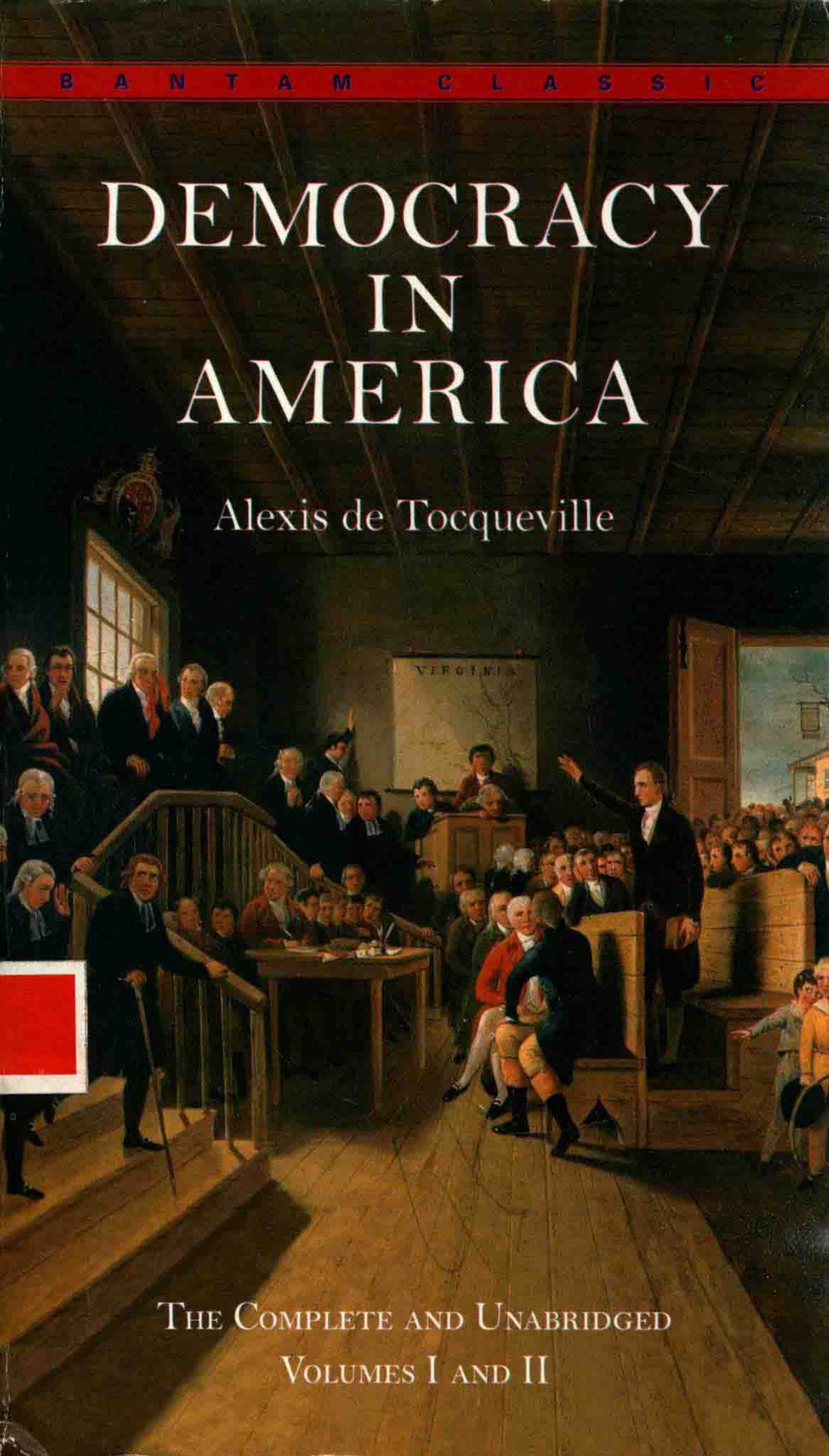
BANTAM CLASSIC

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

Alexis de Tocqueville



THE COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED
VOLUMES I AND II

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

With an Introduction by Joseph Epstein

Translated by Henry Reeve

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ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

COUNT (Charles) ALEXIS (Henri Maurice Clérel) DE TOCQUEVILLE was born in Paris on July 29, 1805, to an aristocratic family. During the French Revolution, his parents had been jailed and his grandfather guillotined. His father was restored to his rank and possessions after the reign of Napoleon, and the young de Tocqueville was given a judicial post in the court of Versailles. Despite the excesses of the French quest for equality, he was passionately interested in democratic government. At twenty-six, he used his position as a magistrate to travel to America to study, he said, the prison system. For nine months in 1831 and 1832, he and a friend, Gustave de Beaumont, visited American prisons, conducted interviews, observed the country and its inhabitants, and collected books and documents. Upon his return to France, de Tocqueville did write a report on prisons, but in 1835 he published the first of four volumes of his great masterwork, *De la démocratie en Amérique.* The first English translation appeared in 1838 and was retranslated in 1862 by American scholar Francis Bowen. De Tocqueville was elected to the French Chamber of Deputies in 1839, became a member of the French Academy in 1841, and held the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs under Napoleon III for a few months in 1848. He left public office completely after the coup d'état of December 2, 1851. His book *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution (The Old Regime and the Revolution)* appeared in 1856. De Tocqueville died in Cannes on April 16, 1859, at the age of fifty-three.

INTRODUCTION: ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

by Joseph Epstein

THE OLDER one gets, the more it becomes clear that it is a great mistake not to have been brilliant when very young. Difficult to arrange, I realize, but what a splendid saving of time it is to come into one's intelligence early! Alexis de Tocqueville, who so handsomely did, is a case very much in point. He was not a traditional genius, at least not of the blazingly-high-IQ-learn-six-languages-while-writing-an-oboe-concerto-at-eleven-years-old sort of genius. The young Tocqueville was instead a genius of perception, of the type that Henry James would describe as someone "on whom nothing is lost." He was a man assailed by perceptions, observations, insights. Where others were confused by the jumble of life about them, he was fascinated by it; where they saw chaos, he perceived patterns. No phenomenon—be it a certain kind of personality, the common thread tying together a group, or the odd character of an institution—could pass before him without his working his way to a determination of its underlying cause, reason for being, ultimate significance. His was an intelligence organized for almost perpetual intellectual penetration.

Alexis de Tocqueville was born in 1805 and came of age during one of the crucial times of transition in modern history. ("I guess we're living in an age of transition," Eve said to Adam on their departure from Eden.) For Tocqueville the transition entailed the slow but persistent closing down of the European aristocracy, into which he was born, and the relentless rise of democracy through the agency of an ever-widening and relentless spread of equality. As the nobiliary particle in

his name makes plain, Tocqueville was born into the aristocracy, but the aristocracy after that class had been routed—and in France, largely rooted out—by the French Revolution.

Tocqueville's father, Comte Hervé de Tocqueville, like many an educated nobleman, was at first sympathetic to the Revolution. But in the Reign of Terror, sympathy counted for naught, and in 1793 he and many members of his and his wife's families were rounded up, taken from Madame de Tocqueville's family home in the countryside, and placed in prison, awaiting trial and almost certain death, in Paris. (Madame de Tocqueville's grandfather, Chrétien de Malesherbes, lawyer and man of letters, had defended the doomed King Louis XVI before the Revolutionary Tribunal.) Tocqueville's parents—Alexis was not yet born—remained in prison, waking each morning expecting to go to the guillotine that day, as many of their family members, including Malesherbes, had already done. One morning Hervé de Tocqueville, not yet twenty-one, woke to find his hair had turned white. His wife was left neurotic by the experience; migraines, depression, neurasthenia, and other residual mental difficulties were with her the remainder of her days. They were released only when Robespierre fell from power. For the rest of his life, Hervé de Tocqueville napped between three and four in the afternoon, because he did not wish to be awake at three-thirty, the exact time that aristocrats were called before the Tribunal of the Revolution.

Alexis de Tocqueville was the youngest of his parents' three sons. The household in which he was raised was one in which books and talk of books were in the air as naturally as oxygen. Charades were played. Chateaubriand, the great French romantic writer, author of *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* and himself an early voyager to America, was Tocqueville's cousin by marriage. Hervé de Tocqueville, a bookish man, also wrote. His mother, after her ordeal in prison, became more and more earnest in her religiosity. André Jardin, Tocqueville's best biographer, believes that Alexis may have inherited his fragile health from his mother and also something of her insistent

anxiety, which in him was transformed to a hypersensitive alertness to his surroundings, wherever they might be. From his father, he more likely came by his sense of public duty, for Hervé de Tocqueville served under the Restoration as a distinguished prefect, or chief administrative officer, in Metz, Amiens, and Versailles. As he grew older, Alexis joined his father at these posts, where he learned a fair amount about the art of practical government at first hand.

Alexis de Tocqueville was precocious, the sort of boy who read books well beyond his age in his father's well-stocked library. He was a good student, winning the much-valued prizes that are part of the French lycée education. But more than precocious or a good student, he was thoughtful, independent-minded, deep. Here he is at seventeen, writing to Eugéne Stoffels, a schoolboy friend, bucking him up after a setback: "Why give up? Why despair? Undoubtedly there is injustice and deceit in this world, but were you waiting for this proof in order to be persuaded? Certainly not. One has to live, therefore, with one's enemies, since one cannot have everyone for a friend, to take men for what they are, to be content with the virtues one finds in them, to endeavor to see that their vices do you the least possible harm, to restrict oneself to a certain circle of intimate friends, outside of that to expect only coldness and indifference hidden or open and keep oneself on one's guard."

Such dark views about human nature may well have derived from the Abbé Lesueur, the tutor assigned to the education of the Tocqueville sons. This man, who was also Hervé de Tocqueville's tutor and whose own austere Catholicism did not get in the way of his treating the sickly Alexis with especial affection, doubtless imbued him with the idea that original sin makes it difficult for men to exercise freedom in an enlightened way without great resources of character and moral delicacy. Religion was always to be a crucial element in Tocqueville's thought—whether running from it or embracing it—and to be part of the inner drama of his own life. This, too, derived from his days with the Abbé Lesueur, whose influence

never left him and to whom Tocqueville felt a lifelong devotion. He was in the United States, doing the groundwork for *Democracy in America,* when the Abbé died at the age of eighty. "I loved our good friend as I love our father," Alexis wrote to his brother Edouard. "He always shared our worries, our affections, our concerns, yet nothing tied him to us but his own wish. . . . [He was a man] whose every thought, whose every affection, turned on us alone, who seemed to live only for us."

This effusion of emotion was not Tocqueville's normal manner. Restrained, aloof, caustic, often with a touch (sometimes more than a touch) of hauteur, Tocqueville did not reveal himself easily, and then only to a limited number of friends. In a joking letter, Gustave de Beaumont, who accompanied Tocqueville to America, notes that he, usually so quick to report Alexis's faults, here wishes to certify the following: "The said Alexis formerly reproachable for a rather cold and too reserved air in society, for too much indifference toward people who did not please him, and for a silent and calm attitude, unduly bordering on dignity, has effected a complete reform in his manner." Behind the reform, it turns out, was Tocqueville's willingness to pay attention to and then compliment a homely young woman in Sing-Sing (now Ossining), New York, who played the piano and sang wretchedly for her French company for better than two hours.

Detachment was another element in his nature. Tocqueville could turn on the ice-making machine. It was, one senses, not a quality he cultivated but instead one he was stuck with. His youthful letters speak of the importance of friendship, but friendship, as he viewed it, was very much a matter of extremely limited franchise. To Louis de Kergorlay, his cousin and oldest friend, Tocqueville, in his early twenties, wrote of "the beautiful passion of friendship"; the older he grew, he added, "the more I believe that friendship, as I conceived it, can indeed exist and conserve its character forever, not undoubtedly among all men, but among some." In his *Souvenirs,* Tocqueville wrote of his ingrained intellectual elitism, noting that "when a man does not strike me by something rare in his

intellect or his sentiments it is as if I did not see him." Tocqueville retained a small circle of friends, and his marriage, to an Englishwoman thought to be between six and nine years older than he, was one of great closeness. But detachment, the quality of never feeling fully part of any setting in which he found himself, was also useful for the polished observer and relentless analyst he was to become.

What Tocqueville would do with his life was not at first clear. He put himself through legal studies without having any especial love of the law. His first (unpaid) job was as a *juge auditeur* in Versailles. This entailed, among other tasks, hearing witnesses for court cases and sometimes sitting in as surrogate judge; he was also responsible for acquiring a vast amount of legal knowledge for an eventual career in the judiciary. Tocqueville came to take pleasure in the law, but he had his doubts about it as a profession, fearing it would soon become much too confining for a young man who dreamed of a higher glory than that found in law courts. In a letter to Kergorlay he writes of his fear that "with time I will become a law machine like most of my fellows, specialized people if ever there were any, as incapable of judging a great movement and of guiding a great undertaking as they are well fitted to deducing a series of axioms and to finding analogies and antonyms. I would rather burn my books than reach that point."

His father planned a parliamentary career for Alexis, but the son had his doubts. He doubted the depth of his own ability; his talents, he felt, were too strictly intellectual: "I am finding it difficult to become used to speaking in public; I grope for my words and I pay too much attention to my ideas. All about me I see people who reason badly and who speak well; that continually throws me into despair. It seems to me that I am above them, but whenever I make an appearance, I feel beneath them."

Doubt is a note often sounded by the youthful Tocqueville. He doubts that law is the right vocation for him. He thinks about becoming a writer, but has doubts about the ennui that is inseparable from a life spent alone among papers and books and about what effect this might have on the imagination, not

to speak of on the heart. A life of action, in politics, is attractive to him, but here, too, he doubts his own abilities. Religious doubts had cropped up for him as well after reading the *philosophes,* and he was inherently too thoughtful a young man to treat these doubts lightly, wishing above all to work them through his finely textured mind to a resolution.

"If I were asked to arrange in order of gravity the grand miseries of mankind," he wrote, "I would do it in this way: 1. disease; 2. death; 3. doubt." That doubt existed on the same plane with disease and death for Tocqueville is worth underscoring, if only because doubt would appear to play so small a part in his impressive, often quite magisterial, writings. Yet the older Tocqueville became, the more he must have been struck with the role of accident and outside circumstances directing the destiny of individuals, not least himself.

The event that would be the making of him, the trip to America that resulted in his writing *Democracy in America,* came about less through a longing for adventure or a deep curiosity about the new nation across the Atlantic—though he claimed that "for a long time now I have had a very strong desire to visit North America"—than through the force of political circumstance. Tocqueville went to America because he felt he could not abide the government, the bourgeois monarchy, of Louis-Philippe, that came to power with the July Revolution of 1830. To lend such a regime the support of his presence seemed unthinkable to Tocqueville. He did not quit his job—in fact, he took an oath of allegiance to the new regime: "I will count this day among the most unhappy of my life"—but instead was able to convince the new minister of the interior to send him and his friend Gustave de Beaumont to America to make a study of the penal system there.

From America, Tocqueville wrote to Charles Stoffels, the younger brother of his friend Eugéne, who, in a *cri de coeur,* revealed that he suffered bouts of melancholy. (Depression hadn't yet been given a name.) Tocqueville replied that he was prey to the same condition, but that he had found it a useful antidote to give up the quest for happiness and accept the world

as it is. This meant neither expecting too much from life nor fearing it. "Life is neither a pleasure nor a sorrow," he writes, "it is a serious affair with which we are charged, and toward which our duty is to acquit ourselves as well as possible."

Tocqueville goes on to warn the young Stoffels about another false quest, that for absolute truth. It is, he asserts, unavailable, simply not to be found. He recounts that he "ultimately convinced myself that the search for absolute, demonstrable truth, like the quest for perfect happiness, was an effort directed toward the impossible." Not, he adds, that there aren't some truths that "merit a man's complete conviction," though he thinks these are very few. In the main we deal in this life, he says, chiefly with probabilities, with difficult choices often having to do with lesser evils, with situations where one must weigh the pros and cons and often act without anything approaching certainty, but act one must, for it is better even to make a mistake than to hobble oneself permanently in indecision. So, Tocqueville tells Charles Stoffels, does he attempt to conduct his own life. The dispenser of this advice was himself then all of twenty-six years old.

If one totes up the qualities that comprise Tocqueville's temperament, one soon enough understands that they handsomely fitted him for his investigation of the new democracy that was now fifty-five years old and well under way in North America. Tocqueville came to the United States without any strong *parti pris;* he held no truths sacred; and, not believing in happiness, he was far indeed from being himself utopian or having utopian expectations for America. What he had was an open mind, but a subtle and fine-grained one, with a strong appreciation of the complexities of institutions, beliefs, and ideas, and the role they play in the human drama at different places and in different times in history. (He had earlier visited England and Sicily, and in the latter noted that the division of land into small holdings was successful, whereas in France it was considered a disaster, which proved to him, as he wrote, "that there are no absolute principles [for judging countries] under the sun.") He also had a strong appetite for

synthesis: the need to find coherence in disparate details, reasoned explanations for what might seem mysterious phenomena. As Tocqueville wrote to Eugéne Stoffels a few days before his departure: "We are going with the intention of examining in detail and as scientifically as possible all the motivating forces behind this vast American society which everyone talks about and no one knows."

The *Le Havre,* the ship carrying Tocqueville and Beaumont, arrived in the United States, in Newport, Rhode Island, on May 10, 1831. The following day they took a steamship to New York City. Tocqueville read English but did not speak it well. He stayed forty-one weeks, or fewer than ten months, departing on February 20, 1832. The ostensible reason for his travels was the study of American penitentiaries, but his net was cast much more widely. When he left North America, he took a great many documents with him. "If I ever write a book about America," he wrote to his mother, "I will write it in France using the documents I am bringing back. When I leave America I will be in a position to understand the documents I haven't yet been able to study."

As the world knows, he did indeed write the book about America, publishing the first part, in two volumes, in 1835, six months before he was thirty. The best-seller was not then a concept, but that is what the book was. No book published in France in that year caused a greater stir. Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, France's most influential political figure under the Bourbon Restoration and the champion of constitutional government, called it the most remarkable book to appear in France in three decades, adding that "since Montesquieu there has been nothing like it." Others queued up to join in the praise: royalists, liberals, socialists, republicans. All agreed that what the young Monsieur de Tocqueville had written was extraordinary.

George Wilson Pierson, in his excellent *Tocqueville in America,* found twenty-three articles about *Democracy in America* written during the first year of its publication, and all but one—that in an ultraroyalist paper—were approving. Both in England and in America the book received great praise.

Work soon began on an English translation. The book's publisher, who apparently never read the book, had printed it in a first edition of five hundred copies. When he called its young author in to discuss arrangements for an unlimited second edition, he said, "But it appears that you have made a *chef d'oeuvre*." It is a judgment with which the world, more than 150 years later, has continued to concur.

The effect of his book's success on Alexis de Tocqueville was to ease his way to the front of French intellectual society. He found himself invited to the most select intellectual salon in Paris, that of Madame Récamier, where Chateaubriand was the leading lion; other, no less formidable, cats included the great critic Sainte-Beuve and the Duc de Noailles. The book was given a prize of eight thousand francs by the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, which also made him a member. (When Part II of *Democracy in America* was published, in 1840, Tocqueville was elected a member of the Académie Française.) The government of Louis-Philippe, which he so much despised, made him a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. How pleasant to have the world agree on one's distinction before one reaches thirty-five! How nice to have all that out of the way!

An anecdote—perhaps apocryphal—is told about an American professor who spends three months in France during the summer, doing the research for a book he plans about the French family. At the end of that time, he decides he has made a good start but must return the next summer to collect more material. At the close of the following summer, he decides to stay on another six months, and at the end of this period he feels his knowledge of his subject is much richer, though more research is needed. He acquires a Rockefeller grant, and spends all of the following year in France. Still more work is required, he senses, so he arranges a Fulbright professorship in Rouen for two years, which will give him the time really to go into the subject in the way it deserves. All very well, except that at the conclusion of the final two years, having had a

chance to investigate the subject from every angle, he decides, alas, that the book cannot be done, and drops the entire project.

Tocqueville was in North America 286 days, of which he spent 271 in the United States. (He and Beaumont sojourned briefly in Canada.) Had he stayed much longer, with the chance to go into things in a more thorough way, would he have ultimately been discouraged and, like the professor of my previous paragraph, determined that the job was hopeless? Difficult to say. What can be said without difficulty is that the task of capturing the spirit and character of a foreign nation is always daunting.

At the time of Tocqueville's visit, the United States had a population of thirteen million people living in twenty-four states, with very little development beyond the Mississippi River; Andrew Jackson was in the final year of his first presidential administration. Tocqueville himself felt the immensity of the task before him. To his friend Ernest de Chabrol he writes: "Picture to yourself, my dear friend, if you can, a society which comprises all the nations of the world—English, French, German: people differing from one another in language, in beliefs, in opinions; in a word, a society possessing no roots, no memories, no prejudices, no routine, no common ideas, no national character, yet with a happiness a hundred times greater than our own." He was impressed with the relative fluidity of the American class system, but it seemed to him so blurred as not to be in any way a system at all. "The entire society seems to have melted into a middle class," he observed.

To Kergorlay he admits the swarming intellectual chaos in which he finds himself: "The people of every foreign country have a certain external appearance that one perceives at first glance and retains very readily. When one wants to penetrate a little further, one finds real difficulties that were not expected, one proceeds with a discouraging slowness, and doubts seem to grow the more one progresses. . . . I am wearing myself out looking for some perfectly clear and conclusive points, and not finding any." He would of course find more than a few of these points—more, actually, than anyone has since—but at first the

somewhat aloof, rather diminutive Monsieur de Tocqueville was less than fully confident about bringing off the task he had tentatively set himself.

Tocqueville and Beaumont arrived in New York with letters of introduction to well-placed Americans. Their methods, such as they were, included interviews with specific people on particular topics, general observation, careful scrutiny of official documents, and the harvest that fortuitous meetings and events brought. Their intellectual regimen during their stay entailed rising early, breakfasting, then walking over to local libraries, where they acquired all the statistical information they could get on population, institutions, political questions, and everything else that interested them. They would lunch late—at three o'clock—return to their rooms to put their notes in order, and then, at seven o'clock, go out into the world. This usually meant dining with influential Americans able to help them with their queries; among them were Justice Joseph Story of the Supreme Court, Albert Gallatin, Daniel Webster, Edward Everett, Josiah Quincy, Samuel Houston, and even President Andrew Jackson himself (the one notable fizzle of all Tocqueville's interviews; it came to no more than an exchange of niceties—mere platitudes, really). The great missed meeting was that which Tocqueville was supposed to have had with James Madison, one of the chief authors of *The Federalist Papers,* whose political sophistication could not but have impressed the young Frenchman; but this had to be missed because of a change in travel plans.

Still, taking elaborate notes, interviewing immensely well-informed people, studying documents, and organizing one's materials carefully do not automatically—or even necessarily—issue in the kind of bold and penetrating insights that Tocqueville was able to make about the United States in his relatively short visit. Tocqueville seems to have understood from the outset that, if his work was to have any power, it would be not through the data he might gather but through what he could make of it—through, in other words, the power of his generalizations. At the beginning of Chapter 3 of Part II of *Democracy in America* he remarks that the Deity is able to

see the differences between all individuals and that "it follows therefore that God has no need of general ideas; that is to say, He never feels the necessity of giving the same label to a considerable number of analogous objects in order to think about them more conveniently." Not so, he adds, with human beings, who in our impressive limitations need all the help we can get from such general ideas, lest we get lost in the dazzling plethora of details that passes, in a hazy hurry, before us all. But no sooner than Tocqueville postulates the need for general ideas, he qualifies their utility: "General ideas have this excellent quality, that they permit human minds to pass judgment quickly on a great number of things, but the conceptions they convey are always incomplete, and what is gained in extent is always lost in exactitude."

Tocqueville makes these remarks in a chapter that carries the title "Why the Americans Show More Aptitude and Taste for General Ideas than Their English Forefathers." Yet one wonders if the remarks do not apply quite as much to the aptitude and taste of the Americans under discussion as to his own methods. Tocqueville was a man who, when young, read a great deal of Machiavelli, Rousseau, and especially Pascal, and his own taste for generalization, often expressed with aphoristic nicety, was reinforced by his natural aptitude for analysis. Sainte-Beuve said of him that "he had begun to think before having learned anything," an amusing if far from true remark. But about Tocqueville's passion for analysis there can be no doubt. It supplies both the skeleton and flesh of *Democracy in America.*

All that is required to write a masterpiece is the application of a first-class mind to a great subject. Tocqueville, though still astonishingly young for a social thinker, had the first-class mind, and in America he found the subject to which to apply it. Yet some would say that America isn't really Tocqueville's subject. The title *De la Démocratie en Amérique,* it has been argued, is better translated *Concerning Democracy in America,* with the emphasis on democracy rather than America. Tocqueville himself, in his brilliant introduction to the book, notes that "America was only my framework; democracy was

my subject." Others have claimed that the second volume of the book ought to have had *equality* rather than *democracy* in its title, for the subject of equality takes up more of his pages than does democracy. Evidence exists, too, in Tocqueville's correspondence and throughout the book itself, that all the while he was writing about America, he was really thinking about the effect of the great wave of democracy that was sweeping over France. "Although I very rarely spoke of France [in *Democracy in America*], I did not write a single page of it without thinking of her," Tocqueville wrote to a friend in 1848.

After the great early success of *Democracy in America*—thirteen editions in fifteen years in France, an English translation by Henry Reeve in the 1830s, a German edition, adaptation in an abbreviated form as a textbook in American schools—the book, beginning in roughly 1870, went into eclipse. Robert Nisbet, the American sociologist, remarked, in a splendid essay titled "Many Tocquevilles," that throughout a strong graduate-school education in social science at Berkeley in the 1930s he never once heard mention of the name Tocqueville, so lost was *Democracy in America* to students of American social and political thought.

Scholarship and intelligent publishing resuscitated the book. George Wilson Pierson's *Tocqueville in America* (originally titled *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*) was published in 1938. The following year J. P. Mayer brought out his *Tocqueville: Prophet of the Mass Age,* in which he persuasively set out the case that Tocqueville was the first modern analyst of mass society and a thinker of the stature of Max Weber, Jacob Burkhardt, Goethe, Nietzsche, and Karl Marx. Just after the war, Alfred A. Knopf printed out a handsome edition of *Democracy in America,* which attracted a shower of comment that continues to our day. To be able to write about America without quoting Tocqueville has become no easy task, so de rigueur, so indispensable has his thought become to the consideration of nearly every aspect of American life. I myself quoted him not long ago, citing him as "the unavoidable Tocqueville."