

**Poetry in America:  
Representing Equality Through Accounts of Poetry in Alexis de Tocqueville, Ralph Waldo  
Emerson, and John Stuart Mill**

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> .....	ii
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	v
<b>INTRODUCTION: Poetry in America: Representing the Figure of the Poet in Nineteenth-Century Democratic Theory, 1833-1856</b> .....	1
<b>CHAPTER I. Equality Adorned: Poetry and the Idioms of Egalitarian Norms in Alexis De Tocqueville’s <i>Democracy In America</i></b> .....	38
<b>CHAPTER II. The Right to Poetry: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Poet” and the Work of Equality</b> .....	68
<b>CHAPTER III. Poetic Address and the Representation of Authentic Expression in John Stuart Mill’s “What Is Poetry?” (1833) and “Two Kinds of Poetry” (1833)</b> .....	92
<b>CONCLUSION: The Idioms of Poetic Citizenship: Representing Literature as Political Practice in Nineteenth-Century America</b> .....	119
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	147

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the relationship between political and literary practices. Highlighting the connection between American literature and democratic theory that appears in the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Stuart Mill, my project considers how the fate of poetry in the new world joins poetical theory to aesthetic practice, and both to the practices of citizenship. For all three nineteenth-century theorists (and critics) of democracy, the representation of American citizens as readers and writers of poetry becomes a productive site for the dramatization of political practices and likewise, for navigating familiar tensions among democracy, egalitarian norms, and human flourishing. In developing this analysis I show how their respective accounts of poetry incorporate the idioms of their political projects, thus extending the promises and pitfalls of democratic equality to literature. I suggest that in so doing, they present the American democratic “experiment” as in part a literary project.

Chapter One considers Tocqueville’s career-long appeals to poetry as part and parcel of his effort to diagnose and remediate the problematic relationship between private individuals and a tutelary state. Poetry, I argue, offers a version of his intermediary bodies writ literary. Chapter Two explores Emerson’s account of poetry as a means of cultivating and enacting admiration for the great while avoiding the worshipful, thus subordinate, postures such admiration risks. By capturing the beauty of ordinary and meager subjects, poetry becomes for Emerson a project of

augmenting the aesthetic value of the lives of democratic citizens. Chapter Three examines Mill's essays on poetry, which he presents as a mode of communication enabling authentic expression without the constraints imposed by democratic conditions. In incorporating the idioms of intimate exchange, Mill's idealized notion of poetic utterance suggests that citizen-interlocutors might overcome the pernicious effects of democratic publicity through indirect address.

This project expands on recent work concerning the diversity of writing genres pertinent to democratic theory, by recovering literary practices and relations as key elements in the political thought of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill. I argue that poetry orients each thinker to the relationship between democratic equality and human flourishing: overlooking how poetry articulates and nurtures this relationship, I suggest, occludes the role of literary writing in both contributing new visions of democratic equality and in giving those new visions worldly form.

keywords: democracy; literature; American political thought; Alexis de Tocqueville; Ralph Waldo Emerson; John Stuart Mill; historical poetics

## INTRODUCTION

### **Poetry in America: Representing the Figure of the Poet in Nineteenth-Century Democratic Theory, 1833-1856**

In the opening pages of *Democracy in America* (1835), Alexis Tocqueville offers a list of talents that democracy makes available to “the people” including “poetry, eloquence and memory, the grace and wit, [and] the glow of imagination.”<sup>1</sup> These are “placed within the reach of the people” under democracy yet it will also turn out that “nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests, in one word, so anti-poetic, as the life of a man in the United States.”<sup>2</sup> Within several years of that work’s publication another democratic thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, would draw on the relationship between poetry and democracy to reach similar conclusions about the possibility of poetry in America. While for Emerson “the great, the remote, the romantic” would give way to a poetry of common subjects, he expresses concerns over whether Americans were up to the task: “the geography is sublime,” he writes, “but the men are not.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, John Stuart Mill would propose the use of a poetic mode of solitary address to

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve (New York: Bantam, 2002 [1835, 1840]), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 591.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in Larzer Ziff, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1982 [1837]), pp. 101-102; Emerson, Journal Entry, in William H. Gilman, Ralph H. Orth, et al, eds., *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960-1972), p. 284.



enhance the possibilities for authentic expression within mass democracy. But the difficult means of maintaining a form of address he defined as poetic amidst the pressures of conformity and imitation made poetry an unlikely art form in democracy.<sup>4</sup>

The possibility of poetry in America appears across three major accounts of American democracy. Used as a lens into the literary lives of democratic subjects, poetry operates in various ways within each account: as a trope for the transcendent human need to adorn the world, as a practice important for human flourishing, and as a practice critical for the functioning of democratic politics. For each, asking about the state of poetry in America was a problematic proper to inquiries into the relationship between democratic egalitarian norms and modern subjectivity. This dissertation explores the appeal to poetic genres in major and minor works of these three primary nineteenth-century democratic critics — Alexis de Tocqueville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Stuart Mill — writing in three contexts within the span of roughly two decades (1833-1856). It recovers the persistent appeal to this aesthetic practice as a privileged site to represent and explore dilemmas between egalitarian norms and the mediocrity, privatization, and political docility of democratic citizens.

My dissertation begins by asking how and why political theorists take up an aesthetic practice like poetry as a political problem. As a literary form associated in the nineteenth century with communication about beauty and aesthetic pleasure, emotional depth, and the articulation of personal thoughts, poetry offered denizens of the American polity a means of ambiguously public and private expression. Indeed, while the role of published writings has long been seen as central to the institutionalization of the public sphere, democratic theorists in the American

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<sup>4</sup> John Stuart Mill, “What is Poetry?” in, eds., *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press (1999 [1833]), pp. 1212-1220.

tradition have been extremely selective in the genres they identify as critical to the development of public speech and to the cultivation of communicative skills that might sustain a democratic culture.<sup>5</sup> In particular, they have overlooked the most ubiquitous form of published writing in 19<sup>th</sup> century America – poetry, and in particular, the lyric — as well as its prominence in the work of these three major democratic theorists.<sup>6</sup>

Each thinker understood poetry’s place as central to their political projects. For each, poetry would come to mean different things; the elasticity of poetry’s definition in these accounts suggests that it was less a coherent literary form in their representation of the literary lives of Americans than it was a site for projecting their political anxieties and political aspirations concerning democratic citizenship. In this project I explore these idiomatic representations of poetry, arguing that for Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill it was both a political practice and a site for doing political theory by another means.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in 18<sup>th</sup> Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1990); Mary Ryan, “Gender and Public Access: Women’s Politics in Nineteenth-century America.” In *Habermas And the Public Sphere*, Ed. By Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992); and David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, And the Public Sphere In Early-modern England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> For accounts that have sought to recenter the role of literature in nineteenth-century print culture see Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2003); and June Howard, *Publishing the Family* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). For accounts that focus specifically on the role of poetry in the print worlds of nineteenth-century America see Terrence Allan Hoagwood, *From Song to Print: Romantic Pseudo-Songs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Meredith L. McGill, ed. *The Traffic In Poems: Nineteenth-century Poetry And Transatlantic Exchange* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life And the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Joan Shelley Rubin, *Songs of Ourselves: the Uses of Poetry In America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Lisa Malinowski Steinman, *Masters of Repetition: Poetry, Culture, And Work In Thomson, Wordsworth, Shelley, And Emerson* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Matthew Rowlinson, “Lyric.” In *The Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Eds. Richard Cronin, Anthony Harrison, and Alison Chapman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); and Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Stein, *Early African American Print Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

Highlighting the vexing and charged role of the literary lives of American citizens in their representation of democratic citizenship brings together what I identify as two, often disparate features of each thinkers' account — and features that are often theorized separately in contemporary democratic theory. One essential feature of the appeal to poetry is to orient each thinker towards the risks that democracy poses for forms of human flourishing. By poetry's connection to human flourishing I mean that each links poetry to processes and practices of self-cultivation, human distinction, and excellence. This conclusion resonates with the claim often made by contemporary democratic theorists that Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill appealed to aristocratic resources as a means to counter the detrimental effects of democracy on elements they define as central to citizenship: understood as a highly refined and stylized mode of literary creation, poetry might well represent such a resource.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, their appeal to poetry as human flourishing can also seem out of step with and overshadowed by other key elements of each thinkers' political project. As reflected in another set of contemporary democratic readings of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill, each is differently reclaimed as a thinker acutely attuned to the fragile nature of political organization in popular and decentralized locales. For example, Tocqueville has been newly reclaimed as attentive to the nature of modern forms of popular power, below the level of formal institutions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Recent scholarship on the democratic dimensions of appeals to human flourishing and distinction include Bonnie Honig, "Antigone's Laments, Creon's Grief: Mourning, Membership, and the Politics of Exception," *Political Theory* 37:1 (2009): 5-43; Melvin Rogers, "Race and Democratic Aesthetic," in *Radical Future Pasts*, edited by Romand Coles, Mark Reinhardt, George Shulman (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2014): 249-282; Brian Walker, "Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation," *Political Theory* 29:2 (2001): 155-189; and Alex Zakaras, *Individuality And Mass Democracy: Mill, Emerson, And the Burdens of Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> See for example George Shulman, "A Tocqueville for Our Time," *Raritan* 36:2 (2016); Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Avramenko, "The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy," *Political Theory* 45:4 (2016).

Emerson has been read as a critic of the complex relations of complicity and coercion in modern states.<sup>9</sup> Mill, likewise, has been taken up as a theorist of forms of coercion beyond state interference and republican forms of domination.<sup>10</sup> In such accounts the role of human excellence and human development is either eclipsed by the imperatives of political organization or interpreted as an element of their aristocratic nostalgia, rather than part of their democratic commitments.

New accounts considered here have sought to re-center the theme of the risks of democracy for forms of human flourishing as critical elements of each thinker's vision of independence, power, and equality. Yet even as elements of human flourishing are recovered in these new accounts, conspicuously absent is the role of the literary. Indeed, as we shall see, these accounts impose conceptual barriers between democratic practice and distinct literary-aesthetic practices, such as writing and reading poetry.<sup>11</sup> In similar ways, aesthetic production more broadly is often folded into other forms of self-cultivation and categorized along with multiple

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<sup>9</sup> For a representative collection of essays on the democratic dimensions of Emerson's thought, see Alan Levine and Daniel Malachuk, eds. *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> See Jennie Ikuta, "Mill as ambivalent democrat: The corruption and cultivation of human flourishing in democratic society and politics." *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. 41 (7) (2015): 697-724; Nadia Urbinati, "The Many Heads of the Hydra: J.S. Mill on Despotism," in *J.S. Mill's Political Thought*. Eds. Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 66-97; and Alex Zakaras, *Individuality And Mass Democracy: Mill, Emerson, And the Burdens of Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> One important exception, in the context of nineteenth-century romantic literature, is Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism: Romanticism And the Reconstruction of Liberal Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987). For Rosenblum the specifically "romantic" underpinnings of individualism deployed by diverse thinkers like Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill can be overlooked by failing to attend to their interest in literature. Recovering these dimensions highlights "discontents" not picked up with an analysis of their political theory exclusively. For example Rosenblum detects criticisms aimed more directly at what she calls the "prosaic" dimensions of economic pursuit (p. 4), a suspicion of government, effeminate citizenship (pp. 12-13), and an egalitarian culture prone to "homogenize individual differences" (p. 14). I draw similar conclusions to Rosenblum regarding the differences among the idioms of a literary-inflected citizenship and, on the one hand, civic enervation connected to republican civic virtue and, on the other, liberal "freedom from the demands of civic virtue" (p. 17). Yet where Rosenblum finds practices of excellence tied to individual distinction I argue Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill find a poetry that was generative of political bonds and political character. In seeking a poetry that is compatible with rather than opposed to egalitarian norms, they posit a democratic poetry of civic enervation.

practices of distinction and excellence. The literary as a means of self-cultivation loses its specific role and precludes contemporary theorists from noticing the persistent role it plays for Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill. Further, such approaches can diminish the historical meaning of poetic literature in the nineteenth century and downplay each thinker's connection to a broader discourse surrounding poetry in America. As a means to recover those connections, I show that the ability to imagine one's self as a suitable subject of poetic representation entails a specific idea of self-cultivation related to the capacity to adorn the world. Likewise, the decision between writing in prose or writing in verse translated to a decision that is not easily characterized as between public engagement and personal expression: at issue is rather a choice between different modes of public address and particular representations of voice.<sup>12</sup>

In recovering the connections between aesthetics and politics that emerge from each thinker's treatment of poetry, I show how poetry highlights the tensions, rather than resolutions, in their accounts of democracy. Poetry's status as a mode of aesthetic production that each thinker relates to democratic equality presents a puzzle: namely, how does each thinker balance the commitment to interrogate the value of egalitarian norms across a range of human practices with the desire to extend the capacity for human flourishing in an egalitarian manner? As scholarship on each as shown, Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill regularly mobilize the aesthetic

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<sup>12</sup> I argue that each theorist conceived of communication in terms other than a set of norms and rules concerning speech but also in terms more typically associated with literary practices, such as voice, rhetoric, expression, and modes of address. For examples of democratic theorists who have taken these dimensions of communicative practice into account in theorizing a public sphere see Kimberly Smith, *The Dominion of Voice: Riot, Reason, and Romance in Antebellum Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000); Elizabeth Wingrove, "Sovereign Address." *Political Theory* 40:2 (2012), pp.135-164; Sheldon Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, and Voice" in Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick, eds., *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Dana Villa, "Theatricality in the Public Realm of Hannah Arendt," in Marcel Henaff and Tracy Strong, eds., *Public Space and Democracy*, 144-171 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). and Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), specifically his chapter "Hearing Voices: Authority and Imagination in Wieland," pp. 156-181.

— as a realm of distinction and excellence — as unsuitable for or impervious to egalitarian norms. Even as each thinker affirms the achievement of equality in America through formal institutions or mechanisms like political and civil rights, they retain a critical account of egalitarian norms as responsible for the homogenizing and coercive pressures they associate with democracy’s worst excesses. Poetry can be read as one potential casualty of the inhibited expressive capacities of democratic citizens, as well as an aristocratic and pre-modern resource to cultivate political sensibilities essential, but also foreign, to democracy.

I argue that a very different formulation of the relationship between equality and aesthetic production happens in their account of poetry. Rather than emphasize a general distress or disdain for egalitarian norms, they each affirm that poetry could take a democratic people as its subject of representation and that democrats could maintain a robust world of poetic production. Not only does each thinker consider it as a possibility but they also conceptualize a poetry on democracy’s terms — a model of what I will call “democratic poetry.” Tocqueville affirms a poetry of democratic man and theorizes its formal components. Emerson celebrates a poetry of ordinary subjects and offers examples of what it would look like. Mill explores the possibility of poetry between equal citizens. For each, a poetry that adheres to egalitarian norms was not merely a speculative concept but a feasible literary practice. Poetry on democracy’s terms and in accordance with egalitarian norms presents a material and rhetorical form holding together commitments to human flourishing and equality. In their appeals to poetry, equality becomes not primarily, or even exclusively, a leveling force downward, but a condition of poetic expression. In other words, each envisages a poetry beholden to democratic values.

Not only does this pose a puzzle for contemporary democratic theorists who study thinkers not normally associated with an embrace of equality, but it also requires democratic theorists to consider how aesthetic practices enable citizens to respond to the dilemmas of democracy introduced by Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill. For Tocqueville, poetry is pressed into the role of navigating the political relationship between private individuals and a tutelary state. For Emerson, poetry enables self-development through admiration of the great without succumbing to worship of the great, a process that requires recovering the aesthetic worth of ordinary, even mediocre subjects. For Mill, poetry is a mode of communication that permits authentic expression and deep emotional exchange against the constraints of public communication. Poetry takes on Mill's valued idioms of intimate exchange but helps interlocutors achieve the goal of authentic expression through its unique mode of indirect address.

In each account the poetic becomes a form of democratic self-making not ancillary to politics but constitutive of it. The literary becomes a register of political navigation as opposed to a merely symbolic form of representing politics happening elsewhere. By devoting chapters and essays to the new subject of poetry, to the test of supporting the democratic poet in the modern world, and to the task of fostering "the like revolution in literature," to use Emerson's terms, each considers politics (and political theorizing) at the level of poetry's translation into a modern world. In their accounts of poetry, I argue, they are concerned foremost with the maintenance of actors' literary lives as a means to equip democratic subjects with the tools for resolving political dilemmas.

In the chapters that follow I explore how each thinker takes these questions up as a problem for poetry. For example, how does Tocqueville address the category of “the people” that both engenders political subservience and “invites the exercise of [the poet’s] powers”?<sup>13</sup> How does Emerson address a world of imitation and conformity whose mediocre and equal citizens he also presents — as a function of their very mediocrity and indistinguishable qualities — as sources of poetic representation? Exploring the poetic promises of democracy—and how poetry could be democratic—each thinker conceptualizes the poetic possibilities of a people whose formal political organization inhibits their suitability as subjects of poetic representation.<sup>14</sup> Taking poetry seriously as a form of political practice, I argue that any account of Tocqueville, Emerson, or Mill as democratic thinkers is incomplete if it does not incorporate their persistent attention to human flourishing as central to the purposes of democratic politics. Finally, I argue that each imagines communication about beauty and the exchange of expressions of emotional depth as a means of fostering egalitarian relations, and in ways that should be seen as parallel to (as well as in competition with) other forms of egalitarian practice. A “relation” to equality informs each thinker’s definition of poetic practice, a relation characterized by the ability of equals to speak to one another about beauty.

In this chapter, I introduce the theme of poetry in the work of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill. I review the commonality at the center of each thinker’s appeal to poetry as a project

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<sup>13</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 590.

<sup>14</sup> The account of an ambiguity between the representation of the people as a political subject and their representation in a literary genre generates an ambiguity between the privileged sites of the people’s representation that extends discussions of the people as aesthetic production in surplus to their representation in formal political institutions. For related discussions on this point see Bonnie Honig, “Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic,” *American Political Science Review* 85:1 (March 1991), 97-113; see also Melvin Rogers, “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (February 2012): 188–203.



endemic to democracy and as a privileged site for representing political dilemmas. I then explore their conception of poetry in the nineteenth-century context. Finally, I explore the relationship between poetry and democratic resistance. Tocqueville represents poetry as a “germ of power” made available to democratic citizens but must conceptualize the act of “adorning” a world of “insipid” subjects as an act of democratic resistance.<sup>15</sup> Emerson “reckons poetry the right and power of every man” and so must theorize how to make this right available.<sup>16</sup> And Mill represents poetry as a means of communication through which interlocutors can establish authentic expression that is hence free of the tyranny of opinion and associated forms of coercion. If their critical intervention is to think of poetry as part of their vision of what democracy makes available but cannot promise (as capacity, right, or norm), then how do democratic actors claim it and utilize it to realize a fuller vision of egalitarian norms?

### *Theorizing Poetry in a Modern Egalitarian World*

Could America offer subjects (e.g., readers, writers, and objects) suitable for poetic representation? This question was not unique to the nineteenth-century political theorizing of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill in their writing on America. As literary scholars have shown, the question of American audiences’ capacity to produce, their reception of, and resources for the production of genres associated with poetry was a motif of both cultural and literary criticism in

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<sup>15</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “New Poetry,” *The Dial* (October 1840) (accessed online at <https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/newpoetry.html>).

the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Others have argued that poetry in America was also foundational in the formation of modern literary criticism itself, inasmuch as it provided resources for claims about periodization and national contexts that comprised nineteenth-century literary criticism's terms of art.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between America and the poetic genres was raised in relation to questions about American culture and the literary capacities of its citizens in essays by nineteenth-century literary critics such as Rufus Griswold, E. C. Stedman, and Matthew Arnold.<sup>19</sup> Each posed questions about whether it was enough for America to possess beautiful landscapes if its denizens did not possess the means to present them poetically. Would Americans turn towards an overwrought, genteel poetics or would they offer a fresh form of verse that broke with Victorian poetic styles?<sup>20</sup> And did American poetry need a recognizable voice or could it represent a plurality of styles and regionalisms?

The irony of these inquiries into poetry in America as a genre-in-waiting is striking, given that poetry was a prominent (if not *the* predominant) genre of American literature in the middle of the nineteenth century. For literary scholars like Michael Cohen, there is a case to be made for

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<sup>17</sup> For a useful summary of the underpinning questions that framed questions of literary production in national terms in both nineteenth century and contemporary scholarship, see Theo Davis, *Formalism, Experience, and the Making of American Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially the "Introduction," pp. 1-29.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Cohen, "E. C. Stedman and the Invention of Victorian Poetry," *Victorian Poetry* 43:2 (Summer, 2005): 165-188.

<sup>19</sup> See Rufus W. Griswold, *The Poets And Poetry of America*, (Philadelphia: Moss, Brother & Co., 1860); E.C. Stedman, *Poets of America* (Boston, 1885); and Matthew Arnold, *Essays On the Study of Poetry And a Guide to English Literature*, (New York: Macmillan co., 1903)

<sup>20</sup> For an example of stylistic questions in poetry as a function of America's (political, cultural) break from aristocratic worlds, see Virginia Jackson, "Bryant; or, American Romanticism," in Meredith L. McGill, ed. *The Traffic In Poems: Nineteenth-century Poetry And Transatlantic Exchange* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008), pp. 185-204. Jackson traces a nineteenth-century narrative of American poetry as that which is "liberat[ed] from the dictates of didactic present-tense intentions and time-bound, conservative popular taste" (p. 187) and "free of public convention [to] speak toward the future in the language of the people" (p.188). This was one way American consumers and producers of poetry were idealized and poetry was expected to fulfill a political function.

poetry as the central literary form of this period.<sup>21</sup> Shira Wolosky has argued that the distinction between poetic verse and public writing was not enforced in the nineteenth century and so poetry was a regular feature of public and political writing.<sup>22</sup> And Mike Chasar concludes that, given the regularity with which it appeared in advertisements, farmers' almanacs, billboards, greeting cards, milk cartons, girly posters, and many other aspects of "commercial, political, educational" life, poetry likely had "tens of millions of readers."<sup>23</sup>

To claim that America will not "wait long for its metres," as Emerson posited, was to invoke a distinction between poetry as actual poems and poetry as literary ideal or form.<sup>24</sup> The term could refer both to a set of writing practices and an abstract social form, one whose circulation and reception in different national contexts might reflect political and social life. In the accounts of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill — along with many other nineteenth-century literary and cultural critics — poetry presents an opportunity to invoke, highlight, or leverage a discrepancy between ideal forms and a writing practice. Indeed, poetry's status as an ideal form makes it especially effective as a site for theorizing the normative political ideals and practices of democratic life.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael C. Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). For Cohen (p. 12), "the clean separation of poetry and prose in the study of American literature may seem normal now but would have been baffling in the nineteenth century, when most authors wrote in every genre; poems appeared in newspapers, novels, and other prosaic formats; and readers were promiscuous in their tastes."

<sup>22</sup> Shira Wolosky, *Poetry and Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 147. Wolosky traces a period prior to end of the nineteenth century before poetry becomes a more or less hermetically sealed rhetoric.

<sup>23</sup> Mike Chasar, *Everyday Reading: Poetry And Popular Culture In Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> Emerson, "The Poet," p. 281.

By the time Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill wrote about poetry in their work they were contributing to a prolific discourse in which poetry had already begun to be linked to the political and social lives of its subjects. Either unwilling to offer a summation of American democracy without addressing the prominent subject of contemporary literary criticism or unable to resist exploring what poetry could enable to them to conclude about democracy, each thinker's persistent return to poetry as an explicit problematic of political theorizing was of a piece with nineteenth-century social theory. The subject of poetry threads through each of their careers as democratic theorists. Tocqueville's chapters in *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) on the "Literary characteristics of democratic ages," "Of some of the sources of poetry amongst democratic nations," and "Of the inflated style of American writers and orators" all take poetry as a primary subject of the literary lives of Americans. Tocqueville would continue to reference poetry in America in letters, and his major later work, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* (1856), would revisit questions over the place of "the literary spirit in politics." Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Poet" (1844), "The American Scholar" (1837), "Thoughts on Modern Literature" (1840), and "New Poetry" (1840) theorize poetry as a democratic genre. John Stuart Mill's "What Is Poetry?" (1833) and "Two Kinds of Poetry" (1833), as well as his essays and reviews of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, take up the question of poetry in a democratic world.

By noting that a consideration of poetry may have been a standard motif in nineteenth-century social theory, I do not argue that poetry was an expected detour in their broader political accounts. As evidenced by the frequency with which they return to poetry, their interest in thinking politics through poetic modernization, and their designation of entire chapters and

essays to discussing poetic forms, poetry stands out among their inquiries into literature as suitable for revealing the national characteristics and voice of its practitioners as well as, I will argue, their political characteristics.<sup>25</sup> By exploring whether democracy would provide suitable subjects of poetic representation, they extend their political theory and democratic inquiry into the realm of the literary. As part of that process, I will show, they construct a relationship between the representational skills of highly adorned poetic expression and of political practice. Departing from other uses of poetry in nineteenth-century literary criticism, Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill approach this form of aesthetic creation as ripe with possibilities for responding to political dilemmas. And in turn, their accounts of political theorizing take on idioms of poetry.

Each thinker's turn to poetry shares several key themes. First, their accounts of the importance of poetry emphasize the role of human flourishing as an element of their democratic theory. Given the association between poetry and pre-modern forms of literature, the inclusion of poetry in an ideal of modern citizenship means underscoring the risks of democracy to practices of excellence and distinction. For Tocqueville, poetry is associated with an aristocratic culture of individual distinction; as such, it becomes for him an opportunity to stage an antagonistic relationship between equality and excellence. He argues that "equality not only turns attention away from the description of the ideal but also provides less to be described." As a result "nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests, in one word, so

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<sup>25</sup> More accurately, poetry was formalized as a nineteenth-century genre in part through its construction as a literary form that reflected back answers to questions about national character and citizenly excellence.

anti-poetic, as the life of a man in the United States.”<sup>26</sup> The potential lack of poetry deprived American subjects of a particular register of expression.

Likewise, for Emerson and Mill the poet possesses both aristocratic and ancient provenance that made his (ill-)fit in America an opportunity to represent antagonism between democracy and aristocracy. For Emerson, democracy makes available new rights and powers for the people, but he also asserts a persistent “chasm...[f]ound between the largest promise of ideal power and shabby experience” of most men — a chasm that inhibited poetic production.<sup>27</sup> At the same time that Emerson hoped Americans would integrate an aspiration for greatness into their political ideal, a “terror of the great . . . imposed awe and hesitation on the talent of the masses of society.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, for Mill, democratic subjects lack a “largeness either to their conceptions or to their sentiments” that otherwise remained ordinary and limited in scope. While poetry had flourished almost without thought in the ancient world, democrats required a means to engage in the expression of individual emotional depth that could overcome the coercive powers of conformity to public opinion. Mill is pessimistic, however, about the broad role of literature in a “republic peopled with a provincial middle class.”<sup>29</sup> The “characteristic” of American literature, he laments, “is imitation.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 483, 591.

<sup>27</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Montaigne; Or, The Skeptic,” in Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Representative Men* (vol. 4), (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903-1904 [1850]), pp. 184-185.

<sup>28</sup> Emerson, “New Poetry.”

<sup>29</sup> John Stuart Mill, “State of Society in America,” in John M. Robson, ed., *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol. 18 — Essays on Politics and Society, Part I* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> John Stuart Mill, “De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II],” in Robson, ed., *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, p. 150 and p. 196.

For each, making the poet a figure of the democratic public sphere is a priority and challenge. That task, as they pose it, requires not just conceptualizing the theoretical possibility of democratic poetry but also describing what it might look like. At the same time, the demonstration of poetic uptake could serve as proof that Americans were capable of cultivating democratic selves and orienting democratic subjects towards excellence. To use Alex Zakaras' phrase, their privileging of literature, and poetry specifically, reveals how "the idea of democracy was . . . inseparable from the aspiration to improve human beings."<sup>31</sup> At the same time, they center their (democratic) appeals for broader access to human flourishing on an aesthetic form associated with individual distinction and codified hierarchy.

The second feature that each thinker's account of poetry shares is a need to understand the value of equality and its practical consequences for a specifically democratic poetry. Each thinker sets this challenge up in a different way. But for each, rather than appeal to poetry as one aesthetic practice where they could show egalitarian norms to be detrimental (or at best futile) to its success, each thinker imagines the possibility of a democratically-inflected poetic practice. No other feature of American life contributed to the dilemma of democratic poetry more than equality.

Each thinker speculates on what it would mean for equality to be a condition of poetry by first representing democratic values as pushing on the idea of a widely accessible poetry at the level of form and production. Democracy threatens to undermine poetic aesthetic forms for Tocqueville and Mill, yet rather than forecast poetry's aesthetic and formal collapse, they imagine the possibility of a democratic poetry that adheres to egalitarian norms. Tocqueville, for

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<sup>31</sup> Alex Zakaras, *Individuality And Mass Democracy: Mill, Emerson, and the Burdens of Citizenship*, p. 7.

example, imagines a new subject of poetry: even “as all the citizens who compose a democratic community are nearly equal and alike, [and] the poet cannot dwell upon any one of them,” he writes, it is the very similitude of Americans that “allows poets to include them all in the same imagery.”<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, Emerson posits that new poetry could adhere to egalitarian norms and continue to function, to the extent new subjects for poetic representation could be found. Opening aesthetic representation to unrefined objects and ordinary thoughts whose rough and incomplete state would retain its own aesthetic appeal, Emerson conceives a democratic poetry of the common. “Instead of the sublime and beautiful,” Emerson writes, “the near, the low, the common, was explored and poetized.”<sup>33</sup>

For Mill the public possibilities for expression opened up by egalitarian norms also threaten forms of authentic emotional expression, as the pressures of conformity dominated the appeal of intimate personal exchange in public. But at the same time, egalitarian norms reveal new possibilities for imagining an enhanced scene of interlocution between equal individuals. For Mill, poetry could become intimately personal and expressive now that it could be imagined as composed by and for equals. New possibilities for personal expression are created rather than closed down by egalitarian norms.

Defining poetry on new terms marks a shift in their vision of the compatibility between poetry and equality. But the conversion of their representation of equality—from a source of leveling and homogenizing to a condition of poetic representation—also marks a shift within

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<sup>32</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 590.

<sup>33</sup> Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays*, p. 101.



their political project. Part of this shift entails a new theoretical relation to equality; another part of this shift entails the creation of a new opportunity for egalitarian practices. Equality is imagined to open up the possibility of new forms of poetry, but in turn the establishment of equality through poetic representation is imagined to offer new possibilities for extending equality through literature. By this I mean that poetry enables communication of beauty and the authentic expression of emotional depth whose achievement could establish egalitarian relations between interlocutors.

Tocqueville imagines how subjects whose very political organization makes them “anti-poetic” can become subjects of adornment and thus affirm their equality within the polis on a deeper level. Emerson explores how a vision of poetry as a right open to all will enable actors to “sing” the value, ritualistic beauty, and ultimately the radical poetic qualities of what are otherwise taken as common or demeaned objects. And for Mill the imperative to generate equal conditions between interlocutors in the public sphere is advanced through the practices of indirect address and solitary expression, available only in poetry. The vision of “literary egalitarianism” that defines each thinker’s turn to poetry, to borrow literary scholar Kerry Larson’s terms, is presented as an alternative but crucial aspect of extending equality in democratic worlds.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kerry C. Larson, *Imagining Equality in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 72.

In these ways poetry serves as a means for both elaborating political dilemmas and attempting to ameliorate them.<sup>35</sup> Poetry takes on the idioms of each thinker's political project. For Tocqueville, the tension between the private individual and the tutelary and provident state is recast as one between the "extremely minute" and the "general." For Emerson, poetry makes possible a self-development spurred by admiration for the great without succumbing to their worship, by recovering the aesthetic worth of the ordinary. For Mill, poetry becomes a mode of communication that permitted authentic expression and deep emotional exchange against the constraints of public communication.

Far from a solution to the ills of mediocre democratic citizens, poetry becomes a means for wrestling with norms of equality beyond the level of formal rights. But, as a result, conceptualizing a poetry that embodied egalitarian norms—a democratic poetry—presented quite a challenge. For Tocqueville America has "poetic ideas" but no poets; for Emerson, America supplies poetic resources but it was "wait[ing] long for its metres." Likewise for Mill, democracy demands the egalitarian norms that poetic address was uniquely suited to provide but could not sustain the conditions necessary to keep them in place.

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<sup>35</sup> See Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). See also Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, "General Introduction," in Jackson and Prins, eds., *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 1-8; Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*. The poetic forms Tocqueville selects as representative of aristocratic forms were part of the American poetic repertoire and remained widely popular. The decisive, collective shift in taste and practice that Tocqueville paints among America's poets—who rejected as frigid, formulaic, fantastic, and epic the existing forms of poetry he associated with aristocratic poetry—was unsuitable, he suggested, to a new democratic speaker *qua* poet. Comic deference, epic praise, and the dramas of personified emotion associated with aristocratic worlds now appear as laughable affect, middling taste, and aristocratic aloofness. These themes in turn can be largely connected to a consolidated definition of what poetry did and was best at doing, what we now can call the lyric: a personal expression, usually in the first person, brief form of verse. By the middle part of the antebellum American world, the odes, doggerels, epic narratives, and ballads were in fact enjoyed prominently by democratic patrons of poetry. According to Michael Cohen (*The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*, p. 2), these debates in one form or another preoccupied denizens of the public sphere: "[P]eople in the 1790s questioned the social and literary value of broadside ballads; in the 1830s, of antislavery verse; in the 1860s, of war poetry; and in the 1880s, of minstrel songs and slave spirituals."

The final key theme in each account of poetry is the use of poetry to “invent” a representational impasse by distinguishing between the poems of America and the ideal of poetry they believed American denizens had not yet realized. Each thinker uses the trope of a poetry not yet achieved to insert ambiguity into the American democratic experiment.<sup>36</sup> To extend Sheldon Wolin’s description of early modern democratic theory, if “debates about democracy had to operate within a largely unsympathetic ideological context” then it also operated, I argue, in a largely unsympathetic literary context.<sup>37</sup>

Poetry, then, serves as a site for describing political practice as well as a means of political theorizing — one that I argue cannot be read out of their accounts of democratic theory. The act of imagining what the democratic poet looks like is part and parcel of dramatizing democratic politics for each thinker. Likewise, the stylized representation of the preternatural poetic figure foreign to modern democratic worlds is a means of theorizing politics in a new way. As I show in each chapter, “the poet” serves as an outcast or strange figure of public address whose status in America is not yet knowable and so can be a subject of theory. Political theory is offered in each account as a dramatic translation of poetry from one context to another. Whether they imagine the content of poems or point to concrete examples, whether they visualize the shape and form of democratic poetry or referenced its primary functions within a public sphere, they are pursuing democratic theory in a literary key..

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<sup>36</sup> For a summary, see Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds. “General Introduction.” *The Lyric Theory Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (2014). Prins and Jackson describe the increasing ineffability of representations of poetry. Michael Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poem in Nineteenth-Century America*, observes that in most accounts of nineteenth century “it is not yet possible to talk about both ‘poetry’ and a poem, except in terms of the latter’s relative failure to realize the former”, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 171.

*Poetry as Political Practice in Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill*

At the same time that each thinker extends the arena for addressing political dilemmas to literary communication, each thinker reimagines political dilemmas as literary dilemmas. For example, an encounter with an aesthetic object becomes a means of moving beyond individual privatization in Tocqueville's account. The poetic encounter dramatizes movement beyond individual particularity, but now as a consequence of an aesthetic experience rather than of contemplating possibilities for collective membership or national belonging. In each account the literary serves to orient subjects towards excellence, towards egalitarian relations beyond the formally enshrined civil and political rights, and finally towards identifying new forms of coercion that impede individual expression and self-cultivation.

Despite the ways that poetry functions within each thinker's account to highlight equality beyond formal rights and alternative forms of resistance to democratic despotism, the literary remains a largely under-theorized element in recent explorations of these thinkers by democratic theorists. There may be several reasons for this limited attention. In this section I compare the literary as a site for dramatizing political practice to the practices more commonly associated with each thinker. I identify potential reasons for why the literary is not only overlooked but more intentionally, perhaps, read out of each account, set aside as counterproductive to authentically democratic goals or as pernicious elements of their project.

To make my case that recovering the literary politics of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill can reveal new elements of their political thought, I point first to their own characterization of the role of literary theorizing in their accounts. A recurring theme is how surprised their readers

might be by the claims each reaches about poetry. Tocqueville, for example, claims his readers might be surprised to learn he thinks poetry is possible in a democratic setting.<sup>38</sup> He therefore presents his conclusion about poetry as unexpected, but does not indicate how or whether this causes him to revise his sense of politics or poetics.

Emerson, too, poses his claims about the possibility of democratic poetry as a shift of position. His embrace of democratic poetry constitutes a refutation of a critical consensus that he had once shared. Emerson performs a self-effacing admission that, whereas he once was a member of “the Parnassian fraternity” who had strict definitions of what counted as poetry, he has relaxed his standards to find beauty in democratic poetry.<sup>39</sup>

Mill takes his account of poetry as an opportunity to address those among his contemporaries who did not appreciate the value of poetry. For Mill, peers like Jeremy Bentham are understandably concerned about poetry as a literary form, particularly for the way it is imagined to sustain illusions of collective life and shared thoughts.<sup>40</sup> Rather than dismiss poetry, however, Mill represents (or dramatizes) a shift in his appreciation for poetry as grounds for rethinking the needs of democratic citizens. He offers a redefinition of poetry as means of persuading his audience to reconsider how they have understood not only literary practice but its value for mass democratic publics.

Each thinker performs an initial skepticism about the value of democratic poetry, apprising his readers of their own initial unwillingness to find the aesthetic—as a realm of

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<sup>38</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 590.

<sup>39</sup> Emerson, “New Poetry.”

<sup>40</sup> See Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*. Edited by J. Bowring. II vols. (Edinburgh: W. Tait and Simpkin Marshall, 1843). See also Karen E. Whedbee, “J. S. Mill on Poetry and Rhetoric,” *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*, 7:1 (2004): 17-29 for an account of Mill’s response to Bentham’s rejection of the value of poetry.

distinction and excellence—suitable to egalitarian norms. Yet in casting poetry as something more than a preserve to limit egalitarian norms, and in announcing the possibility and value of democratic poetry as a viable aesthetic form, they signal the need to rethink democratic theory and signal why literature may be a unique place to turn. This rethinking happens within their own accounts. Poetry might appear to their readers to be at odds with other elements of their account of democracy in America; but in embracing poetry each thinker imagines reframing or challenging how their readers might have initially understood their claims.

The location of poetry in their works of political theory also indicates that it plays a unique role. Although I have suggested that poetry is presented as a means to navigate political dilemmas, their assessment of poetry in America is often framed as initiating, signaling the need for, or setting the opening terms of their democratic criticism. For example, Emerson introduces poetry early into his essays not only as an existing problematic for American democracy but also as a way of calling attention to democracy as a potentially risky regime. For Emerson, what happens to poetry is a sign that criticism of democracy might be needed.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, the possibility of poetry in America appears for Tocqueville as a question as early as the opening pages of the first volume of *Democracy in America* and he frames his subsequent assessment of both what democracy makes available to its subjects and how those subjects understand democracy.<sup>42</sup> Mill's essays on poetry precede his major political works on the public sphere and define the norms of communication that will pose a problem for poetry becoming a vibrant element of public expression. Before he has even criticized democracy, the fate of poetry

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<sup>41</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Larzer Ziff, "Nature," in *Selected Essays*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982.

<sup>42</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, pp. 5-6.

becomes a reason for calling democratic critics to arms. Poetry helps define the very dilemmas they would take up as central to democratic life.

Despite the use, critical relevance, and location of poetry in each account, I've suggested that the literary is largely absent in a number of contemporary engagements with these thinkers. In fact, the turn to reclaim the innovative democratic work of each thinker against their association with anti-egalitarian or liberal projects seems to preclude the value of the literary, for reasons I examine now and then seek to correct.

On the one hand, the association between literature and the imaginative, decorative, and aesthetic can make it hard to theorize the literary as a site for the practical organization of political power, resistance to structures of power, and even withdrawal from politics. For example, in Tocqueville it is hard to see how the reclamation of a capacity to produce poetry on the part of the masses furthers the work of civic organization. Though establishing the beauty of ordinary men may resist a hierarchy between popular and elites, establishing equality on terms of beauty may only extend abstracted and universal idioms of equality that do little to direct challenges to inequality caused by labor, property, or race, to which he attends elsewhere.

Compared to a new emphasis on Emerson's attention to forms of complicity and individuality as political, poetry can appear to be a form of expressive adornment rather than political action. Mill's evocation of poetry as a means of imagining alternatives to public expression can appear at odds with ways he offers possibilities for confronting the effects of the tyranny of public opinion. In each case the literary has been theorized as a pernicious element of political practice; what is more, each thinker's ambivalence about poetry is taken as a sign that the appeal to the poetic is insufficient or secondary to their full vision of democracy.

When contemporary democratic theorists attend to the importance of human flourishing in Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill, the literary can be folded into the general category of excellence such that its unique resources for mobilizing excellence— e.g., through forms of representation and communication—go unrecognized. The fact that poetry takes on idioms of political projects may make it seem like it can be read as a mere extension or analogy for politics proper. But this conclusion ignores how, for each thinker, the literary encompasses singular if not unique opportunities for distinction, expression, and equality. Ironically, the very interest in reclaiming human flourishing as an element of democratic life has eclipsed an essential practice for pursuing and demonstrating such flourishing.

I propose that we interpret the literary as linked to three prominent democratic practices sketched in the accounts of these nineteenth-century democratic critics, while also preserving it as a distinctive political site.

#### Poetry as a Political Practice of Democratic Self-Cultivation

New accounts of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill have appealed to their emphasis on self-cultivation as a key element of their democratic theorizing. This marks a shift in theorizing their representation of equality as having a negative impact on individual excellence and expression. In earlier treatments of their work, this recurrent concern with how democracy hinders practices of distinction was taken as evidence of their fundamentally anti-egalitarian projects. Appeals to literary forms like poetry appear in these readings as aristocratic nostalgia. Further, pessimism about the possibility of robust democratic cultures of excellence represents what democratic theorist Graeme Duncan has characterized as Mill's and Tocqueville's vision of democratic



subjects “incapable of freeing themselves from the trammels of custom and tradition.”<sup>43</sup> Alan Kahan arrives at a similar conclusion, suggesting that an overriding theme in both Mill’s and Tocqueville’s democratic theory is a “common distaste for the masses and the middle classes... [a]nd contempt of mediocrity.”<sup>44</sup> More generally, both Tocqueville and Mill have been read as proposing a form of aristocratically-inflected liberalism, rather than a theory of democracy informed by aristocratic resources.

More recent interpreters, by contrast, have argued that appeals to aristocratic practices in Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill are consistent with democratic commitments. Recognizing the appeal to aristocratic resources as intended to be more widely available to the masses than originally understood, and identifying them as a means for self-cultivation on democratic terms, these interpreters have linked the long acknowledged ideals of self-perfection that suffuse each thinker’s work with forms of democratic independence as personal transformation and self-overcoming. Stanley Cavell, for example, reads Emerson’s appeal to “perfectionism as [a] theory or impetus for social transformation and reform” that is wholly compatible with democratic norms. The appeal to perfectionism pushes not only against the homogenizing and coercive elements that Emerson identifies with egalitarian regimes, but it also, and more radically, entails an expansion of the constitution of the people and their capacity to rule.<sup>45</sup> Jason Frank has also expanded on the appeal to perfectionism in thinkers like Emerson. Frank reads Emerson as

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<sup>43</sup> Graeme Duncan, *Marx and Mill: Two Views of Social Conflict and Social Harmony* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 260.

<sup>44</sup> Alan Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Stanley Cavell, “Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representation in Heidegger and Nietzsche,” in Cavell, *Conditions Handsome And Unhandsome: the Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 33-63.

“preoccupied with acknowledging both the vital importance and use of the ‘great men’ within democracy, and the alluring danger of worshipful submission that lurks in this acknowledgement.”<sup>46</sup> For Frank such appeals to aristocratic values of excellence provoke aversion to self, conformity to others, and in turn “facilitate[s] such transformative surprise, loss, and abandonment” of individual titles, and thus facilitates the constitution of the political body.<sup>47</sup>

I argue that the appeal to poetry is a means of extending the political allure and uses of aristocratic resources for these forms of self-overcoming. The poetic is represented as an encounter with the great; the poetic is also represented as an encounter with the great as a provocation to cultivation. For example, in Tocqueville’s account the poetic encounter with beauty or adornment is linked with a turn away from titles and towards a transcendent democratic actor and a reconstitution of the political body that includes the masses. In Emerson and Mill the poetic aids primarily with a transformation of the individual self. In Mill the association of poetry with authenticity aids the expression of the “eccentric” qualities of character he seeks to be displayed in public life. For Emerson, the vision of personal cultivation in poetry serves to contest the very constitution of the great and the common.

The poetic may be overlooked as a practice of democratic self-cultivation and overcoming in each thinker’s account, owing to a narrow understanding of personal expression rooted in the Latinisms, inverted syntax, versification, and other highly stylized compositional techniques associated with poetry. That characterization of course overlooks the democratic

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<sup>46</sup> Jason Frank, “Standing for Others: Reform and Representation in Emerson’s Political Thought,” in Alan Levine, ed., *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), p. 396. Frank (p. 397) offers an account of the “avowedly public or political dimensions” of Emerson’s poet.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

rethinking at the heart of each thinker's poetic projects. Yet the representation of poetry as an aristocratic provocation makes an encounter with the beautiful the cause of individuals' move beyond a narrow version of the self. It frames overcoming not as personal transformation but as relocating one's sense of the great. The aesthetically wondrous encounter becomes an aesthetic impetus for self-overcoming in way that shifts the register of democratic flourishing.

### Poetry as Egalitarian Practice Beyond Formal Equality

Contemporary democratic scholars have also reclaimed each thinker's disdain for formal levels of political equality as appeals to new idioms of equality beyond rights and equality of conditions. What had been read as an anti-egalitarian tendency in earlier scholarship has been reread as a critical assessment of the blend of political and property rights associated with nineteenth-century American democracy.

Read this way, Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill seek to empower citizens to address forms of inequality enabled by egalitarian norms and to dissuade citizens from settling for codified equality. Exemplary of these accounts is Sheldon Wolin's reading of Tocqueville as an early critic of the relationship between equality and individual privatization.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, George Shulman credits Tocqueville with a criticism of "individualism as equal rights" that "promises emancipation from caste, conformity, and despotism" but cannot address "unequal social powers, cultural capital, and material resources."<sup>49</sup> Finally, Richard Avramenko casts Tocqueville's challenge to people's investment in the "inorganic" unions of the "the people" and national

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<sup>48</sup> Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*.

<sup>49</sup> George Shulman, "A Tocqueville for Our Time," *Raritan* 36:2 (2016), p. 81.

collectives as insufficient for exercising forms of popular power and establishing equality beyond that claimed by membership in the polity.<sup>50</sup>

Poetry, as I have argued, also enables each thinker to appeal to equality beyond and below what can be formally codified in political and civic rights. Poetry extends the sites these thinkers credit with the cultivation of idioms of equality that enhance democratic citizenship. In Mill's terms, poetry helps represent the "laws of human emotion . . . written in large characters."<sup>51</sup> For Emerson poetry might allow each thinker to "sing" the value, ritualistic beauty, and ultimately the radical re-figuration of what are otherwise taken as common or demeaned objects. As Daniel Malachuk argues, for Emerson "equality will not be pursued seriously in the United State or in any democracy unless it is recognized as not just a political good but a religious truth."<sup>52</sup>

If poetry is overlooked as a means for cultivating equality, this might be more of an indication of how we prioritize practices of equality than it is an indication of our willingness to dismiss the literary. Yet the poetic may appear to offer its own abstracted conceptions of equality. Stoking equality through virtual subjects of the human heart, for example, may not provoke notions of affective affiliation and collective embodiment that address forms of inequality central to nineteenth-century worlds. The aesthetic can feel ephemeral when compared to the political practices with which these thinkers are typically associated.

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Avramenko, "The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy," *Political Theory* 45:4 (2016), pp. 1-29.

<sup>51</sup> Mill, "What is Poetry?."

<sup>52</sup> Malachuk, "Emerson's Politics, Retranscendentalized," in Levine, ed., *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 298.

But what vision of equality fostered by poetry might these thinkers be trying to articulate? Moreover, how might more recognizably political practices —e.g., civic associations for Tocqueville, forms of non-complicity for Emerson — fail to extend egalitarian norms such that each thinker frames a turn to the literary as necessary to do that work? Literary egalitarianism may serve as a response, in each thinker’s account, to forms of inequality that more recognizable modes of political action do not, or cannot, address.

### Poetry as Resistance to Democratic Despotism

Finally, a new set of accounts have revisited appeals to the aristocratic values of individual distinction within Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill as means of identifying new forms of coercion and political sacrifice occasioned by democratic equality. In these accounts the aristocratic emphasis on distinction may serve as a resource for contesting forms of democratic dominance that may otherwise go unnoticed or denied.

Yet the appropriation by common subjects of claims to individual distinction that Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill encourage has been re-read as a means to highlight and resist the despotism and domination that masquerade as democracy.<sup>53</sup> For example, Nadia Urbinati interprets Mill as identifying “enduring relations of self-devaluation and conformity, not brute force,” as endemic to the exercise of democratic powers. For Urbinati, Mill seeks to cultivate the capacities within individuals that would resist self-devaluation; toward this end, he turns

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<sup>53</sup> See also George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Judith Shklar offers an appeal to democratic individualism as something more than anti-conformity but a democratic imperative of non-complicity with national projects. See Shklar, “Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy,” in Levine, ed., *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, pp. 53-68. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, finds an anti-civic ethos, p. 17. Also see Jennie Ikuta, “Mill as Ambivalent Democrat: The Corruption and Cultivation of Human Flourishing in Democratic Society and Politics,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 41:7 (2015), pp. 697-724.

helpfully to appeals most broadly associated with the aristocratic.<sup>54</sup> Brian Walker, in his reading of the politics of Transcendental idealism and individual distinction in thinkers like Emerson, likewise finds appeals to “self-cultivation as a tool of freedom.” For Walker, the appeals to “increase one’s nobility” through the “resources of nobility” motivate resistance to forms of coercion beyond liberal notions of interference and republican domination. Instead, these thinkers identify how forms of human excellence enhance individual liberty.<sup>55</sup>

We might include poetry among practices that work to honor and value the excellence of individuals against the forces that devalue human distinction and demand, in Tocqueville’s words, an “insipid” and “puny” existence as the terms of entering democratic life. Poetry in my account is used to highlight both the power of democratic egalitarianism and the political costs to individual worth. As democracy becomes excessive in its denial of means and modes of celebrating and acknowledging the extraordinary, what was once understood as merely homogenizing and difference-denying can be seen as a denial of beauty, aesthetic distinction, and extraordinary human excellence. In this way, claims staked to beauty among and on behalf of the masses can challenge the unfair burdens of democratic sacrifice.

Poetry extends and highlights these dilemmas and takes on or fills functions often designated to other social practices. Yet it does so in ways that are not quite conceivable as, for

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<sup>54</sup> Nadia Urbinati, “The Many Heads of the Hydra: J.S. Mill on Despotism,” in Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras, eds., *John Stuart Mill’s Political Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 66-97.

<sup>55</sup> Walker, “Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation,” *Political Theory* 29:2 (2001), quotations on pp. 170, 172, and 167, respectively. For a related account of the relationship between aristocratic claims and resistance to democratic equality in the context of Ancient Greek democracy, see Bonnie Honig, “Antigone’s Laments, Creon’s Grief: Mourning, Membership, and the Politics of Exception,” *Political Theory* 37:1 (2009), pp. 5-43. For Honig (p. 9), “Creon’s excess is what marks him as democratic... From an elite/Homeric perspective, Creon does not depart from, he rather instances, democratic practice when he mistreats the dead and prohibits burial.” Honig, though not engaged with these nineteenth-century thinkers, identifies the aristocratic resources for challenging the denial of individual worth and the inability to memorialize the sacrifices of democratic subjects.

example, Tocqueville's intermediary bodies or Mill's intimate expression. Instead poetry seems to offer a singular means of navigating these dilemmas by offering practices unique to literary forms of voice, address, and imagination.

### *Chapter Summary*

In Chapter One, "Equality Adorned: Poetry and the Idioms of Egalitarian Norms in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*," I explore Tocqueville's use of poetry in texts ranging from *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) to *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* (1856). Starting in the earliest passages of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville takes the possibility of poetry in America as a problematic for democracy and a subject of inquiry for his democratic theory. His persistent appeal to poetry orients us to the literary lives of his democratic citizens and especially to their consumption and production of a popular writing practice with origins in aristocratic arts. To the extent that poetry requires Americans to find resources worthy of adornment, poetic writing is presented by Tocqueville as the site of democratic subjects' vexing encounter with the beautiful and sublime. The stylized search for "wondrous objects" becomes, for Tocqueville, a staging ground for dramatizing how democratic citizenship inhibits or enables forms of human flourishing. These forms of flourishing are themselves central to Tocqueville's idea of how democratic citizens will navigate dilemmas between privatized citizens and an expansive and overarching body of the state and a people. His appeal to poetry therefore orients us to new, non-normative practices of democratic meaning-making that parallel but are not reducible to his more widely theorized arts of association.

The question I explore in Chapter 1 is how literary practices engage a key political dilemma and why poetry is the chosen means of resolving or navigating that dilemma. Specifically, what is added to Tocqueville's account by insisting on the literary as a crucial practice of democratic politics? Tocqueville frames his dilemma writ literary: a new world has produced homogenous individuals too "insipid" and "puny" to be represented in poetry while also opening the possibility that a "general survey of the people itself" could "invite the poet's powers".<sup>56</sup> I argue that Tocqueville represents the insidious gap between private citizens and the mass collective as the same gap that practitioners of democratic poetry encounter. Now represented as an aesthetic and affective encounter with the terrifying and awe-inspiring, the gap between private individuals and a provident people both motivates and diminishes political (and poetic) activity. Tocqueville represents poetry as the act of finding mediating objects of representation between individuals and the collective or over-arching people.

Tocqueville understands poetry as "a germ of power" placed within reach of the people in democratic worlds. His desire for poetry as a critical political value for American citizens commits him to considering its practical possibilities. Yet Tocqueville also pitches the "source" of poetry in an object distinct from the national and collective democratic conditions that enable it. Therefore I argue that the production of poetry is not easily reducible to practices like the arts of association that mediate isolated individuals and the state. The poet must also navigate the insipid and sublime, while the democratic citizens' eyes must be on the proper exercise of power. At all times the poetic citizen must orient towards forms of aesthetic excellence that themselves

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<sup>56</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 590.



enable him to navigate the gap between isolated individual and provident collective body. Poetic practices are a necessary means of engendering democratic citizens in Tocqueville's account.

In Chapter Two, "The Right to Poetry and the Distribution of the Sublime: Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'The Poet' and the Work of Equality," I explore the use of poetry in a different democratic context. Emerson's celebration of the "democratical" revolution in literature that brought "the tongues" of poetry to American democrats is framed as both supplemental to the work of developing independent citizens and central to fostering independent citizens' capacity for flourishing within independence. As reflected in his essay, "New Poetry" (1840), the literary development of democratic citizens will enhance more than their aesthetic capabilities; it will also enable political transformation: the exchange of deep emotion that poetry allows will replace the bonds of formal egalitarian worlds and permit renewed but informal collective affiliation. In reading Emerson's appeal to the poet as an appeal to forms of equality beyond its manifestation in rights, I show how he remains attuned to a persistent discrepancy in the aesthetic qualities of life between the popular and elites.

But the relations between political independence and worthiness of aesthetic representation are not easy to separate in Emerson's account. I argue that he understands aesthetics as both necessary and risky ground on which to contest inequality. As he notes throughout his political writings, the need to appeal and aspire to the excellent was crucial for human flourishing, yet worshipping the great would constitute its own forms of subordination. Emerson celebrates the "like revolution in literature" that "reckons poetry the right and power of every man to whose culture justice is done" ("New Poetry") as a means to respond to this dilemma, by cultivating the beauty and worth to be found in mundane and ordinary objects. In

provocative ways he links poetry to the redemption of mediocre subjects through verses “which are written for the nations” (“New Poetry”). But such a reading represents Emerson’s poet as attending to dull objects with a specialized, particular, and decorative representational style.

What appears as poetic exercise in Emerson’s account is writing that “worship[s] with coarse but sincere rites” (“The Poet,” 267).<sup>57</sup> Emerson makes clear that democratic poetry is “less pretending than the festal and solemn verses which are written for the nations” (“New Poetry”).

He insists, I suggest, on the practice of an aesthetically austere writing style to engender forms of political independence beyond that enabled by rights and democratic political practices alone.<sup>58</sup>

In Chapter Three, “Poetry and the Representation of Egalitarian Expression: John Stuart Mill’s Poet and the Figurative Language of Democratic Expression,” I explore Mill’s definition of poetry as a means to embody, through poetic address, a practice of circumventing the coercive tyranny of opinion. As “the expression or utterance of feeling” unmodified “by the presence of others,” poetry seems to represent a virtual withdrawal from pressures on public speech. Mill’s analogy for poetry—“what we have said to ourselves” in private—supplies a figurative language of solitary expression, unuttered thoughts, and non-voiced feelings. For this reason scholars have read Mill’s account of poetry as an alternative to democratic address. I consider readings of Mill’s poetry as aristocratic, anti-democratic, and antisocial that highlight the intimate aspirations of Mill’s model of poetic expression.

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<sup>57</sup> Emerson’s description of poetry no doubt remains tied to the esoteric in some ways. “Small and mean things serve as well as great symbols” (“The Poet,” p. 268). The poetic refers to the “stroke of genius” (p. 271). Most, Emerson writes, “cannot report the conversation they have had with nature,” but the poet is the one who reports on this, which feels almost divine, but in fact was a process of stripping and cutting. The poet used “Bare lists of words” (“The Poet,” pp. 268-69) to provoke the “inwardness and mystery of this attachment... to the use of emblems” (“The Poet,” pp. 267-68).

<sup>58</sup> The poet acts almost as, in another essay, Emerson describes “some leveling circumstance that puts down the overbearing, the strong, the rich, the fortunate, substantially on the same ground with all others” (Compensation”).

Yet I also show that Mill believes or understands democracy to benefit from, maybe even require, that ideal of expression rooted in intimate models of exchange.<sup>59</sup> He observes that in a relation so intimate that one imagines holding someone in mind, the very act of holding suggests a power that upsets the balance between the two interlocutors. As Mill explores the imperative to model democracy on intimate modes of communication in order to preserve egalitarian relations between democratic actors, he finds that those very imperatives cultivate modes of address that themselves cannot sustain the egalitarian norms they are intended to preserve.

In the dissertation's conclusion, I revisit a central claim that threads through each of the three chapters: that aesthetic practices are key to the forms of human flourishing that formal egalitarian political practices cannot foster and may inhibit. I argue that, among theorists associated with thinking "beyond" or "below" formal equality, their treatment of poetry reveals the crucial place of aesthetics in self-cultivation, and likewise, how such processes define the outer limits of political equality: practices linked to human flourishing become practices through which they seek to enhance and extend equality.

I situate these claims within a broader context of the link between politics and aesthetics. In particular, I show that discourses around poetry in nineteenth-century America were part of political inquiries into the relationship between democracy and aesthetic practice. Each thinker extends criticisms of the ability of democratic regimes to foster aesthetic and affective relations into the political world. These criticisms reflect a political-aesthetic tradition most often associated with Edmund Burke. Yet in parsing the possibility of a democratic poetry, the thinkers I consider here also subvert that tradition: they stake a claim to the possibility of an aesthetic

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<sup>59</sup> John Stuart Mill, in Stefan Collini, ed., *On Liberty and Other Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989 [1851]), p. 44.

practice central to democratic forms and norms of citizenship by inquiring into the practical possibility of poetic production. Poetry therefore serves as a practice through which each thinker extends common anxieties about democratic politics, but also appeals to as the site of democratic reformation. The particular appeal of poetry and the figure of the poet as foreign or untimely agent of communicative expression meant that poetry can appear as both other-worldly to modern democracies and capable of enhancing democratic relations of equality and collective belonging. Rather than suggest that a theory of democratic politics lies within their account of poetry, I argue instead that poetry enables a dramatizing of democracy's dilemmas, and thus a way of doing democratic theory otherwise.

## CHAPTER I

### **Equality Adorned: Poetry and the Idioms of Egalitarian Norms in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America***

A persistent return to poetry in America as a problematic proper to democratic theory punctuates the nineteenth-century political writing of Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville frames the relationship among democratic egalitarian norms, modern subjectivity, and poetry as an open question: in the second volume of *Democracy in America* (1840) he asks “whether, amongst the actions, the sentiments, and the opinions of democratic nations, there are any which lead to a conception of ideal beauty, and which may for this reason be considered as natural sources of poetry.”<sup>60</sup> The theoretical implications of answering this question depend on an alleged search for poetic forms in the new world. Among the three thinkers I consider in this project, Tocqueville is most explicit about the inquiry into poetry as a component of his political theorizing. Over the course of his political writing he presents poetry as inhibited and shaped by democracy, but also critical to the pursuit of democracy at the level of citizenly practice. For Tocqueville, the literary lives of democratic commoners are saturated with political meaning and import.

Tocqueville represents poetry as a locus of human flourishing important to his account of democracy. But he also imagines poetry as a means to navigate the immense gap between private

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<sup>60</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 587.

individuals and the collective political organization of the democratic state — a critical component of his vision of democratic politics. Tocqueville’s appeal to the aesthetic through poetry functions by representing poetics through idioms central to his account of democratic politics.

In this chapter I offer a first reading of how poetry, a popular form of writing in nineteenth-century publics, became a privileged site for representing democratic dilemmas among three nineteenth-century democratic critics. Tocqueville’s account turns poetry into a literary register for mediating privatization and tutelary state. Although he poses his question on poetry most directly in Volume 2 of *Democracy in America* (1840), the possibility of poetry in America appears as early as the opening pages of Volume 1 and continues through personal letters and his second major work, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* (1856).

The bulk of my reading focuses on two chapters in Volume 2, in the context of a broader discussion of the cultural achievements of American democracy titled “Of Some of the Sources of Poetry Amongst Democratic Nations” and “Of the Inflated Style of American Writers and Orators.” Here Tocqueville poses his most direct inquiry into poetry and attends most closely to the relationship among an idealized “poetry” as a social form important to democracy, poetic writing, and democratic citizenship.

I link Tocqueville’s account of poetry to other sites, namely the arts of association, for generating equality below the level of formal institutions, as well as for negotiating a relationship to the subject of popular sovereignty. Poetry’s objects become the objects of Tocqueville’s political concern. Therefore his appeal to poetry links an important nineteenth-century aesthetic form to the work of building associations that would foster independence, power, and equality

among democratic commoners. Both are locations for dramatizing, but also for crafting responses to the challenges posed by democratic citizenship.

In the first section I review how Tocqueville imagines poetry through idiomatic description that links poetry to his political conception of intermediary bodies between private individuals and the state. The popular form for expressing beauty and personal emotions becomes, for Tocqueville, a literary task defined by the same dilemmas facing democratic citizens in their political lives. For Tocqueville a democratic poetry serves the goal of extending egalitarian relations, empowering subjects, and shaping collective life. Therefore I examine how he establishes the relations between poetry and equality, power, and individual distinction.

In the second section I ask what the articulation of a literary task to the arts of political association adds to an expansive sense of political practice beyond formal institutions. Given renewed interest in these elements of Tocqueville's account, I compare poetic practice to his idealized political practices that serve as intermediary bodies between individuals and the state. I argue that the literary functions to move individuals beyond selves through aesthetic encounters. Yet poetry remains conspicuously absent in most accounts of Tocqueville's vision of democracy. I evaluate several recent accounts of Tocqueville's interest in literature that emphasize how his aesthetic appeals sustain, rather than mitigate, the turn to the tutelary and provident state. I argue that a form of literary egalitarianism, or the literary as a special site for establishing egalitarian relations, is central to Tocqueville's political project.

In the final section I consider a persistent ambiguity in Tocqueville's account concerning the value of egalitarian relations established through literature. If Tocqueville is invested in the extension of equality to a literary form, how do we reconcile that with his appeals elsewhere to

the aesthetic as important for keeping free from the norms of equality? Given this ambiguity, what kind of equality does poetry as a practice offer or extend? Despite these tensions I argue that any account of Tocqueville as a democratic thinker is not complete without the persistent attention to human flourishing and its links to the art of association as they are represented in his account of poetry. His preoccupation with poetry reveals the need for new practices that can establish genuine forms of freedom, collective power, and equality beyond both formal rights and civic associations.

*The “Search and Delineation of” Poetry: Democratic Dilemmas Writ Literary*

For Tocqueville’s democratic subjects, the end of codified hierarchy opened political possibilities for the distribution of power, voluntary contract, and equality. At the same time, he identifies the emergence of new forms of antagonism between egalitarian norms and human flourishing. In particular, the immense gap opened by democracy between private individuals and a democratic nation poses dilemmas for collective organization, and equality. For Tocqueville, the identification of democratic equality with propertied individualism — what he defines as a blend of formal egalitarian civil rights and property — risks fostering political docility, meager forms of self-differentiation, and modes of mediocrity.<sup>61</sup> As several contemporary accounts have identified, Tocqueville targets the narrow idioms of equality and

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<sup>61</sup> For recent accounts that have challenged associations between Tocqueville and nineteenth-century liberalism see Nadia Urbinati, “Democracy and Populism,” *Constellations* 5:1 (1998), pp. 110-124. For Urbinati, Tocqueville is better theorized as one of liberalism’s critics who reformulated rights regimes and free expression as central democratic characteristics. Urbinati emphasizes Tocqueville’s diagnosis of a democratic populist tradition he identified with “limitless decisionism” and “revok[ing] the mediation of political institutions” (p. 118). See also James Morone, *Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 7-12. Morone’s account of nineteenth-century Jacksonian democracy construes Tocqueville as an early critic of the abstraction of “the people” at the expense of more palpable “clashing interests” and other “less grandiose democratic conception[s]” (at p. 7).



collective power in America as responsible for limiting the forms of power, voluntary contract, and equality democrats thought possible. He seeks to expand the practices opened by democracy as a way to redefine political practice.

As scholars have long noted, the defining feature of Tocqueville's attempt to convert readers to new conceptions of power, equality, and collective life is his appeal to mediating forms of association between the democratic state and the privatized individual actor. Tocqueville assigns a number of functions to these decentralized and informal civic associations. The art of association refers to the formation of civic institutions below the level of the state through which democratic actors could exercise power without appeals to the "immense . . . tutelary power" of the state (861).<sup>62</sup> On an affective level, Tocqueville imagines they would be schools of democratic education. He refers to the register of the palpable, or the feeling of power, as a necessary for orienting subjects to the art of association. American democrats have come to "combine the principle of centralization and that of popular sovereignty; this gives them a respite," he writes; "they console themselves for being in tutelage" (862-3). Therefore to challenge the allure of the "protection of individual freedom when they have surrendered it to the power of the nation at large" (863) Tocqueville poses the link between power and "respite" as an endemic feature of the relationship between democratic individuals and the state.<sup>63</sup>

Paradoxically, civic associations between subjects could engender crucial forms of citizenly

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<sup>62</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 587. (All subsequent in-text citations are to this translations unless otherwise noted).

<sup>63</sup> For connections between aristocracy and liberalism in Tocqueville see Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*. For connections between aristocratic liberalism and intermediary bodies, see also Annelin de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

independence, power, and equality, if democrats could navigate the gap between private individuals and the immense collective.

The dilemma defined above is central to Tocqueville's framing of democratic politics. Although it is standard to note the hold the dilemma had over Tocqueville's commoners, scholars presume either that it is specific to politics or that it structures every element of democrats' socio-cultural, as well as political, lives. These presumptions either downplay or overstate the dilemma's representation in Tocqueville's account. Nonetheless, it may matter when and how he represents it. Although the gap between the "puny" individual and the immense and provident state factors into accounts of politics, it most frequently appears elsewhere in his account of literature. In particular, it comprises the core terms of Tocqueville's account of poetry.

Within Tocqueville's account of literature, poetry stands out as that which most closely adhered to and absorbed the tensions reflected in his political account — so closely, I argue, that it reflects the idioms of his political dilemma almost directly. Although scholars have attended to the centrality of the literary lives of Tocqueville's democratic commoners in chapters and essays on politics, it is not clear why the terms of his account of poetry reflect the idioms of his political project in ways no other aesthetic form does. At the same time that poetry attests to the hold that a gap between individual and state had on multiple dimensions of democratic citizenship, scholars fail to consider how and why a literary form serves to mediate privatization and the tutelary state.

These roles played by poetry in Tocqueville's account of the relationship between literature and politics are generally downplayed in accounts of his political practice. As already noted, his discussion of poetry is elaborated in Volume 2 of *Democracy in America* (1840), when

he considers the cultural achievements of American democracy. Yet Tocqueville has teased readers with the possibility of poetry in America as early as the opening pages of Volume 1. There, Tocqueville casts poetry as a promise of democracy. Along with other broad talents, democracy places “Poetry, eloquence and memory, the grace and wit” within “the reach of the people” (5). “Poetry” is not only a deliverable of democratic revolution together with equality, power, and voluntary contract; it also appears as a primary element of what democracy makes available to popular subjects. Poetry surfaces throughout *Democracy in America* (1835-40), in *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* (1856), and in Tocqueville’s personal correspondence over the intervening decades.<sup>64</sup> The frequency of poetry’s appearance in his writing underscores its importance as a means of representing and reiterating the dilemma of democratic citizenship at an aesthetic level.

The question of poetry in America, as Tocqueville poses it, appears less a question of whether Americans could read and write poetry or appreciate its value than whether America could offer subjects suitable for poetic representation. Tocqueville’s sense that America may lack such subjects is framed as a consequence of the core political dilemma. Egalitarian norms, he writes, “dried up most of the old springs of poetry” (589). Poetic production is caught between

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<sup>64</sup> Tocqueville’s description of poetry in America is not so much “developed” across several texts as it serves as a source of impressions over the impact of democratic equality on poetry. Instances of his references to poetry in America include letters written to French compatriots during his travels in the U.S., his publication *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* (1856) that includes broader discussion of American literature and its relation to democracy, and finally *Democracy in America*. I argue in some sense that there is less a theory of poetry than an impression of this icon of excellence. The most sustained discussion of these relationships poetry occurs in the second volume of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Across three chapters, including “Literary characteristics of democratic ages” (XIII), “Of some of the sources of poetry amongst democratic nations” (XVII), and “Of the inflated style of American writers and orators” (XVIII). See, for example, Tocqueville’s letter to Eugene Stoffels from Feb. 21, 1835, on “democracy without poetry, but with order and morality.” This letter appears in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*, translated by the translator of Napoleon’s Correspondence with King Joseph, in two vols. (London: Macmillan, 1861), vol.1, p. 397.

the dual poles of “puny” individuals and an immense state, neither of which are suitable representations for poetry:

In democratic communities each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object, namely himself. If he ever raises his looks higher, he then perceives nothing but the immense form of society at large, or the still more imposing aspect of mankind. His ideas are all either extremely minute and clear, or extremely general and vague (594).

Poetic representation caught between the “extremely general” and “extremely minute and clear” will flounder, according to Tocqueville (594). Nothing poetical could be made out of the paltry lives of individual Americans: “Nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests, in one word, so anti-poetic,” he wrote, “as the life of a man in the United States” (591). As a result, “the poets of democratic ages can never, therefore, take any man in particular as the subject of a piece.”

Without poetic resources in their particular subjectivity Americans were quick to search for new objects of representation. They sought objects that were suitable for the “search and delineation of the ideal” (587) or that would be appropriate for “verse...[a]s the ideal beauty of language” (587). If, for Tocqueville, poetry is a form of aesthetic adoration and adornment, it requires subjects that it could adorn or that enable poetry to adorn the world. He surmises that Americans would come to associate the aesthetic form of poetry with the immense and spectacular and so would seek out sources of poetry in objects that reflected these qualities. Democratic political organization supplied just such an object: even “as all the citizens who compose a democratic community are nearly equal and alike, [and] the poet cannot dwell upon any one of them,” Tocqueville writes:

. . . the nation itself invites the exercise of [the poet's] his powers. The general similitude of individuals, which renders any one of them taken separately an improper subject of poetry, allows poets to include them all in the same imagery, and to take a general survey of the people itself (590).

Democracy supplied a new source of poetic representation in the form of the subject of popular sovereignty. The “nation itself invites the exercise of his [the poet's] powers” and “allows poets . . . to take a general survey of the people itself” (590). And yet, for Tocqueville, a poetry of the immense, while appealing, would be little more than an inflated aesthetic form. His worry is less that the “poetry of democratic nations” “will prove too insipid, or that it will fly too near the ground,” he explains (594). “I rather apprehend that it will be forever losing itself in the clouds” (595). The poetic thus mirrors the paradoxical loop from puny to immense that he evokes to appeal to an intermediary body between them.

As with his depiction of intermediary bodies in the political sphere, Tocqueville represents poetry as a literary practice best served by aesthetic objects between the “extremely general” and “extremely minute and clear” (594). Furthermore, the literary sensibilities nurtured by poetry could orient readers and writers to that space where, currently, “what lies between is an open void” (594). In these ways, Tocqueville's account of poetry dramatizes the dilemmas of his democratic subjects as a function of literary practice. Just as actors burdened by their own puniness and political docility turn to a democratic dependence on the “tutelary” and “provident” powers of a centralized state, so the attempt to compose democratic poetry out of “puny” and “paltry subjects” turns them toward the “immense” — including the state and “the people.”

Such a representation of poetry did not have to engage particular poems or poetic practices. As an ideal, poetry functions within Tocqueville's account as an abstract social form. It

is useful precisely because it represents what is for him an enduring political dilemma in new terms. An instrumental reading of poetry suggests it helped to naturalize that dilemma.

Yet it also makes sense that Tocqueville would turn to poetry, given its association with aristocratic worlds. His appeal to poetry is at once a narrow *and* abstracted construction of a literary genre. But poetry was also primed for association with the grand and elegant.

Tocqueville wants Americans to be drawn to poetic forms and to lament its potential absence in American literary worlds. Thus, beyond a rhetorical strategy for naturalizing his assessment of democratic dilemmas Tocqueville appealed to poetry to make and extend his argument about what those dilemmas were. Poetry could elicit the very move beyond the self that he counsels:

“It is on these terms alone that he consents to tear himself for an instant from the petty complicated cares which form the charm and excitement of his life,” he notes (594). Literature would appear as both an imperative social practice and a dangerous one. By the time Tocqueville composed *The Ancien Régime*, he seems to have settled on the latter conclusion: the “literary spirit in politics,” he writes, is dangerous when “political language itself then adopted something of the language spoken by authors, packed with generalizations, abstract terms, pretentious vocabulary and literary turns of phrase.”<sup>65</sup> More specifically, the literary dimension of politics is useful in and through literary practices, but should be bracketed from political life.

That confusing formulation helps explain some of the ways that contemporary democratic theorists have interpreted the relationship between the aesthetic and the political in Tocqueville’s representation of poetry. Poetry may become one option for representing democratic dilemmas, but it would not be a place to extend the work of politics. Instead, the

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<sup>65</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, translated by Gerald Bevan (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 149.

poetic serves as a kind of analogy, positioning democratic poets caught between “the nation itself” as the object that “invites the exercise of his [the poet’s] powers” and the similitude of particular subjects. He represents the resulting intermediary aesthetic form as something more than a particular individual but less than a collective. As democracy “allows poets . . . to take a general survey of the people itself” (590), the subject of poetry could become something other than a particular individual or a national body. Instead, “man himself, taken aloof from his age and his country, and standing in the presence of Nature and of God, with his passions, his doubts, his rare prosperities, and inconceivable wretchedness” could become the “chief, if not the sole theme of poetry amongst” democratic nations (593). Democratic poetry “fixes it [poetry] on man alone” (590). He represents the virtual object of “man himself” as the mediating object between particular individual and collective. But even if the achievement of democratic poetry depends on this subject, and even if democratic poetry would become a practice in which communication about “man himself” as beautiful and possessing deep emotional thought would become a practice of mediating between the puny individual and collective subject as equals, it would remain to be seen whether the aesthetic could become a site for enacting the equality that democracy promised through the privileged literary form of poetry.

### *Theorizing the Literary as Intermediary Body*

The idiomatic nature of Tocqueville’s representation of poetry reveals its role as a mediating force so integral to his politics. At the same time we might ask how the literary works as a civic practice. Does his appeal to literature consist of an extension of democratic practice to address things that Tocqueville’s civic associations could not? Or is the literary a useless, if not

dangerous, site that poses highly generalizable and abstract notions of equality as opposed to the palpable sites of civic association? The latter characterization is evident in his account of literature in *The Ancien Régime* and in recent interpretations. I engage with these accounts not to debate Tocqueville's own commitments but to question their characterization of the relationship between the aesthetic and the political that emerges from his work. Rather than presume the aesthetic as a given component of his account or as a pernicious infringement on politics, I start by investigating how Tocqueville articulates a relationship between the literary and politics in the first place; we can rethink poetry as a politics, I suggest, only if we reconceptualize its status within his account.

In order to characterize the intimate relations between the aesthetic and political that Tocqueville theorizes I turn first to the account of the relationship between poetry as a cultural practice and his political subjects. My intent is to show that they become difficult to extricate from each other: while Tocqueville characterizes poetry as a national cultural practice, he as insistently presents as of special importance to his quasi-mythical middle-class commoner.

Tocqueville's political appeals to poetry situate him within a larger nineteenth-century discourse regarding both the fate of poetry in America and the relationship between poetry and national culture. For example, in his claim that "the nation" would be the object that "invites [the poet's] power," Tocqueville is explicit in linking the nation as the setting and source for new objects of poetic representation. What determines the availability of a full-fledged poetic tradition is the distinction between lesser objects of poetry like "streams and mountains," which America had in plenty, and sustainable objects like "the people" that would be become more



productive sources of democratic poetry.<sup>66</sup> Tocqueville does not address the discourse around nineteenth-century poetry explicitly but he signals his entrance into a broader conversation over whether Americans could be poets. Therefore, his account relies on and extends discourses that made poetry a legitimate subject of social, if not political, inquiry. Although he appeals to poetry as a popular vehicle of public expression in America he does so by establishing a discrepancy between American poets and the ideal of democratic poetry he holds up. In this way he maneuvers between poetry as an ideal, abstract social form and poetry as the set of written poems that may meet, or strive to meet, those ideals.

Tocqueville's democratic actors conceive the world in terms of its suitability for poetic representation. He suggests that the "poetic" refers to the suitability of subjects (e.g., "anti-poetic" lives), as well as a mode of meaning-making. The poetic meaning "haunt[s] every one of them [Americans] in his least as well as in his most important actions" (591). As a "haunting" aspiration, poetry was an ever-present if not fully articulated aesthetic that could be applied to daily thoughts, feelings, and actions, but always in relation to the suitability of objects as poetic subjects.

Tocqueville links poetry and politics as well through his evocation of democratic poetry's modal reader, the "puny" and "insipid" commoner. I suggest that this reader of poetry is coterminous with his privileged subject of political inquiry, the "eager and apprehensive men of small property" whose political dilemmas form the core of his account of American democracy. It is this representation of and investment in the subjects of poetry—its readers, writers, and

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<sup>66</sup> As noted above, his worry for poetic imagination was precisely that it would become too "literary" in the sense defined by his "literary spirit in politics" — but here almost rendered as the literary spirit in poetry — but this very insistence suggests he believed poetry was and could do something else, capable of resisting by redirecting.

sources—as democratic commoners that distinguishes his representation of poetry from his treatment of the readers, writers, and sources of other forms of literature. Consider that, in his discussion of democratic oratory Tocqueville is interested in the bombastic quality of democratic speakers, including elites, and he characterizes the relationship between oratory and politics as one of personal status. Likewise, in his discussion of the unrefined peasants who read Shakespeare, he considers each subject’s level of literacy and education. In readers of poetry, by contrast, what is activated—vis-à-vis their status as subjects of poetry—is their political position as subjects of propertied individualism. While Tocqueville uses other genres to identify alternative identities through which to view and assess readers, no other genre invokes the status of the reader as political subject.<sup>67</sup> Poetry appears as the preeminent literary genre of democratic aspiration among middle-class subjects.

Lastly, Tocqueville links poetry to politics in a way that may already be apparent in my account. The objects of Tocqueville’s poetry are also the objects of his political analysis: he affirms “the people” as the proper subject of popular sovereignty and as poetry’s proper addressee. Therefore poetic and political representation take the same object simultaneously. Further, he links the conditions that made “poetry and grandeur” so hard for Americans to the same “conditions of enlightenment, of private morality, of beliefs that we do not have.”<sup>68</sup> The

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<sup>67</sup> See Tocqueville, “Literary Characteristics of Democratic Ages,” *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, pp. 568-574.

<sup>68</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, “To Eugene Stoffels (February 2, 1835),” in *Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*, vol. 1 [1861], p. 397. Accessed online at <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/tocqueville-memoir-letters-and-remains-of-alexis-de-tocqueville-vol-1>. Additionally, in *Democracy for America* (p. 471), Tocqueville observes that “Americans constantly draw upon the treasures of English literature... so the Americans have not yet, properly speaking, got any literature.”

likelihood of Americans “exciting pity, admiration, terror, contempt” (592) is a poetic as well as a political problem.

For these reasons Tocqueville’s account of poetry overlaps with and extends the political dilemmas of American democratic subjects. Read side by side and in each other’s terms, the literary becomes a dimension of democratic action parallel to the work of civic bodies.

Nonetheless, politics at the aesthetic level, as represented through Tocqueville’s account of poetry, can appear at odds with what he privileges about the ability of the arts of association to generate forms of independence, power, and equality specific to democracy. Highlighting Tocqueville’s own ambivalence towards democratic literature, several contemporary democratic theorists have argued that he ultimately rejects the literary as a site of democratic politics. In fact, in his discussion of the “literary spirit in politics” in *The Ancien Régime*, Tocqueville offers a reason to contrast democratic politics to the work of the literary. For Richard Avramenko, Tocqueville celebrates the value of literature, but not for its contributions to democratic politics. Tocqueville’s primary insight, Avramenko suggests, is that in resisting or confronting inequality one must also resist “the [democratic] impulse to eliminate the complex and differentiated aspects of human existence”.<sup>69</sup> Because literature is useful for representing egalitarian relations as affective affiliation or shared thoughts, it may be useful as a means to challenge inequality; but at the same it problematically establishes an idiom of equality that is abstract and generalizable. For Avramenko, literature “need not contend with the empirical realities of human relationships and, for that matter, the empirical boundaries of the physical human being”; as a

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<sup>69</sup> Avramenko, “The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy,” *Political Theory* 45:4 (2016), p. 13.

result, he interprets Tocqueville as hoping to keep the ambitions tied to poetry safe at home in literature rather than politics.<sup>70</sup>

Sheldon Wolin, whose work similarly emphasizes Tocqueville's appeal to forms of equality beyond formal rights, worries that the literary in his account is useful primarily for representing the grandiose, and hence for drawing particular individuals outside of their privatized anomie. Yet because literature is only an "extraordinary idiom" suited to representing the "spectacle of America" — that is, suited to representing America *as* spectacle — it functions only to "exal[t] into a phenomenon" the objects it represents.<sup>71</sup> Wolin links the literary with what Tocqueville seeks to diminish in democratic politics, namely, representations of "the sovereignty of the Union [as] a work of art" or an "abstract entity."<sup>72</sup> For Wolin as for Avramenko, then, Tocqueville brackets poetry (and literature more broadly) from politics writ large.

These interpretations note compelling tensions between politics as art of association and as poetics, and they highlight those moments when Tocqueville appears to separate literature from politics. Yet neither can account for why he persistently returns to poetry in his political writings. What is more, neither explains why Tocqueville values poetry as useful for representing the subject of popular sovereignty or for engendering idioms of egalitarian relations. George Shulman offers a different reading of Tocqueville's appeal to poetry, one that seeks to account for

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<sup>70</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, p. 149; Avramenko, "The Grammar of Indifference," p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political And Theoretical Life*, quotations appearing on p. 163, 150, and 163, respectively. p. 239. Wolin (p. 159) reads Tocqueville as seeking to counteract "a sovereignty over a realm of particulars."

<sup>72</sup> Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, quoting Tocqueville on p. 163.

the role of the literary while explaining the turn away from the literary that Wolin and Avramenko identify. For Shulman, Tocqueville's ultimate rejection of poetry is necessitated by his own narrow definition of poetry as "democratic idealism."<sup>73</sup> As Shulman also notes, Tocqueville equates poetry with a move beyond the "puny" and "insipid" lives of individual democratic subjects — a valuable re-direction within Tocqueville's vision of politics. And yet, among the multiple places Tocqueville might find new sources of poetry, he focuses on the nation and the people. Shulman thus concludes that poetry "*redeems* an anti-poetic existence by enfolding it in an idealized national purpose." This move then precipitates Tocqueville's turn to what Shulman calls a "counter-poetry" (and what Wolin and Avramenko might call a turn away from poetry entirely). For Shulman the poetic remains valuable to Tocqueville. But "his poetry turns thwarted desires for purpose and community from abstract (national) community to associational bonds."<sup>74</sup> A democratic actor preserves the authentically "poetic" dimensions of Tocqueville's politics by becoming "neither consumers, nor clients and audiences of the state, but actors forging political bonds."<sup>75</sup> Shulman's attention to the narrow scope of Tocqueville's definition of poetry suggests that he invites the poetic as a key element of democratic life, but restricts or diverts it to very narrow political purposes..

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<sup>73</sup> Shulman, "A Flight from the Real? American Literature and Political Theory," *New Literary History* 45:4 (2014), pp. 549-573. For Shulman, Tocqueville's account of poetry is of a piece with his "tragic narrative" of democracy whereby liberal democracy "promises emancipation from old-world forms of authority, but generates the insidious new form of authority he calls democratic despotism" by drawing "rights-bearing men away from civic engagement into a privatized life of acquisition and consumption." In collective nation life they seek to "enact the heroism they cannot embody in their private lives" (all quotations on p. 554)

<sup>74</sup> Shulman, "A Flight from the Real?," p. 553 and p. 555.

<sup>75</sup> Shulman, "A Flight from the Real?," p. 555

Shulman's account of Tocqueville's equation of poetry with democratic idealism helps explain Wolin and Avramenko's rejection of poetry in Tocqueville. But Shulman also invites contemporary readers to revisit the political potential latent in the multiple definitions of "poetry" that he does not consider. Here Shulman turns Tocqueville's own project of seeking new idioms of equality against him: Tocqueville himself limits the sources of egalitarian idioms he might draw from literature by equating with a national project. Shulman suggests that implicit in Tocqueville's account is a vision of the literary replete with potential for new idioms of egalitarian meaning.

Whereas Shulman sees poetry as nurturing a nationalist identity that must be supplanted with associational bonds, I see a literary practice, the production of which — while certainly enabled by national collectivity — entails the invention and investment in aesthetic objects and forms that themselves may constitute the practice of equality and belonging that literature makes available. In other words, in conflating the source or condition of poetry (the nation) with the objects of poetic production, we may miss how Tocqueville's poetic figures—like the heart, "man himself," or a democratic people—constitute the idioms and objects of aesthetic appeal and poetic practice.<sup>76</sup>

The distinction I draw here between poetry as analogy for politics and poetry as a distinct aesthetic site can be difficult to define precisely because of the ways Tocqueville collapses his definition of poetry into political idioms. Tocqueville's own representation of poetry as a means that "transport[s] into the midst of democracy the ideas and literary fashions" of aristocratic

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<sup>76</sup> Shulman, "A Flight from the Real?," p. 553.

worlds (569) suggests it is a vehicle for political meaning.<sup>77</sup> Yet through poetry Tocqueville also seeks to inject a set of mediating practices at the level of the aesthetic that are not reducible to navigating between individual and state at the political register. For example, by framing poetry as the “search and delineation of the ideal” (587) he casts the search for mediating practice as oriented towards a sense of the ideal. Casting “verse...[a]s the ideal beauty of language” (587) provides an aesthetic provocation that moves subjects beyond themselves through an aspiration for beauty.

### *The Aesthetic Idioms of Poetic Politics*

Read this way, we can identify the democratic struggle as a function of literary practices; in the process, the aesthetic work of politics is represented as a poetic task. I argue that by orienting towards the aesthetic register of politics we might highlight how Tocqueville represents democratic practices differently.

Take, for example, how Tocqueville describes equality in relation to poetic production. “Equality not only turns attention away from the description of the ideal,” he writes, “but also provides less to be described.”<sup>78</sup> Given his appeal to the importance of the ideal as a means to inspire human flourishing, it might be tempting to interpret this statement as a criticism of equality. But I want to suggest instead that Tocqueville reveals what one idiom of equality seeks to diminish and inhibit: he is not opposing the ideal to equality but rather seeking to find an

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<sup>77</sup> See Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*. For Wolin (p. 162), “Tocqueville chose to approach the problem of theory and action not as Marx would, by situating theory in intimate relationship with the material forces of the world, but by way of a discussion of the potential power resident in “ideal” factors, specifically, in the status and character of literature and history in America.” Wolin’s interpretation draws a close connection between idealism and political resistance.

<sup>78</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by George Lawrence (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 483.

idiom of equality that would be expansive enough to embrace it. Here Tocqueville characterizes democratic practice as a turn back towards the ideal. He also implicitly links the act of, or ability to engage in, description as somehow relevant to democratic politics. Democratic poetry is the genre that enables actors “not to represent what is true, but to adorn it, and to present to the mind some loftier imagery” (587). Any idiom of equality that would suspend or deny the act of description or adornment — that is, any idiom of equality that would inhibit an ornamental relation to the world or limit subjects suitable for poetic representation — would also inhibit a means of navigating between the individual and the collective.<sup>79</sup>

Poetry as a literary “task” suggests that the poetic relation to the world is not a given but must be crafted. That proves challenging for democrats, for reasons already stated. Whereas “among aristocratic nations there are a certain number of privileged personages, whose situation is, as it were, without and above the condition of man” and were suitable subjects of poetry, democracy lacks similar subjects, forms, and sources of inspiration (588-589). Equality as it is currently practiced engenders subjects who “grow more alike . . . assimilated to one another” and who are not suited to the representation of the ideal or the adornment that poetry offers. Yet because egalitarian norms will not permit the recovery of elite aristocratic sources of poetry, and because the presently constituted democratic subject “will never lend itself to an ideal conception,” democratic poetry aspires for new sources of awe, upward vision, and an ornamental relation to the world (589).

Where and how does democracy constitute subjects suitable for poetic representation? Tocqueville describes the aesthetic distinction in poetry — one he analogizes to the social

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<sup>79</sup> In George Lawrence’s translation, the same passage reads as the “fairest flower of language” (Ibid.).



distinction between elites and commoners — as a distinction between subjects and sources of “adornment” and subjects and sources that resist such ornamental relation to the world. This distinction was one common trope of poetic theory in the nineteenth century. Drawing on conceptions of “poetry as an ornament to the world,” to use literary theorist Theo Davis’s phrase, Tocqueville represents democratic poetry as “adding some imaginary touches to the picture” and providing a better “picture” or “image” of the world of democratic men.<sup>80</sup> Tocqueville does not specify whether to “adorn” means to add images to an object or to represent that object as “adorning” the world. But he represents poetry as a process of “suppressing part of what exists” in order to offer a succinct but decorative image of the world. He thus represents poetry as a literary act of abridged, compressed, or abbreviated forms.

I attend to that particular aesthetic act because it defines the poetic aesthetic act critical to Tocqueville’s vision of a literarily-inflected citizenship. Democracy must replace elite subjects of poetry with a democratic “self” capable of serving as a source of poetry. It must generate conditions under which awe is no longer generated by the distinction of privilege but by the power of the people. The adornment made possible by the “record of the action of individuals” must find a new subject in the “interior soul of ‘man’.” He frames the worldly condition of having “nothing to add to the picture” (592) as part of the insidious forms of loss specific to democracy. A vision of the poet as one who “by adding some imaginary touches to the picture” contributes to democracy through overcoming “idle imagination” and adorning the world

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<sup>80</sup> Theo Davis, *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 2. For Davis (p. 3), ornament refers to “ways of considering how the author’s human existence — as observers, embodied beings, and searching minds—might bear a laudatory and attentive relation to the world.”

suggests that Tocqueville represents self-overcoming as tied to the act of making beautiful what is plain.

The idioms of equality that Tocqueville represents in poetry therefore consist of the practice of poetry itself rather than the political conditions that make it possible. The mediating work of poetry occurs through the writing practice. For Tocqueville that consists in the representation of and relation to a transcendent democratic actor he identifies as “the chief theme” of democratic poetry. “Man himself, taken aloof from his age and his country” is more than a particular individual but less than a collective body. As opposed to ballads of the state or poems of personal expression, Tocqueville represents democratic poetry as poetry that reveals “all that belongs to the existence of the human race taken as a whole, to its vicissitudes and to its future” (591). Tocqueville links the navigating act of poetry with revelation rather than membership or redemption. To a poetic citizen, the nation invites a new perspective rather than redemption through membership. “Democratic nations have a clearer perfection than any of their own aspect,” Tocqueville writes, “and an aspect so imposing is admittedly fitted to the delineation of the ideals” (590). Democracy allows subjects to see “man” in a full “aspect” and presents “to the eye of the spectator one vast democracy” (591).<sup>81</sup> The emphasis shifts to “perceiv[ing] . . . the immense form of society at large” (594) and to “tak[ing] stock” as critical elements of democratic practice.

Tocqueville also represents the movement from puny to immense in poetry as an inverse relationship between self and collective. He writes:

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<sup>81</sup> The Lawrence translation reads, “[I]t is not only the members of a single nation that come to resemble each other; the nations themselves are assimilated, and one can form the picture of one vast democracy in which a nation counts as as single citizen. Thus for the first time all mankind can be seen together in broad daylight.” Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by George Lawrence, p. 486.

I need not ramble over earth and sky to discover a wondrous object woven of contrasts, of greatness and littleness infinite, of intense gloom and of amazing brightness — capable at once of exciting pity, admiration, terror, contempt. I find that object in myself (592).

He represents the mediating practice of the “search and delineation of the ideal” as enabled by an object he calls the “obscure recesses of the heart.” In poetry’s virtually mediating terms, “I” could “find that object in myself” (592). Poetry is represented as a turn inward to find the vast collective. Tocqueville posits a virtual relation to the body politic mediated through the self as “wondrous object.”<sup>82</sup> The “obscure interior of the heart” within constitutes a virtual poetic relation between self and collective.

The rapid and seamless replacement of objects from aristocratic to democratic poetry can obscure Tocqueville’s own reimagining of poetic functions in a democratic context. The set of terms, maneuvers, and tasks in Tocqueville’s account of poetry are abstract and highly aesthetic. But they need not be recognizable as explicitly political acts to be understood as a set of practices through which he sought to ground and claim a politics. Instead, they serve the intermediary function of the arts of association by supplying a distinct set of idioms for collective life, power, and equality. Tocqueville’s “wondrous object” serves to propel the subject “upward” and “inward” in a way that moves the private individual beyond the self through an aesthetic encounter. If the terms to be navigated at the political level are between belonging or isolation, Tocqueville represents the “poetic” relation between self and nation as between objects

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<sup>82</sup> See Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*. Wolin (p. 155) argues that Tocqueville wants poetry to “compose ballads extolling collective life” by instead writing about the “permanent nature of man rather than the glory of the collectivity.”

that elicit admiration and wonder and those that do not. He supplies a literary vision of the ideal as the intermediary point between them.

Poetry also offers an idiom of equality tied to the practice of poetry itself. Tocqueville argues that democratic poetry reclaims from the aristocratic a distinction between who is and who is not suitable for poetic representation. After suggesting that aristocracy supplied the ideal subject of poetry in actors of distinction, he goes back to suggest that in fact “nothing lends itself more to the delineation of the ideal than the scrutiny of the hidden depths in the immaterial nature of man” (592). The immaterial nature of man as source of poetry is made available through democracy. But in the process Tocqueville has also supplied readers with an idiom of equality distinct to poetry as a literary practice. Tocqueville argues that the average democratic subject becomes suitable as a subject of poetry to the extent that he becomes suitable to being “scrutinized.” That practice is key. The democratic poet must go to the “inner soul” because the insipid quality of democratic life as presently constituted “forces the poet constantly to search below the external surface which is palpable to the senses, in order to read the inner soul” (592). The democratic shift Tocqueville performs here marks not only a shift in object but in the terms of poetic representation itself. Poetry turns from objects “palpable to the senses” to objects that can be “read.” The suitability for poetic representation is the “readability” of the object; hence, the readability of an object suggests that it is worthy of poetic representation. The “interior becomes a new site for the delineation of the ideal” and the “object in myself” becomes the source material for poetic representation (592) because it is now “woven of contrasts, of

greatness and littleness infinite, of intense gloom and of amazing brightness” (592).<sup>83</sup> In and through poetry, objects are equal by virtue of this aesthetic value.

### *Literary Equality as Resistance*

As evidence that Tocqueville remains invested in poetic production as its own practice, consider the examples he offers of work that comprises “the productions of the greatest poets who have appeared since the world has been turned to democracy” (593). They include nineteenth-century epics like Lord Byron’s “Childe Harold” (1812-1818) and Chateaubriand’s “René” (1802) — two epic narratives of dispossessed aristocrats and their subsequent adventures in wars of liberation in both Europe and America. The point is not just that the substance of the poems dramatize democracy as a search for purpose as beauty — which they do — but that Tocqueville casts the act of writing, reading, and finding poetic subjects as a means to exchange beauty and emotional depth as equals. Though Tocqueville ends his account with the ambiguous declaration that he “readily admit[s] that the Americans have no poets” but “cannot allow that they have no poetic ideas” (590), he implies that working towards a democratic poetry may constitute a literary practice of equality.<sup>84</sup>

The question that remains: what does Tocqueville value about egalitarian practice constituted through literature, as opposed to and distinct from other sites that might also propose egalitarian idioms and practices? The addition of poetics to the intermediary work of

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<sup>83</sup> Theo Davis, *Formalism, Experience, and the Making of American Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. To use Davis’s terms, Tocqueville frames a literary task. Literature of this period “seeks to produce in its reader an ideal experience.” Poetry proceeds from “types and emblems as a medium through which to approach experience” (p. 4).

<sup>84</sup> “In this respect aristocracy is far more favorable to poetry.” Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 588.

Tocqueville's civic associations can tell us how he understood the need for a literarily-informed language of equality not exhausted by civic associations. The aesthetic remains an important but under-theorized political dimension in Tocqueville's account, but one I have argued remains difficult to either dismiss as pernicious or to collapse into political association. Instead, literary egalitarianism is entwined in Tocqueville's account of how actors come to "achieve great things single-handed" (630); in the process, it may challenge, bump up against, or expand on the political practices where equality is performed.

One possibility is that any appeal to the poetic identifies ways that Tocqueville remained invested in a positive relationship between democracy and human flourishing. The forms of independence, power, and equality that Tocqueville identifies in civic associations seem geared toward challenges to unequal forms of political power and hence toward reclaiming capacities to shape, contest, and determine the means of self-rule. Enabling practices of excellence, distinction, and transformative aspiration, by contrast, seem distinct from those goals. Yet Tocqueville's appeal to aristocratic sources — of which poetry is only one of the more obvious — to navigate the gap between puny individuals and immense states suggest that challenging forms of mediocrity and docility through human flourishing aid in the exercise of collective power below the level of formal institutions. Not only does Tocqueville articulate how an immense distance between individuals and a centralized state risks throwing an aesthetic practice out of whack, but he also proposes the "search and delineation of the ideal" as itself a kind of mediating corrective or means to orient subjects towards association.

The other value that Tocqueville may find in literary egalitarianism beyond and below rights is a challenge to the ways that equality presently constituted enables or fails to address

inequality between the “puny” and powerful and between the “insipid” and grand. The literary may be grounds for reclaiming a greater, popular “we.” At the same time such universalism remains at a largely abstract level. As already noted, Tocqueville’s primary insight is that to resist or confront inequality one must do so while resisting what Richard Avramenko calls the equally dangerous “[democratic] impulse to eliminate the complex and differentiated aspects of human existence.” For Avramenko, Tocqueville favored aesthetic practices that could “recognize difference—to dwell in the grammar of difference” rather than affective affiliation or shared interior worlds.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, Sheldon Wolin argues that one of Tocqueville’s contributions was to embrace equality while cautioning against the “difference-denying culture of equality.”<sup>86</sup> Tocqueville’s call for “sensitivity to difference” is not an appeal to anti-egalitarian hierarchy but to aesthetic practices that might highlight the extraordinary and distinct in a world “now jeopardized by a world inclining towards sameness.”<sup>87</sup> Poetic appeals to shared “heart,” to a vast interior world, and to affective affiliation do little to meet these needs.

Yet what democratic theorists like Wolin and Avramenko point to as Tocqueville’s stance on literature downplays an ambiguity found within his account. Tocqueville stakes his ambiguity towards poetry as a central feature of his account. This ambiguity makes sense given several competing commitments. For example, Tocqueville is not associated with an embrace of equality in all social practices. We know Tocqueville appeals to the aesthetic as a resource where he can show the limits of egalitarian norms. At the very least the aesthetic was not amenable to norms of

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<sup>85</sup> Avramenko associates this “grammar of difference” with an “aristocratic grammar.” Avramenko, “The Grammar of Indifference,” p. 13.

<sup>86</sup> Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 158.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

equality. Yet his account of poetry is a striking exception to that appeal and vision of aesthetic practice. His decision to extend, value, and conceptualize a poetry that adhered to egalitarian norms suggests that he may value poetry in a distinct way such that its accessibility and extension to all remained of paramount importance.

The same puzzle is true of Tocqueville's account of the sources that sustained democratic poetry. Tocqueville finds poetry's sources to be the very objects he seeks to neutralize as sources of political fantasy. The "nation invites the poet's powers" but he does not want the nation to elicit political power. Likewise, "the people" serve as the "amazing object" of poetry that can "tear [the individual] for an instant from [his] petty complicated cares" (594), but Tocqueville also seeks to divert investment in and adoration of the people as a political object. Finally, the immense gap between private citizens and a massive state that he sought to mediate through "intermediary bodies" is also generative of poetry. The poetic capacity for "exciting pity, admiration, terror, contempt" (592) thrives on the movement between the two.

What Tocqueville offers through poetry is a staging of the tension within arts of association. He is able to provoke this tension by entwining poetry with the work of his intermediary bodies. If poetry matters as a practice/enactment of equality and as a conduit for human flourishing, then this means that Tocqueville must welcome and accept the sources of democratic poetry (e.g., nation, people) as essential to that aesthetic practice. Further, if the gap between the "extremely general" and "extremely minute and clear" (594) is also what stokes the aesthetic project of democratic poetry, then he must preserve that gap as well as mitigate it.

Nor does Tocqueville seem to want to bracket poetry from politics. At various other points he represents poetry as empowering, a "germ of power" placed within the reach of



democratic peoples,<sup>88</sup> and the nation “invites the exercise of [the poet’s] powers.” Tocqueville does not identify what he means by power or why he considers poetry a form of it. But we know that for subjects whose lives are “crowded” with “complicated and petty concerns,” the poetic serves as a source of creative and reflective activity. Because the poetic requires as objects for representation what is “sufficiently disclosed for [the poet] to apprehend” and “sufficiently obscure for all of the rest to be plunged in thick darkness,” (593) the poetic act is world-making.<sup>89</sup> Without that relation of ineffability, democratic man’s “imagination would remain idle [and he] would have nothing to add to the picture” (592). Poetry as an act of capturing the world in aesthetic terms constitutes a form of power. Because “things are not poetical in themselves” (592) democratic practice entails adorning the world or being adorned.

As a final appeal to poetry, Tocqueville may find in literary egalitarianism a set of idioms for addressing forms of inequality that the mere exercise of political power cannot correct. These could include the way the popular remains excluded from forms of honor and valuation to which the elite are granted access. In the face of that kind of inequality, as George Shulman notes, it is “not enough to radicalize his arts of association, as if to draw from it a militant populism” (93) that could correct or resist inequality. Instead, what is required is a means of claiming for the “anti-poetic” subjects whose lives were, on the surface, resistant to representation of the “record of the actions of individuals” (593) a means of establishing an equal relation on aesthetic grounds.

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<sup>88</sup> Aristocracy appears in Tocqueville for Wolin “not as a caste with inherited privileges, but as the embodiment of educated taste, ideals of public service and philanthropy, and earned superiorities.” Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 9.

<sup>89</sup> Tocqueville writes of a “[s]kepticism [that] then draws the imagination of poets back to earth, and confines them to the real and visible earth” (588).

### *Conclusion*

Tocqueville connects literary production and poetic expression to democratic citizenship in ways that make it difficult to deny the extension of democratic practice to literature.<sup>90</sup> The idiomatic representation of equality in Tocqueville's account of poetry may offer new ways of addressing equality. The acceptance of decorative loveliness in egalitarian worlds has an odd effect on the antagonism between democracy and modern political subjectivity that is so crucial to Tocqueville's account. The seriousness with which he considers the possibility of poetry, in and for democratic worlds, commits him to the aesthetic registers of democratic life.

If Tocqueville's representation of exemplary democratic poems offers anything, his turn to Chateaubriand's poem "René" (1802), may be informative. In abandoning his aristocratic estate, the title character claims to abandon an "ancient world [that] had no certainty" but plunge into "the modern world [that] had no beauty." Imagining Tocqueville's middle-class American readers interpreting aristocratic dispossession as democratic dispossession suggests that Tocqueville sought to represent poetry not just as aristocratic nostalgia but as democratic desire.

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<sup>90</sup> See Avramenko, "The Grammar of Indifference." For Avramenko, "The problem" emerges not so much that promise of abstraction as much as "when these epistemological abstractions work their way into the day-to-day practical lives of people." For a "reality full of contingency, difference, and complexity," the forms of "abstraction and false sentimentality" — which Avramenko interprets Tocqueville as equating with literary spirit in politics — "do not adequately address these . . . and severely curtails the development of practical wisdom needed for the arts" of what Tocqueville calls association (p. 11).

## CHAPTER II

### **The Right to Poetry: Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Poet" and the Work of Equality**

"The people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics!" ("The Poet," 1844)<sup>91</sup>

"So then the Muse is neither dead nor dumb, but has found a voice in these cold Cisatlantic States" ("New Poetry," 1840)<sup>92</sup>

The poet was a critical literary figure of nineteenth-century democratic theory. But it was represented and utilized in service of a range of political projects. In this chapter I examine poetic practice as a value in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his political writings, the poet occupies a privileged position in the relationship between literature and democracy. Just as Tocqueville does with the poet in his writings, Emerson mobilizes what he identifies as the poet's preternatural expressive capacities to imagine a literary actor not beholden to norms of democratic communication.

However, rather than serve as an intermediary practice between particular individuals and a provident state as it does in Tocqueville's account, the poet in Emerson's account is pressed into the service of politics specific to Emerson's vision of an ideal democratic practice. In this chapter I show how the poet advances or serves as a model of human flourishing. More

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<sup>91</sup> Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays*, pp. 267-68. All in-text citations refer to essays in this collection (with essay title noted).

<sup>92</sup> Emerson, "New Poetry."

specifically, Emerson places poetry at the center of a dilemma defined by a relationship between mediocre individuals and aspirations for excellence. In Emerson's account poetry would take up a different democratic task. Linked with redeeming the (aesthetic) value of the ordinary and insipid, poetry becomes a means to represent and resist what I define as a persistent, non-codified hierarchy of aesthetic value in modern democracies. Poetry is pressed into service of a new democratic task in ways this chapter explores.

The role of the literary in Emerson, despite its centrality to a number of his essays, has remained an under-theorized element of his account. The poetic is part of a range of practices useful for navigating egalitarian norms, pressures for conformity, and dwindling emphasis on the value of individual human excellence. As a result, when poetry is taken up as an element of Emerson's account, it has been viewed as extending his democratic practices. The poetic figure, by virtue of his public engagement and expressive qualities, is hard to square with older accounts that emphasize Emerson's vision of a withdrawal from politics. With essays on "The Poet" and "New Poetry," Emerson's investment in poetry and his celebration of the "democratical" revolution in literature has been interpreted as an interest in both democratic practice below the level of formal citizenship and in idioms of equality below the level of formal rights. Democracy brought "the tongues" of poetry to American households; in turn, citizens could "sing" the value, ritualistic beauty, and ultimately the radical poetic equality of common or demeaned objects ("New Poetry"). I read Emerson's poetic project as seeking to offer idioms of democratic equality in contrast to what he identifies as existing representations of the democratic people and popular sovereignty, namely, through their "number and size" and their "official power" exercised through the state ("New Poetry").

In the first section I read Emerson's account of poetry as a political project to contest representations of the people, equality and power. I also address how he represents the poetic as responding to a very specific kind of dilemma: how to represent the equality of common American subjects from within a context in which the common was already constituted as mediocre, insipid, and meager. Emerson represents a claim to equality as one that must also challenge an aesthetic inequality that diminished the worthiness of popular actors. In this context, he approaches the aesthetic as both a necessary ground on which to contest inequality and a risky one. As he notes throughout his political writings, the need to appeal and aspire to excellence was crucial for human flourishing and a means to overcome a "terror" of the great. In the second section I attend to how Emerson wrestles with the risk of centering the aesthetic as a key political practice. To the extent that aesthetic relations may always be susceptible to generating feelings of adoration, what risk do we face in making aesthetic practices key to our politics? In the final section I revisit the role of the literary in framing this central dilemma. Emerson's representation of a politics of aesthetics through his account of poetry enables him to address the persistence of forms of non-codified hierarchy in his account of modern democracy.

### *Emerson's Poet in the New World*

In the opening passages of Emerson's first published essay in his *First Series*, he asks the following question about America: "Why should not we have a poetry . . .?" ("Nature," 35). Emerson presumes to be speaking on behalf of a contemporary American culture that, he imagines, is aware of and concerned with the absence of a poetic style and tradition of its own. In asking this question Emerson extends an inquiry into the relationship between America and

literature that, as I have previously suggested, formed a key element of nineteenth-century literary criticism. But he also inserts it at the start of a text that is normally read as an early declaration of his democratic theory. In asking whether America should have poetry, Emerson clarifies that what he really means is whether it could have “a poetry of insight and not of tradition” (“Nature,” 35). Emerson therefore proposes the necessity of a poetry suited for democratic politics and draws a distinction between a poetry that may serve and celebrate “tradition” (in ways similar to Tocqueville’s aristocratic poetry that celebrated the past) and a democratic poetry that is oriented towards its objects of representation through “insight.”

The distinction that Emerson draws between these two kinds of poetry is key to how he will represent a contest over the proper aesthetics for democratic worlds. The question’s placement so early in an essay on the relationship between democratic citizenship and his concept of “self reliance” suggests that, for Emerson, poetry both frames and addresses a problem for democratic citizens. He is interested not only in a people capable of poetic production but likewise in a poetry capable of generating a democratic people. He invokes poetry in America as part of an essay on democratic subjects to motivate the democratic criticism that will follow and focus attention on those subjects.

Poetry is the primary genre through which Emerson evokes the literary lives of American citizens. Poetry as a subject of Emerson’s essays extends from widely circulating essays like “The American Scholar” (1837) and “The Poet” (1844) to more minor essays like “New Poetry” (1840) and “Thoughts on Modern Literature” (1840). Emerson was not primarily a literary theorist and focused on poetry as his exclusive subject only in several essays. More often than not, “poetry” appears in Emerson’s essays as it does in “Nature” — as a quick reference or

trope. But nonetheless it is a reference on which Emerson relies frequently to affirm, evoke, and extend elements of his broader critique of democratic politics. The democratic subjects whose lives of dependence, imitation, and subjection to tyranny of opinion, Emerson affirms again and again, required a robust poetic tradition as a means to navigate democratic life. “My quarrel with America,” he notes in a journal entry, “is that the geography is sublime, but the men are not.”<sup>93</sup> At the same time that democracy made available new rights and powers for the people, Emerson asserts a persistent “chasm . . . found between the largest promise of ideal power and shabby experience” of most men.<sup>94</sup> Expressing his vision of the privileged place of poetry, he asks: “Who can now doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age?” (“The American Scholar,” 84). A poetry of “insight,” if it could be found, would play a transformative role in democratic politics

Contemporary democratic scholars who have turned to the role of the poet in Emerson’s account are faced with several questions: does Emerson rely on poetry to offer a core account of democratic subjectivity? Does poetry signify something new or additional about his understanding of the sites of politics? These questions refer to the relationship between politics and literature in Emerson’s account. The answer requires working through how poetry comes to take on, as it does in Tocqueville’s account, idioms specific to Emerson’s political project. The question is less whether Emerson’s appeal to poetry is important to politics than it is how his articulation of poetry in political terms shapes his account of democratic practice.

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<sup>93</sup> Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, p. 284.

<sup>94</sup> Emerson, “Montaigne; Or, The Skeptic,” pp. 184-185.

Poetry in Emerson's account is often associated with a particular dilemma. As noted above, that dilemma can be defined as broadly aesthetic. It frames a relationship between what we sense as great and what is not. For Emerson there is a gap or "chasm" between democratic subjects and their ability to represent, orient towards, or aspire to the great, sublime, and excellent. Given this framing, scholars have often noted poetry's connection with Emerson's broader interest in the risks to human flourishing posed by democratic worlds. By framing the relation as a "chasm" between subjects and the world they inhabit, however, Emerson represents the dilemma as one that requires subjects capable of, for lack of better term, "closing" that gap. Democracy has fostered a "terror of the great," which, he writes, "imposed awe and hesitation on the talent of the masses of society" ("New Poetry"). It therefore inhibited human flourishing by engendering an expressive paralysis among its subjects. This dilemma appears parallel to Emerson's broader account of democratic subjects, whom he understands and represents as dependent on custom and tradition and incapable of original thought. In both instances, at issue are Americans' expressive capacities; but whereas their political lives appear to be limited by scarce intellectual resources, their poetic lives appear to be stymied by a cowering before greatness that deprives them of the will to excellence and distinction.

Regardless of the differences between the poetic and political tasks in Emerson's account, he pressed poetry into service for elaborating his political account. Unlike Emerson's appeals to other forms of literature, for example, poetry is the only genre whose practitioners he singles out as occupying a "station" central to democratic life. "The Poet" appears alongside figures like "The Idealist," "The Transcendentalist," and "The American Scholar" in his writings. To compose poetry is thus to occupy a social and political role. The poetic, in Emerson's account,



therefore refers to a blend of literary practice, ethos, station, and actor. To the extent that he links “the poet” to other privileged figures, he explicitly and implicitly draws connections between the poet and the practices associated with those figures. Emerson describes the “poet” in ways that tether aesthetic practices to political orientations. For example, the poet represents thoughts shared by all men, but as a result “stands among partial men for the complete man” (260); he “represents beauty” (261) but in so doing elicits the “highest aims of the soul”; he represents “where Being passes into Appearance and Unity in Variety” (“The Poet,” 266) and as a result stands “in silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction” to the world he represents (“The American Scholar,” 96).<sup>95</sup> The poet’s aesthetic practice cultivates an orientation to the world that Emerson values for self-reliant subjects. The poet mimics key Emersonian practices such as withdrawal from the world or orientation towards universal identities.<sup>96</sup>

At the same time Emerson links a vision of independence to the aspiration for beauty without worship of the great. The poet dramatizes a version of his ideal form of negotiating an appeal to the excellent and distinguished without succumbing to the “terror of the great” (“New Poetry”). As Jason Frank argues, Emerson has a preoccupation “with acknowledging both the vital importance and use of the ‘great men’ within democracy” and “the alluring danger of worshipful submission that lurks in this acknowledgement.”<sup>97</sup> I argue that the poetic is a key

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<sup>95</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Review of *Essays and Poems* by Jones Very,” *The Dial* (July 1841) accessed online at <https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/rwe-very.html>. Emerson also associated poetry with the “stamp of grandeur”. While the poet is attentive to democratic conformity he “defer[s] never to the popular cry” (“The American Scholar,” p. 96) but remains focused on the excellent as a counterpoint to the popular.

<sup>96</sup> For example, see Jacob Risinger, “Transatlantic Fate: Emerson, Cavell, and Beautiful Necessity,” *European Romantic Review* 25:3 (2014), pp. 357-364. For Risinger (p. 359), the central challenge was the “capacity of art or utterance to maintain its autonomy without being sequestered from the world.”

<sup>97</sup> Frank, “Standing for Others,” p. 396.

means for Emerson to introduce aesthetic dimensions to this democratic dilemma. “What can be better for the republic,” he asks as he takes stock of a growing interest in poetic talents, “than that the Capitol, the White House, and the Court House are becoming of less importance than the farm-house and the book-closet?” (“New Poetry”). And he celebrates that “Every child has been taught the tongues” of poetry (“New Poetry”).

The political idioms of poetry (and the poetic idioms of democratic citizenship) have offered contemporary scholars new sources for fleshing out Emerson’s concepts of personal independence and freedom. In new accounts scholars have argued that his desire to link politics to figures like the poet require us to rethink earlier interpretations of him as an apolitical individualist.<sup>98</sup> Yet figuring the poet’s expressive turn towards engagement and capacity for self-cultivation, as well as poetry as a mode of human flourishing available for all, suggests that Emerson’s vision of politics is more expansive. Stanley Cavell interprets Emerson’s appeal to the perfectionism of the subject as a means not of opposing the individual’s pursuit of democratic duties but of transforming the individual’s relation to democratic duty as a occasion for self-development.<sup>99</sup> George Kateb emphasizes Emerson’s appeal to aesthetic self-fashioning as an effort to cultivate “private character” rather than a desire for personal liberty.<sup>100</sup> Emerson’s poet also fits with new accounts of American Transcendentalists for whom, in Brian Walker’s terms,

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<sup>98</sup> Emerson’s characterization of the individual is much debated but he pushed back against pejorative associations with individualism including those who read him primarily as supporting the ethical development of individuals. For a summary see Wesley T. Mott, “The Age of the First Person Singular”: Emerson and Individualism,” in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Ed. by Joel Myerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 61-100.

<sup>99</sup> Cavell, “Aversive Thinking.”

<sup>100</sup> George Kateb, “Self-Reliance, Politics, and Society,” in Levine, ed., *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, pp. 69-90.

“self-cultivation [was] a tool of freedom” rather than merely personal virtue (Walker 170). Alex Zakaras asserts that Emerson theorizes “individual genius as a force in world history” not as part of an aristocratic appeal but to convert his readers to new conceptions of democratic coercion that take into account the “shared enemies” of “habit, convention, and received opinion.”<sup>101</sup> Following Frank, Emerson’s appeal to the great is a means to provoke aversion to self, conformity to others, and to “facilitate[s] such transformative surprise, loss, and abandonment” of titles and stations in life.<sup>102</sup>

In each account Emerson’s poet is identified with an appeal to the cultivation of political activity below the level of formal citizenship and state participation. For Emerson the poet will help “replace man for the state” and replace “depth of thought and action” for participation. In this capacity, the poet is not antidemocratic but instead appeals to the limits of formal democratic egalitarianism. The poet “yields us a new thought” and “unlocks our chains” (“The Poet,” 278), enabling new idioms of individual and collective power. Through the poet Emerson seeks practices that could generate equality below the level of enshrined rights. As Daniel Malachuk argues, equality is central to Emerson’s political thinking but “equality will not be pursued seriously in the United State or in any democracy unless it is recognized as not just a political good but a religious truth.”<sup>103</sup> Malachuk does not identify the ways Emerson appeals to or seeks

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<sup>101</sup> Zakaras, *Individuality and Mass Democracy*, p. 35. For Zakaras, Emerson offered a vision of independence not reducible to a classical liberal “absence of interference” or republican “absence of domination by some powerful other.” On the role of genius in Emerson, see also Ronald A. Bosco, “Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882: A Brief Biography,” in Joel Myerson, ed., *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp 52-54.

<sup>102</sup> Frank, “Standing for Others,” p. 386.

<sup>103</sup> Malachuk, “Emerson’s Politics, Retranscendentalized,” in Levine, ed., *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 298.

to construct equality as a “religious truth,” but his poet might provide some assistance: he who “worships with coarse but sincere rites” (“The Poet,” 267) can generate a more meaningful vision of equality.<sup>104</sup>

These interpretations of Emerson’s democratic politics are provocative, and to the extent they draw the poet into the work of democratic practice, they implicitly rely on Emerson’s own idiomatic definition of that figure. At the same time, poetry is presented as a site of democratic contest rather than a means of resolving politic struggles that unfold elsewhere. As Frank notes, Emerson’s appeal to figures like the poet invite and invoke risk and dilemma. The poet is valuable because he encounters and aspires towards the great, but that act comes with the inherent risk of becoming awestruck, and thus paralyzed. Emerson’s insistence that the democratic poet serves egalitarian worlds by cultivating nobility is accompanied by a concern that any appeal to the great might devolve into a relationship of subordination. The very imperative to aspire to greatness also invites democratic self-pity; for this reason, Emerson’s account of poetry is best read as an attempt to navigate between aesthetic aspiration and its attendant terror.

Relatedly, locating a democratic aesthetic within forms of independence ignores ways that Emerson is attentive to democracy’s own capacity to mesmerize and paralyze its subjects. In Emerson’s essay “New Poetry,” he insists that the spread and appeal of poetry among democratic masses was fostering a new kind of subject opposed to democratic engagement:

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<sup>104</sup> See Jacques Ranciere, *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. [First English edition]. (Brooklyn, New York: Verso Books, 2013) for a discussion of the non-profane qualities of the poet’s effort in Emerson. For Ranciere, Emerson’s account of “poetry is not a world of rare sentiments felt by exceptional beings and expressed in specific forms. Poetry is the flowering of a form of life, the expression of a poeticity immanent to the ways of life of a people and its individuals,” p. 60.

If we are losing our interest in public men, and finding that their spell lay in number and size only, and acquiring instead a taste for the depths of thought and emotion as they may be sounded in the soul of the citizen or the countryman, does it not replace man for the state, and character for official power? (“New Poetry”)

But in this passage Emerson posits a role for poetry working against the “spell of number and size” that he also associates with democracy. Democracy for Emerson supplies its own emblems and figureheads — e.g., “the Capitol, the White House” — that function through “spell of number and size.” If poetry is to inculcate new idioms of equality, it must contest existing democratic emblems of equality and collective belonging. Emerson offers poetry as a means to engage in a democratic struggle at the level of idiomatic expressions of equality and belonging. In the next section I examine Emerson’s attempt to define poetry in relation to practices like ritual, rites, and worship.<sup>105</sup>

### *The Poetic Idioms of Equality and Belonging*

The presumed connection between Emerson’s search for an idiom of democratic equality in literature and his appeal to poetry depends on an interpretation of poetry as related to a project of equality in the first place. In this section I argue that he represents poetry as a practice to cultivate egalitarian subjects beyond political equality. Yet rather than presume the connection between poetry and politics, I examine how he imagines the literary as essential for extending egalitarian norms. What practices of equality does he imagine that the literary offers to democratic subjects? The apparent answer—that poetry is a practice of “singing” the value, ritualistic beauty, and ultimately the radical poetic equality of what are otherwise taken as

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<sup>105</sup> The poet acts at times as “some leveling circumstance that puts down the overbearing, the strong, the rich, the fortunate, substantially on the same ground with all others” (Compensation”).

common or demeaned objects—relies, I suggest, on an account of how literature works to enact and represent equality through aesthetic value. Instead, I will argue that Emerson’s account of poetry appears to work differently.

Emerson’s most robust vision of what democratic poetry looks like is found in his two essays on poetry — from “The Poet” (1844) to more minor essays like “New Poetry” (1840) — although important aspects of that vision also appear in minor essays and his reviews of poetry. In each he links poetry in its democratic context to an egalitarian project. Specifically, he contrasts the idioms of equality that poetry makes available to competing idioms of democratic equality dominated by political conceptions of citizenship, public participation, participation in popular sovereignty, and equal rights. Against these Emerson transposes what I characterize as the poet’s democratic station of appealing to the beautiful or the register of aesthetic value. An equality grounded on the beauty of what are otherwise taken as common or demeaned objects will offer an expansive vision of equality and an idiom of citizenship that cultivates independent actors.

This comparison is the key theme of his essay “New Poetry.” Here Emerson poses the literary as revealing a robust alternative to engendering democratic citizens below and beyond a site of formal politics. As noted above, Emerson appeals to the value of poetry in cultivating “a taste for the depths of thought and emotion” in contrast to the alternative democratic vision of “number and size.” Further, an exchange of emotional depth fosters a distinct kind of democratic citizen. Whereas before the democratic subject deferred to the state or only considered his powers in relation to an “official” capacity, Emerson suggests that poetry reveals and invites

“man” as a primary democratic agent possessing powers that exceed his “official power” (“New Poetry”).

In order to do this — and in order for contemporary democratic theorists to identify an appeal to the aesthetic registers of his account — Emerson must offer an account whereby the poetic reveals an idiom of equality that can replace the idioms that dominate democratic politics. Therefore, Emerson must oppose the literary to the representation of figureheads and emblems of the state. But he must also crucially oppose poetry to an aesthetic practice that would invoke and prioritize the “size” and “number” of the democratic people. Going even further, Emerson’s poetry must represent “man” not in his capacities as “public man” embedded in “the state” and exercising “official power” but instead as exercising alternative powers. Emerson grounds his claim that the poetic can break through “so many arid forms which states encrust themselves with” by representing poetry as a distinctly aesthetic practice. It happens “once in a century, if so often, [that] a poetic act and record [can] occur” that breaks through and supplies a new virtual subject of democratic action.<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, he suggests that now might be such a time.

Emerson represents his poetic practice in the following ways. In place of a mode of representing the people as “number and size” or representing individuals in their capacity as “public man,” Emerson’s poetry supplies him and his readers with a distinct idiom of egalitarian representation. Most critically, he frames poetry as representing objects of American life in crude and simplistic verse. As he describes in “The Poet,” the primary target of (and style of

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<sup>106</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Emancipation Proclamation: An Address Delivered in Boston in September, 1862,” in Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Miscellanies* (vol. 11) (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903-1904 [1862]), p. 313.

representing) democratic poetry is the invocation of objects particular to America but shared in the public imagination. Democratic poetry would “sing”:

Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boasts and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas . . . (“The Poet,” 281).

Democratic poetry offers these as replacement “emblems” for “public man” and the “state.” In the “workmen, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death,” Emerson writes, we would find new emblems of collective and egalitarian relations (“The Poet,” 270). The poet would represent “the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life” as “the topics of the time” (“The American Scholar,” 102). He would stand for actors outside of their official citizenly duties, representing instead what Emerson refers to as the “genius” of American subjects. “American genius finds its true theme — if I dare tell you,” Emerson describes, “in the poor negro soldier lying in the trenches by the Potomac, with his spelling book in one hand and his musket in the other” (“Books,” 41). Emerson defines poetry’s democratic task as taking on new objects: “Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the common, was explored and poetized” (“The American Scholar,” 101).

In addition to representing poetry as finding a new set of objects Emerson also represents poetry as an aesthetic practice that establishes its mode of representation in opposition to older forms of what he understands as adoration and decoration. Democratic poetry turns away from a celebration of the big and grand and adapts its mode of representation accordingly. For example, Emerson’s poet offers verses that are “less pretending than the festal and solemn verses which are written for the nations” (“New Poetry”). Rather than represent the poetic as a mode of



celebrating or adorning otherwise dull objects, the poetic is characterized as resisting the allure of specialized or overly ornate aesthetic representation. As he elaborates in “New Poetry” in his declaration of the possibility of democratic poetry,

So then the Muse is neither dead nor dumb, but has found a voice in these cold  
Cisatlantic States. Here is poetry which asks no aid of magnitude or number, of  
blood or crime, but finds theatre enough in the first field or brookside, breadth and  
depth enough in the flow of its own thought (“New Poetry”).

Emerson represents poetry as emptied of theatrical extravagance, appealing instead to the “breadth and depth” of objects. As he notes later, this entailed a democratic poetry that established “a worth beyond that of a high finish.” Here the making of democratic poetry seems to consist in stripping away everything flowery and ornamental from the representation of objects.

It was only through this practice that Emerson’s democratic subjects could cultivate a “taste for a certain private and household poetry” whose “workmanship and . . . material were not equally excellent.” Yet Americans could learn to “find pleasure in verses of a ruder strain” (“New Poetry”). Emerson refers to democratic poetry as verses of the portfolio — personal, often unrefined, expressions of common thought and mundane beauty. Not intended for publication, verses of the portfolio are uniquely positioned to relinquish “that finish which the conventions of literature require of authors.” Instead democrats could represent “imperfect parts, the fragmentary verses, the halting rhymes” as poetry. Portfolio verse is defined as a writing practice that requires “no elaboration, no artifice in the structure of the rhyme, no variety in the imagery; in short, no pretension to literary merit” as he notes in a review in the *Dial* (1841).

Emerson's appeal to poetry as a "voice" in the "cold" represents it as an act of "singing," but one that loses any semblance of rite, ritual, "festal" or "solemn" qualities.<sup>107</sup>

The poetic practice of revealing, representing, and making available new terms of democratic equality is represented in ways that, I argue, pose a challenge to interpretations that define the poetic as easily distinguished from the idioms of egalitarian norms that emerge from formal equality and that scholars take Emerson as most intent on opposing. At the same time that poetry is a form of "singing" it also takes on some of the methodical, even procedural, qualities of "number of size" that it ostensibly rejects.<sup>108</sup> For example, in representing the outcome of poetry as "singing" the beauty of "[o]ur log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians," Emerson casts poetry as at once an aesthetic act that infuses with value and one that lists, names, and leaves its objects unadorned. "Singing" below formal sites must also shun ritual or polish.<sup>109</sup>

Literary scholars have identified similar themes in Emerson's idealization of the poetic. At the same time that he posits a poetry capable of appealing to affective affiliation, shared experience, and thoughts, he represents it as a writing practice that constructs the terms of affiliation without appeal to shared personal experience. Literary scholar Theo Davis argues that Emerson's poet "produce[s] impersonal, abstract experience through extended trains of images"

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<sup>107</sup> In other references to the use of emblems and symbols Emerson also says "the distinctions which we make in events and in affairs, of low and high, honest and base, disappear when nature is used as a symbol" ("The Poet," 268).

<sup>108</sup> Emerson initiates a claim about the relationship among poetry, citizenship, and participation that would be taken up by Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas", in *Democratic Vistas, and Other Papers* (London: Walter Scott, 1888). Whitman associates the poet with practices "underneath the elections of Presidents or Congresses," p. 5.

<sup>109</sup> Emerson defined "*verses of society*" as "those effusions which in persons of a happy nature are the easy and unpremeditated translation of their thought, and feelings into rhyme" ("New Poetry").

as we see with the example of “singing” “our log-rolling, our stumps.”<sup>110</sup> For Davis, in Emerson’s account of poetry, “‘my experience’ as somehow inherently relevant and interesting, because it is either different from yours or analogous to yours, is basically absent”.<sup>111</sup> Even the task of relating common men to “great men” is defined by Emerson as “leading us away from [great men] to a universal experience” rather than towards the extraordinary and distinct value of individuals. Shannon Mariotti observes a similar aesthetic in Emerson’s representation of what we might presume to be practices most amenable to representing particular individuals. Referring to Emerson’s representation of the idealist (a democratic actor with which “the poet” is closely associated), Mariotti argues that “Emerson celebrated with a surprising lack of awareness the way his [the idealist’s] eye violated particular differences” and avoided “greater contact with the immediate particularity of everyday life.”<sup>112</sup> Poetry as an aesthetic practice is defined by the absence of idioms of equality and commonality we might associate with recovering the value of objects below and beyond their formal equality.<sup>113</sup>

In place of that practice Emerson represents poetry as formulaic, even methodical.

Emerson’s account of the poet’s “singing” is mixed with an analogy to procedure, as in his

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<sup>110</sup> Davis, *Formalism, Experience, and the Making of American Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 120. For Davis, Emerson represents “experience which does not depend upon the physical senses or even upon the human subject” (p. 111). The literary subject of Emerson’s vision of poetry “is all but inhuman — devoid of all personality” (p. 117), and the demands of personal experience are foreign to what Emerson means by poetry, that is, “utterly different from the grain of human experience” (p. 110). We are “mistaken in conceiving of experience in Emerson as subjective... [because] experience in Emerson is already ‘universal’” (p. 110).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>112</sup> Mariotti, “On the Passing of the First-Born Son: Emerson’s ‘Focal Distancing,’ Du Bois’ ‘Second Sight,’ and Disruptive Particularity,” *Political Theory* 37:3 (2009), p. 359.

<sup>113</sup> For different treatments of the representation of commonality and the idioms of an abstract equality in Emerson’s theory of poetry, see Stephen Cushman, “Transcendental Poetics,” in *Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-century American Poetry*. Ed. Kerry Larson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011); and G. Borden Flanagan, “Emerson’s democratic platonism in representative men,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Ed. Alan Levine. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), pp. 415-450.

accounting of the poetic task as a means by which “the near, the low, the common, was explored and poetized” (“The American Scholar,” 101). Here, to make poetry means “to poetize.” Literary scholar Kerry Larson captures something of the idiom in his interpretation of broader theories of nineteenth-century poetry as the “summoning of an equality in the form of radical likeness” — e.g., Emerson’s claim that the poet reveals how “The near explains the far. The drop is a small ocean. A man is related to all nature” (“The American Scholar,” 102). Larson’s point is that poetry itself is idiomatically represented as highly repeatable and highly formulaic; in turn, thinkers like Emerson represent poetry’s means of establishing equality as a bringing together of extreme opposites — e.g., high and low, near and far.<sup>114</sup> He represents the democratic work of poetry as no longer having to take “long journeys into far countries” to find inspiration. Instead, poetry is the repeated (and repeatable) insistence “that things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote” (“The American Scholar,” 102).<sup>115</sup> Emerson’s formulaic description of poetry almost obviates the need for actual poems. The poet affects “the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state” (“The American Scholar,” 101) but its task is nearly set in advance of the actual composition of poems.

Poetry itself almost disappears from Emerson’s account as a literary practice. Instead, he celebrates poetry’s increased accessibility as if the mere capacity to produce poems automatically made available a new source and set of idioms through which to imagine equality. (Indeed, the

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<sup>114</sup> Larson, *Imagining Equality in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, p. 143. Evidence for this reading lies in what Larson notes (p. 126) was a deeply held Transcendentalist mistrust of (and an astute ability to root out) dualistic thinking that they perceived had taken hold of mid-nineteenth-century perceptions of self and collective life (and of material and spiritual life). But, I argue, this means that the act of bringing them together was itself a highly formulaic process.

<sup>115</sup> For similar readings of the formal nature of Emerson’s account of poetry see also the Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis*, for whom Emerson seeks to transfer “the vulgar materialities of the world of work and everyday life to the life of the mind and the whole,” p. 58.

station of “the poet,” more than any other figure in Emerson’s account —the Idealist, the Transcendentalist, or the American Scholar — can be “democratized.” By virtue of poetry’s material form of production Emerson could imagine it becoming widely distributed.) The equality that poetry makes possible starts to look very much like the formal and public equality of citizenship, only now extended to cultural forms. Emerson finds the most “democratical tendencies” in poetry in the way it upends hierarchical norms and forms of public authority:

[W]e shall soon have not so much as a pulpit or raised platform in any church or townhouse, but each person, who is moved to address any public assembly, will speak from the floor . . . The philosophy of the day has long since broached a more liberal doctrine of the poetic faculty than our fathers held, and reckons poetry the right and power of every man to whose culture justice is done (“New Poetry”).

The availability of “verses of the portfolio” reads here as poetry’s primary accomplishment for Emerson, a formerly public capacity now made available to private individuals. For these reasons, I contest the representation of poetry as an aesthetic practice that primarily, or even exclusively, offers an idiom of equality entirely at odds with the political idioms Emerson imagines it to contest. “The like revolution in literature” that Emerson celebrates offers an idiomatic representation of equality that is largely of a piece with an increase in “rights” and public authority.

Nonetheless, rather than serve as grounds to dismiss Emerson’s representation of poetry as a new idiom of equality, I argue Emerson’s representation of poetry reveals tensions within the work of establishing equality. These tensions emerge in the act of seeking an idiom of equality within a context defined by the persistence of a non-codified, informal hierarchy — a hierarchy

that works at the level of aesthetic qualities. How Emerson presents poetry as a practice for contesting this particular impediment is the subject of my next section.

*Craft as Struggle: Reflecting the Tensions of Aesthetic Adoration as Politics*

It is important to consider the context — defined by the particular challenges to equality that this age posed — in which Emerson inquires into the possibility and value of a democratic poet. As noted in the first section of this chapter, he appeals to the poet in the face of a particular impasse: in America, “the geography is sublime, but the men are not.”<sup>116</sup> It is the poet who confronts the “chasm . . . found between the largest promise of ideal power and shabby experience” of most men.<sup>117</sup> Emerson appeals to poetry as a response to the gap between democratic subjectivity and virtuosity, excellence, and beauty, which is say, the indices, for Emerson, of human flourishing. He poses this as a dilemma because the democratic subject must admire the great and excellent without worshipping it. Put another way, the democrat must seek equality on terms of aesthetic value without reifying what Emerson describes throughout his account of poetry as a persistent aesthetic hierarchy between high and low, shabby and sublime, great and meager. That the poet thinks primarily in terms of a high and low is indicative of how Emerson imagines the poet must confront and approach equality this particular context.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, p. 284.

<sup>117</sup> Emerson, “Montaigne; Or, The Skeptic,” pp. 184-185.

<sup>118</sup> There are a number of analogies to this process of making whole in Emerson. It is the poet who sees man “divided into functions” (“The American Scholar,” p. 84) – like a limb that has suffered “amputation from the trunk”: “a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow – but never a man” (p. 84) and must “stan[d] among partial men for the complete man” (“The Poet,” p. 260). Also the poet saw “a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet” (“Nature”).

Emerson represents and considers this task throughout his account of poetry, but also at other points in his democratic theorizing. For example, in “History” he seeks to explain the tension between admiring elites for how they represent human flourishing and reifying their elite status. Emerson writes, “We honor the rich, because they have externally the freedom, power, and grace which we feel to be proper to man, proper to us (“History,” 151-152). Emerson is clear that “freedom, power, and grace” are possessed by the wealthy. But it is an illusion to imagine that those are “proper” to them and not to the masses. On the one hand, for Emerson democracy supplies idioms for imagining “freedom” and “power” proper to the masses through egalitarian norms and codified civic and political rights. On the other hand, Emerson identifies a third element that supplements “what is proper” to elites that is not as easily challenged. What we “feel to be proper” to the wealthy is not only freedom and power but the “grace” that attends them. “Grace” refers to the aesthetic dimension of the exercise of power and freedom to which elites were privileged. Of the three terms that Emerson uses, it is “grace” that stands out as peculiar in its distinction from “freedom” and “power,” but also in the way it can be contested. The promise of what is “proper to us” — the democratic promise — entwines grace with freedom and power in a way that the passage makes hard to disentangle. Grace points to another kind of distinction that I have argued the poet is tasked with addressing. But distinctions in grace are neither codified nor formal and so are not addressed by the idioms of equality that appeal primarily to that level. What would it mean to claim or represent “grace” for the masses or as part of a claim to equality?

At the heart of the task of grounding equality on terms that would address the aesthetic inequality between elites and masses is Emerson’s democratic ideal to address inequalities that

are not formally codified or hierarchically enshrined but nonetheless persist within democratic worlds. He must therefore envision an idiom of equality that would incorporate the “grace” of subjects in its representation of equality. A democratic people equal in their “grace” requires an appeal to equality on aesthetic terms.

Emerson identifies a task for which an idiom of equality as shared experience will not be sufficient. He represents the aesthetic inequality between elites and masses as an inequality that cannot be bridged through shared experience. To address the gap or “chasm” between the experience of grace, sublimity, and excellence and the shabby, inelegant, and insipid requires a different approach. Revising Malachuk’s interpretation that, for Emerson, equality would be empty if it were not regarded as a “religious truth,” I argue that, for Emerson, equality remains incomplete insofar as it lacks aesthetic realization. Equality must be felt and seen by subjects: they had to believe that they partook in the grace and elegance that came with the exercise of freedom and power. This could not be guaranteed by formal civic and political rights; nor would the exercise of such rights make these into relevant categories for modern democrats. Emerson’s appeal to poetry that would “replace man for the state, and character for official power” is in part necessitated by what he understands as the narrow ways that formal politics lead us to think and define the fullness of freedom and power. Emerson appeals to poetry first and foremost as a means of expanding the meaning of freedom and power, claiming and celebrating what he understands to be their aesthetic dimensions. Emerson’s “quarrel with America” is a quarrel with subjects who do not aspire towards the “shine” and “sublime” of “ideal power”. In his aesthetic entanglements, Emerson asks us to confront the genuine yet disavowed (because appearance-



based and ephemeral) aesthetic qualities of democratic promise, and the persistence of aesthetic hierarchy.

In this context, how do we address and counteract an inequality that endures outside formal or codified hierarchy? Emerson appeals, I argue, to an account of poetry that admires but does not worship; he also appeals to poetry as form of procedural justice. This may help explain why Emerson defines poetry as an aesthetic practice through which subjects “sing” the beauty of common objects but also as an aesthetic practice that must become a “right and power of every man to whose culture justice is done” (“New Poetry”). Emerson links poetry as aesthetic practice and poetry as right in order to counter what he understands to be a form of inequality that persists even with the demise (or irrelevance) of an older, aristocratic order.

Emerson turns to the literary for what Jason Frank calls its “mystical provocations” of equality beyond formal rights but he does so as an appeal to the justice of aesthetic access, and entitlement. Emerson’s foremost celebrations of poetry include the fact that “the works of the great poets [have been brought] into every house, and made all ears familiar with the poetic forms” (“New Poetry”). Previously, “only one man in the thousand may print a book, but one in ten or one in five may inscribe his thoughts” in poetry (“New Poetry”). Emerson claims this as essential to the practice of equality in nineteenth-century America.

### *Conclusion*

Although Emerson is not associated with a robust language of inequality linked to accounts of labor, property, and slavery, I argue he appeals in compelling ways to the language of

aesthetics in elaborating an account of inequality. Emerson turns to poetry to continue and extend the work of navigating a relation between the great and mediocre subjects of democracy. Poetry takes on these elements of his political project.

Poetry's formal representation matters because it points to Emerson's quest for an idiom of equality that would address aesthetic hierarchy. His popular poetics seek to resist an inequality that is not formally codified but nonetheless persists between popular and elites in American democracy. Emerson welcomes poetry as a privileged literary practice that would enable modern subjects, through literary exchange, to practice and explore mutual interest in others' emotional depths, to refine character, and to redeem the overlooked and neglected aesthetic value of the common and the ordinary. But he paradoxically seeks to make that practice a "right and power of every man to whose culture justice is done." Whereas other scholars explore the productive distinction Emerson makes between democracy's formal political and civic rights and the "spirit of love for the General good" that he hopes to cultivate "below" formal sites, his account of poetry works on both levels, presents an aesthetic practice as a matter of justice and rights.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol 5, p. 203.

## CHAPTER III

### **Poetic Address and the Representation of Authentic Expression in John Stuart Mill's "What Is Poetry?" (1833) and "Two Kinds of Poetry" (1833)**

In John Stuart Mill's account of the relationship between poetry and democratic politics, the poet as a preternatural figure of expressive capacity arrives in the modern world unburdened by norms and standards of communication. As with Tocqueville and Emerson, Mill's approach to poetry is deeply informed by his awareness of democracy's worst tendencies; and like them, he finds opportunities there for shoring up the democratic citizen against those tendencies. But while for Tocqueville and Emerson poetry enables the self-cultivation and aesthetic attunement undermined by democratic conditions yet necessary to human flourishing, for Mill poetry provides an (idealized) model of democratic communication. Throughout his work Mill appeals to such ideals of communicative exchange — including through metaphors of public markets and notions of intimate address —in defending and promoting authentic expression between democratic subjects. In his earliest essays, poetry emerges as a literary practice that might serve that goal. Within these texts poetry already exhibits a political dimension that accords with what Mill offers later in accounts of norms and standards of communication that respond to pressures on conformity, inequality between interlocutors, and inhibition of spontaneous expression.

The themes of poetic expression reflect concerns about democratic speech and interaction that appear in Mill's political essays, from *On Liberty* to *The Subjection of Women*.<sup>120</sup> I suggest that his poetic-political project can be read as a response to pressures on expression generated by the "tendency to equality of conditions" and "leveling influences."<sup>121</sup> Taking up models of communication as both a mode of theorizing and a practice of politics, Mill approaches poetry on these terms. He represents poetry as (an ideal) site of communication between interlocutors. In place of norms of public exchange or intimate scenarios, he turns to poetry as a mode of address through which subjects could engage in "the expression or utterance of feeling" unmodified "by the presence of others" (1218).<sup>122</sup> The model of "overheard" or indirect address becomes the defining feature of Mill's account of poetry as a political practice essential to democracy.

Poetry was the only literary genre Mill explored extensively in his writings. The role of literature as a distinct form of communication is often absent from accounts of Mill's theories of public communication, even as it remains a democratic ideal. In contrast to intimate relations or norms of communication, the appeal of the poetic centered on a contrived scenario of indirect address. In the first section I retrace and uncover Mill's early interest in and idealization of poetry by offering readings of two key essays on poetry — "What Is Poetry?" (1833) and "Two Kinds of Poetry" (1833) — that precede his major works of political theory.

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<sup>120</sup> Mill in Collini, ed., *On Liberty; with The Subjection of Women; and Chapters on Socialism*.

<sup>121</sup> Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume 18*.

<sup>122</sup> Mill, John Stuart. "What is Poetry?" (1833) and "Two Kinds of Poetry" (1833), both in Collins and Rundle, eds., *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, pp.1212-1227. All in text citations refer to this edition. Both were originally published in the *Monthly Repository*, January 1833 and October 1833, and then were slightly revised and published together in 1867 under the title "Poetry and its Varieties" (which briefly preceded *The Subjection of Women*).

In the second section I compare the representation of ideal communication in poetry to the similar functions filled by norms of communication and intimate expression. I center the figurative relation of “overheard” address — as a communicative style that seeks “no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us” — as responsive to paradoxical pressures for authentic expression between equals whose very equality upsets the possibility of communication. I consider accounts that have sought to frame Mill’s turn to a poetry of solitary expression or unuttered thoughts as anti-democratic, showing the variety of immensely public analogies he relies on to describe poetry. These include performance in solitude and soliloquy on a stage.

Rather than cast poetry as a moral or communicative ethos, I argue that Mill positions it as a model for political (democratic) interlocution. In the final section I ask what the ideal of “overheard” speech tells us about this model. I turn finally to a key metaphor in his account of poetry as “song [that] has always seemed to us like the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen, in the next” (1217). There I identify forms of political coercion that are deeply connected to his account of democratic communication.

### *The Poet in the Modern World: Mill’s Vision of Poetic Expression in Modern Democracy*

The place of poetry in the modern world is an early and persistent concern of Mill’s inquiry into democracy. Before he had articulated a theory of the public sphere in terms of standards and norms that enable the exchange of opinions, Mill’s discussions of poetry evinced similar goals for personal expression. In short, his two major essays on poetry, “What Is Poetry?” (1833) and “Two Kinds of Poetry” (1833), provide early articulations of an ideal communicative

practice and in so doing, suggest a way of pursuing democratic theory through the analysis of literary practices and relations.<sup>123</sup>

Mill's interest in literature does not form as clear a through-line in his work as it does in the work of Tocqueville and Emerson. For this reason, his early essays on poetry are often overlooked as elements of his political theorizing. Yet the themes that emerge from these essays anticipate his account of public communication in a democracy. For Mill, poetry represents a political ideal-*cum*-literary-genre, an ideal of expressive exchange that is later replaced by figures like the "marketplace of ideas" and intimate exchange between husbands and wives, and that replace the literary genre as a site of theorizing ideals with norms and procedures. Despite these differences, there is value in thinking poetry, the marketplace of ideas, and intimate personal expression comparatively. Taken together, they reveal Mill's singular pursuit of communicative ideals as part of his democratic theorizing, as well as the expansive locations and diverse relations that were proper to such theorizing and to the realization of democracy. Although poetry would be the only literary form he took up extensively, the essays on poetry would be republished several decades later in conjunction with *The Subjection of Women*, for reasons I explore below, which suggests a resonance in their themes and concerns. But it also reveals the extent to which Mill conceived of communication in terms other than norms and rules

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<sup>123</sup> Mill's compositions on poetry — in two primary essays "What is Poetry?" (January 1833) and "Two Kinds of Poetry" (October 1833) — were published slightly in advance of what would become his first criticism of democracy in reviews of Tocqueville's essays, and of his own essays on American culture. As with Emerson's account of poetry, Mill's two primary accounts of poetry precede essays on democracy and liberalism and hence introduces poetry as a problem that will define and shape his political theory.

concerning speech: also in play were issues more typically associated with literary practices, such as voice, rhetoric, and modes of address.<sup>124</sup>

Mill's attentions to poetry confirm that political practices essential to his vision of democracy were to be found in a literary form. Because poetry appears so early in his political writing, I interpret it less as a means to resolve problems within democratic communication than as a reframing of a problem for democracy. Mill views the problem of poetry in democracy from both perspectives: he explores whether poets could function within democracy and he also questions whether and how democratic egalitarian relations enhance the possibility of authentic expression in poetry. As I show, a key element of Mill's claims are that the egalitarian norms of democracy would in fact fit, enable, and serve the poetic pursuit of authentic emotional expression. The early link he establishes between equality and poetic communicative ideals in his two essays on poetry suggest Mill's ongoing interest in how democracy might enhance, rather than inhibit, authentic communication.

We know, however, that for Mill, pursuing the question of whether poetry could be practiced in democracy was not an easy inquiry. Poetry is not a "natural" literary fit with democracy. Like Tocqueville and Emerson, Mill draws upon associations between poetry and aristocracy, and poetry and antiquity. Like both of those thinkers, he would leverage the account of a poet as foreign to democracy to make a number of claims. For starters (and in ways that parallel both Tocqueville's and Emerson's rhetorical use of poetry) he imagines his readers

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<sup>124</sup> I relate Mill's account of the literary practices necessary for public expression to what Dana Villa has identified as a more nebulous "feeling for public" as necessary for entering a space of expression, authenticity rather than adherence to prescribed norms. See Dana Villa, "Theatricality in the Public Realm of Hannah Arendt," in Marcel Henaff and Tracy Strong, eds., *Public Space and Democracy*, 144-171 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Villa that might be more helpful in defining Mill's account of publics in his description of poetry as compared to his description later of a procedural public sphere.

coming to the question of democratic poetry with skepticism. Thus we find Mill presenting his task in “What Is Poetry?” (1833) and “Two Kinds of Poetry” (1833) as a persuasive one: he must make the case that poetry can fit with, and even flourish in, a democratic polity.

For Mill, the literary genre of poetry, which he associates primarily with “classical antiquity,” presents challenges for denizens of modern democracies. It does not come as easily to modern subjects as it did to denizens of the ancient Greek public. While citizens of antiquity were free from “examining how the works of genius are created” and instead interested “in creating them” (1220), for Mill modern democrats are burdened with having to think about the representative tasks of poetry before they actually write poems. Mill’s question, “Whom, then, shall we call poets?” (1221), is in part a response to the dilemma common to each thinker I have considered: as part of determining whether democracy could have poetry, they had to determine what a democratic poet would look like. In so doing, Mill must consider how egalitarian norms would come to bear on the craft of poetry in the modern world.

Mill takes advantage of poetry’s ill fit with democracy to represent poetry as unburdened by democratic norms of communication. Inasmuch as they engaged in a foreign literary practice, poets could do for democratic subjects what these subjects could not do for themselves. In his appeal to the poet’s pre-modern or ancient provenance, Mill projects a preternaturally expressive figure who is able to improve on democratic worlds without being bound to the very norms and customs that are the target of his criticism.

The majority of Mill’s account of poetry appeals to the communicative practices of poetic address. Yet he also detaches “poetry” from any particular written texts. As a result, in his account the poet can refer variously to someone who wrote poems, to someone whose writings



played a particular role within the modern world, and to someone who embodied an ethos he defined as poetic. Mill's poet is a "variety of man, not solely the author of a particular variety of book" (1221); he can thus play a political role, which for Mill was democratic and privileged. "In an age of revolutions in opinion," he proposes, "if [poets] are not before their age, [they] are almost sure to be behind it" (1224). Mill characterizes poets as in service to democratic worlds to the extent that they remain outside or freed from the customary elements of modern democratic communicative practices.

The question at the heart of both "What Is Poetry?" (1833) and "Two Kinds of Poetry" (1833) is not simply, can democracy have poets?; instead, Mill wants to know what is at stake in our definition of poetry:.. if we could get poetry right, we could extend the expressive imperatives of democratic worlds in ways that non-literary communicative forms had little chance of doing. But what is particular about poetry that enables it to serve this particular role — and what are Mill's contrast categories?.

Poetry orients Mill to what I argue are a different but related set of concerns that emerge from his writings on democracy, which pertain primarily to human flourishing in the context of the tyranny of public opinion and pressures toward conformity in the realm of public speech. As other scholars show, Mill's concerns in his later political essays can appear more tangential in his poetic essays, especially compared to the role they would play in his political theorizing in *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*.

For Mill, poetry's unique capacity to thematize address, voice, and speech made it critically relevant in considering the challenges to individual expression that democratic citizens confronted. In particular, poetry addresses the challenge of authenticity in expressing emotional

depth. To be sure, emotional expression is not unique to the genre of poetry. For Mill, other forms of literary and artistic representation fill that role as well. What is special about poetry is how it requires its subjects (writers, readers, and speakers) to understand the mode of addressing others in a public context. As a form of communication in which “what we have said to ourselves” can be repeated to others and yet remain unmodified “by [their] presence,” poetry exemplifies speech freed from the distorting and diminishing effects of tyrannical public opinion.

Mill’s representation of a poetic communicative practice includes a description of what this ‘speech to no one’ could accomplish. Further, given how hard it might be to imagine, he attempts to describe what such untargeted address might look like in practice. He captures its particularly most succinctly in contrasting it to public oratory:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling: but, if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling of the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind (1216).

The central quality of Mill’s definition is the figurative relation between writer/speaker and reader. Here he represents the difference between poetry and other forms of speech in terms of an imagined or actual addressee: poetry’s “peculiarity” is that its utterances are not directed to anyone. Defining poetry as merely an intense form of “the expression or utterance of feeling” is insufficient, he insists, because such emotive expressions are present in other forms: “eloquence, as well as poetry, [is] thoughts colored by feelings” (1215).<sup>125</sup> He continues: “the purpose of

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<sup>125</sup> As scholars point out, Mill begins “What is Poetry?” by arguing that we have “misapplied the word *poetry*” (1212).

acting upon the emotions, does not belong to poetry alone. It is equally the province (for example) of the novelist.”<sup>126</sup>

As historians of poetic theory have shown, Mill’s conceptualization of poetry as that which is “overheard” would become consolidated as the privileged if not singular model for theorizing poetry in a modern context. His account of poetry has been described as offering a theory of what we now call the lyric form and what in the twentieth century came to be understood as the primary and ideal form of nineteenth-century poetics. But perhaps Mill is not offering an encompassing theory of what poetry should be: perhaps he is instead offering an ideal of democratic communication, as expressed in poetry. To be sure, he draws on a range of sources in his articulation of what distinguished poetry, sources that likewise contributed to the consolidation of a model of poetry as unuttered thoughts and solitary address. But unlike these other accounts, Mill’s remains entwined with concerns about democratic speech

Mill’s essays on poetry mark one way he processes and makes intelligible multiple elements of his account of public expression in mass publics — elements that would ultimately factor into his account of an idealized (but also dystopic) public sphere. Poetry fills an early ideal of a form of communication that might circumvent public pressures on authenticity, including the ways that any kind of interaction in democracy is always potentially threatened (if also enabled) by the demands of communication in public. His extreme account of poetry as complete

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<sup>126</sup> For Mill poetry is not expression in the same way that a particular response to an object might be expression, but rather a representation “arranged in the colors and seen through the medium of imagination.” Poetry is “the imagery which is felt to harmonize with feeling” (1220) at the expense of a potential loss of poetry as those “single figures” or “single heads” (1218, 1219), and a capacity to represent “the likenesses and contrasts which might occur to a mind contemplating” that object (1215).

reproduction of thoughts in private only suggests the extent to which he perceives the pressures of democratic speech to be insidious and requiring an articulated response.

### *Reading Poetry in Democratic Politics*

In Mill's account of poetry, he is not always explicit that the problems he takes up are political in nature. Again, in some ways his poetry cannot be theorized as a "response" to the challenges he would define later or compared to the solutions he would develop. Yet the essays on poetry were also published in the years Mill was reading and publishing inquiries into mass democracy. These came through encounters with Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, among other texts.<sup>127</sup> In his early essays on "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [I]" (1835), "State of Society in America" (1835), and "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II]", (1840) Mill draws on characterizations of America to develop early visions of where public communicative practice was heading. Given a "republic peopled with a provincial middle class," Mill projects forms of communication unsuited for human flourishing.<sup>128</sup> Democrats faced an "irresistible tendency to equality of conditions" and "leveling influences." As a consequence, "provincials dare not be themselves; they dare do nothing for which they have not, or think they have not, a warrant from the metropolis," Mill writes, expressing a common sentiment on the

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<sup>127</sup> These include "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [I] (1835)," "State of Society in America" (1835), and "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II] (1840).

<sup>128</sup> Mill in Robson, ed., *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18.

relationship between American literature and that of Europe.<sup>129</sup> The “characteristic” of American literature, he laments, “is imitation.”<sup>130</sup>

Mill’s account of the power of the poet, brought into a modern context, nonetheless appears as a precursor to early features of what he sought to achieve in democracy. The poet represents “the delineation of the deeper and more secret workings of the human heart” (1214). Similar goals would be expressed later in his more well-known appeals to “spontaneity,” “experiments in living,” “eccentricity,” and “self-development,” which he would seek to cultivate within what he conceived as a free marketplace of ideas.<sup>131</sup> The poet has access to different means to achieve these goals. But we can nonetheless think in terms of parallel goals articulated between what political theorist Graeme Duncan’s identifies as Mill’s diagnosis of democratic subjects as “incapable of freeing themselves from the trammels of custom and tradition” and his accounts of readers and writers of poetry.<sup>132</sup>

Mill frames the poetic less as a means of resistance to political docility and social conformity than as a antidote to what he identifies as a declining “largeness either to [common democrats’] conceptions or to their sentiments.” Put another way, Mill seems to lament the loss not of what he later terms eccentric experiences but rather a more aesthetically (and perhaps aristocratically) inflected “grandeur, a loveliness, a cheerfulness, a wildness, a melancholy, a terror” in democratic lives (1219). Expressing these qualities is an essential part of the literary

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>130</sup> Mill, “De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II],” pp. 150, 196.

<sup>131</sup> David Russell, “Aesthetic Liberalism: John Stuart Mill as Essayist,” *Victorian Studies* 56:1 (2013), p. 15.

<sup>132</sup> Duncan, *Marx and Mill*, p. 260.

and communicative practices of democracy for Mill. Taken together, these dual commitments to human flourishing as resistance to docility and as capacious expression reveal the extent to which he connected expressive authenticity (of either feelings or public opinion) to his substantive vision of human flourishing. Democracy required suitable forms of communication. To mitigate and harness its expressive possibilities, Mill seeks only those forms that might be responsive to new pressures on public speech including conformity, tyranny of opinion, and the subjects' own reticence to make public their innermost, sensitive thoughts.<sup>133</sup>

Mill's account of poetry, then, is part of an early attempt not just to respond to political pressures but also, in its very conception, to name and define them. Poetry is one means he uses to orient readers to the new forms of power that democracy had unleashed, even as it made new forms of equality and collective life possible. Mill certainly uses poetry to retrieve "what was good in the influences of aristocracy . . . within a well-regulated democracy," but recent scholars have tended to see such aristocratic appeals as an effort to rework democratic ideals in ways that minimize the importance of collective life.<sup>134</sup> Alan Kahan, for example, suggests that poetry may serve what he calls Mill's investment in "the primacy of individuality and diversity," over and against the mediocrity of the democratic masses.<sup>135</sup> But it is not clear that Mill's interest in poetry can be reduced to a concern with promoting individuality. If he believes that poetry enabled human flourishing of some kind, then he must connect human flourishing to a

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<sup>133</sup> There are other paths/connections we could draw between Mill's essays on poetry and public sphere. For example, poetry was associated not just with fall back to liberal proceduralism but a romantic ethos. Disassociating poetry from literary techniques actually enhanced its association of a breach with rules. "Ordinary education and the ordinary course of life are constantly at work counteracting this quality of mind," he concluded (1225).

<sup>134</sup> Mill, "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [I]," p. 54.

<sup>135</sup> Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*, p. 5.

communicative practice, and specifically, to the strategies of address specifically enabled by poetry.

At same time, Mill's account of poetry is not just a way to contest democracy. Instead, and as importantly, his account represents democracy as enabling the very relations that might enhance poetic possibilities: namely, by orientating actors to one another as equals. Equality between speakers might enhance possibilities for authentic expression and the depth of emotional exchange to which Mill's readers and writers of poetry aspire. In order to understand how he sees political pressures affecting the communication of authentic emotion, we need to look more closely at how he represents communication in poetry.

Reading Mill's account of poetry as a means to make forms of democratic coercion intelligible can be done in parallel (and in contrast) to some of his persistent concerns. Literary scholars have made observations about the imagined uses of poetry vis-à-vis the projects Mill would eventually adopt as core to his political practices. David Russell, for example, emphasizes how Mill's poetic subject — the subject of solitary address — responds to pressures on personal expression that demand conformity. The desire to imagine away an audience in Mill's representation of poetry is, for Russell, an attempt by Mill to circumvent any and all norms of communication, including those associated with public exchange in a market place of ideas, which “can itself weigh on the manifold diversity of paths” that Mill valued.<sup>136</sup> Russell thus

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<sup>136</sup> Russell, “Aesthetic Liberalism,” p 16. Russel (p. 10) calls these “essays in the art of relationality” that aim to “provide alternative structures and spaces of communication between people.” For him, poetry completes the open, inclusive, and eccentric goals of Mill's proceduralism that itself is marred by its own emphasis on rules of engagement. Poetry makes legible a set of “constrictions of unreflecting custom, habit, and prejudice” that a marketplace of ideas may only reinforce (p. 15). According to Russell, Mill's poet works against a public sphere that “militates against diversity of inclination and experience” (p. 16).

reads Mill's poetry as attentive to the multiplication of directives on how to communicate.<sup>137</sup>

Mill privileges poetry for engendering "precisely the kind of character, following her own inclinations without compliance to public prejudice," that is prescribed in *On Liberty*.<sup>138</sup>

Whereas for Russell, Mill's version of poetry anticipates and surpasses the norms of public communication he would develop later, John Plotz reads Mill's poet as subverting democratic norms of communication by enacting an intimate relation not possible in the public sphere. For Plotz, Mill's account of poetry in "What Is Poetry?" is more compatible with the democratic communicative practices he idealizes in *On Liberty* (1859). But poetry achieves its desired outcome by bracketing, rather than navigating, "the insidious and invasive powers of the social realm."<sup>139</sup> In both readings, Mill represents poetry as stimulating self-expression to the extent that it circumvents elements of a democratic public. For Plotz, the "traps of communication" presented by Mill "may be circumvented by taking refuge, and taking pleasure, in text-based intimacy."<sup>140</sup>

There is no doubt that the liberal democratic themes of Mill's work in *On Liberty* (and *The Subjection of Women*) loom as concepts on the horizon in his account of poetry. Poetry's status as a literary form extends the sites he envisions and is, in turn, taken up by Mill as an ethos

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<sup>137</sup> Mill, in Robson, ed., *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18. Along with Tocqueville, Mill sees "the ever-increasing intervention of the people, and of all classes of the people, in their own affairs" was an intractable feature of modern government (p. 159). Relatedly, he sees aspects of virtue training: "It is not without reason that M. de Tocqueville considers local democracy to be the school as well as the safety-valve of democracy in the state,—the means of training the people to the good use of that power" (p. 63). Mill was resigned to mass democracy on the American model and so viewed his task "not to determine whether democracy shall come, but how to make the best of it when it does come" (p. 50).

<sup>138</sup> Russell, "Aesthetic Liberalism: John Stuart Mill as Essayist," p. 21.

<sup>139</sup> John Plotz, "Antisocial Fictions: Mill and the Novel," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43:1 (2010), pp. 38-46.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 44.



of communication. But does Mill use and appeal to poetry as a literary genre in the same way he appeals to norms and standards of communication? If, as Russell's reading shows, Mill's definition of the poetic is designed to circumvent or surpass the very procedural and communicative standards he would develop in his theory of the democratic public sphere, Russell risks downplaying ways Mill has to think the poet's preternatural expressive gifts in relation to the egalitarian norms of modern democracy. These connections, I suggest, make it difficult to characterize poetic expression as freed from any and all normative constraints, especially those of equality.

At the same time, because Mill represents the poetry-as-political *ideal* (so not as an actual mode of interaction) poetry serves as an ideal of communication in a different way. For example, Mill's poetry is not explicitly a response to norms of communication.. Rather, he seems to instrumentalize poetry as a means to highlight an antagonistic relationship within both public and intimate forms of expression. The poet's preternatural capacity to express the "laws of human emotion . . . written in large characters" requires that he be distanced from both public norms and intimate relations of communication (1214).<sup>141</sup>

The crucial difference in Mill's account of the poet's subjects (its readers and writers, but also the figures its asks its readers and writers to hold in mind) is that these subjects are imagined to relate to each other as objects of address and voice, and not necessarily as public or intimate subjects. Although perfecting that public/intimate relation can yield or enable a level of

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<sup>141</sup> See Karen E. Whedbee, "John Stuart Mill on Poetry and Rhetoric," *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*, 7:1 (2004): pp. 17-29, p. 23. Whedbee argues Mill's account of poetry was most likely an extension of William Wordsworth's definition of poetry in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Here, poetry is best understood as a self-expression of a mind in solitude, rather than with the emphasis on communication of feelings. See also Jackson and Prins, "General Introduction," p. 3, who credit Wordsworth's preface as marking a "shift not only in the fortunes of the lyric but also in the conceit of the form and function of literary genres."

emotional expression that Mill values, the content and function of intimate or public expression seems secondary to the effect of establishing a relationship of overheard communication in the figure of poetry.<sup>142</sup>

Mill, of course, uses a range of idioms of intimacy, nonconformity, distinction, and privacy to describe poetic literature. In so doing he makes poetic expression analogous to the relations between interlocutors.<sup>143</sup> For example, poetry is “a soliloquy in full dress and on the stage”; poetry is what happens when words are written without any intention of being published but still “printed on hot-pressed paper, and sold at a bookseller’s shop”; finally, Mill compares poetry to a “song [that] has always seemed to us like the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen, in the next” (1217).<sup>144</sup> And yet, Mill represents poetry *itself* as a mode of address, a strategy for getting one words and thoughts to another.

The model of “overheard” communication is not an obvious resource for constructing a political ethos. The primary distinction Mill draws between poetry and other forms of persuasive prose reflects what Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have argued is “a distinction between

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<sup>142</sup> At the very start of “Two Kinds of Poetry,” for example, “One may write genuine poetry, and not be a poet” (p. 1221), but instead “something which does not even require the instrument of words.” This also frees poetry from poetic practice including individual demonstrations of poetic achievement (p. 1212). It also differs from expression as a representation of states of mind like “fervid imagination” or a “State of feeling”. More than mere “graceful, even beautiful, decoration to a thought” (1223), poetry is insufficiently captured by virtue of adding a “halo of feeling” to thoughts and ideas (p. 1222). Instead Mill describes poetry in order to “paint the human soul truly” (p. 1214). Cast now as a “quality of mind,” Mill can elaborate on the relation between that quality and democracy.

<sup>143</sup> But at other moments he gives up: “Whether explained or not, [this difference]” for Mill “is felt to be fundamental” (p. 1212).

<sup>144</sup> Within Mill’s immediate circle of British utilitarians, the figure of the poet was a subject of literary and political inquiry. See Jeremy Bentham, in J. Bowring, ed., *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, in two vols. (Edinburgh: W. Tait and Simpkin Marshall, 1843). For example, Jeremy Bentham wrote that poetry draws “false analogies, and gather[ed] round the truth a mist” of personal mental relations (p. 307). In “John Stuart Mill on Poetry and Rhetoric,” Whedbee (p. 20) argues that Bentham had a “conception of poets as paid performers whose wit could be hired.”

discursive modes of direct and indirect address.”<sup>145</sup> The element of unknowable indirection in public sphere theorists’ account of public address is different from the intentional indirection or rerouting of address to its intended recipient that Mill identifies in poetry. Indirect address can be achieved in several ways: it can be overheard, as Mill explains in his vision of the eavesdropper; it can be imagined to be accidentally heard, as Mill does with his example of poetry as like “the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen, in the next” (1217); or it can be done in the presence of someone but without speaking directly to them.

Indirect address was valuable for Mill as the means through which a speaker or writer could “cut fresh channels for thought” (1212). The emotional authenticity necessary for democracy could be achieved by imagining the repetition of unuttered thoughts in public, thereby imagining away an audience that was ultimately (but not at the outset) critical to poetic address.

Democratic theorists in particular have been critical of Mill’s (and others’) account of this lyric form of poetry as detrimental to democratic practice. The image of poetic address as the expression of solitary thoughts, for example, looks to some like an anti-democratic turn away from public communication in public. Consider Michael Warner’s critique of communication as the expression of unuttered thoughts to be a fantasy of the “self-communion of the speaker.”<sup>146</sup> Adverse to the risk of public uptake and to the distortions of communication that inevitably arise in public contexts, Mill’s vision of poetry marks for Warner the limits to democratic

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<sup>145</sup> Jackson and Prins, “General Introduction,” p. 3.

<sup>146</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 81. For Warner the idea of the lyric is “constructing both an ideal self-presence for the speaking voice and an ideal intimacy between that voice and ourselves.”

communication. Elaine Hadley also describes Mill's account of poetry as an analogy of "one mind 'operating' on one mind at a time" — a popular Victorian discourse of poetry.<sup>147</sup> In this vision of communication, Hadley suggests, "one's thoughts about the social whole pointedly substitute for the clamorous public 'debate'" and so become a means to replace actual interaction with an ideal. As with Plotz's characterization of Mill's poetry as "taking pleasure in text-based intimacy," Hadley's interpretation underscores how Mill's vision of poetry responds to democratic pressures through a fantasy of withdrawal and substitution.<sup>148</sup> That is, Mill seeks to replace public communication with the ideal of what we might call an intimate form of communication — if "self-communion" is communication at all. In a similar fashion, Jason Frank identifies the lyric tradition with an "undemocratically unitary theory of the subject as expressed by speech."<sup>149</sup>

There is good reason to evaluate the fantasy of solitary and so undistorted communication as at odds with democratic expression. Yet I am not persuaded that Mill's model of overheard speech is at odds with mass publics. Which is to say: his account of poetry is best understood, not as a turn away from publics, but rather as a means of being public differently. It is precisely

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<sup>147</sup> Elaine Hadley, "On a Darkling Plain: Victorian Liberalism and the Fantasy of Agency," *Victorian Studies* 48:1 (2005), p. 94.

<sup>148</sup> Plotz, "Antisocial Fictions," pp. 39, 44. To be clear, for Plotz this is not a retreat for "social intercourse" (p. 39), but a remaking of the relevant models and tropes. "Mill eventually decides that immersing oneself in the written emotions and thoughts of others is the best way for individuals to participate in a community without becoming rigidly committed to oppressive everyday social roles" — that is, "lonely readers overhearing lonely writers" (p. 39). For these scholars, texts offer "indirect emotional affiliation with one another" (p. 44) but one that offers "sociality, but without actual society."

<sup>149</sup> Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Frank argues (p. 198) that Mill presents the "individual as the fount of meaning." Here Frank interprets and draws on M.M. Bakhtin's vision of lyric poetry as "attempts to cleanse language of heteroglot associations" (p. 198). See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. ed. Michael Holquist. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

because he casts poetry as a re-presentation to others of what one has thought in solitude, that Mill's version of poetry always anticipates a public.

For example, at the same time that Mill posits poetry as a version of “what we have said or done in solitude [and that] we may voluntarily reproduce when we know that other eyes are upon us,” it remains the case that poetry is incomplete without that voluntary reproduction of feelings; further, the poet must do this “as he is conscious that he *should* feel them, though they were to remain forever unuttered.” Likewise, the poet seeks to resist “express[ing] the feelings of one person as modified by the presence of others” but must also express what he “*knows that others* feel . . . in similar circumstances of solitude.” By drawing references almost exclusively to public performance—including the stage and published texts—poetry appears to serve as a public means of expression whose terms and tensions become lost if we cast them as anti-democratic. As Virginia Jackson has argued, reading the poetic lyric as a “temporally self-present or unmediated” mode of address is to deny poetry its own economy.<sup>150</sup> And in the end, Mill's plea for a model of overheard speech itself falls back on an account of an economy of circulation.<sup>151</sup>

Rather than anti-egalitarian or anti-democratic, Mill's account of poetry seeks to extend democratic practice by preserving equal relations between actors through (imagined) overheard speech. Rather than understanding poetry as resolving democratic tension, he uses it to push

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<sup>150</sup> Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>151</sup> Jackson and Prins, “General Introduction,” p. 3. The indirection of address is different than what other scholars have defined as the affordances of public address in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. See Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in 18<sup>th</sup> Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). As Jackson notes in *Dickinson's Misery*, the poem's generic contract or set of expectations is that “it is up to us, as sophisticated readers of the genre, to know that it is” ultimately directed to us (p. 57).

democratic imperatives to an extreme. This explains why Mill's vision of poetry is so highly pressurized: the possibility of speech as entirely reproduced from thoughts one has without any consciousness of a listener is an immensely difficult ideal. As Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins note, "such extravagant metaphors testify to the peculiar pressures on the notion of the lyric ideal in the nineteenth century, yet they also indicate that even a writer like Mill . . . knew that his requirement that the lyric poet be unconscious of the audience always already posed a problem."<sup>152</sup> In the final section I argue that that problem is one Mill diagnoses as endemic within norms of egalitarian communication.

*Poetic Pressure and the Metaphor of "Prisoner's Lament"*

Mill's account of poetry, if it represents communication in any ideal way, is intimate — or at least draws on intimacy as a metaphor. A model of overheard speech also relies on an intimate moment of self-address. Adela Pinch argues that Mill's vision of poetry is closely linked with the models of intimacy that he conceived later in this career. Pinch identifies intimacy as a model that persists throughout Mill's own career as an idealized communicative scenario. In fact, correcting the way that his interest in the intimate as ideal is often taken, Pinch suggests that one way to read his account is as a response to the pressure to make intimate figures of speech an ideal of democracy.<sup>153</sup> Put another way, Mill understands the authentic expression that results from intimacy to be an imperative of democratic speech but one that, when applied to democratic practice, is nearly always too difficult to execute.

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<sup>152</sup> Jackson and Prins, "General Introduction," p. 4.

<sup>153</sup> Adela Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 11.

Pinch argues that Mill's attempts to represent the intimate as a form of perfected communication holds tensions in place that he is unwilling to fully conceal. For example, one kind of problem that Mill identifies is an inability to maintain the conditions of or relations of intimacy that might allow for authentic expression. He finds in intimate communication between partners, for example, that "there is the most complete unity of feeling and community of interests as to all external things, yet the one has as little admission into the internal life or fate of the other as if they were common acquaintance."<sup>154</sup> Pinch argues that while intimacy appears at first to generate a kind of equality between speakers, such equality gets in the way of authentic expression.<sup>155</sup> Because intimate communication is unsustainable as a model, Mill turns to literary forms, namely poetry. Pinch points to another analogy used by Mill in this context (one that was popular in many accounts of Victorian lyric poetry): the model of thinking rather than conversation as a means of recreating the goals of intimate communication. "Thinking" as a metaphor enables Mill to imagine poetry as circumventing forms of direct address. Yet his appeals to "not-speaking" or "non-voicing" (i.e., attempts to turn speaking into thinking) also turn thought into a form of address.<sup>156</sup>

For Mill's, however, the attempt to remove the possibility of an audience from the mind of a speaker suggests that he is responding to the same pressure all over again — in which the very ability to conjure someone to address upends or upsets the very relation of equality he hopes to extend as necessary for authentic expression. Paradoxically, the moment one conjures an

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<sup>154</sup> Mill in Collini, ed., *On Liberty and Other Writings*, p. 44.

<sup>155</sup> Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing*, p. 95.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96 and 90.

addressee, the possibility of truly authentic expression is upended. Just as with his concerns over intimate address, Mill imagines that a relation in which one holds someone fully in mind entails the very power to replace their presence with a mental image, thus upsetting the the balance between the two interlocutors. I argue that the idiomatic model of poetry that Mill devises is a response to what he constructs as, to use Pinch's terms, the "non-egalitarian nature of having another person *in mind*" (88).<sup>157</sup> For Pinch, in Mill's account "the possibility of purely mental relations would seem to be both ideal, and more highly charged" (103); he seems to contemplate whether "the act of thinking about the other can constitute a form of damage to him or her" (104). The poetic practice of rejecting even the possibility of "thinking about another" is an attempt to relieve the pressure of approaching an egalitarian relation between speakers that immediately threatens to undo the terms of that relation. Mill's conception of what Pinch calls a "sublimely bossy sovereignty" points to the perception that the power of addressing an equal — or being addressed by one — is both necessary for democratic communication and almost impossible to sustain.<sup>158</sup>

Mill is suggesting that the need to sustain egalitarian relations that would permit authentic expression itself threatens to undo those relations, by granting a form of power over the other. The removal of all traces of an addressee is an attempt to idealize poetic communication. An appeal to overheard communication can be theorized as a means to imagine a situation where Pinch's "sublimely bossy sovereignty" could be managed.

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 91. Pinch is less confident that such models of thinking dispel Mill's worries. Instead, they invite new questions that permeate Victorian ideas of association, mesmerism, intimacy, and poetry. Pinch (pp. 87-88) writes, "is thinking about someone the next best thing to being with them, or only a pale and disappointing substitute? Does it bring a person closer, or push them further away? Does it create, or destroy them?" And, we might add, what violence is involved?



On this reading, Mill's poetry attempts to work against what Hadley describes as "one's thoughts about the social whole pointedly substitute[d] for the clamorous public 'debate'," or what Plotz calls the attempt to "represent all the positive features of ordinary social life—hearing others speak, making them mentally present, catching hold of their feelings and responding, within one's own mind."<sup>159</sup> Rather, in attempting to circumvent the pressures of democratic speech by tracing the challenges of implementing an ideal of intimate expression, Mill ends up with strange forms of mental representation that he must then dispense with.

Democracy enabled these powers writ large. Mill connects the spread of literacy in democratic America to a vision of a power to hold a full public in each subject's mind. "The power and the habit of reading begins to permeate the hitherto inert mass," he observes, and makes palpable the idea that "every individual who holds [books] knows that they are held by the multitude."<sup>160</sup> Mill here recounts the opening of egalitarian norms that sustained a vision of one mind possessing the capacity to represent and even replace the whole — a vision for which poetry in particular seemed primed. But this power also upsets the dynamics of egalitarian relations. The power to "hold . . . the multitude" in one's mind that is enabled by egalitarian norms also threatens to undermine equality between speakers. Mill's poetic figure is the product of attempting to mitigate that outcome.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> See Plotz, "Antisocial Fictions," who suggests that Mill seeks to represent communication "[without] any of the viscosity, the dreadful demands of intimate human contact that, to writers like Mill... can seem a suffocating component of social interplay," p. 41.

<sup>160</sup> Mill in Robson, ed., *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18, p. 50.

<sup>161</sup> Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, p. 146. Put another way, Mill in his essays on poetry seems equally worried about what for Virginia Jackson is central to Emily Dickinson's attempt to "strategically renounc[e]... not the presence of the other (the presence of what is absent) but the way in which figurative language works to replace that other with an illusion of presence."

In the final section I examine one of the metaphors connected to politics as a means to highlight how Mill represents a paradox in communication. Accounts of Mill's poetry that represent poetry as a "resolution" to a problem of democracy are only partly right, because poetry is also an effect or product of the paradoxical relations Mill hopes to represent through it. His account of poetry can be read as an expression of the pressures that he believes are brought to bear on poetry from democracy rather than an attempt to solve them. That the poet has to compose "unuttered thoughts that have no other means of being expressed except through words" means that he is representing a paradox.<sup>162</sup>

The pressures on Mill's poetry and their relation to politics is best seen in his analogy of poetry as "the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen, in the next" (1217).<sup>163</sup> Mill states that the poet expresses a thought to some unknown audience but "no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself" (1216). Further, Mill wants the expression of emotions like grief and pity, but "grief, taking the form of a prayer, or of a complaint becomes oratorical" and is no longer poetry (1217).<sup>164</sup> The scene of the prison, however, reveals something far more uncertain than a "soliloquy in full dress" or thoughts "printed on hot-pressed paper." The analogy between poetry and the prisoner's lament t

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<sup>162</sup> For Mill (p. 1221), "the poet, no more than any other person who writes... has any means of communicating even these but by words."

<sup>163</sup> Warner, *Publics And Counterpublics*, p. 81. The sheer proliferation of analogies suggest that poetry is not an unmediated relationship. Rather than, in Warner's phrasing, the "insertion into the self-communion of the speaker," the prison analogy attempts to turn to indirect address into a relational category. See also Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, p. 129. Rather than an intersubjectivity that, as Jackson suggests, "must be achieved by denying to the poem any intersubjective economy of its own," Mill's prison analogy — along with the inequality and coercion it entails — are the terms of the intersubjective economy of his poetry.

<sup>164</sup> See also Whedbee, "J. S. Mill on Poetry and Rhetoric" for an account of Mill's definition of poetry as split between participation and withdrawal from the public: "the poet somehow must stand simultaneously as an exile from the world and as a participant in the world" (at p. 23).

is less an outlier within otherwise power-free accounts of expression. Rather, it puts questions of power that have lingered in Mill's account of poetry front and center. The choice of the analogy of prison as a form of imposed solitude reflects an attempt, I argue, to bring an account of power to the figurative language of co-presence and representation.

The analogy of the solitary prison cell appears all the more intentional as we imagine how alternative analogies could have sufficed if the intention of the analogy was simply to depict solitude: for that purpose, analogies to darkness or distance might have worked. Expression from within darkness might capture the sense of an inability to know when one is overheard and would likewise have highlighted the mystery and thrill of unexpected and unknowable interlocutors nearby. Metaphors of distance—of being at a vast remove from one's interlocutors—might have had the same effect.

Mill's conjuring of a prisoner's call, to another prisoner, underscores the role that a vision of subordination and disempowerment play in his ideal of expression. In this account, a prisoner's call serves to enforce the alienation that becomes the condition of equality. The prison rests explicitly on separation from others through political force. The analogy of the prisoner's lament stands out among Mill's metaphors—and is cited often in accounts of his theory of poetry—to the extent that it entwines expression with forms of coercion, unmediated exchange within a coerced space, and physical entrapment with successful communication.

Scholars have read the poetry-as-prisoner's-lament analogy in several ways that downplay the appeal to a political institution. For Virginia Jackson, the "poet's solitude stands in for the solitude of the individual reader" while the figure of voice helps "bridg[e] the otherwise

incommutable distance between one ‘solitary cell’ and another.”<sup>165</sup> Yet such a reading overlooks the conditions that make individual exclusivity resonant with solitary confinement in the first place. If we consider the whole scene, “voice” alone is not enough: also needed is the relation established between two prisoners. For Russell, the prison walls serve as a “transmitting obliquity” that generates a speaker or writer “uncertain of its audience” which in turn assures perfected communication.<sup>166</sup> Yet the focus on a distortion or uncertainty misses how an “obliquity” in this analogy is the product of coercion and confinement.

If Mill’s goal is to seek a model that brings interlocutors together in egalitarian relations and to hold, as long as possible, that relation as they address each other, the analogy of the prison cell reveals the coercion Mill is willing to draw on as part and parcel of that imperative. It also represents an inability to emerge from that relation voluntarily. And yet, the prison analogy, reveals the coercive components that have been, from the beginning, at the center of Mill’s attempt to represent free exchange. It demands coordination with others and conformity to what the condition of solitude demands.

Through the analogy of the prison cell Mill seeks to represent the sheer power of address and the ability to conjure others. It serves as a caution against presupposing that we are being hailed on the terms that either party can fairly establish..

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<sup>165</sup> Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery*, p. 132. Jackson compares Mill’s prison analogy to similar tropes of interlocution in nineteenth-century poetry as “a private moment yet unpublicized, a moment before or outside literature.” Yet unlike analogies that recall “modern readers to an archaic moment of handwritten composition and personal encounter,” the prison metaphor functions differently. Mill’s metaphor of a voice between prison cells is neither in or outside of literature, neither before or after publication, but rather appeals to a form of communication that is, if anything, illicit.

<sup>166</sup> David Russell posits “other forms of relation than the conflictual.” Russell, “Aesthetic Liberalism,” p. 22.

### *Conclusion*

Mill's accounts of poetry's archaic status allow him to introduce an incompatibility between poetry and democratic expression that becomes a central tension within democracy as he understands it. As he explores the imperative to model democracy on intimate modes of communication in order to preserve egalitarian relations between democratic actors, he finds that those very imperatives cultivate modes of address that themselves cannot sustain the egalitarian norms they are intended to preserve.

Mill's essays on poetry precede his accounts of the public sphere. Mill uses poetry as the overheard utterance spoken in solitude not to enforce liberal spontaneity and free exchange, but to question the figurative language we use to imagine and enforce democratic address in the first place. Through his appeal to poetry, he reveals a coercive core at the center of this process — the power to hold in one's mind the multitude of democratic publics — yet one that is enabled by egalitarian norms. The misidentification of Mill's poetry as part of his appeal to resist democratic communication through withdrawal, anti-sociality, and even aristocracy, misses poetry as a unique attempt to wrestle with the norms of communication that preoccupied him throughout his writing career.

## CONCLUSION

### **The Idioms of Poetic Citizenship: Representing Literature as Political Practice in Nineteenth-century America**

How and whether Americans read and wrote poetry served as a highly charged component of inquiries into democracy in the nineteenth century. Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill oriented readers to aesthetic practices that they believed ought to accompany practices of political engagement and expression. In the process, they also introduced aesthetic considerations as salient to democratic theorizing. In poetry they saw a literary genre whose characteristic writing practices—the expression of deep emotion and the representation of beauty—corresponded to a crucial but also threatened aspect of political life: namely, the possibility of human flourishing under conditions of (modern, mass) democracy. What Tocqueville’s, Emerson’s, and Mill’s preoccupations with poetry thus reveal, I have argued, is the importance of aesthetic (in)equality in assessing democracy’s promise of political egalitarianism: for these nineteenth-century thinkers, fulfilling that promise required attention to hierarchies rooted in the aesthetic “worthiness” of citizens’ lives. I conclude this study by revisiting the conceptualization of poetry as aesthetic practice and in particular, how such an approach expands our understanding of democratic theory and critique.

In preceding chapters I sought to center the role of aesthetic concerns in the accounts of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill. But until now I have linked poetry to the establishment of idioms and practices crucial to their democratic politics, without examining in any detail how their inquiries into poetry also served as a mode of criticizing democracy. For theorists who are associated with thinking both “beyond” or “below” what formal egalitarian political and civic rights can offer and at the level of self-cultivation and the enlargement of character (what I will call “individual development”), those two components are not always joined together. This is in part because they seem to suggest different priorities within democratic theory: to analyze, advocate, and debate the extension of equality to different realms of citizen interaction and to explore what (if any) version of human flourishing democracy promotes. Yet I have been suggesting throughout that the two are inseparable in the thinking of Tocqueville, Emerson and Mill, and that understanding this inseparability entails attending to their appeals to aesthetic practices. And poetry, I argue, is a privileged site for such inquiry into how they understood the relationship between aesthetics and democracy.

In what follows I link Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill’s account of poetry to a broader tradition of democratic criticism centered on the relationship between aesthetics and politics. In looking for poetry in America, they look simultaneously for practices that will make suitable democratic subjects. While it may not be surprising that the aesthetic gets privileged as a realm of practices that may work against democratic despotism, conformity, and coercion through engendering self-cultivation, I argue that the political relevance of aesthetic practices is an effect of their dramatization of the poet in America. It was not inevitable that they would connect poetry to ideals of self-composure or a politics of anti-complicity. But in the process of

connecting them, I argue, they make individual development — and attendant aesthetic practices — key to their evaluation of the limits of formal equality, including how and where equality can and ought to function as a norm of human practices. In turn, using practices of individual development as a contrast category to the formal practices and mechanisms of political equality helped to shape their representation and criticism of democracy.

I begin by tracing how their appeal to the poetic introduces an ambiguity in the representation of the people. By representing “the poet” as variously pre-modern, anti-democratic, and preternaturally expressive, he appears in their accounts as unburdened by democratic (communicative) norms and less susceptible to the pressures on modern democratic subjectivity. As a result, they enter a long tradition of theorizing an antagonism between aesthetic practices and democratic regimes, but they do so through the particular figure of the poet. Poetry is made politically relevant for actors-qua-democrats insofar as it is imagined to generate egalitarian relations rather than hierarchical ones and to direct adoration towards the subject of popular sovereignty. Poetry thus names an aesthetic practice that extends the work of equality and belonging by expanding the idioms of politic association to registers of sensuous encounter, affective response, and deep emotional affiliation. Making the poet democratic is, I argue, a mode of dramatizing a new relation between aesthetics and democracy.

In the first section I review the ways Tocqueville’s, Emerson’s, and Mill’s accounts of poetry insert them not only into theoretical conversations about democracy and aesthetics but into the practical discourse around aesthetics and poetry. They take up the relationship between politics and aesthetics by turning to a popular literary genre whose uncertain fate in America might give them clues about that relationship. In the second section I explore how the poet is



transformed into a democratic station. My account of the connections between poetry and politics resonates with literary scholarship on nineteenth-century poetry; at the same time, I argue, my thinkers dramatize poetry as being “introduced” to democracy from a distant time and place.<sup>167</sup>

In the third section I consider why the aesthetic practices associated with poetry were imagined to extend equality in ways that formal egalitarian rights and inclusion could not. In the final section I explore if and how each thinker mobilizes idioms of “the beauty of the popular” as a means of challenging informal hierarchies of “high” and “low” subjects. Were appeals to the practices of human flourishing important for a notion of equality in Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill? I conclude that although they do not take up relations of inequality that many consider exemplary of the period (e.g., slavery, property ownership, class) as central concerns, they do register the consequences of such inequality in the realm of the aesthetic, as they (re)imagine the subjects—elite versus popular—that are suitable for poetic representation.

### *Theorizing aesthetic practices by dramatizing the poet*

Recent scholarship on what constitutes the “democratic” contributions of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill is united in its identification of each thinker’s dissatisfaction with or disdain for formal egalitarian institutions and idioms of collective belonging. In broad terms, the

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<sup>167</sup> See Tricia Lootens, “States of Exile,” in *The Traffic In Poems: Nineteenth-century Poetry And Transatlantic Exchange*, ed. Meredith L. McGill. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008; Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Stein, *Early African American Print Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012; Michael Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2015); and Meredith L. McGill, *The Traffic In Poems: Nineteenth-century Poetry And Transatlantic Exchange*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008

“democratic” recovery undertaken by some scholars (often but not always associated with liberal individualism) centers on the practices of individual distinction that resist pressures of conformity, mediocrity, and political docility— forms of coercion that formal egalitarian practices cannot address. A different set of scholars (often but not always associated with radical democratic theory) center on each thinker’s appeal to projects of collective world-making (below the site of the state) through which actors exercise the power and independence that will engender individual distinction and expression. In several recent examples, these emphases of each thinker converge but for scholars who emphasize very different political practices. For example, scholars point to Tocqueville’s criticism of a regime of propertied individualism and his appeal to decentralized, sub-state associations as evidence of his desire to introduce practices of collective power and equality “beyond” the state.<sup>168</sup> For George Shulman, Tocqueville emphasizes combatting “inequality, political docility, and cultural stagnation” through an appeal to the arts of association, over and against appeals to individual rights of expression and civic participation. By contrast, Nadia Urbinati understands Tocqueville’s criticism of democracy as a rejection of its equation with “mass mobilization or mass organization,” insisting instead on the centrality of “equal freedom of expression of each as single, not of the totality”.<sup>169</sup> These accounts point us in different directions—toward or away from collective processes, offering alternative visions of how Tocqueville understands the limits of democratic equality (that is, what formal egalitarian practices ignore or leave out) and likewise of the resources he draws on

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<sup>168</sup> Shulman, “A Tocqueville for our Time”; Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*; Avramenko, “The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy”, Nadia Urbinati, “Democracy and Populism”, *Constellation* 5.1 (1998).

<sup>169</sup> Shulman, “A Tocqueville for our Time,” p. 85; Urbinati, “Democracy and Populism” , p. 121

in identifying ameliorative practices that take place beyond politics “proper” and orient subjects towards (and are necessary for) their individual development. Though taken together the accounts may point to the dual imperative for collective sites of power that enable individual distinction, I suggest that what may also be at stake in how we conceive of the proper practices “below” formal equality are the unexplored and unrecovered practices of human flourishing to which each thinker appeals.

Recent scholarship on Emerson’s democratic contributions reflect similar tensions. For example, his writing on modes of resistance to regimes through acts of withdrawal as well as his mystical appeals to idioms of collective thought and universal soul are both linked to engendering independence and human flourishing.<sup>170</sup> Both seem crucial to individual development, but each set of practices points to largely disparate notions of what human flourishing means within Emerson’s account. Even less clear are how (and for whom) each set of practices is accessible to individual subjects who Emerson understood as differently positioned vis-a-vis their relations to beauty and aesthetic value. Finally, Mill has been interpreted as thinking seriously about limits to procedural norms and standards of communication for mass democratic actors. His turn to poetry as a site of self-cultivating better suited to resisting coercion from the tyranny of opinion is evidence of his attention not only to ideal practices but to the sheer difficulty of overcoming coercion that operates through self-devaluation and inhibition of authentic expression.<sup>171</sup> Yet the range of practices scholars claim as necessary for forms of

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<sup>170</sup> Alan Levine and Daniel Malachuk, eds. *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

<sup>171</sup> Jennie Ikuta, “Mill as ambivalent democrat: The corruption and cultivation of human flourishing in democratic society and politics.” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. 41:7 (2015): 697-724; Urbinati, “The Many Heads of the Hydra: J.S. Mill on Despotism”; Zakaras, *Individuality And Mass Democracy: Mill, Emerson, And the Burdens of Citizenship*.

resistance to that coercion vary; and accounts that emphasize Mill as democratic theorist overlook disparities between procedures and norms of communicative exchange, intimate relations, and literary practices like poetry that he takes up at different points. Although there is a broad consensus that each theorist criticizes democratic politics by positing the limits of formal political practice, consensus breaks down on identifying the practices outside of or separate from formal inclusion and formal equality that provide a comparative context for identifying the limits of formal equality.

Missing from such accounts is a thematic overview of the range of resources each thinker draws on to develop contrast categories of democratic political practice. In particular, there is little attention to the persistent return to practices that would orient democratic subjects to consider their (individual and collective) relationship to beauty, adornment, excellence, and depth of emotional expression — the profoundly affective-aesthetic terms that each explores through the possibility of a democratic poetry.<sup>172</sup> How and why do aesthetic practices get linked to means of overcoming the multiple forms of democratic despotism? Multiple accounts identify similar, negative effects on political activity that Tocqueville associates with democratic conditions, namely, what Shulman calls “cultural stagnation”, what Urbinati calls the inhibition of “freedom of expression of each as single”, and what Alex Zakaras calls “the aspiration to

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<sup>172</sup> Like contemporary democratic accounts of the role of autobiography, advice writing, prophecy, and other forms of literary dramatization, I argue that Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill offered an early case for poetry as a relevant democratic literary form. For examples of literary genre and political theory see Nolan Bennet, “To Narrate and Denounce: Frederick Douglass and the Politics of Personal Narrative.” *Political Theory* 44(2) (2016): 240-264; Andrew Murphy, “Trial Transcript as Political Theory: Principles and Performance in the *Penn-Mead* Case.” *Political Theory* 41: 6 (2013): 775-808; George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race And Redemption In American Political Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Elisabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama And the Politics of Freedom*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014; Brian Walker, “Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation.” *Political Theory*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2001, pp. 155–189

improve human beings”.<sup>173</sup> But the inseparability of democracy and an “aspiration to improve human beings” was a consequence of a normative claim that democratic politics should not be separated from questions of human flourishing, as well as an analytic claim that it *could* not be so separated. Lost in prior accounts of Tocqueville’s, Emerson’s, and Mill’s appeals to the relations and spaces “beyond” politics proper that entail a turn to the aesthetic is a full accounting of how and why the aesthetic becomes a means to ameliorate, shore up, or indeed, fulfill the promise of democratic egalitarianism. This includes literary practices and more specifically, poetry, where the cultivation and enactment of aesthetic values is a critical aspect of both fulfilling that promise *and* suggesting to whom it might never—despite formal rights and guarantees—be available.<sup>174</sup>

A positive relation between poetry and ideals of self-composure was not guaranteed. On the contrary, all three thinkers start from the assumption that democratic conditions impede human flourishing; and for each, the possibility of overcoming these impediments was indexed by the prospects for democracy to achieve “its meters.”<sup>175</sup> Such a starting point in each account reprises (and, I will show, reformulates) an inquiry into citizens’ capacity to name and value

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<sup>173</sup> Zakaras, *Individuality And Mass Democracy*, p. 7

<sup>174</sup> My claims echo a recent account by Melvin Rogers of the relationship between human flourishing and representations of the people in American political thought. See Melvin Rogers, “Race and Democratic Aesthetic.” In *Radical Future Pasts*, edited by Romand Coles, Mark Reinhardt, George Shulman (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), pp. 249-282. Rogers traces connections “between democratic sovereignty and the idea of ethical and political development” in accounts ranging from Thomas Jefferson, to Ralph Waldo Emerson, and W.E.B. Du Bois. For Rogers the use of “the people” as a category requiring and inspiring ethical self-improvement (at both individual and collective levels) “foregrounds the importance of understanding the people as an aspirational category” (p. 254). I build off Rogers’ assertion that “the importance of character in theorizing the democratic self, and the language of “sense,” and “sensibility” achieves primacy in American political discourse because it accentuates the malleability of the cognitive and affective dimensions of the self” (p.257).I argue that the people’s aesthetic representation helps generate ambiguity between the people’s aspirational (and incomplete) formation and its identification with a state.

<sup>175</sup> Emerson, “The Poet,” p. 281.

beauty associated primarily with conservative thinkers like Edmund Burke. Burke, for example, argued that the need for loyalty, collective commitment, and active/free consent to the nation depended on subjects' love of the national body, and thus the country itself must be lovely and adorned.<sup>176</sup> Burke framed the role of the aesthetic as generating adoration in service of political fealty, primarily to ruling elites. Such a narrow conception of the political function of the aesthetic contributed, according to Jason Frank, to strong associations between aesthetic practices and assent to hierarchical regimes that helped shape a narrow conception of aesthetic practice in political context. Frank posits a long tradition of anti-egalitarian political thought that casts equality as aesthetically displeasing: by linking equality to a “violation of the order, proportion, and norms dictated by God or nature” anti-democratic thinkers deployed aesthetic critiques of egalitarian norms.<sup>177</sup> Frank's emphasis on an antagonism between equality and aesthetic categories implicitly points to a second component of these critiques, namely, an aesthetic imaginary that narrowly conceives of aesthetic practices and objects in terms of harmony and proportion in particular ways.

What for these anti-democratic thinkers may have been a constitutive feature of the relationship between aesthetics and the forms of political engagements it encourages (e.g. fealty, adoration of hierarchy), was for Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill a problematic not fully resolved to their satisfaction. Each begins their account of poetry with uncertainty over its fate and a willingness to rehash well worn associations between aesthetics and political regimes. For

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<sup>176</sup> Edmund Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999).

<sup>177</sup> Jason Frank, “Democracy and Disgust,” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, Volume 5, Number 2, Fall 2017, pp. 396-97. For Frank notions of political disorder in these accounts were “connected to democratic disorder in the moral, aesthetic, and economic worlds” (398). “conservatives sought to preserve these rules of propriety and authorization in not only formal legal institutions but also the deportment and composure of everyday life” (398).

Tocqueville, the question of poetry in America appears to be merely rhetorical; but it becomes practical as he probes the feasibility of a specifically *democratic* poetry. Emerson demands an updated poetry suitable to democratic politics, but at the same time spends several essays discussing the unlikelihood of a democratic poetry. Mill assesses inhibitions on poetic uptake in democratic worlds but laments a democracy without poetry — and ultimately points to ways that democratic egalitarian relations will foster improved authentic expression. Each leverages an uncertainty about a people and a regime suitable for poetic representation but makes an inquiry into its possibility central to democratic criticism — a criticism that must now, in their framing, commit to exploring the possibility of a democratic poetry before it can dismiss it wholesale.<sup>178</sup> Relatedly, each posits strong distinctions between aristocracy and democracy (and their attendant aesthetic forms). But in viewing poetry as a practice that will “transport into the midst of democracy the ideas and literary fashions” of aristocratic worlds, to use Tocqueville’s terms, they complicate that stylized dichotomy.<sup>179</sup>

In the next section I explore how each thinker uses poetry to dramatize a relation between aesthetics and democracy by bringing a “foreign” poet into the democratic public sphere. By envisioning how poetry would translate into a democratic context, the possibility of a relationship between politics and aesthetics shifts from a theoretical question to a function of the

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<sup>178</sup> As literary scholar Kerry Larson has summed up, the aristocratic is arguably the key contrasting (if also highly stylized) category for accounts of democracy in Tocqueville and other thinkers like Emerson and Mill. Kerry C. Larson, *Imagining Equality in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2012). There is evidence for the centrality of aristocratic practices even within their accounts of poetry. Tocqueville links poetry’s key aesthetic traits to aristocratic social forms, for example. Emerson associates poetry with elites. Likewise, Mill’s early statements on the usefulness of aristocracy to democratic politics lay the foundation for his appeal to poetry.

<sup>179</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 569.

rhetorical use and material production of poetry in America.<sup>180</sup> How and whether Americans would consume poetry was, in part, a practical question about actually-existing poetic practices. As such, these thinkers make possible a new mode of theorizing. They dramatize what contemporary scholars often only note as a theoretical claim in their accounts.

*The aesthetics of poetic practice as idealized politics in Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill*

Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill's persistent appeal to poetry as an aesthetic practice that might be lost in democracy highlights the antagonism between democratic equality and literature at the outset of their accounts. Yet by taking that antagonism up as a question rather than constitutive feature of democratic cultures, and by casting the potential disappearance of poetry as a democratic loss, they reorganize the stakes of what may otherwise appear as a familiar account of aesthetics and equality. Poetry now appears, I argue, as a matter of political imperative for democratic actors; but as such, it becomes subject to claims of equal access and justice. As I posited above, it is not obvious that an aesthetic practice could be linked to political practices in the accounts of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill, so in this section I reconstruct how they conceive poetry as part of the political practices essential to democratic life and thus set up the terms by which the poetic worthiness of democratic subjects becomes a claim to contest.

As I have noted in the chapters on each thinker, the connections between poetry and political engagement are at once explicit and dependent on a dramatic account of the need for

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<sup>180</sup> Partly, I credit the elasticity of the definition of poetry with enabling the kind of democratic transition reflected in each account. Poetry is represented as both a transcendent literary form and one that is responsive to time, place and the political tasks at hand. That formulation enables each thinker to dramatize the action of politics in the process of poetry being updated, translated, and modernized in a democratic context.



democratic poetry. When Emerson claims that poetic man will foster “a taste for the depths of thought and emotion as they may be sounded in the soul of the citizen or the countryman,” the poetic becomes imperative for self-rule. Ensuring poetry in Emerson’s account will help “replace man for the state, and character for official power”.<sup>181</sup> In Tocqueville’s account of poetry, an encounter with a poetic object beyond a subject’s “puny” life constitutes the “terms alone that he consents to tear himself for an instant from the petty complicated cares which form the charm and excitement of his life”.<sup>182</sup> In Mill, the poet equips subjects with new powers of expressiveness that, unburdened by democratic norms of expression, allows actors to engage in authentic expression unsurpassed in other modes of communication. In each account the poet fulfills and extends political functions and so becomes a crucial model for democratic actors.

The transition of the poet’s role into a democratic station is dramatic — by which I mean both that it is dramatized (that it is a subject of a dramatic narrative) and that the poet must overcome obstacles to serving as a democratic actor. As I have argued, aesthetic practices are represented as a realm of distinction in various parts of their accounts in ways that permit them to imagine the aesthetic realm as unsuitable for or impervious to egalitarian norms.<sup>183</sup> In a democratic poetry equality becomes a condition of representation. To the extent that democratic poetry serves and adheres to democratic politics and egalitarian norms it is posed as accessible,

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<sup>181</sup> Emerson, “New Poetry”.

<sup>182</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 594.

<sup>183</sup> See for example Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, p. 546-551.

aesthetically leveling, and extending the subjects of beauty outward and against informal hierarchies.<sup>184</sup>

As literary scholars have noted poetry had long served as an idealized aesthetic practice for extending the scope of the political community in ways that Tocqueville's, Emerson's, and Mill's accounts also tap. My account resonates, for example, with literary scholar Tricia Lootens' argument that the hallmark of nineteenth-century poetic appeals — to shared, “strong emotion” — was closely tied to many poems' thematic appeal to “authorize the new nation's claims to possession of land” and what I would argue to popular sovereignty.<sup>185</sup> Poems frequently staged claims to deeper forms of belonging — in this case, affective affiliation — through which to cement or justify claims to territory and legitimate political authority. Yet implicit in Lootens' account is a connection between the power of poetry to hail political participants and engender political practice that I claim Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill sought to stage — and sought to stage for democratic rather than merely nationalistic ends. As other literary scholars have highlighted, nineteenth-century poetry's connection to politics was often framed as indicative of democratic belonging. Literary scholar Michael Cohen notes an emerging practice in nineteenth-century literary criticism of thinking how the “value of institutions [like democracy] will be determined by the poetry with which they coincide”.<sup>186</sup> Likewise, literary scholar Hadji Bakara has argued that theorizing poetry in the nineteenth century included outfitting the poet with the

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<sup>184</sup> See Walker, “Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation,” p. 157. See Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, for this assessment of the “task of retrieving a receding aristocratic past in order to counteract the new forms of despotism”, p. 9.

<sup>185</sup> Lootens, “States of Exile,” p. 21

<sup>186</sup> Michael Cohen, “E. C. Stedman and the Invention of Victorian Poetry,” Vol. 43, No. 2, *American Victorian Poetry* (Summer, 2005), p. 180

task of representing “man” as a modern democratic subject and hence a subject of rights, equality, and popular power. Therefore according to Bakara poets like Walt Whitman could refer to their poetic work explicitly in terms of a task to “cleave open space between the institutions codifying... rights and the abstract objects that these institutions rendered” on behalf of supplementing a broadly democratic project.<sup>187</sup> Finally, Americans’ use of poetry was a robust source for cultivating insights, both positive and negative, about American audiences and a range of political dispositions. As literary scholar Meredith McGill writes about the nationalized accounts of literary audiences in the transatlantic production of poetry,

America occupied multiple temporalities in British poets’ imagination: it was an alternative future for British radicalism, a figure for Britons’ heroic past..., stark evidence of social and cultural regress, and a disconcerting reminder of the inevitability of empire’s collapse.<sup>188</sup>

In McGill’s account of the imagined communities of transatlantic poetic audiences, Americans’ uptake of poetry (that is, how and what they read or considered to be good poetry) could be evidence of political progressivism or democratic despotism. Americans were sometimes imagined to favor crass, formulaic, and overly genteel poetry but at other times were idealized as participants in a vibrant and new form of verse made possible by their new political organization as equals. Poetic consumption was ripe for speculation into politics; and in turn politics informed poetic taste, consumption, and production. McGill therefore points out contingencies in the

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<sup>187</sup> Hadji Bakara, “Poetry in the Shadow of Human Rights,” *American Literary History*, Volume 28, Issue 3 (September 2016), p. 512

<sup>188</sup> Meredith L. McGill, *The Traffic In Poems: Nineteenth-century Poetry And Transatlantic Exchange* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008), p. 5

nature of conclusions drawn about citizens through accounts of their poetic consumption and hence of the role that poetry could play in the lives of democratic actors.

Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill drew on each of these connections between poetry and politics in the nineteenth century. They follow in the tradition that both Cohen and Bakara highlight as well as the tendency, defined by McGill, of idealizing democratic actors as consumers of new forms of authentic poetic practice enabled by their egalitarian relations. We know that for Tocqueville, democracy opened up new subjects of poetry. For Mill, democratic equality extended opportunities for authentic expression crucial to poetic practices. And for Emerson, democracy extended the poetic station to serve the explicit “task” of elevating what was common and ordinary. Over the course of each account the poet transitions from a figure “foreign” to democratic worlds to one whose expressive capacities extended democratic equality. Subverting what Frank identifies as a tradition of associating “egalitarian politics [with] the grotesque figure of the disorganized” masses (397), Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill mounted a challenge to that aesthetic association by claiming an egalitarian body that was also beautiful. As part of staging that claim they conceived of a democratic poetry that enhanced the political lives of its subjects by fulfilling a promise of aesthetic worthiness to whom it might never—despite formal rights and guarantees—be available. We can reconsider each theorists’ account of poetry on the terms of enacting equality and inclusion beyond formal egalitarian politics.

For Tocqueville, poetry served as a literary site for navigating between the isolated and privatized individual and the provident and tutelary state. As I have shown, Tocqueville deployed the poetic as offering its own intermediary sense between the private individual and the immense collective of the state by mitigating the appeal of an overarching source of power. Despite the

resignation of actors to “puny” and “insipid” lives, Tocqueville suggested that the poetic encounter with a “wondrous object” would lead subjects to an enlarged conception of themselves. The poetic stimulated awe and terror towards collective life — affective relations that Tocqueville understood as critical for shaping modern subjects among the masses — and fostered a movement towards the collective through participation in and attraction to the sublime.

Tocqueville posed the poetic orientation to a virtual “democratic man” as overcoming both privatized lives and the appeal of redemption in the nation that was the fate of so many democratic actors. For Tocqueville, that aesthetic orientation upwards towards a transcendent democratic man and inwards towards the recesses of the heart generated bonds between private individuals — in the newly shared “readability” of a democratic actor or character in epic narrative and historical struggle — not otherwise available to ordinary citizens in their isolated lives nor to ordinary citizens through their national affiliation. Such “readability” granted access to forms of affiliation greater than private individuals amassed in national collective: instead it offered access to collective life in idioms related to excellence in expression.

What guides Tocqueville’s poetic practice as a means of orienting individuals away from privatized life is not an orientation towards an originality of voice, national language, or other hallmarks of poetry as a national tradition, such as Lootens identifies. Instead, it is a shared story of democratic struggle and personal distinction. Joined through personal story to the “popular” struggle for power, poetry as an aesthetic practice oriented its readers, for Tocqueville, beyond national belonging (and the aesthetic markings that might link poetry to national tradition) and towards a trans-historical “democratic man” — a subject not otherwise accessible to mass democratic actors through national affiliation. What remained inaccessible through national

belonging (a form of belonging that Tocqueville seems to cast as a widely available source of meaning and redemption) was access to and orientation towards individual adornment and personal development. Instead, the poetic cultivated a readerly subject whose sensuous and affective desire must be for an encounter with and personal relation to “man... aloof” but whose link to this poetic subject is denied by the very unequal conditions that persist within democratic worlds. Poetry for Tocqueville thus highlights a disavowed idiom of political belonging that remains unfulfilled by national belonging and hence whose accessibility remains obscure to mass democratic actors without poetic aesthetic practice.

For Emerson, the aesthetic was important in a different way as a challenge to the conditions of democratic life for modern subjects. Emerson represented poetry as a site for navigating a need for self-development through admiration for the great without succumbing to forms of subordination that adoration might entail. Emerson cast poetry as a project of recovering the aesthetic worth of ordinary or mediocre subjects. For Emerson, what was usually associated with civic withdrawal and anti-conformity as a means of exercising a form of holistic independence from the collective body was here represented as an effect of poetic practice. Emerson’s representation of poetry’s motivation suggested that part of overcoming this dilemma was subverting aesthetic distinctions between high and low that persisted within democratic cultures. Emerson, too, represented poetry as a literary-political task to the extent that it was part and parcel of the cultivation of empowered and independent democratic subjects.

Yet Emerson represented the poet alongside a political project of overcoming the terror of the great by cultivating reactions to both aesthetic “features” (e.g., wonder, beauty, appeal, size) and affect (e.g., terror, pride) of excellence. Therefore Emerson represented democratic passivity

and conformity as a consequence of differently situated relations to the excellent. This condition persisted in democratic worlds not only as a legacy of privileged aristocratic forms but as a result of new aesthetic appeals to the “number and size” of the people, the state, and its figureheads. Emerson thus sought to redirect readers and writers of poetry away from a political aesthetics that would immediately draw them into fealty and subordination. He did this not just by defining poetry as the act of revealing and amplifying the worthiness of ordinary objects and experiences but by devising a literary practice without “that finish which the conventions of literature require of authors”.<sup>189</sup> That is, he sought to cultivate a sensibility for the act of stripping or taking away the flowery, ornamental, and literary qualities of writing.<sup>190</sup> He envisioned this as a means of resisting the very aesthetic forms that drew mass democratic subjects into relations of subordination through aesthetic adoration while maintaining access to aesthetic creation. For Emerson, aesthetic relations to the excellent and ideal were not evenly accessible and thus required remaking for democratic worlds.

In this way Emerson represented democratic politics not as individual distinction but as relinquishing older aesthetic forms and adaptation of an austere writing practice that nonetheless responded to and cultivated the beautiful. Rather than pose democratic poetics as an inhibition to excellence, as Judith Shklar describes Emerson’s politics, the excellent remained a key motivating ideal to which Emerson sought to extend access that was otherwise fraught for mass

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<sup>189</sup> Emerson, “New Poetry”.

<sup>190</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, review of “Essays and Poems” (1841).

democratic actors.<sup>191</sup> The distinction granted mass democratic subjects access to poetry not as private verse but as practices of personal adornment that would sustain egalitarian relations.<sup>192</sup>

For Mill, poetry was a mode of communication that permitted authentic expression and deep emotional exchange against the constraints of public communication to which mass democratic actors were most vulnerable. As others have read it, Mill's appeal to poetry was an attempt to push past adherence to procedural norms that aided authentic expression and towards practices that surpassed all prescriptions for public expression. For deeper emotional exchange Mill demanded a public expression modeled, in various interpretations, on intimate exchange, personal thought, and indirect address. Poetry aided Mill's vision of independent citizens not just through free expression but through conditions for authentic and personal expression that were particularly precarious for ordinary subjects. These practices served as key resources for mobilizing not just any subjects, but Mill's common subjects, against the coercive effects of what Nadia Urbinati calls "enduring relations of self-devaluation and conformity, not brute force".<sup>193</sup> It was Mill's attention to the challenges of overcoming those relations for common subjects in particular that motivated an appeal to the form of poetry as a model of democratic communication that would (theoretically) permit all subjects access to modes of authentic expression crucial for democratic subjectivity.

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<sup>191</sup> Judith Shklar, "Emerson and the inhibitions of democracy," *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Ed. Alan Levine. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2011, pp 53-68.

<sup>192</sup> Scholars have associated the portfolio with writing practices that circulated anonymously outside of books in giftbooks, travel brochures, and advertisements. Kristina Silva Greusz, in *Ambassadors of Culture*, argues that poetry, in its unpublished or portfolio form, was often exchanged, transcribed by hand, and "cop[ied] or clip[ed] into a scrap book," (p.24); Mary Louise Kete, in "The Reception of American Poetry: Trends and Transformations," describes poetic writing practices as a "personalizing" process, (p. 26).

<sup>193</sup> Urbinati, Nadia. "The Many Heads of the Hydra: J.S. Mill on Despotism," in *J.S. Mill's Political Thought*. Eds. Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2007) 66-97.



Yet for the aesthetic to serve as a privileged site for protecting and enabling this excellence in personal expression beyond what procedural norms would encourage, it had to encourage self-expression for those most vulnerable to forms of coercion and conformity. As such, poetry helped subjects navigate the pressures not just of tyranny of public opinion but of relations of personal devaluation that Mill deemed endemic to democracy. For these reasons Mill's poetry took on the additional appeal to indirect address as an appeal to a cultivated habit of indifference to who or how expression is received. Mill's idioms of poetry facilitated the goals of intimate exchange between equal interlocutors by enhancing the scenarios through which equality between speakers — especially between average or ordinary speakers — might best be cultivated.

In each account the poetic expanded readers' encounters with beauty and emotional expression as practices that were essential to addressing persistent forms of coercion that remained unaddressed by formal egalitarian practices. Whether by casting poetry as attuning to the excellent without fear, to thoughts without judgment of their value, to mundane objects with wonder, or to immense objects with suspicion, each thinker framed poetry, wittingly or not, as essential for democracy's common and ordinary actors especially. For them the coercive powers of conformity and self-devaluation were differently activated and acutely felt. In part each thinker addressed the way democratic despotism distorted the sources of aesthetic representation and notions of the beautiful. The poet was thus a critical, embedded figure who could serve democratic politics by orienting readers in practical ways to resist or overcome profound inequality not only in power and mobility but aesthetic worthiness. The poet — as able to see beyond or past what an informal hierarchy has set up — equipped actors to identify the way

questions of “high” and “low” subjects of poetic representation could be colonized on behalf of elites against the popular. This marks the poet’s final political role in Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill.

### *Democratic poetry as resistance*

Given what I have identified as poetry's relationship to practices of equality in the theoretical accounts of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill along with ways other scholars have begun to rethink their attention to formal equalities' limits, there is reason to see a connection between challenges to aesthetic inequality and challenges to inequality in their accounts. If an expanded sense of equality is motivated by perceived forms of aesthetic inequality that remain unaddressed by formal egalitarian regimes, what kind of resistance is required to address an aesthetic inequality?

Thinking poetry as a means of resistance against inequality has some challenges within the accounts of thinkers who are not normally associated with addressing inequality along the salient nineteenth-century terms of labor, property, race, and slavery.<sup>194</sup> Emerson, for example, openly posited a role for poetry as an explicit tool for resisting inequality when he noted “it is

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<sup>194</sup> For accounts of the defining roles of labor and property in nineteenth-century discourses of inequality see Amy Bridges, “Becoming American: The Working Classes in the United State before the Civil War.” In *Working-Class Formation*, edited by Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg, 157-196. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986); and Alexander Keyssar, *The Right To Vote: the contested history of democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Book, 2000). For reflections on the role of race and relations of slavery on defining idioms of inequality in the U.S. context, see Nicholas Knowles Bromell, *The Time Is Always Now: Black Thought And the Transformation of US Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). For analyses of ways in which these thinkers do not engage with these social relations see Sean Wilentz, “Many Democracies: On Tocqueville and Jacksonian America” in *Reconsidering Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Abraham S. Eisenstadt (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 1988), pp. 210-273; and James H. Read, “The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery, and Abolition.” In *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Ed. Alan Levine (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), pp. 152-184.

strange how little poetry this old outrage of negro slavery has produced” in a review of *Antislavery Poems* by John Pierpont in 1843.<sup>195</sup> Here Emerson expresses an affiliation between poetry and a political “outrage” but does not articulate why he believes there is not more antislavery poetry. Tocqueville likewise identified poetry as a “germ of power” placed within the reach of democratic citizens but without specifying its particular uses in the service of the masses or as a form of power.

At the same time, by drawing attention to poetry as a democratic practice, Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill implicitly highlight a literary form that in the nineteenth century was a key element of the communicative tactics of democratic movements. Poems on behalf of women’s and worker’s rights, anti-slavery movements, and even the fair treatment of Native Americans flourished as part of the public sphere in nineteenth-century America.<sup>196</sup> Poems punctuated abolitionist periodicals; and where there were worker movements, there were worker poetics.<sup>197</sup> Literary scholars have attempted to articulate the place of poetics in these contexts. Scholars

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<sup>195</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Antislavery Poems. By John Pierpont. Boston: Oliver Johnson. 1843.” in *Uncollected Prose* [accessed online at <https://user.xmission.com/~seldom74/emerson/pierpont.html>]

<sup>196</sup> See Paula Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The emancipatory project of American women’s poetry, 1800-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (2003); Ingrid Satelmejer, “Print Poetry as Oral ‘Event’ in Nineteenth-Century American Periodicals.” *Cultural Narratives: Textuality and Performance in American Culture Before 1900*. Ed. Sandra M. Gustafson and Caroline F. Sloat. Notre Dame, IN: Univ of Notre Dame Press (2010), 200-219; Lisa Steinman, Malinowski. *Masters of Repetition: Poetry, Culture, And Work In Thomson, Wordsworth, Shelley, And Emerson*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998; Shira Wolosky, *Poetry and Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2010).

<sup>197</sup> The popularity of poems in antislavery literature made poetry a central medium by which many denizens of the nineteenth century public came to experience antislavery appeals. Michael Cohen makes the claim that the antislavery reform project was preceded by antislavery verse by about 100 years in British antislavery poetry from the 1770s onwards as well as in Danish and American presses. See Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*, especially “The Poetics of Reform,” pp. 60-99. For early examples of antislavery poetry and poems see William Wells Brown’s 1847 compilation, *The Antislavery Harp; A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings*. Slaves as subjects also appeared in the poems of major British poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth. William Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, William Blakes’ “The Little Black Boy”, Cowper’s “The Negro’s Complaint”, and Coleridge antislavery poems “Ode to the Departing Year” and “Fear in Solitude” often speak in the voice, form and diction of the slave they address.

Lara Langer-Cohen and Jordan Stein, for example, have acknowledged how the “understandable tendency of literary critics studying slavery to focus on slave narratives can (unintentionally) create the impression that slavery only enters the picture when it is being recounted”.<sup>198</sup> The same can be said of workers’ print publics. Radical republican presses published poems about the agony of the factory system and Whig periodicals published poems on work as social uplift. Poetry helped writers condense or advance arguments regarding the unnatural inequality of industrial labor, the socially situated alienation imposed by capital markets, and the connections to other emancipation movements.<sup>199</sup>

Poetry was therefore part of the means of establishing standing in the public sphere for democratic actors. As David Zaret argues, workers became “speakers, hearers, writers, publishers, printers, [and] readers” through engagement in the public sphere. But poetry was just one among many practices.<sup>200</sup> Did poetry offer distinct terms on which to claim membership or equality among democratic movements? To the extent that much nineteenth-century poetry was relatively short, simply structured, highly repetitive, and easily memorizable, Kristina Greusz has argued poetry “was and is the genre through which an aspiring writer can most easily enter the

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<sup>198</sup> Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Stein, *Early African American Print Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, p. 8

<sup>199</sup> Between 1828 and 1835, publishers of the two largest American worker presses — Philadelphia’s *Mechanics’ Free Press* (1828-1835) and New York City’s *Free Enquirer* (1828-1835) — printed hundreds of poems. Radical republican activists and publishers like William Heighton, Robert Dale Owen, and Frances Wright published poetic writing dramatizing broader themes of radical self-rule. Poetic appeals tended to emphasize human flourishing as central to the claims of labor as upward “mobility” and independence from the “vassalage” of speculators and capital. See for example, the poems by Yankee. “Written for the Fourth of July 1828 (Addressed to the Working Classes)” in *The Mechanics’ Free Press* (5 July 1828) and “The Dying Factory Girl.” *Free Enquirer* (3 March 1835: 105).

<sup>200</sup> David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, And the Public Sphere In Early-modern England*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 33.

literary field”.<sup>201</sup> Kerry Larson has added that “the very conventionality of its [poetry’s] cadences and the familiarity of its imagery, allowed unprecedented numbers of men and women to demonstrate a refinement and cultural literacy that prose alone did not provide”.<sup>202</sup> One possible reading of these arguments about the role of poetry in nineteenth-century public spheres is that the practice of poetry was a claim to equality that entailed a reference to the speaker’s excellence in ways that other (non-literary) forms could not offer.

That is not an explicit part of Tocqueville’s, Emerson’s, and Mill’s accounts. Nonetheless, each frames the poetic as itself a claim against a constituted order and an act of resistance. This is most apparent in Emerson who links the “democratical” revolution in literature to a means of staging authority to participate in cultural production in ways that the popular masses have previously been cut off from. Democratic poetry is both a writing practice and, for Emerson, a robust claim over who has access to privileged modes of literary representation. Emerson claims that the spread of poetry addresses more informal cultural hierarchies of education and taste.<sup>203</sup> He dramatizes democratic poetry as a breakdown of the “Parnassian fraternity” — a trope he uses to represent informal hierarchy as an institutionalized arbiter of poetic taste.

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<sup>201</sup> Greusz, Kristina Silva. *Ambassadors of Culture*. Greusz argues poetry allowed “a wide range of readers/auditors from different points on the literacy continuum to understand, enjoy and repeat... verses” (p. 25). See also Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life And the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). As Robson notes, poetry was connected to education for the poor (p. 7). See also Joan Shelley Rubin, *Songs of Ourselves: the Uses of Poetry In America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). For Rubin, poems “undercut any aura of exclusivity it acquired by ensuring its distribution to virtually everyone” (p. 10). Despite uneven literacy rates among working class and educated white men, women, free black and slave communities, there is evidence that poetry was the genre through which many Americans who were denied the privilege of authoring public prose gained access to forms like authorship, printing and publishing through poetry.

<sup>202</sup> Kerry C. Larson, “Introduction.” *Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*. Ed. Kerry Larson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP (2011), p. 2

<sup>203</sup> Each centers an antagonism between popular and elite. For a sustained discussion of that formulation in American political thought see Laura Grattan, “Populism and the Rebellious Cultures of Democracy.” In *Radical Future Pasts*, edited by Romand Coles, Mark Reinhardt, George Shulman (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), pp.179-216.

The analogy to a “Parnassian fraternity” reveals the extent to which each thinker sought to cast the persistence of informal, non-hierarchical inequalities of aesthetic worthiness in the terms of formal hierarchy. The goal was to reflect aesthetic worthiness as an imperative of democratic equality and hence to represent a form of aesthetic inequality as one that might be overcome through practice. These thinkers do not address forms of inequality stemming from labor, property, race, and slavery but point to forms of inequality that are grounded in aesthetic distinctions — that is, inequality that takes root in terms of “high” and “low” or “shabby and grand — and thus persists beyond the dismantling of codified hierarchy.

One way to interpret the work of Tocqueville’s, Emerson’s, and Mill’s appeal to poetry is an attempt to define a practice that might address a nebulous inequality along with the norms that enable such inequality to persist. They each make a claim to resist forms of inequality that contribute to informal disqualifications from public life and thereby may call attention to what George Shulman calls forms of “general dishonor” that contribute to exclusion even in the face of formal equality and inclusion.<sup>204</sup> At the same time, it remains unclear how to challenge such forms of “dishonor” through political practices. It is possible that poetry becomes a site for launching a challenge not to narrow idioms of democratic belonging but to the sacrifices of individual distinction and extraordinary recognition required of democratic life. To use Bonnie Honig’s formulation of an aristocratic challenge to democratic equality, poetry may supply idioms for acknowledging the extraordinary against the democratic demand for mediocre

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<sup>204</sup> Shulman, “A Tocqueville for our Time,” highlights acts that “enlarge the registers through which we imagine what equality means, and that we do so by drawing on resources available beneath, behind, or beyond the language of rights” p. 93

subjects.<sup>205</sup> In these contexts, claims to beauty (for example of ordinary things) might *be* forms of resistance. If for Tocqueville the tutelary power of the state also generated insipid subjects, then claims to access the beautiful or attempts to locate the poetic within the ordinary actor may be stands against one register of democratic inequality. For Emerson, if unequal power and freedom operated by denying “grace” as well as power and freedom, then might a challenge to democratic despotism also come from a desire for the lovely and the decorative among those cast as mediocre?

If that is the case then (political) demands for equality, for Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill, were at once demands for the forms of aesthetic excellence that attended political independence, power, and equality.<sup>206</sup> The demand for power and independence also seems, in the accounts of Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill, to have served as a demand for the forms of integrity, grace, and elegance that power and independence offered.<sup>207</sup> The primary discrepancy between forms of popular and elite power, then, remained a distinction between the way each was granted access to forms of human flourishing.

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<sup>205</sup> Honig, “Antigone’s Laments, Creon’s Grief,” p. 5-43

<sup>206</sup> Such claims may parallel what Jacques Ranciere distinguishes as a claim for “social equality” in nineteenth-century worker movements. See Jacques Ranciere, “A Reply,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 25 (Spring, 1984), pp. 42-46. For Ranciere workers’ demands for “social equality is nether mere political equality, nor plain economic leveling” but a demand to be “full participants in social life: people *individually* able to dress, talk, and write like members of other classes; people *collectively* able to share the same forms of debate and contract concerning general social interests. We misunderstand their view of *association* if we think of it apart from that ideal” (p. 44). Instead, demands like time to read the newspaper at work meant “their aspirations were related to public opinion and social events; to displays of eloquence and national glory, fashion and stage performance” (p. 43) that combined pursuits of individual excellence alongside communal association. For further work on this topic see Jacques Ranciere, *The Nights of Labor: the Workers’ Dream In Nineteenth-century France* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

<sup>207</sup> Jasmine K. Syedullah, "Is this Freedom?" A Political Theory of Harriet Jacobs's Loopholes of Emancipation, University of California, Santa Cruz (2014).

As scholars critically assess the historical meanings of political power and equality (and the positions from which subjects come to alter and contest those terms), I argue that the appeals to the literary dimensions of citizenship reveal a historically specific component of nineteenth-century democratic theory and practice: where claims for equality in the aesthetic realm served as provocative terms of the expansion of the meaning of equality and democracy to the right, imperative, and desire for beauty. In accounts like the democratic challenge for poetry in Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill, full citizenship seems to entail access to a range of aesthetic experiences. Poetry was one way that my theorists could represent democracy offering equality as more than a right to expression, a promise for power, or entitlement to participation, but as access to the aesthetic registers of freedom and power. If poetry was one site through which equality made itself known and knowable in the lives of my thinkers' non-elite citizens, then equality was experienced as more than access to civic engagement, deliberation, and public standing but as access to human excellence.

My thinkers do not see these claims as natural to democracy but as claims that must be articulated to it through the integration of "foreign" aesthetic practices like poetry. Rather than merely promote the relevance of making claims to belonging and equality through literature, they theorized an impasse between poetic production and democracy and therefore an uneasy relationship between aesthetic and political practice. Hence Emerson's work at the level of how to think and frame poetic equality — is it a right? something else? — and Tocqueville's concerns with whether poetry could really ever describe the reality of most lives indicate an unease with how best to conceptualize the democratic promise of aesthetic access. Whether democratic citizens could ever be suitable subjects of poetry in their everydayness is a question of how and



whether one could make aesthetic practices accessible to all democratic citizens. Could democracy deliver that vision of equality and if so would it be in tension with other terms or sites of equality? Each uses poetry to pose a space of aesthetic claims making that may come into conflict with, appear insufficient for, or be too expansive for other versions of equality in America in the nineteenth century.

It is not clear that my thinkers offer a firm answer, and certainly not one that can be used to put them on the side of democratic or anti-democratic theorizing. Instead, they use poetry to inject an ambiguity into their accounts. Beginning with Tocqueville's account of an American people with poetic ideas but not poetry, moving to Emerson's account of America "wait[ing] long for its metres," and to Mill's impossible poetic ideal of a speaker without audience, each thinker enacts an ambivalence at the heart of their account of democratic poetry.<sup>208</sup> Their uncertainty over whether Americans could find a democratic poetry at all — by in effect treating poetry in America as an empty genre — may mark the impossibility of ideal equality fulfilled by mass democratic subjects' status as worthy subjects of poetry.<sup>209</sup> Yet rather than sustaining the fiction of ideal states (both affective and political) each thinker appeals to actual poetry-related practices as a means to strive for and contest inequality in the aesthetic realm. A theory of the potential (un)suitability of the people to be objects of poetic representation introduces an ambiguity into the constitution of the people that might otherwise appear to resolve itself at the formal level of democratic practices.

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<sup>208</sup> Emerson, "The Poet," says "I look in vain for the poet whom I describe," p. 281.

<sup>209</sup> See Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds. "General Introduction." *The Lyric Theory Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (2014). Prins and Jackson describe the increasing ineffability of representations of poetry. Michael Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poem in Nineteenth-Century America*, observes that in most accounts of nineteenth century "it is not yet possible to talk about both 'poetry' and a poem, except in terms of the latter's relative failure to realize the former", p. 13.

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