John Lukacs, ed., *Tocqueville: The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 231-32.
32. Boesche, *Tocqueville's Road Map*,
33. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*,
34. *Ibid.*, 15.
35. *Ibid.*, 14.
36. *Ibid.*, 14.
37. Tocqueville invokes this sense of "religious dread" in "Two Weeks in the Wilderness," an originally unpublished narrative recounting a trip he and Gustave de Beaumont took to the Great Lakes region during their stay in the United States. There the phrase is used to describe his experience of the "profound silence" and "perfect stillness" of the most remote American wild. In this environment, Tocqueville writes, "the soul feels pierced with a sort of religious dread," as all change, the rhythms of life and death, seem to merge together in a terrible stasis. In both *Democracy* and "Two Weeks in the Wilderness" "religious dread" is invoked to describe Tocqueville's affective response to a world in which agency and the possibilities of deliberate action seem to have disappeared: in the one, the agency of secular history, in the other, that of sacred nature. Tocqueville associates this overwhelming sensation with the terrible hand of Providence in history in the first instance, whereas in "Two Weeks in the Wilderness" Tocqueville's religious dread is experienced as the sensed absence of god in nature. "The Creator appears to have turned his face away for a moment," Tocqueville writes, "and the forces of nature lie in a state of paralysis." There is an underlying continuity here: whether applied to the spectacle of history or the untouched wilds of nature, Tocqueville associates the experience of religious dread with the absence of an actor and a withdrawal of meaning, with a terrible stasis or entropy. Tocqueville, "Two Weeks in the Wilderness," 875-927, 907.
38. Frank Ankersmit, "Tocqueville and the Sublimity of Democracy," *Tocqueville Review* 14 (1993), 173-201.
39. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 215.
40. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 136.
41. Cited in Andre Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1989), 452.
42. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 750.
43. Richard Boyd, "Tocqueville and the Napoleonic Legend," in Ewa Atanassow and Richard Boyd, ed., *Tocqueville and the Frontiers of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 264-287, 265. On the power of the Napoleonic myth see Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Saint-Napoleon: Celebrations of Sovereignty in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
44. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 573.
45. *Ibid.*, 575.
46. *Ibid.*, 573.

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47. Ibid., 574.
48. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 100; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 576.
49. Douglas Johnson
50. Linda Orr, *Headless History: Nineteenth-Century French Historiography of the Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).
51. Cited in Boesche, *Tocqueville's Road Map*,
52. Jules Michelet, *The People* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1973), 95.
53. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 15.
54. Eyal Chowder, *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth: Politics and the Entrapment Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
55. Benjamin Constant, "The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation," in *Political Writings*, trans. and ed. by Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 51.
56. J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought Primarily in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
57. See Tim Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2012).
58. Quoted in Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, 106.
59. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, 178.
60. On Tocqueville's adaptation of the "tropes and themes of classical republicanism," see Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror*, 304-305; Melvin Richter, "The Uses of Theory: Tocqueville's Adaptation of Montesquieu," in *Essays in Theory and History: An Approach to the Social Sciences*, ed. Richter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970); Alan Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*, Ch. 4.
61. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 612.
62. Ibid., 612.
63. Ibid., 806.
64. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 120.
65. Ibid., 120.
66. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 604.
67. Ibid., 207.
68. Ibid., 750.
69. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 322
70. See Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
71. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 11.
72. Ibid., 64-65.
73. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 125.
74. Boyd, "Tocqueville and the Napoleonic Legend," 279.
75. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 153.
76. Ibid., 150.
77. Ibid., 151.

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78. Ibid., 151. 216
79. Ibid., 143.
80. Constant, "The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation," 54.
81. "It was military glory which intoxicated the nation while the nets of despotism were spread out by some men whose meanness and corruption cannot be sufficiently emphasized." Madame de Staël (Anne-Louise Germaine), *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*, Aurelian Craiutu, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007), 490.
82. Constant, "The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation," 82.
83. Boyd, "Tocqueville and the Napoleonic Legend," 276.
84. Cited in Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 341.
85. Alexis de Tocqueville, "Essay on Algeria" (October 1841) in *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, Jennifer Pitts, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 59-116, 59.
86. Ibid., 59.
87. Jennifer Pitts, "Democracy and Domination: Empire, Slavery, and Democratic Corruption in Tocqueville's Political Thought," in Atanassow and Boyd, eds., *Tocqueville and the Frontiers of Democracy*, 243-263, 250.
88. Boyd, "Tocqueville and the Napoleonic Legend," 279.
89. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 738.
90. Corey Robin, "Easy to be Hard," in *The Reactionary Mind: From Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 217-245, 227.
91. Cited in Hazareesingh, *Saint Napoleon*, 182. On radical egalitarian aesthetic critiques of utility in nineteenth-century France, see especially Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Verso, 2012).
92. Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy: Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 126.
93. "Tocqueville to Nassau William Senior (April 10, 1848)," in *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 205-208, 207.
94. Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
95. "Tocqueville to Eugène Stoffels (October 5, 1836)," in *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 112-115, 113.
96. Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism Under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lexington Books, 2003), 92.
97. "Tocqueville to Corcelle October 19, 1839," cited in Wolin, *Between Two Worlds*, 121.
98. Cited in Boesche, *Tocqueville's Roadmap*, 101.
99. Boesche, *Tocqueville's Roadmap*, 48.
100. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 6.
101. Tocqueville, *The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, 161.
102. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 70.
103. "Tocqueville to Nassau William Senior, April 10, 1848," in *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 205-208, 208.
104. Cited in Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 305.

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105. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 76.
 106. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 62.
 107. *Ibid.*, 53.
 108. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 444.
 109. *Ibid.*, 445.
 110. *Ibid.*, 443.
 111. See Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
 112. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 119.
 113. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 189.
 114. "Tocqueville to Louis de Kergolay, May 16, 1858," in *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 371-374, 373.
 115. Tocqueville, "My Instinct, My Opinion," cited in Craiutu, "Tocqueville's Paradoxical Moderation," *Review of Politics* 67:4 (Fall 2005), 599-630, 604.
 116. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 38.
 117. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 189.
 118. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 114.
 119. *Ibid.*, 136.
 120. "Tocqueville to Gobineau, September 5, 1843," in *The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, 190-195, 193.
 121. "Tocqueville to Paul Clamorgan, June 24, 1848," in *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 212-214, 213.
 122. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 136.
 123. Neil Hertz has a quite different reading of this scene.
 124. Tocqueville, "The Emancipation of Slaves (1843)," in Pitts, ed. *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 199-226, 199.
 125. *Ibid.*, 199.