Democratic Theory in American Literature

Caitlin O'Keefe, Class of 2013

When I started this project, I set out to examine the ways in which some of the authors of the American Renaissance went about crafting a distinctively American literature in a society lacking the social stratification that had previously been the basis of much of literature. In order to do so, I examined the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, a prominent theorist about democratic life whose seminal work, *Democracy in America*, examines the changes to culture that result from the shift from an aristocracy. In particular, he examined the shift that came from an added emphasis on equality. Although such a movement towards equality was inevitable and in many ways societally beneficial, Tocqueville also believed that it led to a set of problems that were particular to democracy. In my reading of *Democracy in America* this summer, I focused on the ways in which men are, although equal, also in some ways weakened as a result of that equality. In particular, Tocqueville believed that “In centuries of equality all men are independent of one another, isolated and weak.”¹ He continues: “each man…becomes more like the others, weaker and smaller, one gets used to no longer viewing citizens so as to consider only the people; one forgets individuals so as to think only of the species…the idea of unity obsesses [the mind].”² The equality of conditions in democracy, he concluded, have the potential to diminish the individual’s ability to act and stifle his political liberty, the exercise of which Tocqueville believes is necessary for the guarantee of that liberty and for maintaining man’s capacity to achieve greatness.

After conducting a reading of *Democracy in America*, I shifted my focus towards seminal works of American literature that were in many ways aimed at addressing the same problems that Tocqueville identified. As Matthew Sitman and Brian Smith say in their commentary on Tocqueville, “Each man sees himself as similar in power and capacity to achieve his greatest ambitions, yet the loss of…supports for the individual betrays his limitations and frustrates his hopes.”³ I chose to focus on Ralph Waldo Emerson as perhaps the greatest writer of self-reliance and individualism in the American canon.

The need to bolster the individual’s idea of himself was a central focus of Emerson in his famous essays. Emerson believed that the great potential of democracy was that it allowed the individual to follow his own interests and passions – his own individual genius, as he put it. He believed that everyone should follow their own perceptions of the world, and that, in order to attain greatness, every individual must rely on themselves and resist the urge to conform to the will of a large number of people. In some ways, then, Emerson is addressing the problem that Tocqueville identified; he is holding up the capabilities of the individual man, and encouraging him, painting him as someone strong enough to obey his own will instead of conforming to the will of the majority.

I found, however, that, although Emerson does in some ways address the concerns that Tocqueville presents, his own ideas have their own problems. Although Emerson is a poet of self-reliance, he neglects a crucial aspect of the Tocquevillian project. Tocqueville

² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 426.
says that, in democracy, having common morals are extremely important. It is only by having morals that then lead to laws that people can obey the laws and still truly be free. For Emerson, however, at his extreme of individualism, everyone must intuit their own morals, which he believes comes from an individual’s experience of God as perceived in nature.

My summer project, then, culminates at the nexus of individualism and common morality. Although Tocqueville makes it clear that it is crucial for there to be strong individuals in democracy, there is a point at which everyone in that democracy must also have common moral ideas. There is a tension between the necessity of having a common morality that must be legislated and needing to follow without exception one’s individual experience of the world, which extends to crafting one’s own system of morality. I plan to continue my study into how those two things can coexist in democracies, and to what extent people can truly legislate their own lives – in essence, to what extent a person can really be free in democracy, and to what extent their lives must to some degree be shaped by others. Reading Tocqueville has allowed me to explore the political implications of Emerson’s thinking, and in so doing to explore the way in which there must be not only practical but also philosophical limitations on freedom in democracies for them to function, and how the need for those limitations are embedded in the literature of some of the greatest of American authors.

I read a great many of Emerson’s essays this summer, including “Self-Reliance,” “Circles,” “Experience,” “The Sovereignty of Ethics,” “The Fortunes of the Republic, “Nature,” “Solitude and Society,” “Man the Reformer,” “Heroism,” “Intellect,” “Art,” “The Poet,” “Experience,” “Character,” “The Over-Soul,” “Politics,” Worship,” “The Divinity School Address,” “The Uses of Great Men,” “The American Scholar,” “Compensation,” “Love,” “Friendship,” “Power,” “Wealth,” and the “Address to the Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law,” among others. I also became familiar with much of the secondary literature on Emerson, and did work with Democracy in America and attendant secondary literature as well. I took copious notes throughout the summer, periodically synthesizing them into arguments, and met weekly with Professor Franco in meetings that were extremely helpful in clarifying my own thoughts and carrying them yet further. I have become very familiar with the scholarship on the politics of American literature, and am much more confident about engaging with that scholarship as I embark on my honors project in the academic year.

Faculty Mentor: Paul Franco

Funded by the Surdna Foundation