The Many and The Best

A Search for the Aristocratic in a Democracy

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AMERICA'S PRE-EMINENCE IN WORLD AFFAIRS has been one of the most significant features of our century. Culturally, however, America has been accused of promoting much that is mediocre: the fast-food chain, the disposable convenience item, the tooth-rotting soft drink, the spiritually vacuous "soaps," the cosmetized youth culture, the instant whatever. In the world of ideas, we are generally perceived as preferring the practical to the profound. At the Second Vatican Council, for example, our bishops were reported to have contributed more to its communications technology than to its theological deliberation. Our values are said to be more quantitative than qualitative, acquisition taking precedence over appreciation, concrete accomplishment over historical wisdom, practical know-how over refined sensibilities. Many might concur with our own H. L. Mencken who said, "You'll never go broke underestimating the taste of the American public."

While we might object that those buying into this mediocrity have some soul-searching of their own to do; and while we might point out that America has, indeed, fostered ideas of significance, produced work of
enduring quality in the arts and literature, and given a number of great men
and women to history, we must also admit that the above charges have
some basis in fact. To the extent that they do, they call our attention to one
of the radical (and generally unheeded) problems inherent in democracies:
if rulership is to abide in the common man or woman, in the average
person, then the "average" is likely to become the standard of national life
and culture. For citizens of a democracy, this is a serious issue, for none of
us is pleased to believe that our culture is mediocre, that the "average" is a
national norm.

It is the purpose of this essay to examine this issue—its implications, its
possible resolutions. In doing so, I would like to do what the traditional
humanist does: I would like to step back. A fundamental argument for the
study of the Humanities is that they preserve the wisdom and experience of
the tribe, thus giving us something by which to measure, understand and
direct our lives. As William J. Bennett explains, "the Humanities tell us
how men and women of our own and other civilizations have grappled with
life's fundamental questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What
deserves to be defended? What is courage? What is noble? What is base?
Why do civilizations flourish? Why do they decline?" (To Reclaim a Legacy:
implications, one that stands out in this definition is that the past and the
unfamiliar ("other civilizations") and the present and familiar ("our own")
are significantly related, can help explain one another.

To derive what we can from this relationship, we'll engage in that
mind-play so characteristic of liberal study wherein thought and literature
from the past, remote and recent, shall be brought to bear on the question
before us. If truth is, as St. Augustine points out, forever partial in our
experience—forever discovered, modified, forgotten, expanded—then
wisdom indicates that we not equate our general assumptions with the
"last word," with absolute truth; that we "play," rather, with the evidence
before us, much as the scientist does with new combinations or the poet
with new forms and relationships. This is serious play, of course: one must
read carefully, assess the evidence of the ages, think long and honestly. The
closed or bigoted mind—the mind of the extremist and the fanatic—
cannot tolerate such play, either assuming it already has all the truth or
fearful of that which it does not have. But it is such play that thinkers like
Aristotle or St. Thomas would place among the highest of human activities,
even when ancillary to the contemplation of divine mystery. "We see now in
a glass, darkly," says St. Paul. But we are meant to see, to search that
imperfect mirror for whatever may enlighten our lives.

Our play in this essay will have to do with aristocracy and democracy,
with concepts of freedom and equality, with the function of tradition and
the arts, and, especially, with the question of leadership and the moral
quality of life. You may find that this play challenges some of your fondest assumptions, that it raises questions you had not considered before, that it points to difficulties you had not associated with democracies. We shall also consider possible resolutions to the problems raised, or, perhaps, ways of living in creative tension with them. In any case, if this "serious play" provokes you to devise your own responses or proposals, it shall have done its humanistic work.

We begin with Homer, who, we must note, composed for the aristocracy of his own day. His was a literature meant not only to enhance their social positions by providing them with heroic ancestry, but also to represent and endorse that behavior and those virtues critical to the survival of Greek society. In Book Seventeen of the Odyssey, the hero, disguised as a beggar, walks the final miles on his long journey home. In Odysseus' twenty year absence, his kingdom has come to suffer from the loss of its leader: his household is besieged by arrogant suitors seeking both his property and his wife; his son, the rightful heir, lives in daily peril; his countrymen are too wrapped up in their own affairs to get much involved; and many of his servants have fallen in with their abusive new masters. One of these, the goatish goatherd, Melanthios, insults the "beggar" aiming a vicious kick at his thigh. Odysseus' companion, the loyal swineherd, Eumaios, cries out in dismay, "let heaven bring him [Odysseus]/to rid the earth of these courtly ways/Melanthios picks up around the town—/all wine and wind! Bad shepherds ruin flocks!" (244-47).

In another epic poem, composed some fifteen centuries later, the Germanic warrior-king, Beowulf, deserted by all but one of his retainers, has slain his last dragon and himself succumbed in the struggle. Confronted with the hero's death and the absence of any heroic society to succeed him, "a grieving woman keened a dirge in Beowulf's memory, repeating again and again that she feared bad times were on the way, with bloodshed, terror, captivity and shame" (Ch. 43).

Some seven centuries later, Geoffrey Chaucer depicts, in his Canterbury Tales, an exemplary cleric in the country Parson. This man takes his vocation seriously. Aware of his exalted position and its attendant responsibilities, he explains his high personal standards and his sense of pastoral mission in a telling metaphor: "If gold rust, then what will iron do?" (Prologue).

Chaucer's countryman, John Milton, addresses the same issue a few centuries later, this time, however, deploiring the clerical corruption of his day. In his poem, Lycidas, he denounces those who, unlike Chaucer's Parson, have lost their sense of spiritual mission:

Blind mouths! That scarce themselves know how to hold
A sheep-hook, or have learned aught else the least
That to the faithful herdsman's art belongs!
What each of these poets over this twenty-five hundred year span addresses is the fundamental social question of leadership. Whether king or cleric, the leader's role would seem to be critical to the well-being of the larger community. And for each of these poets—even for the republican Milton—those who lead do so sustained by societies essentially aristocratic; that is, by societies whose systems of hierarchy, rank and privilege were fundamental to the ordering of the community.

Ideally, I see aristocratic societies as those in which the heroic and the kingly merge, where the leaders are those who exemplify aristos—that is, "the best." In such societies, rulers and their noble retainers are expected to manifest, in their own persons, the best that their societies have achieved, devised or learned in thought, manners, morality and taste. The very leisure and opportunity afforded by their freedom from concerns of money or social status make the acquisition of these manners and tastes possible. Theoretically, at least, aristocratic behavior should reflect and sustain a standard, should infect and inform the life of the entire populace from least to greatest. It was the violation of such function that led Eumaios to exclaim, "bad shepherds ruin flocks!" Certainly it was this aspect of aristocratic leadership as moral responsibility that provided some basis for the Christianization of Europe, for conversion to that creed whose spiritual leaders were seen as "servi servorum Dei" (servants of the servants of God)—an ideal that had a later secular counterpart in the code of chivalry, itself an aristocratic institution.

Homer gives us some idea of what this "best" was for his own society. Odysseus, the most resourceful of leaders, risks his life for his men and his society. His expedition to Troy, though to some degree this great individualist's indulgence in wanderlust and adventure, can also be seen as a defense of a social principle—the principle of hospitality violated by Paris' abduction of the Greek noblewoman, Helen. What is certain is that, within the context of this extraordinary mission, Odysseus comport himself as one of the "best" of the Greeks—as a true aristocrat. His entire sojourn, moreover, becomes a study in contrasts between his civilization and barbarism, between what he considered the best and the worst in human behavior, human institutions, human language and arts.

Consider some examples: In the Iliad, a grotesque and garrulous commoner, Thersites, publicly (and with some truth) criticizes King Agamemnon's leadership. Odysseus is quick to chastise him—"You shall not lift up your mouth to argue with princes"—and strikes him sharply with his sceptre (II. 250). What is important in this scene is that Thersites' fellows, though they share his resentment of the King, praise the action taken by Odysseus; indeed, they value it beyond his more conspicuous military accomplishments: "Come now, Odysseus has done excellent things by the thousands,/bringing forward good counsels and ordering armed encoun-
ters; / but now this is far the best thing he has ever accomplished" (Italics mine). And what has he accomplished but to endorse, vividly, the imperative of leadership! We with our democratic sentiments might naturally condemn this action as arrogant and abusive. It is important for us, reading historically, to understand, however, that for the ordinary soldiers beholding the event, another principle—the principle of social function and value—is uppermost. Though Odysseus outstrips the King in almost everything but his wealth; though he has more than once saved the King from folly; though he is braver and more intelligent and certainly more congenial to the popular imagination, he acts, throughout the Iliad, to advance the principle of leadership over personal considerations. It is no anomaly, therefore, that in the hierarchy of his accomplishments, the men see this as his most significant public service, his "best" moment.

Odysseus, of course, brings exceptional and distinctive personal gifts to this service: a disciplined intelligence, a courageous heart, a tireless imagination. Aristocrat that he is, he uses these gifts both for his own recognition and the welfare of his people. Manifest always in the pitch of battle, they also express themselves in that most distinctive of human endowments, namely, language. The Trojan Antenor, recalling Odysseus on diplomatic mission, notes how his unassuming manner served merely to underscore his power as a speaker: "Resourceful Odysseus . . . would just stand and stare down, his eyes fixed on the ground beneath him, / nor would he gesture with the staff backward and forward, but hold it/clutched in front of him, like any man who knows nothing. / Yes, you would call him a sullen man and a fool likewise./ But when he let the great voice go from his chest, and words came/drift down like the winter snow, then no other mortal man beside could stand up against Odysseus" (III. 216-223).

Readers of the Odyssey delight, and rightly so, in the hero’s ingenuity as story-teller, in the quick wit of this man who could devise an escape from the Cyclop’s cave. But I have always been especially taken by the ready and gracious speech in which the ship-wrecked adventurer, naked and clotted with seabrine, disarms the young girl who discovers him on the shore of Phaiaicia. He indulges in no conventional assurances or avuncular flattery, but employs, rather, a tone of parental admiration and a singularly apt metaphor: "If you are one of earth’s inhabitants, / how blest your father and your gentle mother, / blest all your kin. I know what happiness/must send the warm tears to their eyes, each time / they see their wondrous child go to the dancing.” He has now established his credentials as one who perceives the virtues of family (and, hence, his status as a civilized man). Next, the metaphor—that one extra gesture that sets him above the merely competent diplomat. Before the young Nausicaa, in the first blush of her womanhood, he turns to poetry: “So fair, one time, I thought a young palm tree/at Delos near the altar of Apollo— / I had troops under me when I was there/
on the sea route that later brought me grief—/but that slim palm tree filled my heart with wonder:/ never came shoot from earth so beautiful./So now, my lady, I stand in awe so great,/I cannot take your knees" (VI. 150-168). How graceful, yet how judicious a speech! Armed with the most apt of metaphors, he touches her heart even as he lets her know that he has been a man of substance, command and breeding; of suffering and experience. Indeed, he presents himself as an aristocrat of the word, one who, in an awkward moment, employs the best of language.

Beyond these qualities of Odysseus, there abides one even more fundamental and, from an ideal point of view, aristocratic: an enduring sense of reverence; a respect for those forces and mysteries within and beyond us which wise men have learned it is folly to ignore. It is this quality which should keep the aristocrat, or any person, aware of his or her humanity, of those flaws and propensities and contradictions which make us at once so interesting and so unpredictable; of those twists of circumstance and nature that make our lives so perilous and exciting. And it is this quality above all that explains Odysseus' safe return to Ithaka. His men, in a moment of avarice and envy, open the satchel of winds that blow them off course and into misery; later, unable to endure the pangs of hunger, they eat the forbidden cattle of the Sun-god, thus sealing their doom. In contrast, Odysseus, admittedly curious, nevertheless takes precautions when approaching the land of the treacherous Seirenes, and has himself lashed to the mast before listening to their haunting song. This man, who speaks to the gods as familiars, is also most obedient to them—and of his entire crew, he alone survives! In this obedience, and in his concern for his family and his people, he manifests something of that virtue the Romans were later to call "pietas."

The classical exemplar of this virtue is Virgil's Aeneas—the champion who places the destiny of Rome before all personal considerations, including love; who, in the person of his aged father and the ancient gods, bears his tradition and culture into the future; who fights for and ensures the perpetuation of those values that would make Rome pre-eminent among nations. In taking leave of his beloved Dido, we see something of this noble Trojan's "pietas," his subjection of personal gratification to a larger mission—in this case, the founding of Rome: "And good Aeneas, longing to ease her grief with comfort, to say something to turn her pain and hurt away, sighs often, his heart being moved by this great love, most deeply, And still—the gods give orders, he obeys them; he goes back to the fleet . . ." (IV). Now Odysseus, by way of contrast with Aeneas, might be called our literature's proto-individualist. Nevertheless, it is some aspect of this quality of "pietas" in him that preserves his aristocratic privilege from pride and abuse, that directs it towards higher communal ends by keeping the hero ever mindful of his humanity. For example, when asked by King
Alcinoos to recount his adventures, he begs first to be allowed to eat, explaining, “there is no part of man more like dog than brazen Belly crying to be remembered . . . Belly must be filled.” Though addressed by Athena as her near-equal in scheming, though the (unwilling) lover of the goddess, Calypso for seven years; though rescued by the direct intervention of the sea-deity, Ino, this hero longs for the simple comforts of mortal men and women. Concluding his remarks on hunger, he tells the King, “Rough years I’ve had; now may I see once more/my hall, my lands, my people before I die” (VII. 224–5).

This aristocratic poem, then, is far more than a simple tale of adventure or even a catechism of tribal virtues. It is indeed a paean to civilization. We are struck, for example, by the sharp contrast between the cannibalistic Lystragonians and the gracious household of King Menelaos, which we see through the dazed eyes of Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, and his companion.

The young men gazed in joy before they entered
into a room with polished tubs to bathe.
Maidservants gave them baths, anointed them,
held out fresh tunics, cloaked them warm; and soon
they took tall thrones beside the son of Atreus.
Here a maid tipped out water for their hands
from a golden pitcher into a silver bowl,
and set a polished table near at hand;
the larder mistress with her tray of loaves
and savories came, dispensing all her best,
and then a carver heaped their platters high
with various meats, and put down cups of gold.

(IV. 49-60)

If what this passage describes seems to be aristocrats living the good life, it must also be seen as the embodiment of graciousness and courtesy, of those manners that give form and security to civilization. It is also an expression of a cultural striving for the “best,” beginning with the humble larder mistress and including all the servants and craftsmen who represent, as surely as the king himself, that society’s sense of its best self, of its highest humanity. There is also a paradox here that, in keeping with the focus of this paper, should give pause to citizens of less rigidly structured societies: the class distinctions implicit in the scene described, can beget, interestingly, a sense of freedom and a striving for excellence. The very definition of roles and stations, precluding as they do the distractions of ambition or the anxieties of uncertain identity or social standing, *liberate* individuals at all levels to dedicate themselves fully to the task at hand, to the pursuit of the ‘best’ in those endeavors proper to their social functions.

Though we may regret the limited possibilities such societies held out to
their citizens, especially those on the lower rungs, we cannot help but admire the grace and quality made possible by the aristocratic system. And, in keeping with our larger theme, we must ask how such quality in manners and craft might be achieved in a democracy where no such institution as aristocratic succession exists to help perpetuate standards and culture: where tradition is supplanted by the fluctuation of individual taste and preference, or, worse yet, by the machinations of those who influence standards primarily for reasons of profit and personal gain.

The Odyssey offers a further encomium to civilization in the contrast between the loathsome Cyclopes and the citizens of Phaiacia. The former "neither plow/nor sow by hand, nor till the ground." They "have no muster and no meeting,/no consultation or old tribal ways,/but each one dwells in his own mountain cave/dealing out rough justice to wife and child,/indifferent to what others do" (IX. 163-171). It may be significant that Odysseus, as if tainted by their barbarity, is here least prudent himself, boastfully revealing his name to the monster he has just blinded—an action that brings upon him much of his later trouble. How different the Kyklopes' island from that of the Phaiacians: Approaching their palace, Odysseus beheld "the brazen threshold of the great courtyard./High rooms he saw ahead, airy and luminous/as though with lusters of the sun and moon,/bronze-paneled walls at several distances,/making a vista, with an azure molding/of lapis lazuli. The doors were golden. ... and silver were sculpted hounds flanking the entrance way.../undying dogs that never could grow old" (VII. 79-94). Further on, he discovers maids in waiting, maids grinding corn or weaving at the loom. Outside, "he saw an orchard/closed by a pale—four spacious acres planted with trees in bloom...", winemakers at their work, vegetable gardens plotted for the seasons, and a sophisticated irrigation system. Having won the confidence of King Alcinooos and his Queen, Arete (whose name means "excellence"), Odysseus proceeds to enjoy the fruits of civilization. His host recalls his ancestry and recounts it proudly. His people exult in the beauty and grace of their work and play—in their dance and sport and, especially, in their seamanship (even their names revealing their functions). Homer does note their propensity for the surly and suspicious traits of insular folk, but it is their civilization that restrains their rougher impulses and reveals their distinctive humanity. And it is all this that Odysseus has fought to preserve for his own society, all this that he now struggles to restore to his own kingdom. In the hero's absence, civilization has suffered. The aristocrat now returns to restore "the best."

What we see in Homer we see in almost all epic literature: the hero is an aristocrat. Despite his idiosyncrasies or flaws, he represents "the best" (or, ideally, should do so) in the eyes of his people. The poets who give us Odysseus or Aeneas or Beowulf or Roland or Arthur give us leaders who are
extravagantly generous (a Germanic synonym for "king" was "ring-giver"), eager to fight for their people, mindful of tribal tradition, and respectful of the gods (who, in some sense, embody all the above). Their deeds and speeches are presented in poetry that exploits the highest resources of language. Its attendant imagery reflects a loving attention to all that circumscribes their lives, a respect for the finely wrought object, the well told tale, the well crafted tool or weapon or statue. They are aware that their arts transcend time and their own mortality ("dogs that could never grow old"). They delight in the lore of navigation or warfare or farming or hunting. Their poetry evokes the deepest human feelings, the loveliness or pathos of human events: funeral rites, marriage banquets, harvests, trials, religious rituals. Their settings often reflect the magnitude of nature and natural forces, the terror and exaltation of battle, the majesty of tribal function, the refinements of court life. In language, manners, moral, art and tradition, then, the ideal aristocratic hero embodied and was associated with all that was the best.

It is likely that aristocracies fell because they deserved to fall; because the human propensity for self-aggrandizement and security led them to evolve readily into, or even begin as, power cliques. It is likely they fell because they were infected with those abuses of power and position, those repressions of others' needs and talents, that eventually gave rise to the great populist revolutions. But in their finest hours, and in their abiding principles, aristocracies have sustained and promoted "the best." It is no historical accident that many of the greatest artistic, legal, philosophical, political, even religious developments have received impetus, direction or patronage from those institutions known as patrician, genteel, noble or aristocratic. It was the tyrant, Peisistratos, who elevated Greek drama to the level of State function; the Greek "litourgos" who, out of his wealth, provided theater for the general public. It was where social patterns had already been established, where tribal traditions and hierarchies ran deep, that the religion of universal brotherhood, Christianity, found its first seeding grounds. It was the patronage of kings and queens, of prelates and nobles, that supported the work of Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare; of the court schools; of Renaissance artists. Indeed, one cannot read Homer or the bardic poetry of Germanic, Celtic and other aristocratic traditions without noting the close relationship between artist and ruler, art and society. In such societies, then, it was the aristocracy—that body of people whose inherited privilege entailed exposure to the very best in training and tradition—whose charge it was to perpetuate their highest perceptions of human behavior and social order.

What history tells us, of course, is that aristocratic societies never realized their highest ideals nor long sustained their virtues without some taint, some decline from excellence; that, indeed, many so-called aristocra-
cies functioned to secure the most self-serving, repressive and brutal of leaders. Aristocratic succession does not ensure aristocratic behavior. The consequent unrest of distressed peoples and radical changes in western society sounded the death-knell for aristocracies. With the onset of broader trade and travel, the spread of education and literacy, the rise of science and technology, came the emergence of the middle class and, with it, of more representative and participatory forms of government—a process continuing into our own times. It is a process that leads to questions central to this paper: with the loss of aristocratic forms and traditions, whence shall our leaders arise? what will determine the values they endorse? what ends will their leadership serve? how will it shape and affect the moral quality of their societies? To put it more briefly, in the absence of a cultural and moral aristocracy, how can we ensure the highest cultural and moral standards in our public and private lives?

This is a good question for students of the Humanities. It is inherently historical, referring as it does to earlier political forms and cultures; it is speculative, insofar as it invites analysis based upon certain principles or assumptions about human nature; and it is eminently practical, for it has everything to do with our being citizens of the world’s foremost democracy.

One of the most perceptive and prophetic students of our democracy was a nineteenth century French political philosopher who visited the young American republic in 1831 and subsequently published *Democracy in America*, a book hailed as one of the most insightful and sobering studies of democratic societies in general and of America in particular. Richard D. Heffner, in his Mentor edition preface to this work, calls Alexis deToqueville “a master prophet and political scientist [whose] generalizations concerning politics, religion, government, art, and even literature in democratic America are amazingly shrewd and perceptive in their way” (Introduction 16).

Toqueville, himself a member of the deposed aristocracy, was aware that the historical tide had turned irrevocably towards democracy. He was also aware that, despite its abuses, aristocracy had served as the vehicle of those traditions and standards necessary for sustained cultural identity and quality. Moreover, he was aware that, despite its grandiose rhetoric and exuberant optimism, democracy had its own inherent dangers generally unheeded by its advocates. Toqueville visited America shortly after the rise of Jacksonian democracy, a period in which “American political thought and institutions underwent the most profound transformations as political control was rapidly shifted from an older aristocracy of education, position and wealth to the ‘common man,’ the average American” (Heffner 10). This rise of the average citizen Toqueville attributes to what he considers the most distinctive feature of American society, namely, its “equality of
condition.” But, in contrast to the prevailing perception of this condition as our chiefest blessing, his “classic study thoroughly rejects American's magical equation of equality with freedom, of democracy with liberty” (Heffner 11). Toqueville was among the first to point out that this very equality of condition was fraught with dangers of which Americans, and the world generally, were unaware. His argument, in its broadest terms, goes something like this:

When “equality” becomes the general and primary object of a people's striving, its most natural and immediate expression, given the absence of a previous tradition, is likely to take concrete, material forms—the tangible acquisitions and accomplishments of which I spoke in my introduction. The very notion dismisses the role of an aristocracy, in the absence of which, cultural symbols are likely to be quantitative rather than those more subtle qualitative expressions of taste, manners and bearing that were the charge of aristocratic traditions. For example, one would assert his or her value or distinction, not through language or refined speculative or historical sensibilities, nor through graceful behavior, nor even selfless and heroic gesture, but rather through accumulation of wealth, acquisition of goods, or tangible commercial and political achievement. Personal worth and identity, then, will tend to be assessed more in terms of such material and concrete norms than in those of a spiritual or aesthetic or philosophical nature. And the energies and motivations of such cultures are likely to be directed towards the pursuit of wealth and material accommodations. (Chaucer may have had something like this in mind when, in the Canterbury Tales, he depicts the guildmen's wives assuming that their merely dressing like noblewomen will warrant the attendant courtesies.) Aristocratic societies, Toqueville reminds us, ensured perpetuation of traditions through perpetuation of family name and lands and history—a result primarily of that system known as “primogeniture” wherein the eldest child inherited virtually the entire family estate. In democracies, however, with their constant redistribution of wealth and estates, their volatile rises and falls in fortunes; with their consequent dependence upon individual and fluctuating values, preferences and tastes, the perpetuation of commonly esteemed standards and values is rendered most difficult. The average citizen, therefore, will tend to express his “equality of condition” not in manners or behavior or in refined sensibilities but in the only ways certain of common and immediate recognition among his or her peers: material acquisition (“her salary is in six figures”), tangible accomplishment (“they own three auto agencies”) or ostensible power (“he sits on four corporate boards”). What all this implies is that the national ethic, generally, espouses individual over community goals; prefers exertion and action over reflection or sensibility; relegates intelligence and talent to predominantly practical ends; and, at all levels, endorses the agency of wealth either as motive, as vehicle, or as symbol of accomplishment.
In such an ethos, wealth and position become ends in themselves whose means are material and practical. This contrasts interestingly with the idealized aristocratic mode in which wealth and position are conditions instrumental to the pursuit of "the best." This may explain the observation I once read that an aristocrat will sustain a loss of fortune with more grace and equanimity than one who has recently risen from poverty to wealth: for the former, the loss is incidental to purpose; for the latter, the very end of striving has been obliterated.

Toqueville notes another aspect of aristocratic privilege in the freedom from the very striving, the devotion to work, which makes possible democratic man's "condition of equality." "We do not find [in democratic societies], as amongst aristocratic people, one class which keeps in repose because it is well off; and another which does not venture to stir because it despairs of improving its condition. Everyone is in motion: some in quest of power, others of gain. In the midst of this universal tumult — this incessant conflict of jarring interests — this continual striving of men after fortune—where is that calm to be found which is necessary for the deeper combinations of the intellect?" (164). Reflecting upon the American obsession with work in the pursuit of the symbols of equality, Toqueville makes a particularly disturbing observation: "Nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests, in a word, so anti-poetic, as the life of a man in the United States" (181). If a clue to a society's quality of life is the manner in which its citizens use their leisure, we might well wonder the extent to which our leisure uses enhance "the deeper combinations of the intellect."

Despite such observations, this young philosopher did not write to condemn democracies. Convinced that they were the inevitable expression of history, he was concerned, rather, that western nations (including his own), exulting in slogans about freedom and equality, understand the true nature of this new system — its limits, its possibilities, its dangers. A passage in his introduction to Democracy in America reflects his own ambivalent sentiments, but also his commitment to this new order of human society:

On the one hand were wealth, strength and leisure, accompanied by the refinements of luxury, the elegance of taste, the pleasures of wit, and the cultivation of the arts; on the other were labor, clownishness and ignorance. But in the midst of this coarse and ignorant multitude it was not uncommon to meet with energetic passions, generous sentiments, profound religious convictions, and wild virtues. [And further on] I can conceive of a society in which all men would feel an equal love and respect for the laws of which they consider themselves as the authors; in which the authority of the government would be
respected as necessary, though not as divine; and in which the loyalty of the subject to the chief magistrate would not be a passion but a quiet and rational persuasion . . . The people, well acquainted with their own true interests, would understand that, in order to profit by the advantages of society, it is necessary to satisfy its requisitions.  

(131)

This passage brings us to the critical dilemmas of democracies: individual benefits, he points out, are linked to the "requisitions" of society. But this same individualism, when obsessed with "equality," begets a form of self-interest prone to ignore the communal requisitions. In a chapter entitled "Individualism in Democratic Countries," he says, "Selfishness blights the germ of all virtue: individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run, it attacks and destroys all others, and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness. . . . Individualism is of democratic origin, and it threatens to spread in the same ratio as equality of condition" (193).

He further asserts that this individualistic ethic will tend to isolate citizens in a democracy, and concludes, "not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart" (194). Toqueville's predictions here would seem to be born out in the modern American literature of alienation, in the words of popular songs that exclaim, "I did it my way" or "I want to be Me"; in such admire phrases as "she's her own person" or "he's a self-made man"; and, sadly, in those lonely masses who huddle up to late-night radio talk shows for solace and community.

The consequences of this pursuit of equality are many. On the positive side are the realization of those talents and dreams which, in more rigid systems, might never have come to fruition; the development of free institutions for the greater dissemination of learning and culture; the respect for work and the dignity of the worker; and, especially, the sense of optimism and opportunity which is so distinctively American. This same passion, of course, can and does lead to petty envies (keeping up with the Joneses); to that leveling in taste and quality resulting from a consumer ethic which panders to the broadest possible market. Without the example of such standards as an aristocracy might endorse, Toqueville notes, "the general mediocrity of fortunes, the absence of superfluous wealth, the universal desire of comfort, and the constant efforts by which everyone attempts to procure it, make the taste for the useful predominant over the love of the beautiful in the heart of a man" (169). He concludes that the result of all this will be a decline in workmanship and design, a concern for
appearances over substance (the Ford that's make to look like a Rolls), and the constant pursuit of novelty.

The last, and greatest, danger of the pursuit of equality Toqueville sees taking form as "the omnipotence or despotism of the majority." Arguing against the romantic notion that men and women collectively represent more wisdom and virtue than they might individually, he says, "A majority taken collectively is only an individual, whose opinions, and frequently whose interests, are opposed to those of another individual who is styled a minority. If it be admitted that a man possessing absolute power . . . may misuse that power by wronging his adversaries, why should not a majority be liable to the same reproach. Men do not change character by uniting with each other" (italics mine) (114).

The acquisitive instinct, however, stimulated by the pursuit of equality, will tend to generate a self-serving majority. Ironically, Toqueville sees the very individuals whose interests it serves submitting their thinking and values to a majority tyranny in return for its protection. Identifying this as a loss of moral freedom within the very texture of political liberties, he warns, "If ever . . . institutions of America are destroyed, that event will be attributed to the omnipotence of the majority which may at some future time urge the minorities to desperation, and oblige them to have recourse to physical force. Anarchy, then, will be the result, but it will have been brought about by despotism" (121).

Reflective Americans are aware, of course, as was Toqueville, that respect for and preservation of our Constitution is the greatest safeguard against the rule of the mob, the tyranny of "King Numbers." Our concern in this essay, however, is not so much with the political implications of democratic rule but with those that are cultural and related to the quality of our lives. In this matter, a contemporary political philosopher, Claes Ryn, offers some provocative insights. In his study, Democracy and the Ethical Life, he explores the issue of majority rule in its ethical and qualitative implications.

An ethical theory of democracy will not be satisfied with stating . . . that democracy is a form of government in which public policy rests on the will of the great mass of the people as opposed to some privileged elite. While this principle has something to contribute to a theory of popular rule, it evades the question whether democracy has to foster a certain quality of popular will. (italics mine) (10)

Dr. Ryn here addresses the very question we have associated with the aristocratic charge, with the quality of national life. What he means here is that mere satisfaction of majority interests is not enough to guarantee that quality. He goes on to argue for something beyond mere system, beyond the
rule of numbers: "An ethical theory of democracy looks for more in the celebrated principle of majority rule than the idea that a numerically superior portion of a people is entitled to a greater influence over public decisions than a numerically inferior one." So restricted a perception of democracy, he argues, reduces it to a "mere form" with "no reference to the quality of will which democracy is supposed to articulate." And he concludes that what limits such perceptions is "their failure to relate popular government to man's transcendent moral destiny" (10, 11). But is not this transcendent consciousness the very charge traditionally ascribed to aristocracies? Is it not what Homer implicitly advocated in his comparison of barbarism to civilization? Is it not what the traditional hero struggled to defend—something more than power or security or wealth? Is it not a matter of identity, of cultural quality—a system of myth and manners, of history and heroes; of geography and craft; of arts and values and beliefs that set a society apart? Is it not the grounds, in the words of Dr. Bennett, of what is to be loved, to be fought for, to live and die for?

The question before us, then, is how, in a democracy, to perpetuate this sense of a "transcendent moral destiny." How, in other words, do we motivate our compatriots to live for something more than two cars in the garage, a full pantry, a comfortable retirement? Lacking any institution so committed by privilege or common expectation, where are we to turn? If, as Toqueville asserts, democratic citizens are primarily engrossed in pursuit of those practical and material symbols indicative of "equality," they are not likely to be concerned with "transcendent moral destiny." Or, rather, abstracting this dimension from the fabric of ordinary life, they are likely to reserve it for religion—but religion now seen as separate from the rest of life, as leisure or family or work are seen as separate aspects of our lives. Some have called this compartmentalization of modern life a form of cultural schizophrenia, a far remove from the life of the medieval Christian or the golden age Athenian for whom every act was, at once, religious, political, cultural, and personal. In any event, given our individualistic and departmentalized ethos, Dr. Ryn's question is pertinent: "How can moral values be promoted and maintained by a form of good based upon popular consent?" (13).

If the common denominator is material security, the common vehicle of equality material acquisition, then our symbols are likely to fall short of transcendent significance. Symbols, though, are critical to cultural identity and ought not to be relegated to chance or individual whim—or the impulse of a random majority. And again, we ask, who, in a democracy, should determine and sustain the symbols of our highest humanity? With each repetition, it seems, the question becomes more urgent and more difficult.

The answer may lie, interestingly enough, in that very individualism
which, as Toqueville points out, can so easily lead to destructive self-interest and alienation. I would like to argue, however, that the freedom and opportunity democracies make possible can also foster a productive and creative individualism—one that is both paradoxical and unceasingly vital. It is paradoxical because based upon the principle that only in community, that is, only in the context of otherness, can human individuals express their talents, realize their distinctive personal identities; it is a vital individualism in that, at every turn, the responsible citizen must maintain a delicate balance between self-expression, self-realization, and the demands of the larger human community. We have here a paradox and a tension not much in favor with a culture dedicated to individual rights, to personal gratification. A study of any serious literature, however, will show how individuality and social function are inseparable, and indeed, are basic to the classic and enduring human drama. As Allan Bloom says in The Closing of the American Mind, "Man is ambiguous. In the tightest communities, at least since the days of Odysseus, there is something in man that wants out and senses that his development is stunted by being a part of the whole rather than a whole itself. And in the freest and most independent situations, men long for unconditional attachments. The tension between freedom and attachment, and attempts to achieve the impossible union of the two, are the permanent condition of man" (113).

It is this same tension and paradox that Ryn refers to when he says that "social life must indeed be regarded as a trans-subjective existence" (italics mine) and concludes, "'private' and 'social' are inextricably related. Paradoxically, self-discovery is a communal, cultural process" (45). In other words, it is only within the context of otherness that the self can express its unique distinction, only within the frame of community that one's gifts and energies can be applied and assessed.

Think for a moment how our popular ethic flies in the face of this reality. Scholars of American literature like R. W. B. Lewis show how the isolate frontiersman (later become the lonesome cowboy and still later the unattached hero of detective and adventure fiction) has become a cultural type. In contrast with traditional champions who lived for their societies, note how the American hero generally moves away from society to the wilderness (Natty Bumppo, Grizzly Adams), how the surly private eye is always on the outs with the police, how the successful executive is a stranger in his own kitchen or bedroom.

Our relentless individualism, it would seem, has moved in the direction that Toqueville feared it might—towards apartness and alienation. And yet, as Ryn asserts, individuation is a cultural, communal process "in which the testimony of many . . . is tested against immediate experience" (45). That is to say, our particular and distinctive acts, when performed within a context of community, establish their value and significance against a
norm at once transcending individual whim or impulse while defining the individual agent. The classic expression of this reality is enacted in Homer’s *Iliad* when the sulking hero, Achilles, discovers he can be no hero apart from service to his society. Following the death of his dearest friend, the result of his own refusal to fight, he laments, “I was no light of safety to Patroklos, nor to my other companions, who in their numbers went down before glorious Hecktor, but sit here beside my ships, a useless weight.” Then, recognizing the distinctions and burdens of individual gifts, he adds, “I, who am such as no other of the bronze-armed Achaions in battle, though there are others also better in council. . . .” And he concludes, ruefully aware that one is distinguished as an individual precisely as he serves the larger community, “I stayed too long out of the fighting” (XVIII 118, passim).

What this study of one man’s painful individual realization may suggest is that, in the absence of a traditional aristocracy, individuals—or groups of individuals—may have to be the source of “transcendent moral vision” for their societies; but individuals not seen as entities in pursuit of private, predominantly material goals, but as moral persons committed voluntarily to the common weal, to the pursuit of the best for their societies—and in so behaving, achieving a measure of self-realization and public recognition.

How, realistically, is this to be accomplished? We know we cannot invest this responsibility in government, for governments, as executive systems, tend to endorse efficiencies rather than qualities. In the critical matter of education, for example, governments are likely first to think of budgetary limitations before pedagogical ideals. Furthermore, governments, whether aristocratic or democratic, strive for self-perpetuation, generally accommodating other considerations to this end. Indeed, one of the functions of aristocracies, as Toqueville points out, was to temper the absolutist tendencies of monarchies. What entity, then, might function in a democracy to temper the leveling and quantitative propensities of centralized government? Religion, certainly, must work towards the highest spiritual ends; but the very pluralism which democracies safeguard limits the influence of religious teaching and practice amid a populace embracing various or no religious convictions. Education, likewise, in its purported and generalizing objectivity, eschews those more substantial positions which might encourage a distinctive public moral voice. Again, we come to the question: whence, in a democracy, are we to derive our leaders? What transcendent ends and values will direct and motivate them and those whom they lead?

For Toqueville and Ryn, the answer is similar: at the level of political structure, both see constitution and law as tempering the self-serving, individualistic impulse, and its collective counterpart, the tyrannical majority. More importantly, at the ethical and cultural level, both see the formation of voluntary public interest associations, distinct from govern-
ment, as our major safeguard against mob rule, against the leveling of
tastes and values and standards, against the impersonalization of bureau-
cracy, against the dulling of the common moral sensibility.

The existence in America of so many societies with concerns that are
both special and public attests to our recognition of this need: the ACLU,
the Sierra Club, societies concerned with the aged and the handicapped:
minority organizations, service clubs, associations promoting the arts and
sciences, historical and cultural organizations, Common Cause, and count-
less more. They would seem to substantiate Ryn's conclusion that "the
democratic ideal is not to do away with leaders, but to make them as
numerous as possible" (italics mine) (201). Toqueville's resolution repres-
sents a slightly different emphasis. Near the end of his book, he says, "I
firmly believe that an aristocracy cannot again be founded in the world; but
I think that private citizens, by combining together, may constitute bodies
of great wealth, influence and strength corresponding to persons in an
aristocracy (italics mine). By this means, many of the greatest political
advantages of an aristocracy would be obtained without its injustice or
dangers. An association for political, commercial or manufacturing pur-
poses, or even for those of science and literature, is a powerful and
enlightened member of the community, which cannot be disposed of at
pleasure, or oppressed without remonstrance; and which, by defending its
own rights against the encroachments of the government, saves the com-
mon liberties of the country" (308).

Such organizations, of course, are made up of individuals who might
find, in serving them, the agency of their own individuation and self-
realization. In this context, however, self-realization takes place not in
some isolate expression of "rugged individualism" or in some romantic
remove from the society of one's fellows, but in the pursuit of the common
weal, in the preservation of those standards and ideals which, formerly,
were the charge of aristocracy. Such commitments, because they transcend
individual interests, can be directed to what Ryn calls our "transcendent
moral destiny" and to what Toqueville meant, I believe, by "the greatest
political advantages of an aristocracy."

Allan Bloom, lamenting the reductionist proclivities of modern psycho-
logy and modern education (wherein data replaces wonder, anatomy repla-
ces eros, and "values clarification" replaces moral sensibility) asserts,
"Without the great revelations, epics and philosophies as part of our
natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left
inside" (60). No government can, of itself or by mere legislation, rectify this
decline. Only individuals, committed and in consort; only those multiple
leaders whom democracies are uniquely designed to foster and develop,
only such moral agents—free and informed by a vision of "the
best,”—can redeem democracies from the greed, mediocrity and violence that ever threatens freely structured societies.

We have, in this paper, taken democracy rather severely, perhaps even unfairly, to task. We have warned against those facile, self-serving slogans that would blind us to the grosser implications of "equality" and to the dangers of freedom uninformed by a transcendent moral vision. On balance, we must conclude, therefore, by asserting that it is also, and pre-eminently, in democracies that individual men and women, informed and morally committed, can most effectively sustain and perpetuate the values and traditions that make a society human—and in so doing, realize, as well, their fullest individuality.

If democracies have within them the seeds of anarchy and their own dissolutions, they are also uniquely disposed, when safeguarded by a constitution such as our own, to empower those natural and multiple leaders who can give to history and the world an aristocracy not of blood but of the spirit.
Bibliography


