CHAPTER 17

1. Definition of poetry. Search for and portrayal of the ideal. Object of the chapter. Try to find out if among the actions, sentiments and ideas of democratic peoples, some are found that lend themselves to the ideal and can serve as source of poetry.

2. Democratic peoples have naturally less taste for the ideal because of the passions that bind them constantly to the pursuit of the real.

3. Moreover there are several subjects proper to the portrayal of the ideal that they are lacking.

4. Religions are shaken.

5. They become simplified

6. Men take no further interest in the past.

7. They find with difficulty material for the ideal in the present because they are all small and see each other very clearly.

8. So most of the American [ancient? (ed.)] sources of poetry are drying up, but others are opening.

9. Men of democratic centuries readily take an interest in the future.

10. If individuals are small, society seems [blank (ed.)] to them and lends itself to poetry. Each nation sees itself.

11. The human species is seen and it can be portrayed.

12. There is no complete divinity, but the figure of God is greater and clearer and his place relative to the whole of human affairs is more recognizable.

13. The external man does not lend himself [to poetry (ed.)] but poets descend into the realm of the soul and there they find the sentiments of not just one man in particular, but of man in general to portray; equality brings forth the image of man in general and is interested in him.

Thus democracy does not make all the subjects that lend themselves to the ideal disappear. It makes them less numerous and greater (YTC, CVI, pp. 18–19).

In the rubish of these chapters you find this as well:

Poetry of democracy.

Future of democracy, sole poetic idea of our time. Immense, indefinite idea. Period of renewal, of total change in the social system of humanity. This idea alone throws more poetry into souls than there was in the century of Louis XV and in that of Louis XIV.

It is only the past or the future that is poetic. The present very rarely is. There was nevertheless a great deal of poetry in the present in the Middle Ages. Facts to explain (Rabish, 1).

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Of Some Sources of Poetry among Democratic Nations

b.

b. On a jacket that accompanies that of the chapter:

Piece that began the chapter and that must be deleted, I believe, as written in an affected style and above all verbiage./

I would like to portray the influence that democratic institutions exercise in the United States on the poetic genius of man, but beyond the fact that the subject is placed outside of the ordinary circle of my thoughts, a first difficulty stops me.

I do not know if anyone up to now has taken care to provide an uncontested definition of the thing I am attempting to speak about. No one can deny that poetry has not obtained great power over the imagination of men; but who has ever said clearly what poetry was; how many different and often dissimilar things we have gathered under this very name!

[In the margin: Show in a more striking way what is useful in poetry. The Romans./

It is not sufficiently understood that men cannot do without poetry./

Poetry and poetic faculty to distinguish. Taste for the ideal./

I want to examine not only if democracy leads men to do works of poetry but also if it suggests poetic ideas to them./

The one is not the necessary consequence of the other, for a people can have a great number of poetic ideas and not have the time or the art of writing or the taste for reading. But in general you can say that these two things go together.]

A small rhymed epigram is a work of poetry; a long epic in verse is as well. I see enormous differences between these two productions of the human mind, but they have something similar in the form. I understand that it is to form that the word begins to be attached, and I conclude from it that poetry consists of carefully enclosing the idea in a certain number of syllables symmetrically arranged. But no. I hear that these verses are poetic and that those are not. Some grant that there is poetry in a prose work and others contend that they find no trace of it in a long poem. So poetry rests not only in the form of the thought, but also in the thought itself. It can reside in the two things united or inhabit each one of them separately. So what definitively is poetry? This could become the topic for a dissertation, with which I do not intend to fatigue the reader. So instead of trying to find out what language has wanted to include in the word poetry, I will say what I include in it myself and I will fix the meaning that I give to it in the present chapter.

On a page bearing the title of POETRY IN AMERICA, you read this first beginning of the chapter: "I often wondered while traveling across the United States if, amid this people exclusively preoccupied by the material cares of life [v: commercial enterprises], among so many mercantile speculations, a single poetic idea would be found, and I believed I recognized several of them that appeared to me eminently to have this character."
Several very different meanings have been given to the word poetry. It would tire readers to try to find out which one of these different meanings is most suitable to choose; I prefer to tell them immediately which one I have chosen.

Poetry, in my view, is the search for and the portrayal of the ideal. The poet is the one who, by taking away a part of what exists, adding some imaginary features to the picture, and combining certain real circumstances that are not found together, completes, enlarges nature. Thus, the aim of poetry will not be to represent truth, but to embellish it and to offer a higher image to the mind.

Verse will seem to me like the ideal of beauty for language, and in this sense it will be eminently poetic; but in itself alone, it will not constitute poetry.

[<Poetry always takes as the subject of its portraits beings who are really found in nature or who at least live in the imagination of the men to whom it is addressed. It changes, enlarges, embellishes what exists; it does not create what does not exist, and if it attempts to do so, it can still amuse or surprise, but it no longer rouses and becomes the puerile game of an idle imagination.>]

I want to find out if, among the actions, sentiments and ideas of democratic peoples, some are found that lend themselves to the imagination of the ideal and that must, for this reason, be considered as natural sources of poetry.

It must first be recognized 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.

(In democratic societies the human mind finds itself constantly bound by the small details of real [v: present] life. That results not only from the fact that all men work, but above all from the fact that they carry out all their works with fervor and I could almost say with love.)

Among aristocratic nations, it sometimes happens that the body acts as if by itself, while the soul is plunged into a repose that weighs it down. Among these nations, the people themselves often show poetic tastes, and their spirit sometimes soars above and beyond what surrounds them.

But, in democracies, the love of natural enjoyments, the idea of something better, competition, the charm of impending success, are like so many spurs that quicken the steps of each man in the career that he has embraced and forbid him from standing aside from it for a single moment. The principal effort of the soul goes in this direction. Imagination is not extinguished, but it devotes itself almost exclusively to imagining the useful and to representing the real.

Equality not only diverts men from portraying the ideal; it decreases the number of subjects to portray.

[You cannot deny that equality [v: democracy], while becoming established among men, does not make a great number of these subjects that lent themselves to the portrayal of the ideal disappear from their view, and does not in this way dry up several of the most abundant sources of poetry.]

Aristocracy, by holding society immobile, favors the steadiness and duration of positive religions, as well as the stability of political institutions.

Not only does it maintain the human spirit in faith, but it disposes it to adopt one faith rather than another. An aristocratic people will always be inclined to place intermediary powers between God and man.

You can say that in this aristocracy shows itself very favorable to poetry. When the universe is populated with supernatural powers that do not fall within the senses, but are discovered by the mind, imagination feels at ease,

f. In the margin: "<This sentence is found word for word, I believe, in revolutions. Vary it in one place or the other. The idea is necessary to both.>"

g. In the margin: "<While the middle classes, although they have more leisure, show it almost not at all. From that you can see clearly that it is less the constraint of work that stops the poetic impulse than the spirit that is brought to work.>"
and poets, finding a thousand diverse subjects to portray, find innumerable spectators ready to be interested in their portraits.

In democratic centuries, on the contrary, it sometimes happens that beliefs go drifting away like the laws. Doubt then brings the imagination of poets back to earth and encloses them within the visible and real world.Indeed, uniformity in itself is immemorially poetic over all. Byron proved it very well. What poetry in the why and the how of man in face of God and of nature.

Audacious doubt is eminently democratic” (RUBISH OF THESE CHAPTERS, RUBISH, 1).

Each one, while viewing himself, sees all the others at the same instant. So poets who live in democratic centuries cannot ever take one man in particular as the subject of their portrait; for a subject with mediocre greatness, which you also see clearly on all sides, will never lend itself to the ideal.

Therefore equality, while becoming established on the earth, dries up most of the ancient sources of poetry.

Let us try to show how it finds new ones.

When doubt depopulated heaven and when the progress of equality reduced each man to better known and smaller proportions, poets, not yet imagining what they could put in place of these great subjects that withdrew with aristocracy, turned their eyes toward inanimate nature. Losing heroes and gods from view, they undertook at first to portray rivers and mountains.

That gave birth in the last century to the poetry that was called, par excellence, descriptive.

Some have thought that this embellished portrayal of the material and inanimate things which cover the earth was poetry appropriate to democratic centuries; but I think that is a mistake. I believe that it only represents a period of transition.

I am persuaded that in the long run democracy diverts the imagination from everything that is external to man, in order to fix it only on man.

Democratic peoples can be very amused for a moment by considering nature; but they get really excited only by the sight of themselves. Here alone are the natural sources of poetry to be found among these peoples, and it may be believed that all poets who do not want to draw upon these sources will lose all sway over the souls of those whom they claim to charm, and will end by no longer having anything except cold witnesses to their transports.

j. "Democracy diverts the human mind from the contemplation of external objects in order to concentrate on itself. 'Man is the most beautiful study of man', Pope said. That is true for all peoples, but there is no more evident truth for a democratic people. Almost the whole of its literature is contained in this single expression" (RUBISH, 1).
I have demonstrated how the idea of the progress and of the indefinite perfectibility of the human species was appropriate to democratic ages. Democratic peoples hardly worry about what has been, but they readily dream about what will be, and their imagination has no limits in this direction; it expands and grows without measure.

This offers a vast opening to poets and allows them to move their portrayal far away from what is seen. Democracy, which closes the past to poetry, opens the future.

[# In democratic centuries poets cannot take as the subject of their portrait a hero or a prince. #]

Since all the citizens who make up a democratic society are nearly equal and similar, poetry cannot attach itself to any one of them; but the nation offers itself to its brush. The similarity of all individuals, which makes each one of them separately inappropriate for becoming the subject of poetry, allows poets to include them all in the same image and to consider finally the people itself. Democratic nations see their own figure more clearly than all others and this great figure lends itself marvelously to the portrayal of the ideal.

I will easily acknowledge that the Americans do not have poets; I cannot admit as well that they do not have poetic ideas. m

Some in Europe are very much interested in the American wilderness, but the Americans themselves hardly think about it. The wonders of inanimate nature leave them indifferent, and so to speak they see the admirable forests that surround them only at the moment when they fall under their blows. n 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. [Every day they notice their size growing and their strength increasing, and they already perceive themselves in the future leading as absolute masters the vast continent that they have made fruitful and cleared.] 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. o [You must not be astonished by this for how could you think that men who do such great things would be entirely devoid of great ideas?] p

In aristocratic centuries, each people, like each individual, is inclined to hold itself immobile and separate from all the others.

In democratic centuries the extreme mobility of men and their impatient desires make them constantly change place, and make the inhabitants of different countries mingle together, see and hear each other, and borrow from each other. So it is not only the members of the same nation who become similar; nations themselves assimilate, and all together form in the eye of the beholder nothing more than a vast democracy in which each

k. "I cited this example of America not only because America is the particular object of my discourse, but also because I believe that in this it provides me with insights about what must happen among democratic peoples in general" (Rubish, 1).

m. Milton, democratic poet.

"Byron idem."

"The one is democratic because he drew his generative idea from Christianity.

"The other by the natural impulse of his time" (Rubish of these chapters, Rubish, 1).

n. "There is until now only a single writer who has felt and could produce this admirable poetry of wild nature such as the wilderness of America reveals to us, and this great poet is not American" (Rubish, 1).

o. "So I do not fear that democratic peoples lack poetry, but I am afraid that this poetry aims for the gigantesque rather than for grandeur. For it, I fear the influence of their poets more than their timidity, and I am afraid that the sublime there may be several times closer still to the ridiculous than anywhere else" (Rubish of these chapters, Rubish, 1).

p. In a first draft, this paragraph followed: "# The sight of what is happening in the United States makes me reflect on democratic peoples in general, and these new reflections modify the opinion that I had had formerly that democracies could not fail to extinguish the poetic genius of man and to substitute for the empire of the imagination that of good sense. That is true, but to a lesser degree than I had believed at first. So I think that there is a kind of poetry within reach of democratic peoples, and I am persuaded that great writers who will be born among them will not fail to see it and to take hold of it#" (Rubish, 1).
citizen is a people. That brings to light for the first time the figure of the human species.

All that relates to the existence of the human species taken as a whole, its vicissitudes, its future becomes a very fertile mine for poetry.9

Poets who lived in aristocratic ages made admirable portraits by taking as subjects certain incidents in the life of a people or of a man; but not one of them ever dared to include in his tableau the destinies of the human species, while poets who write in democratic ages can undertake to do so.

At the same time that each person, raising his eyes above his country, finally begins to notice humanity itself, God reveals himself more and more to the human mind in his full and entire majesty.

If in democratic centuries faith in positive religions is often shaky and beliefs in intermediary powers, whatever name you give them, grow dim, men on the other hand are disposed to conceive a much more vast idea of Divinity itself, and the intervention of the divine in human affairs appears to them in a new and greater light.

Seeing the human species as a single whole, they easily imagine that the same design rules over its destinies, and in the actions of each individual, they are led to recognize the mark of this general and constant plan by which God leads the species.7

This can also be considered as a very abundant source of poetry that opens in these centuries.

Democratic poets will always seem small and cold if they try to give bodily forms to gods, demons or angels, and try to make them descend from heaven to quarrel over the earth.

But, if democratic poets want to connect the great events that they are relating to the general designs of God for the universe, and, without show-

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q. Note on the other side of the jacket that contains the rubish of the chapter: “In aristocracy, the detail of man poetic. Homer portrays Achilles. In democracy, humanity independently of the particular forms that it can take in certain places and in certain times. Byron, Childe Harold, Chateaubriand, René” (Rubish, 1).

r. “What is more poetic than the Discours sur l’histoire universelle of Bossuet? Only God and the human species are present there, however” (Rubish, 1).

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s. We have had today (22 April 1837) an interesting conversation on poetry.

We all fell into agreement that the intervention of the divinity in human affairs was essentially poetic by nature and particularly necessary to epic poetry.

The discussion turned on the means of making the intervention of the divinity felt today, of making it perceptible.

By common agreement we abandoned mythological divinities, personified passions . . . , as operatic machines that chilled the spectator.

I maintained that today you had equally to avoid using saints, demons and angels, since the spirit of the century was drawn more and more to grasp the idea of the entirely intellectual and non-material action of the divinity on souls, without intermediaries in whom you scarcely believe. But the difficulty arose of making this action, conceived by the mind alone, felt and making this invisible agent seen in the very play of human passions.

Charles [Stoffels (ed.)) maintained that man was so made that you could never make him conceive of the intervention of the divinity without visible agents. I maintained the opposite, but without being able to develop my thought practically.

In the margin: Humanitarian poetry.

Poem of man. Human destiny.

Jocelyn. Human condition.

This merits being carefully examined (Rubish of these chapters, Rubish, 1).


Appropriate to democratic peoples” (Rubish of these chapters, Rubish, 1).
itself more to portraying the ideal than man envisaged in this way in the depths of his non-material nature.\(^{11}\)

I do not need to travel across heaven and earth to find a marvelous subject full of contrast, of grandeur and infinite pertinence, of profound obscurities and singular clarity, capable at the same time of giving birth to pity, admiration, contempt, terror. I have only to consider myself. Man comes out of nothing, passes through time, and goes to disappear forever into the bosom of God. You see him only for a moment wandering at the edge of the two abysses where he gets lost.

If man were completely unaware of himself, he would not be poetic; for what you have no idea about you cannot portray. If he saw himself clearly, his imagination would remain dormant and would have nothing to add to the picture. But man is revealed enough for him to see something of himself, and hidden enough for the rest to disappear into impenetrable shadows, into which he plunges constantly and always in vain, in order finally to understand himself.\(^{v}\)

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u. In the manuscript, you find in place of this sentence two paragraphs that repeat ideas present in other places of the chapter.

v. Miseries of man./
   [In the margin: To put perhaps with sentiments. Transition.
   Put somewhere because good.
   Human will.
   In preface probably when I say that I am speaking about the difficulty of the subject.]
   If you examine the conduct of men, you easily discover that tastes direct them much more than opinions or ideas.
   Where does the instinctive, almost physical sensation that we call taste come from? How is it born, is it supported? Where does it take us and push us? Who knows?
   Thus man does not know even the principal motive of his own actions and when, tired of looking for truth in the entire universe, he comes back toward himself, obscurity seems to redouble as he approaches and wants to understand himself.
   [In the margin: This text is better.
   And when, tired of looking for what makes his fellows act, he tries hard at least to untangle what pushes himself, he still does not know what to believe. He travels across the entire universe and he doubts. He finally comes back toward himself and obscurity seems to redouble as he approaches himself more and wants to understand himself.]

9 March 1836 (YTC, CVk, 1, pp. 12–13).

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So among democratic peoples, you must not wait for poetry to live by legends, for it to be nourished by traditions and ancient memories, for it to try to repopulate the universe with supernatural beings in whom readers and poets themselves no longer believe, or for it coldly to personify virtues and vices that you can see in their own form. It lacks all these resources; but man remains for it, and that is enough. Human destinies, man, taken apart from his time and country and placed in front of nature and God, with his passions, his doubts, his unprecedented prosperity and incomprehensible miseries, will become for these peoples the principal and almost unique subject of poetry; and this is what you can already ascertain if you consider what has been written by the great writers who have appeared since the world began to turn toward democracy.

Writers who, today, have so admirably reproduced the features of Childe Harold, of René and of Jocelyn\(^{w}\) did not claim to recount the actions of one man; they wanted to illuminate and enlarge certain still obscure aspects of the human heart.

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Tocqueville here is referring to Pascal, very specifically to the fragment on the disproportion of man (pensée 390 of the Lafuma edition).

In 1831, he had already written to Ernest de Chabrol a letter with accents of Pascal:

The more I examine this country and everything, the more I see and the more I am frightened by seeing the few certainties that man is able to acquire in this world. There is no subject that does not grow larger as you pursue it, no fact or observation at the bottom of which you do not find a doubt. All the objects of this life appear to us only like certain decorations of the opera that you see only through a curtain that prevents you from discerning the contours with precision.

There are men who enjoy living in this perpetual half-light; as for me, it tires me out and drives me to despair. I would like to hold political and moral truths as I hold my pen, and doubt besieges me.

Yesterday there was an American who asked me how I classified human miseries; I answered without hesitating that I put them in this order: chronic illnesses, death, doubt. . . . He stopped me and protested; I have reflected about it since and I persist in my classification, but this is enough philosophy (letter of 19 November 1832, YTC, Blaz).

w. Henry Reeve added Faust to these examples.
Those are the poems of democracy.
So equality does not destroy all the subjects of poetry; it makes them less numerous and more vast.x

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CHAPTER 18a

Why American Writers and Orators Are Often Bombastic.b

I have often noticed that the Americans, who generally treat matters with a clear and spare language devoid of all ornamentation, and whose extreme simplicity is often common, fall readily into bombast as soon as they want to take up poetic style. They then appear pompous without letup from one end of the speech to the other; and seeing them lavish images at every turn in this way, you would think that they never said anything simply.
The English fall more rarely into a similar fault.
The cause of this can be pointed out without much difficulty.
In democratic societies, each citizen is habitually busy contemplating a very small object, which is himself. If he comes to raise his eyes higher, he then sees only the immense image of society, or the still greater figure of the human species. He has only very particular and very clear ideas, or very general and very vague notions; the intermediate space is empty.

x. I do not know if poetry such as I have taken care to define it, poetry that does not consist of a particular form but [of (ed.)] a certain kind of ideas, is not among the literary tastes most natural to democracy -because it is enjoyed without preparation and in a moment and it rapidly removes the soul from the middle of the pettiness and monotony of democratic life.
The great images of poetry seize so to [speak (ed.)] the soul without warning; they draw it as if by force far away from its everyday habits.> The enjoyments that poetry provides are more instinctive than reasoned; you enjoy them without preparation, you obtain them for yourself instantaneously. They seize so to speak the soul without warning and draw it as if by force far away from its everyday routine.

What fits democracy better than all that? (RUBISH OF THESE CHAPTERS, RUBISH, 1).

a. 1. Men who live in democracies have only very small ideas that relate to themselves or very general ones. As soon as you take them out of themselves, they want the gigantesque.
2. Their writers give it to them readily because they have similar instincts and as well because they have the democratic taste of succeeding quickly and with little cost.
3. Among democratic peoples poetic sources are beautiful, but rare. They are soon exhausted. And then you throw yourself into the monstrous and the imaginary (YTC, CVF, p. 19).
b. On the jacket of the manuscript: "Perhaps this chapter is too thin to be put separately and should be joined to the preceding one."
So when you have drawn him out of himself, he is always waiting for you to offer him some prodigious object to look at, and it is only at this price that he agrees to keep himself away for a moment from the small complicated concerns that agitate and charm his life.

This seems to me to explain well enough why men of democracies who in general have such narrow affairs, demand from their poets such vast conceptions and portraits so beyond measure.

For their part, writers hardly fail to obey these instincts that they share; they inflate their imagination constantly, and expanding it beyond measure, they make it reach the gigantesque, for which they often abandon the great.

In this way, they hope immediately to attract the eyes of the crowd and to fix them easily on themselves, and they often succeed in doing so; for the crowd, which seeks in poetry only very vast subjects, does not have time to measure exactly the proportions of all the subjects that are presented to it, or taste sure enough to see easily in what way they are disproportionate.

The author and the public corrupt each other at the same time.

We have seen, moreover, that among democratic peoples the sources of poetry were beautiful, but not very abundant. You soon end by exhausting them. Finding no more material for the ideal in the real and in the true, poets leave them entirely and create monsters.

I am not afraid that the poetry of democratic peoples may show itself to be timid or that it may stay very close to the earth. I am apprehensive instead that it may lose itself at every moment in the clouds, and that it may finish by portraying entirely imaginary realms. I fear that the works of democratic poets may offer immense and incoherent images, overcharged portraits, bizarre compositions, and that the fantastic beings that have emerged from their mind may sometimes cause the real world to be missed.

CHAPTER 19

Some Observations on the Theater of Democratic Peoples

1. It is in the theater that the literary repercussions of the political revolution first make themselves felt. Spectators are carried away by their secret tastes without having the time to acknowledge it.
2. The literary revolution takes place more suddenly in the theater than elsewhere. Even in aristocracies the people have their voice in the theater. When the social state becomes democratic, the people become sovereign and overthrow by riot the literary laws of the aristocracy.
3. It is in the theater that the literary revolution is always most visible. The theater puts into relief most of the qualities and all of the defects inherent in democratic literatures.

a. Subjects taken from current society and presenting its inconsistencies.

b. On the jacket of the manuscript:

CH. [perhaps M (ed.)] to whom I have just read this chapter (22 December 1838) immediately found 1. that it greatly resembled literary physiognomy; 2. that it was a bit serious given the subject. 3. that it would be desirable to introduce more citations and less argumentation.

Doesn't interest begin to tire and isn't this chapter, which is only the development of literary physiognomy, too much? Examine the impression of those who hear it.

I believe, taking everything into account, that this chapter should be deleted.

CH could indicate Charles Stoffels or Ernest de Chabrol. Tocqueville read part of his manuscript to Chateaubriand, but a letter to Beaumont obliges us to place this reading
When the revolution that changed the social and political state of an aristocratic people begins to make itself felt in literature, it is generally in the theater that it is first produced, and it is there that it always remains visible.

The spectator of a dramatic work is in a way taken unprepared by the impression that is suggested to him. He does not have time to search his memory or to consult experts; he does not think about fighting the new literary instincts that are beginning to emerge in him; he yields to them before knowing them.

Authors do not take long to discover which way public taste is thus secretly leaning. They turn their works in that direction; and plays, after serving to make visible the literary revolution that is being prepared, soon end by carrying it out. If you want to judge in advance the literature of a people that is turning toward democracy, study its theater.

Among aristocratic nations themselves, moreover, plays form the most democratic portions of literature. There is no literary enjoyment more accessible to the crowd than those that you experience seeing the stage. Neither preparation nor study is needed to feel them. They grip you amid your preoccupations and your ignorance. When the love, still half crude, for the pleasures of the mind begins to penetrate a class of citizens, it immediately drives them to the theater. The theaters of aristocratic nations have always been full of spectators who do not belong to the aristocracy. It is only in

the theater that the upper classes have mingled with the middle and lower classes, and that they have agreed if not to accept the advice of the latter, at least to allow them to give it. It is in the theater that the learned and the lettered have always had the most difficulty making their taste prevail over that of the people, and keeping themselves from being carried away by the taste of the people. There the pit has often laid down the law for the boxes.

[So democracy not only introduces the lower classes into the theater, it makes them dominate there.]

If it is difficult for an aristocracy not to allow the theater to be invaded by the people, you will easily understand that the people must rule there as a master once democratic principles have penetrated laws and mores, when ranks merge and minds like fortunes become more similar, and when the upper class loses its power, its traditions and its leisure, along with its hereditary wealth.

So the tastes and instincts natural to democratic peoples as regards literature, will show themselves first in the theater, and you can predict that they will be introduced there with violence. In written works, the literary laws of the aristocracy will become modified little by little in a general and so to speak legal manner. In the theater, they will be overthrown by riots.

[All that I have said in a general way about the literature of democracies is particularly applicable to the works of the theater.]

The theater puts into relief most of the qualities and nearly all the vices inherent in democratic literatures.

Democratic peoples have only very mediocre esteem for learning, and they scarcely care about what happened in Rome and in Athens; they mean for you to talk about themselves, and they ask for the present to be portrayed.

Consequently, when the heroes and mores of antiquity are often reproduced on stage, and care is taken to remain very faithful to ancient traditions, that is enough to conclude that the democratic classes do not yet dominate the theater.

Racine excuses himself very humbly, in the preface of Britannicus, for having made Junie enter among the vestal virgins, where, according to Aulu-Gelle, he says, “no one younger than six or older than nine years of age was
received." It may be believed that he would not have thought to accuse himself or to defend himself from such a crime, if he had written today.

Such a fact enlightens me not only about the state of literature in the times in which it took place, but also about that of the society itself. A democratic theater does not prove that the nation is democratic; for, as we have just seen, even in aristocracies it can happen that democratic tastes influence the stage. But when the spirit of aristocracy alone rules the theater, that demonstrates invincibly that the whole society is aristocratic, and you can boldly conclude that this same learned and lettered class that directs authors commands citizens and leads public affairs.

It is very rare that the refined tastes and haughty tendencies of the aristocracy when it governs the theater, do not lead it to make a choice, so the speak, in human nature. Certain social conditions interest it principally, and it is pleased to find them portrayed on the stage; certain virtues, and even certain vices, seem to the aristocracy to merit more particularly being reproduced on stage: it accepts the portrayal of these while it removes all the others from its sight. In the theater, as elsewhere, it only wants to find great lords, and it is moved only by kings. It is the same for styles. An aristocracy willingly imposes certain ways of speaking on authors; it wants all to be said with this tone.

The theater therefore often happens to portray only one of the dimensions of man, or even sometimes to represent what is not found in human nature; it rises above human nature and leaves it behind.

In democratic societies spectators do not have such preferences, and they rarely exhibit similar antipathies; they love to find on stage the confused mixture of conditions, of sentiments and ideas that they find before their eyes. The theater becomes more striking, more popular and more true.

Sometimes, however, those who write for the theater in democracies also go beyond human nature, but in another way than their predecessors. By dint of wanting to reproduce minutely the small singularities of the present moment and the particular physiognomy of certain men, they forget to relate the general features of the species.

When the democratic classes rule the theater, they introduce as much liberty in the manner of treating the subject as in the very choice of this subject.

The love of the theater being, of all literary tastes, the one most natural to democratic peoples, the number of authors and that of spectators, like that of the performances, increases constantly among these peoples. Such a multitude, composed of such diverse elements and spread over so many different places, cannot accept the same rules and be subject to the same laws. No agreement is possible among very numerous judges who do not know where to meet; each separately makes his judgment. If the effect of democracy is in general to make literary rules and conventions doubtful, in the theater it abolishes them entirely, in order to substitute only the caprice of each author and each public.

It is equally in the theater above all that what I have already said elsewhere in a general way concerning style and art in democratic literatures is revealed. When you read the criticism brought forth by the dramatic works of the century of Louis XIV, you are surprised to see the great esteem of the public for verisimilitude, and the importance that it placed on the fact that a man, remaining always true to himself, did nothing that could not be easily explained and understood. It is equally surprising how much value was then attached to the forms of language and what small quarrels over words were made with dramatic authors.

It seems that the men of the century of Louis XIV attached a very exaggerated value to these details, which are noticed in the study but that elude the stage. For, after all, the principal object of a play is to be presented, and its first merit is to stir emotion. That came from the fact that the spectators of this period were at the same time the readers. Leaving the

c. In the margin of a first version that is found in the Rubish of the chapter: "Shakespeare, Addison: There where authority does not deign to interfere in the theater" (Rubish, 1).

d. "What made the men of the century of Louis XIV want to find only princes and kings on the tragic stage was a sentiment analogous to that which made Alexander say, when requested to appear at the Olympic games: I would willingly go if only kings raced there." (Rubish, 1). Toqueville here takes up a known episode, drawn from the Life of Alexander of Plutarch.
performance, they waited at home for the writer, in order to complete their judgment of him.

In democracies, you listen to plays, but you do not read them. Most of those who attend stage plays are not seeking the pleasures of the mind, but the intense emotions of the heart. They are not waiting to find a work of literature, but a spectacle, and provided that the author speaks the language of the country correctly enough to make himself understood and that the characters excite curiosity and awaken sympathy, they are content; without asking anything more of the fiction, they immediately reenter the real world. So style there is less necessary; for on the stage observation of these rules escapes more and more.

As for verisimilitudes, it is impossible to be often new, unexpected, rapid, while remaining faithful to them. So they are neglected, and the public pardons it. You can count on the fact that they will not worry about the roads you have led them along, if you lead them finally to an object that touches them. They will never reproach you for having moved them in spite of the rules.

Two things must be clearly distinguished. Complicated intrigues, forced effects, improbability are often due to scorn for art and sometimes to ignorance of it. These faults are found in all theaters that are beginning, and for this reason aristocratic theaters have often provided an example of them, because it is ordinarily aristocracy that leads the youthful period of peoples. The oddities, coarseness and extravagance that are sometimes found in Lope de Vega and in Shakespeare do not prove that these great men followed the natural taste of the aristocracy, but only that they were the first to write for it. Their genius subsequently perpetuated their errors. When a great dramatic author does not purge the stage of the vices that he finds there, hefixes them there, and all those who follow imitate those courtiers of Alexander who found it easier to tilt their heads to the side like their master than to conquer Asia.

Democratic writers know in general the conventions of the stage, and the rules of dramatic art, but often they willingly neglect them in order to go faster or to strike more forcefully.

The Americans bring to full light the different instincts that I have just depicted, when they go to the theater. But it must be recognized that there is still only a small number of them who go. Although spectators and spectacles have prodigiously increased since forty years ago in the United States, the population still goes to this type of amusement only with extreme reticence.

That is due to particular causes that the reader already knows and that it is sufficient to recall to him in two words.

The Puritans, who founded the American republics, were not only enemies of pleasure; they professed in addition an entirely special horror of the theater. They considered it as an abominable diversion, and as long as their spirit reigned unrivaled, dramatic presentations were absolutely unknown among them. These opinions of the first fathers of the colony left profound traces in the mind of their descendants.

The extreme regularity of habits and the great rigidity of mores that are seen in the United States, moreover, have not been very favorable to the development of theatrical art until now.

There are no subjects for drama in a country that has not witnessed great political catastrophes and where love always leads by a direct and easy road to marriage. Men who use every day of the week for making

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e. The rubish also names Calderón.


g. Variant in the rubish: "This is seen in the renaissance of letters among all peoples even aristocracies. See Lope de Vega, Shakespeare and the French before Corneille. When a great genius . . . . . . (Rubish, 1).

h. I am moreover obliged to admit, and perhaps it is proper to do so, that in this matter America cannot serve as an example. By what is happening in the United States, it is difficult to judge the direction that the American democracy would give to theatrical art, since the American democracy has so to speak no theaters. Forty years ago I do not think that you would ever have attended a dramatic presentation in this part of the New World. Since then halls for spectacles [v: theaters] have been built in two or three great cities of the Union, but these places of pleasure are closed part of the year and during the rest of the time the native population frequents them little (Rubish, 1). Cf. Beaumont, Marie, 1, pp. 394–96.

j. The manuscript reads: "public catastrophes."
their fortune and Sunday for praying to God do not lend themselves to the comic muse.

A single fact suffices to show that the theater is not very popular in the United States.

The Americans, whose laws authorize freedom and even license of speech in everything, have nonetheless subjected dramatic authors to a kind of censorship.\(^k\) Theatrical presentations can only take place when the administrators of the town allow them. This demonstrates clearly that peoples are like individuals. They give themselves without caution to their principal passions, and then they are very careful not to yield to the impetus of tastes that they do not have.

There is no portion of literature that is tied by tighter and more numerous bonds to the current state of society than the theater.

The theater of one period can never suit the following period if, between the two, an important revolution has changed mores and laws.

The great writers of another century are still studied. But plays written for another public are no longer attended. Dramatic authors of past time live only in books.

The traditional taste of a few men, vanity, fashion, the genius of an actor can for a time sustain or bring back an aristocratic theater within a democracy; but soon it collapses by itself. It is not overthrown; it is abandoned.

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\(^k\) With a note in the *rubish*: "Ask new clarifications from Niles" (*Rubish*, 1).