



The solitudes of this America

By William Eaton

In the woods of Michigan in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville recounts, he found a not entirely unfamiliar solitude, but what was unusual was that, unlike previously, when he had visited the ruins of ancient European civilizations, the solitudes of America led his mind to project forward, losing itself “dans un immense avenir” (in a vast future). He and his traveling companion, also from France, asked themselves why fate had given them this quite singular opportunity to see both a portion of the primitive world and also the cradle of a great nation. “These are in no way the sketchy predictions of experience,” he writes (in my translation).

These are facts as certain as if they had already come to pass. In just a few years these impenetrable forests will be felled. The noise of civilization and industry will break the silence of the Saginaw River. Its echo will cease. . . . Wharves will imprison its banks. Its waters—that today run quiet and unnoticed in the middle of an unnamed wilderness—will be pushed aside by the prows of ships.¹

¹ The ellipses after “will cease” are in the de Tocqueville text, as published by Gallimard in 1991. Whether they represent a part of the manuscript that was lost or that is unclear, or whether they are de Tocqueville’s own ellipses—to indicate the trailing off of the echo—this I do not know. The later sets of ellipses are mine. They indicate places where I have left out parts of de Tocqueville’s text.

Fifty leagues [about 175 miles] as yet separate this solitude from the great European developments [U.S. and Canadian farmlands and cities], and—given how the White race is compelled to take over completely this new world—my companion and I may be the last travelers given the opportunity to contemplate from within its primitive splendor.

It is this idea of destruction, this intimation of an upcoming and inevitable change that, we sense, has given the solitudes of this America their striking originality and such touching beauty. . . . The idea of this natural and wild grandeur mixes with the wonderful visions that the triumphant progress of civilization inspires. We feel proud to be human beings, and, at the same time, we have some kind of bitter regret about the power over nature that God has given us.

All this from a 20,000-word account by de Tocqueville which I recently came upon in a Gallimard paperback titled *Quinze jours dans le désert* (Fifteen Days in a Remote and Empty Land).² In a passage that precedes the one quoted above, de Tocqueville, one of the inventors and great practitioners of sociology, describes the four different peoples he found uneasily combined in what was then the small frontier outpost of Saginaw. There were those of mixed race, struggling to live at the same time in two different worlds, with two different languages and belief systems. “His tastes in contradiction with his ideas, his opinions with his customs.” There were the Indians, sleeping under their coats in the smoke of their dwellings, looking scornfully across the river at the more comfortable homes of the Europeans.

He smiles bitterly watching us tormenting our lives to gain useless luxuries. What we call industriousness, he calls shameful servitude. He compares the workers to the beasts struggling to plow each furrow. . . . He only envies our weapons. When a man at night can shelter his head under a leafy tent; when he is able to light a fire to chase away the mosquitoes in the summer and keep himself from freezing in the winter; when his dogs are worthy and the country full of game—who would ask for more from the Eternal Being?

² De Tocqueville’s use of the French word *désert* in a book about the northern woods may strike English readers as odd, and indeed it presents translation challenges. In the dominant dictionary, *Le Petit Robert*, the primary definition is not a desert (i.e. a very dry and sparsely inhabited area), but rather *any* sparsely inhabited, or indeed uninhabited, area. And, by extension, the word is used to refer to a place that is far away and little visited—a little provincial town, for example. More abstractly, the word can be used to refer to nothingness or solitude. I have seen the word translated as “wasteland,” but it is hard to read de Tocqueville as making this point, except perhaps in a moral sense and in reference to the future: that this is a part of the world that is slow but inexorably being turned into a wasteland. My first choice was “wilderness”—Fifteen Days in the Wilderness—but to communicate the idea of wilderness French has other compounds: *régions sauvages* or *espace naturel*. “Backwoods” was another single word recommended to me. I came to feel that with his *désert* de Tocqueville was trying to convey at once several possibilities—solitude, remoteness, lack of people, lack of real purpose. Hence the Fifteen Days in a Remote and Empty Land.

Alexis may go light on his fellow Frenchmen, come from Canada presumably. He describes them as fitting right in, wearing the local clothes, adopting the local customs, preferring hunting to farming—alone and far from civilization, from women, and from the coziness of their European village origins, but happy and proud of themselves, in love with the wild life.

As for the Anglo-Saxon settlers come from the United States to the east and already the dominant group in northern Michigan:

. . . cold, persistent, relentlessly argumentative; he is fixed to his land and takes from the wilderness everything that he can. He fights ceaselessly against it. He daily strips it of its particular qualities. He transports into it, piece by piece, his laws, his habits, his customs—if possible, every last nicety of his advanced civilization.

This hitherto unknown man, de Tocqueville writes earlier in his narrative,

is the representative of a race to whom the future of the New World belongs, an uneasy race, calculating and adventuresome; cold-hearted though driven by passion; trafficking in everything, not excepting ethics or religion.³

³ Another translation challenge. The French here is: « qui fait froidement ce que l'ardeur seule des passions explique ». Among other possible translations considered: “who coldly does what can only be excused by his ardor” and “which does coldly what should only be done with passion.” I thank several French translators—Anne Fassotte, Claude Lestelle, and Adelino Pereira—for helping me wrestle with this passage. The conclusion that I came to was that the passage is ambiguous. It is not clear if de Tocqueville meant that the pioneers were passionless and calculating or passionate yet hardly warmly so. I was led, too, to this further reflection and paradox: Translation depends on our reading between the lines, but once one starts reading between the lines all bets are off; most anything can be seen in the invisible ink that lies between lines.

We return here to the philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine’s discussion of whether the possible fat man in the doorway and the possible bald man in the doorway are one possible man or two possible men. (This touches as well on Kant’s idea of the *noumena*: the thing(s)-in-itself, not perceived or interpreted.) For present purposes I will reduce Quine’s discussion to this: there’s just one possible man—who might be called the unknown or given most any, absurd name you like. Does this prevent us from translating with the help of invisible words or intimations found between the lines—no, of course, not; millions of pages of translation are produced every day. And most of us, most all of the time have quite clear ideas about what this invisible material has to say. It is at the exceptional moments that we are forced to realize how, as Quine put it in another context, “The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges.”

A more positive view can be built from Wittgenstein’s proposal that our linguistic agreements are based in our agreeing in our “form of life” (*Lebensform*). That is, we understand one another because we share so many customs, habits, and institutions. (And thus, “If a lion could talk we could not understand him.”) But, of course, it is precisely the gaps between cultures—the differing institutions, habits, customs, and language-shaped views of experience—that translators are challenged to bridge, in however makeshift a fashion. In the case of de Tocqueville’s phrase, for example, does the translator work with the between-the-lines material that seems obvious or ambiguous to people whose mother tongue is the target or source language?

May I also here thank Anne for her help with several other moments in the de Tocqueville text. And I recall, too, that, many years ago, when she and a colleague were translating a novel from French into English, I suggested that in certain cases the “solution” to a translation challenge might include a footnote discussing it. Since their text was popular fiction, intended to be a “good read,” they rejected my suggestion, which I have adopted for my own purposes.

A nation of conquerors who submit themselves to living in the wilderness without ever letting themselves be seduced by its sweeter pleasures; whose only attachment to civilization and to the ideas of the Enlightenment is to whatever practical contributions they may be able to make to his well-being; who pushes himself into the solitudes of America with his ax and his papers. This is a people who, like all great peoples, has only one thought, and who pursues the acquisition of wealth, the sole object of its hard work, with a perseverance and scorn for life which might be called heroic if such a word could be applied to unvirtuous actions. It is this nomadic people that the great rivers and lakes do not stop in any way, before whom the forests fall and the prairies become shaded. It is this people who, after having touched the Pacific Ocean, will retrace its steps and disturb and destroy the society that has grown up in its wake.

This would seem the right moment to say *amen; ça suffit, Alexis; nous avons eu notre dose de tes malédictions*: (OK, Alexis. We've had enough of your condemnations.) But his *Quinze jours* has another impressive feature that I would at least touch on. The book includes, for example, a long description of the typical family living alone in a one-room cabin in a clearing that, with ax and fire, the father was struggling to make and preserve in the middle of the forest. Here and in other places de Tocqueville evokes forcefully the solitude that the pioneers (though not the Indians) endured—and endured in part by ignoring, not appreciating. Farther on in his text he says that he found the solitude of this New World more powerful and affecting than the solitude he had felt when crossing the Atlantic.

At sea at least a traveler contemplates a vast horizon at which he always looks with hope. But in this ocean of trees, who can show you the way? Toward what objects should you turn your attention? In vain might you climb to the tops of the tallest trees; still higher ones would surround you. Pointlessly would you march up the hills; everywhere the forest marches with you, and this same forest spreads before your feet from the North Pole to the Pacific Ocean. You can cover thousands of miles in its shade, and for all your marching you will seem not to have moved.

Here in the twenty-first century—and as Americans, or more generally, as human beings living under capitalism—we might adapt these phrases of de Tocqueville's, magnifying what is only a hint in his text. It may seem, we might say, that, despite all our marching—despite all our relentless effort and hard bargaining, our tenaciousness and pragmatism, our turning away from beauty and pleasure—it

Quine: "[Empiricism Without the Dogmas](#)" and "On What There Is," *Review of Metaphysics*, reprinted in Quine, 1953, *From a Logical Point of View* (Harper and Row, 1953): 1–19. Wittgenstein: *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations: The German text, with a revised English translation*, third edition, G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. (Blackwell, 2001).

may seem that we have not made any progress, that we have not gotten anywhere at all. And that our solitude is no longer of the earth, but the product of human hands and minds, of human ambition.

— Wm. Eaton, Editor, *Zeteo*

Afterword

It so happens that de Tocqueville and his companion, Gustave de Beaumont, made their trip through the Michigan woods exactly one year after the July Revolution. It might be said that, in the space of three days (“les Trois Glorieuses,” they are called in France), this event put an end, perhaps once and for all, to the idea of hereditary monarchy in France, and replanted the seeds of popular sovereignty, which had not exactly flourished in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Among the best known slogans from the rioting in Paris in July 1830: « Mort aux Ministres! » « À bas les aristocrates! » (“Death to the ministers!” “Down with the aristocrats!”).

De Tocqueville, from an old Norman aristocratic family, was at best a hesitant supporter of the revolt and political change. One can read that he “despised” the July Monarchy (1830-1848), though he also served in the parliament throughout this period. Mistrusted by both the left and right, as the scholar Joshua Kaplan has apparently put it, de Tocqueville (25 at the time) found himself in an untenable position. More than wisely, we may say in retrospect, he obtained permission from the Monarchy to go examine prisons and penitentiaries in the United States. This trip led not only to his great book *De la démocratie en Amérique*, but also to *les Quinze jours*.

In the final paragraph of *les Quinze jours*, de Tocqueville, in the middle of the Michigan woods, notes that it is the one-year anniversary of the July Revolution. He recalls the 29th of July, the third and final day,

the cries and smoke of the fighting, the noise of the cannons, the rumble of the muskets, the yet more terrible ringing of the bells, sounding the alarm. This whole fiery day seemed suddenly to leave the past and take the place of the scene in which I found myself. It was only a quick flash, a passing dream. When, raising my head, I looked around, the vision had already faded; but never had the silence of the forest seemed so icy, its shadows darker, its solitude more absolute.⁴

He’s caught between a rock (civilization) and a hard place (nature), unable to take heart from either.

⁴ I would add, though de Tocqueville does not, that the 29 July 1831 was also his twenty-sixth birthday. Far from home, in Michigan, he may, perhaps above all, have felt homesick.

Links

For those interested in some context, the [Wikipedia entry on Saginaw](#), Michigan sketches the history of the conquest and development of the region by White Americans.

Joshua Kaplan, *[Political Theory: The Classic Texts and Their Continuing Relevance](#)* (Recorded Books, 2005).