

Democracy and Tocqueville's Poetry of the Revolution

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Introduction

In *Democracy in America* and elsewhere, Alexis de Tocqueville designates a widespread culture of materialism, or the love of material comfort and pleasure, as one of the most politically troubling features of a democratic society where the old aristocratic distinctions are destroyed. Especially concerned about materialism's replacement of authentic politics characterized by disinterested devotion to a public good, Tocqueville throughout his career invested much effort in identifying those factors that could generate such politics under democratic social conditions.¹ On this topic, scholars have generally focused on his commitment to promoting certain kinds of moral beliefs, associational life, or local participatory institutions.² Brian Danoff, for instance, highlights Tocqueville's belief that moral duties toward others imposed by religion can foster genuinely public-spirited politics (Danoff 2007, 2010). Peter Augustine Lawler also points out Tocqueville's understanding of American local political institutions as having "heart-enlarging effects" (Lawler 1995, 231).

Though there has been much discussion on Tocqueville's response to the threat to public-spirited political life posed by democratic materialism, no scholar has yet presented cultural media that convey *the beauty of a heroic moral ideal* as Tocqueville's major—perhaps most important—solution to the crisis. Some commentators discuss the chapters on poetry or literature in *Democracy* from the perspective of democratic moral education (e.g., Campagna 2007, 174; Cooper 2012, 222–224; Franco 2014, 453), but most do not focus on the role of poetic aesthetic qualities such as beauty and all overlook any further development in Tocqueville's political aesthetics since writing these chapters.

This interpretative landscape seems to be underlain by a particular understanding of Tocqueville's view on the democratic individual's aesthetic nature. Mostly based on several chapters in the second volume of *Democracy* that highlight the predominance of a materialistic, utilitarian taste in democratic societies (e.g., "Democratic nations will by habit prefer the useful to the beautiful, and they will want the beautiful to be useful" [Tocqueville 2010e, 519]), many scholars interpret Tocqueville as indicating democratic individuals' radical alienation from the ideal and beautiful. According to Dana Jalbert Stauffer, Tocqueville believes that "[if] people no longer talk about the 'beauties' of virtue, it is in part because they are no longer so interested in

¹ As Aaron L. Herold points out, scholars "have in general tended to present [Tocqueville] as seeking either to encourage or to roll back" "the ascendancy of material self-interest" in modern democracy (Herold 2015, 524). Though I disagree with those writers who claim Tocqueville "[attempted] to continue the spread of liberal commercialism" as "an admirer of the Enlightenment project," I also do not think it is accurate to "[characterize] his project as a wholehearted attempt to overcome material self-interest" as others have done (Herold 2015, 524). Tocqueville did not think that the choice presented to those living in the democratic age was one between the two extremes (pure republics of either self-interest or public virtue). Even as he recognized the democratic social condition as a permanent and character-shaping structure, Tocqueville believed it was possible to have a modern democracy where there is always some considerable number of citizens who are genuinely committed to public interests, most importantly to liberty (though specific individuals composing this number may shift over time). What enhanced this possibility in his mind, this paper suggests, is his faith in the poetic nature of democratic individuals which has been largely unacknowledged by his commentators.

² Nearly all scholarly works that discuss Tocqueville's attempt to foster public-spirited politics stress at least one of the three approaches. There are, for instance, Wolin 2001, Danoff (2007, 2010), and Villa 2017 among others.

beauty itself" (Stauffer 2014, 775). This change in taste furthermore "[leads] to a loss of admiration for devotion" in modern democracy (Stauffer 2014, 776). Richard Avramenko also implies that Tocqueville held an unpoetic, utilitarian conception of the democratic individual by presenting Tocqueville's new liberalism for the democratic age as being premised on "useful honoring" and "useful courage" rather than "beautiful honor" and "beautiful courage" (Avramenko 2011, 207).

I believe that scholars have generally underestimated Tocqueville's appreciation of the democratic individual's poetic taste for the ideal and beautiful to such an extent that they have completely failed to recognize its promise of political redemption for democracy in Tocqueville's eyes. In contrast to American moralists who would "almost never say that virtue is beautiful" but constantly appeal to their compatriots' utilitarian reason (Tocqueville 2010e, 1017), Tocqueville did not despair of democratic citizens' poetic capacity to be morally and politically elevated through the ideal and beautiful. This paper aims to illustrate this point by recovering a branch of Tocqueville's political aesthetics according to which the beauty of revolutionary political actors' public virtue conveyed through cultural works can play a significant role in generating authentic politics in democracy. For this purpose, not only *Democracy* but also his later writings during the Second Empire in France on the French Revolution of 1789 will be closely analyzed.

In the sections that follow, I start by introducing Tocqueville's conception of authentic politics as well as his political critique of the predominance of materialism in democratic societies such as America and France. I then illustrate how his eventual turn to aesthetics as a response to the political challenges of materialism reflected nineteenth-century romanticism's critique of discursive reason and valorization of imagination in the domain of moral education. In the final section, I explore a much-overlooked aspect of his political aesthetics by considering his own role as a "democratic-aristocratic poet" who tried to promote authentic politics among the French people under the Second Empire through idealizing depictions of the French revolutionaries of 1789. I also suggest that *Democracy* presents a more nuanced and affirmative picture of democratic persons' poetic capacity than what is typically assumed. In the conclusion, I compare Tocqueville's poetic strategy with a couple of major contemporary neo-Tocquevillian approaches to civic virtue.

I. The Crisis of the Political in Materialistic Democracy

As Sheldon S. Wolin points out, "[the] abiding concern of Tocqueville's thinking, the referent point by which he tried to define his life as well as the task before his generation, was the revival of the political," or, "in his phrase, *la chose publique* [the public thing]" (Wolin 2001, 5). In Tocqueville's view, a key aspect of authentic politics is the concern for public good, or what he often calls "disinterestedness."³ For instance, in an 1847 letter to Louis de Kergolay, comparing political and religious passions, Tocqueville notes that both share "concern for general and to some degree immaterial interests" and that "political passion and the passion for

³ Although Tocqueville nowhere explicitly defines disinterestedness, its broad meaning can be grasped somewhat by considering what it is *not* from his perspective; especially, being a disinterested political actor requires transcending material self-interest (including one's economic class interest). As the present paragraph suggests, the public interest Tocqueville most closely associates with disinterestedness is civil and political liberties. Despite this emphasis on an "immaterial" public good, his notion of having public spirit does not seem to exclude being concerned for the general economic welfare of one's own society.

[private] well being cannot exist in the same soul” (Frank 2021, 165). As Wolin suggests, “[the] elevation of the political and the making of a public self were conscious gestures of opposition to the privatizing tendencies for which he, as much as any writer of this time, provided the authoritative critique” (Wolin 2001, 5). In addition, the public interest to which Tocqueville was most passionately devoted for much of his career was the establishment and preservation of institutions of political liberty at both national and local levels in France. Apart from himself, Tocqueville often considered the French revolutionaries just before the first meeting of the Estates-General in 1789 as exemplifying an authentic politics characterized by heroic self-sacrifice for the sake of liberty. Furthermore, in a sense he considered such politics dedicated to the political cause of liberty to be itself an inspiring manifestation of liberty.

At the same time, Tocqueville felt deeply concerned about the actual or potential replacement of authentic politics by several manifestations of materialism rooted in the democratic social state: Indifference to public affairs due to preoccupation with money-making, interest politics, and political inaction against despotism out of the overriding concern for one's own material well-being.

In *Democracy*, especially in the second volume, Tocqueville highlights the presence of widespread materialism in America and analyzes at length its nature, cause, and effects. He observes that in America “everyone feels” “the passion for material well-being” (Tocqueville 2010c, 931). The love of bodily comfort and pleasure, though it had been present throughout human history, never existed in society in such a generalized fashion.

In aristocracy, Tocqueville explains, the upper classes mostly take wealth for granted while the lower ones hope only for the riches of afterlife. But the situation changes as social conditions become more equal. When “ranks are mingled,” “privileges destroyed,” “patrimones divide,” and “enlightenment and liberty spread,” social mobility increases dramatically, and all classes become concerned with either gaining or protecting material wealth and comfort (Tocqueville 2010c, 933). Simultaneously, there also occurs a great expansion in the size and influence of the middle class whose particularly intense love of material prosperity begins to infect all the rest of society.⁴

In *Democracy* and elsewhere, Tocqueville indicates that materialism has various negative implications for liberty. One way in which materialism can manifest is political apathy, or indifference to public affairs due to preoccupation with economic activity. Even “honest materialism” which is compatible with the “regularity of morals” and “public tranquility” might lead democratic citizens to be absorbed in the private pursuit of material pleasures and “silently [relax] all their springs of action” (Tocqueville 2010c, 938). When in such society citizens from all classes regard the “exercise of their political rights” as “a tiresome inconvenience that distracts them from their industry,” “the place of government is as though empty” and would be soon occupied by either one man or one faction (Tocqueville 2010c, 951). Toward the end of *Democracy's* second volume, Tocqueville also conceives apathy as promoting administrative despotism. In this possible future democratic society, a great majority of citizens are so preoccupied with pursuing “small and vulgar pleasures” in private life that the regulation of much of their lives is placed in the hands of an immense centralized bureaucracy (Tocqueville 2010d, 1249).

⁴ In *Democracy*, Tocqueville suggests that people in the middle class tend to be especially materialistic because they “have enough material enjoyments to conceive the taste for these enjoyments [and] not enough to be content with them” (Tocqueville 2010c, 933).

Another form of materialism about which Tocqueville was concerned is politics driven by material self-interest. In *Democracy*, he observes that both northern and southern political parties in America in the 1830s “rest [not] on principles [but] on material interests” (Tocqueville 2010b, 284). During the July Monarchy (1830–1848) in France, Tocqueville also criticized the interest politics of the bourgeoisie who formed the country’s governing class. In *Recollections*, written after this regime ended, he remembers the period as when “every matter was settled by the members of one class [the bourgeoisie], in accordance with their interests and point of view” (Tocqueville 2009, 10).

After the establishment of the Second Empire in 1852, Tocqueville shifted his focus to the expression of materialism in the French people’s political inaction against Louis Napoleon Bonaparte’s despotic government. In an 1852 letter to Christophe Léon Louis Juchault de Lamoricière, Tocqueville claimed that most people in the country, throughout the different classes, “asked only ‘to serve under whoever would assure its material well-being’” (Jardin 1988, 475). While “the farmers, the bourgeoisie, [and] the shopowners” were all “happy to sacrifice the freedom, the dignity, [and] the honor of their country” “so long as they [were] assured tranquility and the sale of their produce or merchandise,” the salons of Paris were replete with “so-called gentlemen” who “trembled so much for their incomes” that the new despotism “[filled] them with joy” (Jardin 1988, 475).

Meanwhile, there are several mitigating factors of materialism that are given serious attention by Tocqueville in *Democracy*. One of them, which has been much discussed in the secondary literature, is religious beliefs. According to Aurelian Craiutu, Tocqueville believed that, in addition to other services it can perform for democracy, religion can “purify and regulate the love of wealth and materialism predominant in democratic societies” (Craiutu 2005, 625). Danoff claims that for Tocqueville religion fosters a “genuine commitment to civic virtue” by “inculcating a sense of duty to one’s fellows” (Danoff 2007, 180). Hence, Danoff further suggests, in Tocqueville’s thought religion’s role in democracy is comparable to that of civic republicanism, which teaches that “citizens should actively participate in public affairs and care deeply about the common good” (Danoff 2007, 180). Similarly, Alan S. Kahan notes Tocqueville’s emphasis on the role of religion in “[balancing] the imperatives and inclinations of human nature in democratic society, above all materialism,” by demanding certain kinds of human perfection including “political perfection” (Kahan 2015, 103).

But even though religion has an important place in Tocqueville’s thinking about counteracting materialism, its connection to authentic *politics* within his thought is more tenuous than what some scholars seem to assume. Particularly during the Second Empire when the Catholic church failed to resist the regime, Tocqueville became painfully aware that religion, even Christianity which he favored most, does not necessarily promote political action against a bad government (Kahan 2015, 116). He recognized that Christianity cannot serve as a source of such politics if its moral demand to love others is interpreted to require only private acts of assistance.

Along with religious teachings, what Tocqueville discusses as “the doctrine of interest well understood” (Tocqueville 2010c, 918) in the second volume can be also considered a kind of mores that mitigates materialism, albeit in interaction with other factors. In *Democracy*, he presents this doctrine as the favorite of American moralists who grasp that they must speak in the language of self-interest in order to have a hearing among their fellow citizens. The doctrine teaches that “man, by serving his fellows, serves himself, and that his particular interest is to do good” (Tocqueville 2010c, 919). Tocqueville notes the immense popularity of the doctrine in

America; it has been so “universally admitted” that it is found “no less in the mouths of the poor than in those of the rich” (Tocqueville 2010c, 920). Importantly for Tocqueville, the doctrine of interest well understood counteracts “individualism,” or indifference to public affairs, by promoting service to others through political participation (Tocqueville 2010c, 918). As Danoff points out, “Tocqueville makes it clear that ‘self-interest properly understood’ not only teaches us to be good in our private lives, but it also leads us to be good citizens insofar as it induces us to participate in communal life” (Danoff 2010, 13).

Tocqueville's promotion of a liberal conception of citizenship based on the doctrine of interest well understood in *Democracy* indicates that he cannot be unambiguously classed as a civic-republican thinker. But it is to go too far, as Jessica L. Kimpell seems to do, to hold that Tocqueville considered enlightened self-interest to be sufficient for protecting liberty or at any rate the most that could be aspired to in modern democracy (Kimpell 2015, 345–367). As Danoff argues, Tocqueville regarded the doctrine of interest well understood insufficient for safeguarding freedom in democratic society because he recognized that the doctrine is only “*in part*” true; it is simply false that “public virtue” is always “useful” to the individual (Danoff 2010, 14; see Tocqueville's notebook entry on May 29, 1831). Furthermore, Tocqueville did not conceive any citizenship that is ultimately based on self-interest to be suitable for the revolutionary task of establishing liberal democratic political institutions against despotism. In general, from Tocqueville's perspective, situations in which an attempt to either protect or newly establish civil or political liberties is individually costly (incurring a net loss in terms of private material interest) call for public-spirited citizens who perceive freedom as the highest public good having a greater priority than their individual economic well-being.

Although the doctrine of interest well understood teaches that it is in the interest of each individual to promote public good, the doctrine by itself “cannot make a man virtuous” (Tocqueville 2010c, 922) and willing to “sacrifice private interests to the general good” like citizens of ancient republics (Danoff 2010, 13–14). Rather, the doctrine generates public-spiritedness in interaction with local political institutions and associations, which Tocqueville considered to be “both manifestations of political freedom and a pedagogical tool” (Toloudis 2010, 11; Danoff 2007, 2010). In *Democracy*, Tocqueville suggests that local political participation eventually fosters genuine public spirit in an initially self-interested individual: “You first get involved in the general interest by necessity, and then by choice; what was calculation becomes instinct; and by working for the good of your fellow citizens, you finally acquire the habit and taste of serving them” (Tocqueville 2010c, 893). Similarly, Tocqueville indicates that in American democracy “[sentiments] and ideas are renewed, *the heart grows larger* [,] and the human mind develops [emphasis added]” through life in associations (Tocqueville 2010c, 900).

There is reason to believe, however, that Tocqueville simultaneously had a significant doubt about the plausibility of the process of moral change driven by the utilitarian rationality described above. Concerning his response to the crisis of the political, scholars rarely discuss him as a theorist of political aesthetics. Yet I argue that toward the end of his career Tocqueville developed a poetic strategy for promoting authentic politics in democratic society which reflected his romantic faith in the power of idealizing imagination.

II. Tocqueville's Romanticism: A Faith in Poetic Imagination

I suggest that romanticism, one of the dominant intellectual currents of the early nineteenth century in both Europe and America, played a major role in the formation of Tocqueville's political aesthetics. In *Democracy*, Tocqueville describes several prominent romantic works—Lord Byron's *Childe Harold*, François-René de Chateaubriand's *René*, and Alphonse de Lamartine's *Jocelyn*—as being representative of democratic literature. Also, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Tocqueville read, met, and admired William Ellery Channing who was deeply influenced by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Virtanen 1950, 21–28). Although Tocqueville did not frequently cite a specific romantic author in his writing, he certainly “lived amid the swirl of ideas occasioned by the poetry of Coleridge, Byron, and Wordsworth both in England and on the Continent” (Lombardo 1981, 68).

Among the scholars who discuss romanticism's influence on Tocqueville, most focus on how romantic literature formed his conception of democratic poetry as described in *Democracy* while some highlight his sharing of certain broad anthropological and historical themes with the romantics such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Coleridge, Byron, and Wordsworth.⁵

In this paper, however, I trace in Tocqueville's thought two key elements of the romantic theory of moral education: Its critique of discursive reason as a source of moral transformation and valorization of imagination as the alternative.⁶ To the extent that they inform his reflection on the generation of authentic politics, these two strands of romantic thinking play a formative role in his idea of political cultivation and agency in democratic society.

Though romanticism as an intellectual movement in Europe between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been characterized in various ways, I suggest that one of its key aspects is its skepticism about the power of rational persuasion to effect moral transformation in the individual. For some romantics, this was primarily due to discursive reason's inability to establish moral truths.⁷ In their view, these truths simply did not have discursive reason's sanction; the rational faculty either contradicts them or could offer only philosophically weak and unconvincing arguments for them. But apart from the issue of discursive reason's epistemic authority in moral matters, other romantics attributed the impotence of moral arguments (whether they are philosophically strong or not) to their abstract nature; unlike imagination, discursive reason does not engage our passions or desires through concrete images in the mind, thereby failing to motivate behavior that promotes the formation of a virtuous character.

In “Essay on Morals,” for instance, Wordsworth suggests that “bald & naked reasonings” contained in works of systemic moral philosophy, such as William Godwin's *Enquiry*

⁵ The examples Paul A. Lombardo cites in this regard are: “the eventual perfectibility of man, the inevitability of equality, and the progress apparent in human history” (Lombardo, 1981). In addition, Harry Liebersohn attributes the theme of a European aristocrat's having a shared identity with a noble savage appearing in Tocqueville's writings on non-Europeans to Chateaubriand's literary influence (Liebersohn 1994).

⁶ Meanwhile, in *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*, Roger Boesche provides a brief discussion of the relationship between romanticism and Tocqueville that centers on the effect of discursive reason (Boesche, 1987). Though Boesche is right to see the theme of reason's generation of uncertainty and doubt as a romantic element in Tocqueville's thinking, his account of romanticism's influence on Tocqueville concerning the role of reason in politics needs significant expansion. As Boesche suggests, Tocqueville undoubtedly preferred a passionate, bold, convinced, romantic individual making a great political effort to a cold, calculating, vacillating, utilitarian, liberal individual who for the most part has no political life. But Tocqueville also importantly raised the question of whether the latter could be reasoned into becoming the former, and Boesche shows no awareness of Tocqueville's essentially romantic position on this issue of reason's role in forming a virtuous political individual.

⁷ By “discursive reason,” I broadly refer to a faculty for logical reasoning which in romanticism is frequently contrasted with the power of intuition (sometimes called “intuitive reason”) or the ability to apprehend revealed truths.

Concerning Political Justice (1793) and William Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), are "impotent" to form a virtuous moral disposition to disinterestedly promote the good of other people (Wordsworth 2009, 126). The nature of rational persuasion's impotence with regard to this kind of moral reform according to Wordsworth becomes clearer when his thought is compared with Godwin's. As Alan Grob points out, Wordsworth, especially in *The Old Cumberland Beggar* (1798), suggests a pathway from "[the] vain man, the proud man, [and] the avaricious man" to "the affectionate & benevolent man" (Grob 1967, 101–102). His idea is that, even when a person initially does a good work (e.g., giving alms) for another person ultimately out of some self-interest, as the act *repeats*, the person eventually becomes what he or she has pretended to be: someone who is truly good and virtuous in the sense of caring for others rather than oneself. A similar thought, in fact, is found in Godwin's *Enquiry*: "[After] having habituated ourselves to promote the happiness of our child, our family, our country or our species, we are at length brought to approve and desire their happiness without retrospect to ourselves" (Grob 1967, 102).

In the hope of triggering and sustaining such process of moral transformation, in Chapter 9 of *Enquiry* ("Of the Tendency of Virtue"), Godwin offers arguments on behalf of good works that appeal to the individual's self-interest ("there appears to be sufficient reason to believe, that the practice of virtue is the true road to individual happiness") (Godwin 1793, 661). Wordsworth, however, as "Essay on Morals" implies, did not believe that a rational argument of any kind was potent enough to make a person undergo the kind of a period of morally transformative practices that both he and Godwin believed could bridge selfishness and disinterestedness. In the essay, Wordsworth attributes this moral impotence of "a series of propositions" to their abstractness ("these bald & naked reasonings are impotent"; "lifeless words, & abstract propositions"); these products of much celebrated "reason" present "no image" and therefore convey "no feeling" (Wordsworth 2009, 125–126).

As illustrated by Wordsworth's criticism of Godwin who was one of the early exponents of utilitarian philosophy, utilitarianism informed many romantics' conception of discursive reason and served as a foil for their various philosophical positions. Compared with the romantics, Tocqueville clearly envisioned a more positive employment of utilitarian moral argument in the form of the doctrine of interest well understood. As previously mentioned, he affirmed in some degree a Godwinian process of moral transformation based on a utilitarian moral argument in that he saw a potential for synergy between the doctrine and local participatory institutions in generating disinterestedness in the individual; unlike Wordsworth, Tocqueville acknowledged that moral arguments which appeal to self-interest can motivate a self-interested individual to perform public duties until the person becomes genuinely public-minded.

But already at the time of writing *Democracy*, Tocqueville seems to have harbored doubts about the plausibility of this rationally driven, incremental progress toward disinterestedness that had only grown larger afterwards. In one of the drafts of *Democracy*, for example, he comments that in fact only "[great] souls" move beyond the doctrine of interest well understood to become truly virtuous while "ordinary souls" merely "stop" at the doctrine. In this claim, what differentiates the "great" from "ordinary"? A great soul is one for whom the utilitarian doctrine "cannot be enough" (Tocqueville 2010c, 922). Later, in *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856), Tocqueville also claims that the "lofty desire" for freedom as the highest public good more important than one's own material well-being "enters of itself into those great hearts which God has prepared to receive it" (Tocqueville 2008, 168). In both instances,

Tocqueville posits some particular experience (dissatisfaction with the utilitarian doctrine or divine grace) that is external to the Godwinian process and yet crucial for one's possessing some sort of disinterested love of public good. Tocqueville's political aesthetics of revolution, which will be subsequently reconstructed, suggests that a political actor's such love itself, when perceived as beautiful by a spectator, can via this aesthetic experience lead to the latter's taking a moral leap from the life of *homo economicus* toward authentic politics.

The counterpart to the romantics' belief in discursive reason's impotence in moral transformation is their valorization of imagination in the same domain, which is the other major aspect of romanticism that can be traced in Tocqueville's thought. That imagination, a "[pictorial]" power (Mahony 2004, 149), unites the abstract (including normative ideas such as freedom and the moral law) with the concrete (sense data) and thereby connects the former to desires and passions that serve as motives of conduct, is one of the reasons why the romantics considered imagination to be so important for moral education. Crucially, one way in which imagination joins the abstract and the concrete is creating elevating images or ideals in the mind, and implicit in the writings of several major romantics, such as Wordsworth and Novalis, is the idea of moral transformation through this idealizing power of imagination. As Grob points out, in "Essay on Morals," Wordsworth implicitly contrasts "the power of the poet and the power of the philosopher to move men to virtue" (Grob 1967, 116). Whereas the philosopher uses and appeals to discursive reason to no avail, the poet shapes the reader's conduct by inducing his or her imagination to form a morally elevating "image" (Wordsworth 2009, 125).⁸

As the chapter "Of Some Sources of Poetry among Democratic Nations" in the second volume of *Democracy* implies, for Tocqueville, too, imagination is "the faculty by which we construct and contemplate the ideal," for the depiction of which poetry exists (Stauffer 2014, 776). Notably, in the same chapter, he also attests to the power of certain poetic images conceived by imagination to shape the individual's ethical life with an example drawn from America. He notes that, while some Europeans find the American wilderness itself interesting, Americans are only beholden to *an image of themselves* as its conqueror or master:

Their sight is filled with another spectacle. The American people see themselves marching across this wilderness, draining swamps, straightening rivers, populating empty areas, and subduing nature . . . This magnificent image of themselves does not only present itself now and then to the imagination of the Americans; you can say that it follows each one of them in the least as well as in the principal of his actions, and that it remains always hovering in his mind.

You cannot imagine anything so small, so colorless, so full of miserable interests, so anti-poetical, in a word, than the life of a man in the United States; but among the thoughts that direct him one is always found that is full of poetry, and that one is like a hidden nerve which gives vigor to all the rest. (Tocqueville 2010c, 836–837)

⁸ In nineteenth-century literary criticism, "poetry" did not exclusively mean verse, or a "poem." Although the specific definition of poetry varied between neoclassical and romantic writers and among the romantics themselves, it was broadly understood as a cultural medium that is primarily generated by, and achieves its effect through, the human faculty of imagination, which forms some kind of "image" in the mind that is perhaps derived from, but never absolutely identical to, the sense data. Because of this imaginative quality of poetry, the romantics often contrasted it with science, or "Matter of Fact" (Abrams 1971, 101).

In short, despite their materialistic utilitarianism (“so full of miserable interests”) that is so “anti-poetical” from an aristocratic point of view, Americans are in fact always trying to conform to a “magnificent image of themselves” that is “full of poetry.”

On this self-image of the American people, Tocqueville had a somewhat mixed moral and aesthetic assessment. On the one hand, the idea of nature-subduing entrepreneurship represented by the image did contain certain admirable human qualities such as physical strength and courage, which seems to account for the fact that in the book's manuscript Tocqueville refers to Americans described in the passage as people doing “great things” following “great ideas” (Tocqueville 2010c, 837). Hence, to some extent the American self-image was indeed a morally elevating ideal. On the other hand, the heroism of the image was still that of *homo economicus* pursuing material self-interest rather than public good. Given the close association of “grandeur” with disinterestedness in his mind, Tocqueville could not quite apply the label to the American poetic image, which is reflected in his comment in the draft of the second volume: “I am afraid that this [democratic] poetry aims for the gigantesque rather than for grandeur” (Tocqueville 2010c, 837).

Whereas his awareness of the partial fallacy of American moralists' utilitarian doctrine did not prompt Tocqueville to introduce or devise any superior moral argument himself under any circumstance, his response to the political inadequacy of the American democratic self-image and poetry was somewhat different. During the Second Empire, Tocqueville tried to enlist the idealizing power of imagination for the sake of the political by playing the role of what I call “a democratic-aristocratic poet,” attempting to create a heroic collective self-image characterized by public-spiritedness in the minds of his compatriots based on the French revolutionaries of 1789.

III. Tocqueville: A Democratic-Aristocratic Poet of the Revolution

The Second Republic, which succeeded the July Monarchy with the outbreak of the 1848 Revolution, proved to be short-lived when its president Louis Napoleon staged a coup in 1851 which led to the establishment of the Second Empire in 1852. With the beginning of Louis Napoleon's reign as Napoleon III, what little amount of liberty France used to have diminished even more; “papers no longer printed any objective news” and “[people] talked about nothing but their private affairs” (Jardin 1988, 478). Although Tocqueville, now without any public office and in an “internal exile” (Jardin 1988, 463), was “struck by the difference in mentality between the men of his generation, with their aspirations to justice, and those of the generation that followed, with its hunger for material well-being,” he rejected his friend Jean-Jacques Ampère's analogy between the Second Empire and the Byzantine Empire, a symbol of “an irremediable decadence”: “Your Romans were dead, while we are asleep” (Jardin 1988, 473).

Though there is little doubt about Tocqueville's desire and hope for a political revolution that would overthrow the government of the Second Empire, his ambivalence toward the notion of revolution must be duly acknowledged. From his writings, it is clear that he was critical of several different kinds of revolution in French history. One of them is administrative centralization in France prior to 1789. Closely tracing its development in *The Old Regime* (1856), Tocqueville highlights administrative centralization as evidence of significant continuity between the Old Regime and post-Revolution society (which led François Furet, among others, to interpret Tocqueville as deflating the revolutionaries' immense sense of their capacity to make the world anew.). Tocqueville's main issue with administrative centralization was that in his

view it had sapped the life out of local political institutions in France, greatly detracting from the civic education of the French people. Tocqueville also held a critical perspective on much of the original French Revolution that started in 1789. Especially its class struggle and Terror led him to often view “revolutionary behavior as a series of unnatural acts in which people overstep the boundaries that make them human and enter an alternate mental universe in which the rules of human logic are suspended” (Welch 2001, 160). He certainly had this sense of being revolutionary in mind when he wrote to Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard in 1841: “The liberal but not revolutionary party, which alone suits me, does not exist” (Craiu 2005, 603). Finally, Tocqueville was famously hostile to the 1848 Revolution in which the working class played a major role. Although he was “happy to see France rid of the July Monarchy in February of 1848,” “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” (Frank 2021, 169).

All of this, however, does not mean that Tocqueville attached no sense of political redemption to the notion of revolution at all. As Jason Frank points out, “[despite] Tocqueville’s critique of the ‘revolutionary catechism,’ he remained intermittently enthralled by the revolutionary promise of political and moral regeneration” (Frank 2021, 171). This can be also seen from the fact that Tocqueville, regardless of his horror at the Terror, “[defended] 1789 and the Declaration of the Rights of Man to the last,” emphasizing that the Declaration ““had as object *liberty* much more than equality”” (Kahan 1985, 596).

As the previous line suggests, liberty, which Tocqueville at one point called “the first of [his] passions” (Tocqueville 2002, 220), is the key to understanding his varying attitudes toward different revolutions. Although he never precisely defined liberty, a broad description of his notion of it is still possible (Welch 2001, 51). Freedom for Tocqueville certainly includes negative liberty, but it also implies self-government through political participation (Welch 2001, 51), which explains his strong commitment to the establishment of democratic political institutions in France throughout his career. Despite his tendency to use the term “revolution” with a negative connotation connected to the violation of liberty, it seems accurate to say that during the Second Empire he did wish for a broadly liberal revolution which would achieve his political vision of robust national and local participatory institutions with a legal guarantee for civil and political liberties.⁹

Moreover, Tocqueville sometimes associated liberty more exclusively with disinterested politics freed from selfish materialism (rather than political participation as such), which is illustrated by his moral use of the term “slave.” For instance, he would write that “[a] nation that asks no more of its government than the maintenance of order,” “is already a slave at the bottom of its heart,” “*a slave to its well-being*, ready for the man who will put it in chains [emphasis added]” (Frank 2021, 171). Also, as mentioned earlier, he would describe the June uprising of the working class in Paris in 1848 as “a ‘slave’s war’” because he saw it as “a grotesque extension of the debased interest-oriented politics of the July Monarchy.” While understanding the politics of both bourgeoisie and proletariat to be essentially driven by material self-interest, he would present the revolutionaries of 1789 as the paradigmatic example of a life lived in liberty in pursuit of the supreme public good of civil and political liberties.

During the period between the coup of 1851 and his death in 1859, Tocqueville occupied himself with a series of research on modern French history close to his own time. Among others, his effort to gain a deeper understanding of the country’s weak attachment to political freedom

⁹ On Tocqueville’s ultimate political vision, see Jardin 1988 and Watkins 2003.

led to the publication of *The Old Regime* in 1856 which focuses on the development of administrative centralization during the Old Regime, though the book also contains descriptions of the revolutionaries of 1789. After *The Old Regime* was published, Tocqueville in the same year embarked on what proved to be his last major project of writing “a history of revolutionary ideology”; in a letter to G. C. Lewis, he stated that his aim was “much more to paint the movement of the feelings and ideas which successively produced the events of the [1789] Revolution than to recount the events themselves” (Tocqueville 2001, 5). As a result, roughly between December 1857 and January 1858, he wrote seven chapters covering the period from 1787 to 5 May 1789 (the first meeting of the Estates-General). Immediately afterwards, he began working on what “was to lead from the meeting of the Estates-General to the end of the Constituent Assembly [1791]” but for this work “he did not have time to do more than accumulate notes and broadly trace a plan” (Tocqueville 2001, 9–10).¹⁰

Whereas it is typical to describe Tocqueville's work in the 1850s as that of a historian, I suggest that in a sense he was simultaneously being a poet during this period. In “Tocqueville and Nietzsche on the Problem of Human Greatness in Democracy,” Paul Franco counts “democratic poetry” among the remedies (the others are religion and “the pursuit of ambitious political goals”) that Tocqueville considered for the absence of greatness in democracy (Franco 2014, 449).¹¹ Yet Franco also asserts, without elaboration, that Tocqueville “[did] not develop” the poetic response implied in *Democracy's* chapter on the sources of poetry (Franco 2014, 453). Contra Franco, I argue that Tocqueville did develop a poetic response to the problem of political greatness beyond what is contained in *Democracy* by playing the role of a poet himself with regard to the French revolutionaries of 1789.

In making this claim, I am not suggesting what Furet and Françoise Mélonio indicate in their introduction to the collection (2001) of Tocqueville's unpublished chapters and notes on the 1789 Revolution and Napoleon. For Furet and Mélonio, Tocqueville can be said to have pursued “a new poetics” through his description of the Revolution in the sense that he aimed for a “shortened narrative” to convey “the furious haste of the Revolution” (Tocqueville 2001, 9). His depiction can be also seen as “a work of tragedy” “whose characters imagine that they are masters of their destiny when they succumb to that modern form of fatalism which is historical determinism” (Tocqueville 2001, 18). Finally, his history of the Revolution can be likened to “a sort of national autobiography” that is “infinitely [dark]” and descriptive of “a primitive savagery” which the French were uniquely capable of (Tocqueville 2001, 18).

Rather, my claim about Tocqueville's poetic status rests on his own definition of poetry and poet in the second volume of *Democracy*. In the chapter “Of Some Sources of Poetry among Democratic Nations,” he defines poetry as “the search for and the portrayal of the ideal” that aims to “embellish” rather than accurately describe what actually exists and thereby “offer a higher image to the mind” (Tocqueville 2010c, 832). With this broad definition of poetry, he includes not only Homer but also the painter Raphael in the category of poet whom he defines in a draft of the second volume as anyone “who [undertakes] to offer images to men” that represent “something superior to what is” (Tocqueville 2010c, 832). Although Tocqueville is not known to

¹⁰ Tocqueville's final project of writing “a history of revolutionary ideology” was interrupted by his death from tuberculosis in 1859. Even though the drafts from this research were thus unpublished in his lifetime, it is clear from his preface for *The Old Regime* (1856) that he wrote them with an intention to publish a sequel to the publication in 1856 (Tocqueville 2008, 10).

¹¹ Although Tocqueville does not precisely define greatness, political greatness in his mind is certainly associated with disinterested concern for public good. As previously pointed out, he did not believe that free institutions can either be newly established or long endure without truly public-minded politics.

have written any verse during the 1850s, he certainly fits into his own definition of poet in *Democracy* concerning his depictions of the French revolutionaries of 1789; for example, in *The Old Regime* as well as his aforementioned unpublished history of the Revolution, he highly idealizes or “embellishes” the character and conduct of the revolutionaries on the eve of the first meeting of the Estates-General. In fact, the level of idealization carried out by Tocqueville in this regard is such that Wolin even calls the resulting portrayal a “myth” (Wolin 2001, 416).

Given his status as a poet, what can be said about his poetic style? On this topic, Stauffer describes Tocqueville as a “democratic poet” based on his similarity with the romantic poets he cites in *Democracy* (Stauffer 2014, 781). Like “Byron, Lamartine, and Chateaubriand” who “sought to ‘illuminate and enlarge certain still obscure aspects of the human heart,’” Tocqueville “[highlighted] the continued presence of devotion in a world that sees only interest” (Stauffer 2014, 781).¹² Meanwhile, Peter Augustine Lawler conversely emphasizes Tocqueville’s emulation of “the classical or Greek and Roman aristocratic philosopher poets” who were always “seeking an ideal beauty” (Lawler 1993, 96). In my opinion, while Stauffer by designating Tocqueville as a “democratic poet” overlooks the aristocratic and classical elements of his poetic style as evidenced by his description of the French Revolution of 1789, Lawler makes an opposite mistake by unduly elevating those elements; I believe that Tocqueville is most aptly described as a “democratic-aristocratic” poet.

This is perhaps best illustrated by that portion of his unpublished history of the Revolution covering the period between 1787 and 1789. The manuscript “ends at the sublime moment of the meeting of the Estates-General on 5 May 1789” (Tocqueville 2001, 9), and in this last chapter he paints the following portrait of the revolutionaries:

I do not believe that at any moment in history, at any place on earth, a similar multitude of men has ever been seen so sincerely impassioned for public affairs, so truly forgetful of their interests, so absorbed in contemplation of a great plan, so determined to risk everything that men hold most dear in their lives, to strive to lift themselves above the petty passions of their hearts. This is the common basis for the passions, the courage, and the devotion from which came forth all the great actions which were going to fill the French Revolution.

This first spectacle was short, but it had incomparable beauty . . . (Tocqueville 2001, 68)

According to *Democracy*, because “[language], dress and the daily actions of men in democracies are resistant to the imagination of the ideal,” poets in democracy are motivated to “penetrate below the external surface that the senses reveal to them, in order to glimpse the soul itself” (Tocqueville 2010c, 839). Similarly, Tocqueville in the passage focuses on depicting the revolutionaries’ inner being or character (“so sincerely impassioned for public affairs, so truly forgetful of their interests . . .”).

Yet Tocqueville’s poetic style as illustrated by the passage is characterized by certain aristocratic features as well. One is its temporal orientation. In *Democracy*, Tocqueville claims that, whereas “[aristocracy] naturally leads the human mind to the contemplation of the past,”

¹² In making this remark, Stauffer is not suggesting that Tocqueville tried to move democratic individuals through the ideal and beautiful, which she discusses only as part of “the ‘sociological and aesthetic’ causes of the decline of devotion in democracy” (Herold 2015, 524). She also describes Tocqueville as being mostly resigned to the low level of devotion in the actual democratic societies of his time.

“[democratic] peoples hardly worry about what has been” but “readily dream about what will be” to the effect that “[democracy], which closes the past to poetry, opens the future” (Tocqueville 2010c, 836). But Tocqueville, from the standpoint of the 1850s, idealizes a past (1789)—albeit a relatively recent and revolutionary one. More importantly, the passage shows his broadly aristocratic poetic aim of representing public virtue, or liberty in the sense of being free from the selfish materialistic desire; he presents the revolutionaries as heroic political actors whose political virtue and heroism rival those of citizens of ancient republics. As mentioned earlier, he was concerned about democratic poetry's tendency to portray the mere “gigantesque,” or even the “ridiculous,” rather than things that had true “grandeur” (Tocqueville 2010c, 837), which for him was closely associated with the political.

Meanwhile, Tocqueville's revolutionary poetry also contains an element that is neither purely democratic nor aristocratic but situated between the two opposites. In *Democracy*, where Tocqueville discusses several new sources of poetry for democracy, he points out that “democratic peoples” “get really excited only by the sight of themselves” (Tocqueville 2010c, 835). Whereas poetry in aristocracy frequently takes a particular individual as its subject matter, because democratic individuals are “nearly equal and similar,” poetry in democracy focuses on “the nation” or “the people” as the “great figure [that] lends itself marvelously to the portrayal of the ideal” (Tocqueville 2010c, 836). In the passage above, Tocqueville departs from what he understood to be typical aristocratic poetry by taking a “multitude of men” rather than any named revolutionary figure for his poetic idealization. Yet though in the section containing the passage Tocqueville refers to these men simply as “people,” the historical moment under description suggests that he is depicting not the literal majority of the French people but the much smaller set of their political representatives who he presumably believed also represented the nation's noblest self or character.¹³

As mentioned previously, Wolin calls Tocqueville's portrayal of the Revolution a “myth” on account of its high degree of idealization. According to Wolin, Tocqueville aimed to establish the Revolution as “a unifying myth of the nation,” which “required a particular and highly idealized construction of events,” for the purpose of “[elevating] the political above the ideology of a class” (Wolin 2001, 416). But what type of force or power did Tocqueville associate with such an idealized depiction of the Revolution that could induce moral elevation toward the political? In other words, from Tocqueville's perspective, what kind of uplifting force was involved in his poetry or myth that could counteract the structural force of the democratic social state which tended to make citizens preoccupied with material self-interest?

I suggest that Tocqueville conceived poetry to effect moral transformation through the force of beauty. In *Democracy* and elsewhere, his idea of poetry is intimately connected to the notions such as imagination, ideal, and beauty. Poetry is generated by, and appeals to, the faculty of imagination which is used for contemplating an ideal, and beauty is an aesthetic excellence most closely associated with such a higher image in the mind.

In Tocqueville's writing, the notion of beauty appears in various contexts and kinds. Generally speaking, by beauty he seems to refer to that aesthetic quality which affirms and makes attractive what is good, just, or great. In *Democracy*, he sometimes discusses beauty from God's perspective; for instance, he notes how equality, which promotes “the greatest well-being of all” rather than “the singular prosperity of a few,” must be in God's eyes not lacking in “grandeur” and “beauty” because it is “more just,” though “less elevated” (Tocqueville 2010f, 815). In other writings, Tocqueville frequently refers to the beauty of a great enterprise or task

¹³ I thank Jason Frank for pointing out this distinction.

from a political actor's point of view. In his unpublished work on the history of the Revolution and Napoleon, he describes the revolutionaries of 1789 anticipating the Estates-General's first meeting as being "delighted" by the "beauty" of their great revolutionary task (Tocqueville 2001, 67). In a letter to Gustave de Beaumont in 1858, he also calls "the enterprise of making France a free nation" to which they both have dedicated their lives "bold and beautiful" (Tocqueville 2002, 340).

But there is in Tocqueville's thought another type of beauty which is *of* a heroic political actor but experienced by a *spectator* of the political action. In fact, Tocqueville explicitly mentions this sort of what I call "heroic beauty" in his account of the revolutionaries of 1789. Referring to their heroic character and conduct, he writes:

This first spectacle was short, but it had incomparable beauty [*beautés incomparables*]. It will never depart from human memory. All foreign nations saw it, applauded it, were moved by it. Don't try to find a place in Europe so out of the way that it wasn't seen and where it didn't give rise to hope and admiration. There was none. Among the immense crowd of individual memoirs which contemporaries of the Revolution have left us, I have never seen one where the sight of these first days of 1789 did not leave an indelible trace. Everywhere it communicated the clarity, the intensity, the freshness of the emotions of the youth.¹⁴ (Tocqueville 2001, 68)

"Incomparable beauty" in this passage applies especially to the disinterestedness, or public-spiritedness, of the revolutionaries ("so sincerely impassioned for public affairs," "so truly forgetful of their interests," etc.). Accordingly, the phrase corresponds quite closely to the reference to "grandeur" that appears in an analogous paragraph in *The Old Regime*: "It was '89, a time of inexperience certainly, but also of generosity, enthusiasm, manliness and grandeur [*grandeur*], a time to be remembered forever, which the eyes of men will turn towards with wonderment when those who saw it and we ourselves have long since disappeared" (note especially the parallelism between ". . . grandeur, a time to be remembered forever . . ." in *The Old Regime* and ". . . incomparable beauty. It will never depart from human memory . . ." in the passage above) (Tocqueville 2008, 204).¹⁵

There is reason to believe that Tocqueville hoped the "incomparable beauty" of the revolutionary self-image of the French people would have a similar degree of potency over their character and conduct as the "magnificence" of the entrepreneurial self-image of the American people had over those of Americans, for whom the "magnificent image of themselves" "[remained] always hovering in [their] [minds]." This is to some extent suggested by the reactions of the foreign spectators of the Revolution Tocqueville describes in the passage. Though these spectators, being foreigners, perhaps had less reason to identify with the heroic image of the people formed in their imagination through the reports of the Revolution, they were nevertheless "moved" and filled with "admiration" as the revolutionary sight "communicated" to them "the clarity, the intensity, [and] the freshness of the emotions of the youth." As a result, the spectacle of the Revolution also left "an indelible trace" in their minds.

¹⁴ In a later note on the Revolution, too, Tocqueville describes it as "one of the greatest and most noble spectacles which humanity has ever presented" (Tocqueville 2001, 170).

¹⁵ This illustration suggests that in Tocqueville's writings "grandeur" sometimes indicates beauty attached to moral greatness. The language of the sublime seems to have a similar usage.

Tocqueville's aesthetics relies on the force of beauty to effect moral "elevation," or the experience of an attraction or a pull toward an ethical ideal formed in one's imagination. The beauty of revolutionary political actors motivates their spectators to realize the ideal of authentic politics in their own lives by inspiring love and admiration for it.¹⁶ Tocqueville's poetic pedagogy of the Revolution thus presupposes a spectator who is wont to be enchanted and swayed by beauty—in short, a poetic individual.

Many readers of *Democracy*, however, might point out that this presupposition is deeply at odds with Tocqueville's own democratic anthropology presented in the work. For instance, in the second volume's chapter "In What Spirit the Americans Cultivate the Arts," he says, "[The] general mediocrity of fortune, the lack of superfluity, the universal desire for well-being and the constant efforts made by each person to gain well-being for himself, make the taste for the useful predominate over the love of the beautiful in the heart of man" (Tocqueville 2010e, 519). "Democratic nations," he continues, "will by habit prefer the useful to the beautiful, and they will want the beautiful to be useful" (Tocqueville 2010e, 519). In the previously discussed chapter on sources of poetry, he also points out that "the taste for the ideal and the pleasure that is taken in seeing its portrayal are never as intense and as widespread among a democratic people as within an aristocracy" (Tocqueville 2010e, 659). In fact, this predominant taste for the useful explains why American moralists "almost never say that virtue is beautiful" (Tocqueville 2010e, 1017) and serves as the main reason for Tocqueville's interest in the doctrine of interest well understood. Given such descriptions and suggestions of modern democracy's materialistic taste, it seems fair to ask whether Tocqueville did indeed believe in a poetic remedy that can be effective for an average democratic individual.

But although *Democracy* indicates that materialism born of democratic equality extends in some degree to the aesthetic dimension of democratic life as well, the work overall provides a much more nuanced picture of democratic individuals' poetic susceptibility than the lines cited above. In various places of the text, Tocqueville suggests that democratic persons, too, possess the potential to be morally elevated toward an ideal through the experience of aesthetic excellences such as beauty. From his perspective, Americans' poetic enchantment with the magnificent image of the heroic pioneer in the wilderness illustrates an essentially dual human nature; even as "the human mind leans from one side toward the limited, the material and the useful, from the other, it rises naturally toward the infinite, the non-material and the beautiful" (Tocqueville 2010e, 466). Americans' religious life also has an important poetic dimension; they are "[touched]" by the Bible's "sublime" "portrayals of the grandeur and the goodness of the Creator" and can enter into "an ideal world where everything is great, pure, eternal" (Tocqueville 2010e, 1152, 1153). Moreover, Tocqueville's discussion of human interiority as the most promising subject matter for poetry in democracy implies a democratic audience who can feel "admiration" for this inner world's partial "grandeur" (Tocqueville 2010e, 703).

Concerning the poetic nature of democratic individuals, Tocqueville's literary advice for writers in democracy in the second volume's chapter "Why the Study of Greek and Latin Literature Is Particularly Useful in Democratic Societies" is also highly suggestive. Here, he recommends democratic literary writers to closely study the ancient, aristocratic literature (which constantly shows "the search for ideal beauty") and "be thoroughly penetrated by its spirit" (Tocqueville 2010e, 605, 609). As his own democratic-aristocratic poetic style indicates, this

¹⁶ In light of this, Matthew William Maguire's description of Tocqueville as "a passive spectator who finds a certain enjoyment in the disordering of the new order for its own sake" (Maguire, 2006) does not seem to reflect the latter's interest in the transformative power of revolutionary spectatorship.

does not mean that Tocqueville advocated any strict imitation of aristocratic writers for the new democratic age; there are certain democratic tastes, such as one for the depiction of “the people” rather than a single individual, that a poet must accommodate in order to be effective. Yet Tocqueville’s emphasis on closely emulating aristocratic writers who tended to pursue the ideal and beautiful seems to make little sense unless he assumed democratic individuals to be essentially poetic.

Conclusion

This paper has explored a much-neglected dimension of Tocqueville’s political aesthetics that affirms the role of revolutionary political actors’ heroic beauty in inspiring similar political actions among democratic citizens. Having long been concerned about the various manifestations of materialism in modern democracy and influenced by romanticism, Tocqueville during the Second Empire assumed the role of a “democratic-aristocratic poet” by trying to offer idealizing depictions of the French revolutionaries of 1789 to the French people. This episode, along with a close reading of *Democracy*, reveals that Tocqueville had a stronger appreciation of democratic individuals’ poetic capacity than what is commonly believed.

Though developed in the context of nineteenth-century America and France, Tocqueville’s political aesthetics reconstructed in this paper is not without contemporary implications. For any current liberal democracy, too, there exist many important public interests that are individually costly to promote; in general, for instance, taking political actions on behalf of some significant civil or political liberty is not rational in terms of the actor’s material self-interest. In *the Old Regime*, Tocqueville comments that, while “[certain] nations pursue freedom obstinately amid all kinds of danger and deprivation,” “[other] nations grow tired of freedom amid their prosperity” and “allow [it] to be wrenched from their hands without a fight, for fear of compromising, by making an effort, the very wellbeing they owe to it” (Tocqueville 2008, 168). Then and now, safeguarding liberty and other essential political goods in liberal democracy seems to require some critical mass of citizens who disinterestedly pursue such goods.

Currently, there are mainly two different neo-Tocquevillian approaches to promoting genuinely public-spirited politics in liberal democracy. The first is perhaps best represented by Robert Putnam to whom Danoff attributes the idea inspired by *Democracy* that, though “we may start out as *homo economicus*,” “if people can be persuaded to engage in civic and political activity out of self-interest” (e.g. wealth and health), eventually “their hearts and souls will move toward a more genuine form of civic virtue” (Danoff 2007, 175). But as this paper illustrated, Tocqueville himself actually had growing doubts about the plausibility of this rational, utilitarian process of building “a public-spirited community on the privatistic motives of individuals” (Danoff 2007, 174). Furthermore, it is questionable that promoting public good through communal or political activities can be reliably justified by individual utility alone, which leads Danoff, citing Robert N. Bellah and others’ *Habits of the Heart* (1985), to suggest as an alternative “[reappropriating] the moral languages of civic republicanism and biblical religion,” or “reviving a language of commitment, obligation, and sacrifice” (Danoff 2007, 183, 185). Basically, this second approach is about telling people that they *ought* to serve public good; advancing human rights, for example, is simply a duty which one must perform regardless of how this affects one’s own interest. But even though working for public good out of a sense of duty is indeed disinterested by definition, it is not clear whether the language of duty as such is so effective for making this happen. Rather than focusing on the language of either interest or

duty, this paper tried to draw attention to Tocqueville's poetic strategy implicit in his writings on the Revolution. For Tocqueville, authentic politics, or a life lived in freedom, has a better chance of staying with liberal democracy when perceived as having "incomparable beauty" by democratic citizens.

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