

Letters From Tocqueville by John Lukacs

"I am rich in letters. . . ."

—Horace Walpole

Alexis de Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society, edited by Roger Boesche; translated by James Toupin and Roger Boesche, Berkeley: University of California Press; \$24.95.

Alexis de Tocqueville was an immensely prolific writer. His friend Gustave de Beaumont wrote that "for one volume he published he wrote ten; and the notes he cast aside as intended only for himself would have served many writers as text for the printer." The publication of his collected works and letters began in Paris 35 years ago: 16 volumes have now been printed, but there are many more to come. His published works, besides *Democracy in America*, include his *Recollections* (of the year 1848) and his great unfinished history of the *Old Regime and the French Revolution*; in addition to numerous smaller booklets, articles, speeches, and the still unpublished memoranda, instructions, and dispatches that he composed during his short tenure (1849) as Foreign Minister of the Second French Republic.

He wrote many thousands of letters, some of which are still in the stocks of French manuscript dealers (two of them are in my possession). Thirty years ago, when I was engaged in serious research and writing about Tocqueville, I came to the conclusion that his letters may be as important as his books: perhaps not so much for the purposes of his eventual biographer but because we may find in his letters the expression of his thoughts and ideas about an immense variety of important themes that we cannot find elsewhere. I cannot even begin to list these themes: They include tremendous topics, ranging from Christianity

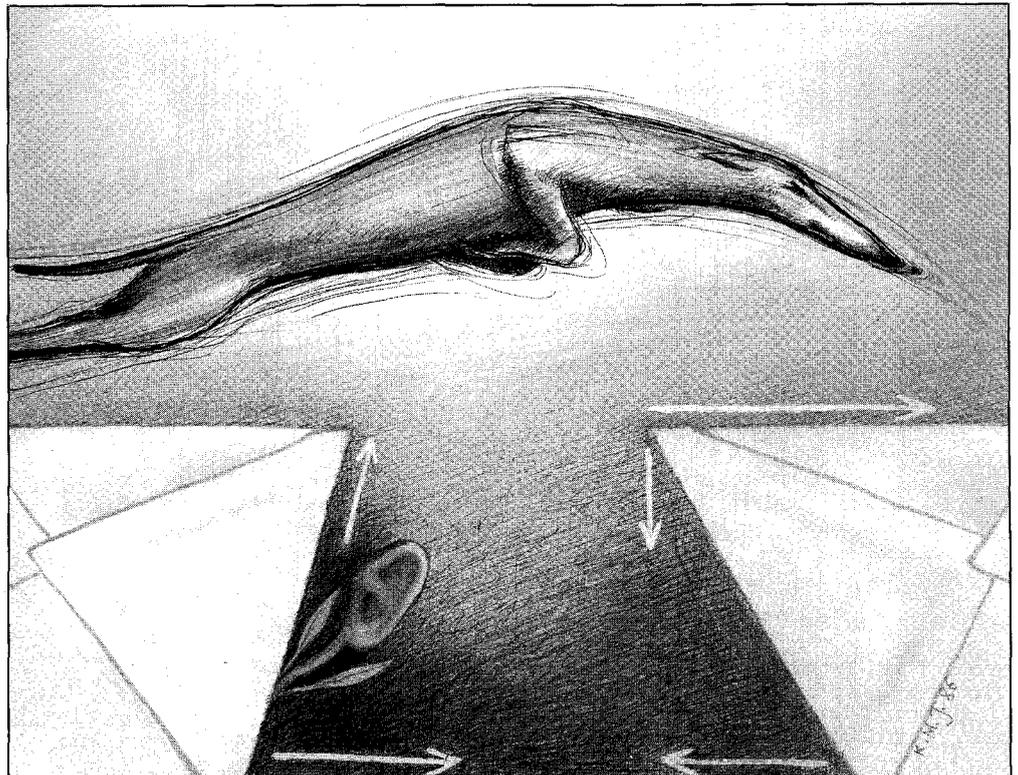
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to race, from Plato's mind to the limitations of the Newtonian system, from India and China to America and the prospects of the English-speaking world.

Correspondence was very important to him. He did not lead a very busy social life. For months he was fairly isolated in the manor of Tocqueville. He depended on his friends. He saw friendship as one of the greatest gifts in a man's life; toward his friends he was warmly emotional and sentimental. He needed their presence and their letters; they were a sounding-board for his ideas and opinions but not merely in a passive sense; he listened avidly to their opinions. Goethe once said that "to communicate our thoughts to others is nature; to assimilate what is communicated to us, with understanding, is culture." Alexis de Tocqueville was a good listener. There was another motive behind this tremendous correspondence. Tocqueville had a quick mind; and he was a born, that is, compulsive, writer. Letter-

writing served him as a diary would another thinker, and in some of his letters we find the germ of ideas he would later develop in a book.

And now we have a selection of his letters, in English. Except for the early, unreliable, and heavily amended, deleted, and "corrected" edition of his letters in the Beaumont edition of his "collected works," published shortly after Tocqueville's death, this is the first chronological, not topical, selection of the letters. (The volumes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* are organized according to their recipients, or to their general contents. So was my publication of the Tocqueville-Gobineau correspondence in 1959.) A reviewer in *The New Republic* praised the chronological approach, saying that in this way we get a more rounded picture of Tocqueville's person. He was wrong. The editors of this volume themselves make bold to say that "this volume of selected letters offers a more complete picture of Tocqueville than previously available." They are wrong. Their book is premature, inadequate, imperfect, and sloppy. Their mistakes and mistranslations run into hundreds. They do not know French well enough: A *cabaret* is not a cabaret but a low-class wine-shop; an *idée-mère* is



not a "mother-idea"; *Ancône* is the city of Ancona; *Clélie* is the heroine of a novel by Mlle. Scudéry. They print and "translate" such things without explanation, while at the same time they print hundreds of words in unnecessary footnotes telling the American reader who Guizot or Napoleon III were. They do not know English well enough: They write such phrases as "at this point in time" and use "presently" when they mean "at present." They chose to retranslate some of Tocqueville's letters of which English translations exist; in nearly every case this was unnecessary, since the previous translations are better and clearer than theirs. In many other places, their translation is tone-deaf. Of the thousands of Tocqueville letters, they selected 104, some of which are wholly without importance (no. 2, for example, to Louis de Kergorlay, in which Tocqueville lists his expenses on a forthcoming trip, including his pocket money). In sum, the impression and reflection of Tocqueville in this volume is fragmentary, and the contents are often dull.

Inseparable, alas, from these short-

comings of the editors is their inability to understand Tocqueville's thinking. "One searches in vain in Tocqueville's published writings for any systematic discussion of the philosophical basis for his personal ethical positions," they write. What nonsense this is. Had they known Tocqueville better, they would have understood his profound mistrust for philosophical "systems." Tocqueville was an existential and historical thinker: the opposite of an abstract categorizer or systematist. To write, as Boesche and Toupin do, that Tocqueville was "occasionally longing for a quiet middle-class life of financial security" is to misunderstand him completely. Yes, Tocqueville wished he had a little more financial security; but he had the aristocrat's contempt for the exaggerated importance that so many people attribute to money. Religion was very important to Tocqueville. These editors fail to comprehend the meaning of this (and the evolution of Tocqueville's relationship to the Catholic church), relying as they do on the superficial remarks by Tocqueville's liberal commentators. A last example will demonstrate the superficiality of

their edition. In a long footnote on page 3 of their Introduction, they write: "Recent biographies tend to be good but too short whereas turn-of-the-century biographies tend to be tedious and tainted by an urge to claim Tocqueville for the Catholic church." There were *no* such Tocqueville biographies at the turn of the century. In Antoine Redier's *Comme disait Monsieur de Tocqueville* there is a chapter about Tocqueville's last days; but, as Boesche and Toupin write in the footnote, that book was published in 1925. This is, alas, typical of the quality and of the scholarship of this volume.

Yet I write this review not only for the purpose of *caveat emptor* but to advise readers: There is so much more of Tocqueville that we ought to know.

There are many topics in the sub-chapters and chapters of his published works that have not yet received the attention they deserve; and the contents of many of his letters amount to an immense mine of themes. The *idearium* of Tocqueville—as well as his solid and detailed biography—is yet to be written.

Germania Tremens by Arthur M. Eckstein

"What wonders I have done, all Germany can witness. . . ."

—Christopher Marlowe

Germany Today by Walter Laqueur, Boston: Little, Brown; \$19.95.

On Writing and Politics, 1967-1983 by Günter Grass; translated by Ralph Manheim, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; \$16.95.

Anyone who has lived in Germany eventually realizes that Germany is a nation of hypochondriacs. Germans spend far more than Americans on nostrums, vitamins, tranquilizers, and elixirs; Americans may watch "Dynasty," but the most popular TV

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show in the Federal Republic is "Black Forest Clinic." A similar obsession prevails in politics: Germans are always questioning the health of their society and their politics, just as they constantly question the health of their bodies. What they usually examine themselves for now, of course, is political instability and the antidemocratic disease. Given their history, this is hardly surprising. And the Germans' political hypochondria is catching: it soon affects outside observers of the German scene. This is hardly surprising, either. The Germans' political past, and their vital importance to the Western alliance, makes obsession with the political and social health of the country understandable. The

problem, however, is to know when the hypochondriac is really sick: Luther, after all, terrified his audiences with the prediction that society was so iniquitous that the Day of Judgment would come before the end of summer 1541.

In *Germany Today*, Walter Laqueur gives the Federal Republic his own close examination. Born and reared in Germany, Laqueur has written much first-rate work on German history. He is also a leading neoconservative thinker who has been much concerned with the direction Europe has been taking ever since the 1970's. *Germany Today* is a beautifully written and almost encyclopedic description of the condition of the Federal Republic as it stood in 1982-1984.

Laqueur ends up giving the West Germans an almost clean bill of health. Or rather, assertions of basic political, social, economic, and cultural health are placed at the beginning and end of chapters whose con-