

# IDEAS ON THE SUBLIME WITH JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

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**ABSTRACT.** Stolz places the political legacies and writings of John Adams and his son John Quincy Adams in the context of the tradition of politics as he sees it, tracing its roots from the oratorical habits of the Greeks through the Romans and into the Italian renaissance. He offers a detailed analysis of the roots of American political thought in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. He is particularly interested in resurrecting the classical celebration of public speaking. As elsewhere, Stolz argues that Adams often implies that there are depths and dimensions to American politics that can be explored through the action of its citizens. Although politics may be only a human convention, Stolz concedes, he claims that Adams insists that even a democratic politics serves both high and low, both ordinary and extraordinary practices. Stolz grounds the roots of American political theory in Demosthenes, Cicero, the rhetoric of the Romans such as Tacitus, but he traces its living spirit as far as Nietzsche and later to Hannah Arendt. From this tradition, the author lays claim to an American political tradition that embraces the everyday politics of the U.S. Constitution and a patriotism of action.

**KEY WORDS:** Demosthenes, Hannah Arendt, John Adams, constitution, politics, rhetoric

## **Introduction**

Always there is politics, most often second rate, sometimes vicious and brutal, on occasion exceptional and sublime. Nevertheless, many political theorists, John Gunnell is a good example, dismiss those authors who assert the full range of political possibilities: “My argument is that politics is only a form of conventional human action. We may to defend its intrinsic worth, but I reject attempts to link it to transcendental grounds. Furthermore, I am dubious about attempts to identify the political with the sublime” (Mitchell 1983: 133). I agree with Gunnell that politics may be only a human convention; but a sublime politics can be an aspect of those historical conventions. Indeed the public life and political thought of John Quincy Adams suggests that the sublime was once and may yet be part of the conventions of American politics. Both Adams and the political sublime are missing from the American political tradition: I wish to know why that is so, as well as the costs consequent to the repression of a complete mode of discourse. Gunnell rejects the sublime elements of American politics, of politics

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itself, because he mistakenly finds the concept active only in those who perceive politics as field of salvation, or as a space in which world-historical or transcendental meanings inform political life.

Plato never found politics sublime nor did the great, theologian of salvation—St. Augustine. Hegel had little use for the aesthetic or historical use of the concept. Although Hegel took up the question of the sublime, both explicitly in *Aesthetics* and implicitly in *The Philosophy of History* he subordinated it, according to Haydon White, “to the notion of the beautiful in the former and the notion of the rational in the latter” (Mitchell 1983: 133). Furthermore, the American political sublime, as elaborated by Adams and others, emerges neither a philosophic nor as a fully aesthetic category, rather it expresses the intimate connection between speech and action, word and deed. It is embedded in the highest possibilities of political action.

Adams, as we shall argue, knows no other vocation than politics and while he may admire the sublime moral action of Socrates he expresses only contempt for Plato’s theoretical speculations. “His *Laws* might with more propriety be called the Republic than the work that bears that name... As a project of government, it is if possible, more absurd and impracticable than the *Republic*” (CF Adams 1874: II 324). Although a religious man, who often believes that his actions—say his war against slavery embodies a divine purpose, the principles of his politics, the standards of judgment remain in nature worldly. Longinus wrote the classic text on the sublime, and the American sublime as enacted by Adams exhibits a Longinian structure and dynamics. Longinus argues, as will Adams, that the form of politics can either foster or stifle the sublime. The critic treats literature and politics as realms of human action subject to great achievement followed by decay. The sublime appears, more importantly to my argument, both in Longinus and Adams as a deep convention of the republican tradition and slides into considerations of political virtue and glory. Adams celebrates all who seek “to shine through great antagonisms.”

Accordingly, the active sublime of John Quincy Adams carries a highly corrected Machiavellian moment much further into the story of American politics than allowed by Pocock and other students of civic republicanism in the American political tradition. (I will venture in a later chapter that once the language of the political sublime is recovered it may be used to illuminate the sublime in contemporary American politics.) Pocock snaps the republican tradition by the 1830’s or reduces it to an obsession with corruption. “The Americans”, he notices, “having made a republican commitment to the revolution of virtue, remained obsessively concerned with the threat of corruption—with, it must be added, good and increasing reason. The political drama continues in ways both crude and subtle, to endorse the judgment of Polybius, Guicciardini, Machiavelli and Montesquieu in identi-

fyng corruption as the disease peculiar to republics” (Pocock 1975: 133). Montesquieu limns the broad outlines of the republican conception of corruption that many republicans could accept: “The principle of democracy is corrupted in two ways: when a democracy loses the spirit of equality; when the spirit of equality becomes extreme, that is, when everyone wishes to be the equal of those he has chosen to command them... Thus, democracy goes to void two types of excess: the spirit of inequality, which leads to aristocracy... and the spirit of extreme inequality that leads to despotism” (Richter 1977: 224-225).

Another element that enters into the definition of corruption, one that shapes Adams’ politics thought constitutes the substitution of the private interest for the attending to the public.

### **The Sublime in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

Adams takes his historical lessons on the corruption of Republics from Cicero and Tacitus rather than from the theorists listed by Pocock. Yet more than a generalized fear of corruption inspires Adams’ concern for the American Republic his jeremiads erupt out an experience of betrayed greatness: the power of slavery joined with the distortions of concentrated wealth have subverted the integrity of the Union. His words and deeds comprise a sublime assault on these malignant powers. That confrontation will constitute the narrative line of my text.

But that still leaves open the as to where effectively to place John Quincy Adams within the movement of a perhaps declining tradition of civic republicanism. Some do recognize the linkages between the imperatives of republicanism and Adams’ fears and achievements. “As a politician”, Daniel Walker Howe observes, “Adams remained in the tradition of the eighteenth-century ‘country party’, a political heritage with a long history in his native New England. His concern with the ‘character of the good ruler’ was one he shared with generations of Yankees and Puritans before him” (Howe 1983: 133).

Still Howe finds Adams’ republicanism belated, foreign to the reformulations of Whig thought that had arisen around him. And, if we wish to reduce Adams to an epigone of republicanism then the judgment of Gordon Wood on the politics of John Adams applies as well to the son. Only a few perhaps saw in an instance the momentous the Constitution had for American traditional understanding of politics... some of those who became Federalists never really comprehended the newness of the system. Of these undoubtedly the most notable was John Adams. Indeed it was Adams’ fate to have missed the intellectual significance of the most important since the Revolution (Wood 1969: 567).

If Wood is correct the politics of Adams becomes foreign to America as the politics of interest and constitutionalism replace the republic of active virtue. While that may be true of John Adams, and I doubt that to be the case, John Quincy attacks the practical effects of the new Constitution through his public career. The unspeakable politics of interest enrages him. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Madison speaks as the prophet of the new American politics—he stands as advocate of a new science of politics bases upon interest rather than virtue. Only a well-organized constitution can control the riot of interest and faction. Virtue never suffices because “enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm (Kammen 1986: 148). Madison reduces politics to the play of faction and the need to regulate faction where virtue, given the nature of humanity or political humanity, must of necessity be lacking. “The latent causes of action are those sown in the nature of man”, he warns his readers, “and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society... regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principle task of modern Legislation” (Kammen 1986: 147). To those embedded within the republican tradition this may seem only the regulation of corruption not its transcendence.

Nevertheless, John Adams in his most depressed moments seems to accept the judgment of Woods on his marginal status. The new science of politics has exiled him. “From the year 1761, now more than fifty years”, he lamented to Benjamin Rush in 1816, “I have constantly lived in an enemies Country” (Kammen 1986: 592). While Adams may despair of American virtue, the republican persuasion continues in the words and deeds of his son. John Quincy Adams reveres the Constitution and accepts the compromises on slavery until he is shocked into action by what he takes to be the great conspiracy of the slave powers against the Republic. (In fact, his hesitation to speak out against slavery early on reflects his belief that there did not exist in the Republic a power strong enough to challenge the South’s lock on national power). Power to one side; Adams fears that compromise has corrupted the Republic. His political sentiments invoke the principles of action that Wood argues are largely dead in his father’s generation. As late as 1843 Adams claims that the American Republic is “the true republic of Montesquieu—the government of which *virtue* is the seminal principle, and that virtue consisting of the love implanted in every bosom of the community of which it is a member” (Koch and Peden 1946: 400-401).

Adams embraces older vision of American politics and, thereby, preserves it from anachronism. He plays the full range of American politics—the normal as well as the extraordinary. Still Wood and Pocock make a telling point. Generations of Americans subsequent to the early Republic have lost the political language to appreciate a politics that sublimely transcends

self-interest. Adams reintroduces us to the lost to this lost vision of a politics, grand and sublime. The political sublime, I will argue, informs Adams' public life as well his *Lectures of Rhetoric and Oratory* (his neglected masterwork of republican theory), and his *Memoirs* (a unique record of a worldly life). From Adams' *Lectures* we may relearn the rhetorical language appropriate to the citizens of the Republic and from his *Memoirs* much about our history and political selves. "In all American political literature", writes Allen Nevis, "there is no record of the kind which approaches this interest and value" (Nevis 1929: xviii). Yet, read as structured by the notion of the political sublime, Adams' *Memoirs* are more than a comprehensive narrative of American politics, they comprise a mirror-for-citizens whose pages relate the antagonistic drama between virtue and vice as these forces shape the life of the Republic.

Adams' *Memoirs* fashion a moral-political theatre whose drama calls upon the reader to emulate the words and deeds that maintain a sublime and free politics. Of course, it may be a private document perhaps only to be read by members of the family, but the tone is public in nature as reflected in his public speeches and writings. The admonition of the title page speaks to all citizens of a free polity: be "thou also bold, and merit praise from age yet to come" (CF Adams 1874: I 83). When we examine Adams' intentions, moreover, the evidence suggests that he hoped to make and public statement and was deterred only by his sense that they were inadequate to that task. Accordingly, Adams theatre also teaches contempt for the vicious citizen whose actions subvert the principles of the Republic. He fills the pages of this Mirror-For Citizens with many such pernicious examples. Adams' mode of argument, as I shall argue, is largely absent from contemporary political thought but one near modern recalls the moral-political foundations that sustain any vision of the sublime that is not purely aesthetic in form. Alfred North Whitehead suggests that moral "education is impossible apart from the habitual vision of greatness." For the idea of greatness, as the Greeks discovered, "is ultimately self-corrective as well as self-impelling. This is especially true when it is presented with the compelling power of a concrete example, whether in persons we meet, or... in a human achievement" (Bates 1963: 147).

The theoretical power of Adams' *Lectures of Rhetoric and Oratory*, with its vision of a sublime republican politics, informs the political examples and achievements around which Adams structures his *Memoirs*. Adams wrote these lectures after accepting the position at Harvard of Boylston Professor of Rhetoric. He prepared them when his tenure as Senator from Massachusetts indeed his whole political career appeared compromised by his support of Jefferson's embargo. Jefferson hoped to avoid the Republic being dragged into the war between France and Great Britain. The boycott was

opposed by the Massachusetts Federalist Party as a threat to the economy of the region. Its members withdrew support from Adams, and he resigned from the Senate. Adams reflected, after beginning his lectures in 1806, that the “term of my public life will soon be at an end and in the present condition of politics in this state, as well as almost all the rest, there is no danger that when my time expires I shall have an opportunity to continue my public life” (Bemis 1949: 132). Adams treats the writing and teaching about rhetoric as a bitter Machiavellian substitute for public life. Finally, however, Adams believed the two volumes of lectures to constitute something of a personal triumph. “These lectures”, Adams observes, “are the measure of my powers, moral and intellectual. In the composition of them I have spared no labor, and omitted no exertion of which I was capable. I shall never, unless by some favor of Heaven, accomplish any work of higher elevation or more extensive compass” (CF Adams 1874: II 148).

The *Memoirs* direct our attention to the Republic’s active player: the citizen-orator; and in that role Adams, as we shall see, aspires to a near perfect fusion between thought and action. His late sublimity in Congress does shrink the achievement of his writings; nevertheless, his actions stand upon the principles of citizenship, as well as his vision of the American Republic, announced throughout his writings both early and late. Furthermore, even in the shadow of his father’s political speculations, Adams’ *Lectures* stand out as the most systematic account of American republicanism ever written by a political actor. Those who have written about his public life and thought have simply ignored this fact. This neglect concerning the conjunction of his public life and the most important of his political writings rests upon reservations and doubts concerning the scope of Adams’ achievements. These doubts prompt a series of questions. As a public man his reputation is exceedingly fragile. What should be honored? What ridiculed or simply ignored? How does Adams’ reputed failure as President qualify his sublime activity as a Congressman? Such perplexity would not surprise Adams, as he understood well the fragility of a public man’s reputation. It is not easy to estimate accurately the moral character of public men. Their reputation is always made up of a composition by friends and foes; all discolored by favor and hatred (CF Adams 1874: VI 75).

After reading Walpole’s *Memoirs*, he observes that the “political history of all countries, and of all ages is a sort of mask, richly colored... And, shall not I, too, have a tale to tell?” (CF Adams 1874: VI 98). Unhappily, however, many stories about Adams pivot on the perception of a failed presidency. Even those who respect Adams’ passion to elevate the office above party are bemused by his wrong headedness or incompetence. “Perhaps the most revealing aspect of John Quincy Adams’ presidency then is its subsequent perception as ‘unreal’ or ‘lurid’ or ‘archaic’” (Ketcham 1984: 139). He simp-

ly ignores the facts of party politics, many complain, by keeping political foes within his own cabinet. Adams' first annual message discredits his vision of the American Republic by demonstrating its distance from the realities of public opinion.

This helps to establish a permanent disconnection between his thought and action in the minds of even those who admire him. Emerson Adams' sublime in the steel of his constitution, but not necessarily in his republicanism. Although a minority President hated by the majority fans of Jackson, Adams, in his first message to Congress, summoned his fellow citizens to a grand, national politics: "The great object of civil government is the improvement of/The condition of those who are parties to the social compact,/and no government, in whatever form constituted, can/accomplish the lawful ends of its institutions but in/proportion as it improves the condition of those over whom/it is established.../For the fulfillment of those duties/governments are invested with power" (Koch and Peden 1946: 360-361).

Adams proposes to use those powers for the material, cultural and political improvement of the nation and its citizens. Under his administration, the national government would build roads, canals and establish national and scientific institutions. Both liberty and power are compatible with Adams' vision of republican government, and he reminds Congress "that power is liberty; that the nation blessed with the largest proportion of liberty must in proportion be the most powerful nation of earth" (Koch and Peden 1946: 366-367). This theme will echo in the political thought of Hannah Arendt, but has little resonance with the majority of his contemporaries.

Neither the Congress nor the citizenry respond to his summons to greatness. One study of Adams suggests that his understanding of the role of government predates that of modernity: "The study of John Quincy Adams offers the opportunity to draw certain interesting parallels between his ideas... with respect to American statesman of the twentieth... the political views of Adams were more akin to Roosevelt's ideas than were Jackson's" (Lipsky 1950: 139). Adams would take little pleasure in that judgment and laments that the "people of this country do not sufficiently estimate the importance of patronizing science as principle of political action; and the slave oligarchy systematically struggle to suppress all public patronage to countenance the progress of the human mind" (Lipsky 1950: 407). Modern historians and political theorists fault Adams' embrace of federal power as incompatible with the triumphant epic of Jacksonian democracy. "No American notable", Charles Sellers observes, "was less qualified by experience, conviction and temperament to cope with the surging democracy" (Sellers 1991: 271). Another historian condemns Adams' political morality as well as his projected use of Federal power:

He appeared as if he wanted to impose his benevolent will on the people, instead of heeding the people's will... More important, those expensive federal policies were anathema to most Americans—and most of their elected representatives—who were still recovering from the economic and political crises of the Monroe years... the president wanted to spend the people's money to built a university and an observatory—an extravagant waste it seemed... (Wilentz 2005: 260)

The response to his congressional message suggests that many of his contemporaries feared or hoped that his presidential tenure would be a catastrophe. No one, however, anticipated grandeur similar to that of Washington, Jefferson or his father. Even Adams expressed envy at the political situation that nourished the greatness of these public men:

Among the felicities of Washington's life is the unity of two great objects which he had to pursue: first, the War of Independence, and, secondly, the Constitution of the United States... No reputation of a great man can be acquired but by the accomplishment of some great object. The Revolutionary age and the Constituent age were the time for great men; the Administrative age is the of small men and small things. (CF Adams 1874: VI 75)

At best, even his friends judged the achievements to have been minimal. "The story of Mr. Adams' Administration will detain the historian, and even the biographer only a short time. Not an event occurred during those for years which appears of any special moment" (Lipsky 1950: 37). Adams, as his diary indicates, feared being a small historical figure, bore with inner rage or accepted with prideful fury attacks upon himself, yet perhaps never expected as president the hatred and contempt directed his way.

At the time of his retirement from the presidency into private life Adams perceives himself as less the sublime leader of the Republic than the object of universal vilification. "I go into it", he decries, "with a combination of parties and of public men against my character and reputation such as I believe never before was exhibited against any man sine the this Union existed... this combination has been formed, and is now exulting in triumph over me... the North assails me for my infidelity to the Union; the South for my ardent aspirations" (CF Adams 1974: VIII: 100). Perhaps the polarizing effect of Adams' person and policies on politics should not have surprised him. Certainly he had a foretaste of this in 1809 when forced by the Federalist's to resign from the Senate for supporting the Louisiana Purchase and Jefferson's embargo. Then his former party associates denounce Adams as "erratic" and "independent" like a "kite without a rudder" (Bemis 1949: 1223). An anonymous Federalist declaimed: "Lucifer son of the Mourning, how hast thou fallen" (Bemis 1949: 1223).

Adams believed himself chased from public life, perhaps never to return. Yet, when he did return to electoral office as President he experienced

much the same form of public assault. The bargain he struck with Henry Clay to become a minority President appeared corrupt to many. The brilliant, often mad, John Randolph denounced both the President and the new Secretary of State: “I was defeated, horse, foot and dragoons—cut up and clean broke down by the coalition of Bifil and Black George—by the combination unheard of till then, of the Puritan with the blackleg” (H Adams 1898: 286). After his election a Jacksonian newspaper published this obituary for the Republic: “Expired at Washington on the ninth of February, of poison administered by the assassin hands of John Quincy Adams... the virtue, liberty, and independence of the United States” (Weeks 1992: 189). Hoping to govern as man of the nation, the election Adams, as his friends had warned him, reopened a new era of party anger and passion.

Prior to his election Adams confided in his diary to wish to continue the harmonious politics of James Monroe. “It would hereafter”, Adams opined, “be looked back as the golden age of the Republic, and I felt extreme solicitude that its end might correspond with the character of its progress; that the Administration might be delivered into the hands of the successor, whoever that might be, at peace and amity with the world” (CF Adams 1874: VI 197). Nevertheless, the resumption of party hostilities which led to Adams’ rout in 1828, dashed these hopes and seemed to confirm the worst fears of Adams and his friends. “In the excitement of contested elections and party spirit”, he observes, “judgment becomes the slave of the will. Men believe everything... as it suits their own wishes” (CF Adams 1874: VII: 379). In 1837, after a decade of bitter reflection, he judged his political life a failure to have been a failure—no great deeds, no sublime achievements:

I fear I have done and can do little good in the world. And my life will end in disappointment. And my life will end in disappointment of the good which I would have done have I been permitted. The great effort of my administration was to mature in to a into a mature into a permanent and regular system the application of all the superfluous revenue of the Union to in internal improvement... When I came to the presidency the principle of internal improvements was swelling the tide of public prosperity. Till the Sable Genius of the South saw the signs of his own inevitable downfall in the in the unparalleled progress of the general welfare of the North, and fell to cursing the tariff, and internal improvements, and raised the standard of free trade, nullification, and states rights. I fell... the great object of my life has failed. (Koch and Peden 1946: 389).

In this letter to Charles Upham, Adams assesses failure primarily in public terms: that canals and railroads not built, the high wages and jobs lost to future generations. The collapse of a whole political system oppresses him. Yet Adams’ sigh, “I fell”, suggests more than public disgust, rather a deep personal chaos haunts him. He knew that his parents had placed his education under the genius of the sublime. When addressing the education of his

son John Adams had reminded his wife Abigail that human “nature, with all its infirmities and deprivation, is still capable of great things... Education makes a greater difference between man and man, than nature has made between brute and man... the virtues and powers to which men may be trained, by early education and constant discipline, are truly sublime and astonishing” (Seward 1849: 31-32). Humiliation at having fallen beneath the high standards expected of him by his parents may well have increased his unease. Early in his life his mother had opened up the career of Cicero for his consideration: “Nothing is wanting with you, but attention, diligence and steady application, nature has not been deficient. There are times in which genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed. Would Cicero have shone so distinguished an orator, if he had not been roused, kindled and inflamed by the tyranny of Catiline, Milo, Verras and Mark Anthony” (Seward 1849: 253).

Does he ever reach his mother’s standards for him? Perhaps not. But the Adams family cannot drop the puzzle of John Quincy Adams. His grandsons, Brooks and Henry Adams discover in Adams’ presidency the cause of an almost psychotic break in their grandfather’s mind and soul. Henry, in a letter to his brother Brooks, calls his grandfather’s tenure in office “lurid” and “tragic”, and surmises that, as consequence of his defeat the old President “loathed and hated America” (H Adams 1988: VI 229). Americans, accordingly, avert their eyes from John Quincy and celebrate Jackson. “Americans”, he continues, “are afraid of tragedy; they fly from it, or shut their eyes to it:

J. Q. Adams, is to my artistic fancy, tragic picture, and his Presidency is the most tragic shadow of it. He is the prophet who ends in secret murder, violence and fraud, and hideous moral depravity. America dare not look at such a Shakespearean or Sophoclean plot, and would turn their backs upon it... (H Adams 1988: VI 229-230)

To Henry Adams the tragedy of his grandfather illustrates the triumph of the slave powers in America yet presages the violence of civil war, “the terrible sublime”, that Adams welcomes with an almost horrified delight in the pages of his *Memoirs*.

Brooks Adams compounds the gravity of Henry’s analysis by allowing that defeat injected into his grandfather’s “mind the first doubt as to whether there was a god, and whether life had a purpose” (H Adams 1910: 10). The election of Jackson, if Brooks is correct, convinces Adams that God had broken with the American Republic and cursed his own desire to use the presidency as an agent of public regeneration: “He knew that he had kept his part of the covenant, even too well. In return, when it came to a test,

God had abandoned him and had made Jackson triumph, and to Adams Jackson was the materialization of the principle of evil” (H Adams 1910: 77). Adams’ most self-conscious writings seem to confirm the evaluation of history and family. His contempt for the enfolding of American democracy suggests an evolving hatred for the Republic he had served so well and diligently. “Democracy”, he decries, “has no forefathers, it has no posterity, it is swallowed up in the present and thinks of nothing but itself. This is the vice of democracy, and it is incurable... its very essence is iconoclastic. This is the why Congress has never been able to erect a monument to Washington” (CF Adams 1874: VIII 433). The slight of Washington’s unfinished monument, in Adams’ judgment, symbolizes the nation’s turn away from political grandeur to the vulgar populism of Jackson.

Anticipating his own beating, Adams leaves his diary empty between August 16<sup>th</sup> and December the first, 1828. While Adams makes no comment on Jackson’s immediate progress, his entry on the first day of the New Year shows deep depression. “The year”, he reflects, “begins in gloom. My wife had a sleepless and painful night. The dawn was over cast, and, as I began to write, my shaded lamp wet out, self-extinguished. It was only for lack of oil, and the notice of so trivial an incident may be serve to mark my present state of mind” (JQ Adams 1929: 386). His reaction to the flickering out of the lamp may indicate a suicidal element in Adams’ constitution unrelated to private grief but to his fear of public repudiation or humiliation. In 1822 he writes his wife a letter that suicide might provide a path out of political anxiety.

There will be enough for the Presidency without me and if my delicacy is not suited to the times, there will be candidates who have no such delicacy... They think [his political friends] that I am panting to be President, while I am more inclined to envy Castlereagh [who had committed suicide] the relief he found from a situation too much like mine. It is my situation that makes me a candidate and at least you know that my present situation was neither of my own seeking, nor my own choice (Weeks 1992: 186).

However, Adams’ embrace of the political sublime demanded the ambitious, passionate pursuit of fame even political immortality. Early on in his *Memoirs*, Adams cites with admiration this admonition: “be thou also bold, and merit praise from ages yet to come” (CF Adams 1874: I 83). As we have seen, his ambition was one aspect of an education in self-sacrifice begun by his parents. The injunctions of his adored mother held a terrible power over Adams, both as a child and as an adult. When he was ten Abigail wrote to him, “I would rather you should found our grave in the ocean that you have crossed... they see you an immoral, profligate, immoral child” (CF Adams 1874: I 14). William Weeks argues that Adams was a victim of the “Family Myth” that entwined him in a net that hung him between public

aspiration and personal sacrifice. “John Quincy Adams”, adds Weeks, “bore the responsibility of extending the fame of a family convinced of role as an agent of national destiny—a responsibility made greater by the alcoholism and dissipation of his two brothers... success required extending the achievements of his father’s generation” (Weeks 1992: 9). Consequently, during moments of failure and doubt Adams imposed lacerating psychological punishments upon his self. Then, as Brooks Adams understands, his grandfather questions his self, American democracy and God—not always in that order. Late in life, in 1843, Adams affirms the articles of the Christian faith, yet feels cursed by disbelief and sinfulness:

Of all the articles of faith, resting upon the first, the existence of all an Omnipotent Spirit, I entertain involuntary and agonizing doubts, which I can neither silence nor dispel, and against which I need for my comfort to be fortified by stated and frequent opportunities of receiving religious admonition and instruction. I feel myself to be a frequent sinner before God, and I need to be often admonished and exhorted to virtue... (H Adams 1910: 34).

Atheism or the lack of active belief was one of the vices, as we shall see, that Adams believed subverted the personal and political integrity of Jefferson. He must have been vexed by his own doubts.

Adams’ sense of passivity, his need to be secured by some external authority, mixes poorly with the imperatives of the human sublime. Nevertheless, Adams’ education to active virtue usually breaks him out of passivity and doubt. Had he been content to suffer exile to private life, as his father had been, or to sit in his study and whine about the ingratitude of the nation, the negative judgments of his grandson would have been fully vindicated. That, however, discounts Adams’ active, joyous return to public life as a member of Congress. His sense of public duty, as we shall see, snaps him out of stupor and lethargy. His actions demonstrate that the essence of Adams’ character was public duty. In an entry in his diary Adams allows that every generation of a republic’s citizens inherit a hierarchy of duties: First to family, then to society, all culminating in the obligations that citizens owe to the Republic:

There are also the duties of a citizen to his country, which are binding upon all, and more forcibly binding in a republican government... other governments suppose that the great interests of the community are... committed to a certain number of individuals... But upon the republican principle... every individual lies under the obligation of attending to and promoting the common interest to the utmost of his power... (CF Adams 1874: II 12).

To follow that hierarchy of duties raises the citizen to the service of the public good. His acclimation of public duty affirms his father’s dictum that “it is

of acts that constitute our happiness” (J Adams 1797: II 40). Despite reservations about democracy Adams welcomes the opportunity to serve the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: “My election as President of the United States was not so gratifying to my innermost soul No election or appointment conferred upon me so much pleasure” (CF Adams 1874: VIII 247). Adams’ leap back into politics reveals another perspective on the man that sometimes escaped his detractors, yet often, as we shall see, dismayed his enemies. When he escapes from self-pity Adams evidences great physical, moral and political strength. Combat restores him, resurrects Adams in the character of a dangerous public, street fighter. The sublime qualities of his last years emerge in the context of political antagonism—he acts out a powerful negativity. Adams, as we shall argue, needs an enemy to publicly flourish. “My success”, he observes at the commencement of his political career, “has been more frequent in opposition than in carrying any proposition of my own” (CF Adams 1874: I 471). In these moments Adams’ activity may serve to challenge Carl Schmitt’s conclusion that neither liberalism nor democracy can generate a real politics as these regimes flee into parliamentarianism as to avoid any conflict that will divide the political system between friends and enemies.

Yet Adams’ antagonistic sublime, as I shall demonstrate, accepts intense conflict, even the threat of civil disruption to activate the deliberative politics necessary for protest and fundamental reform. Henry Adams admires that aspect of his grandfather’s character: *Nitor in adversum* (I strive against opposition) is the motto of a man like him” (H Adams 1988: VI P. 231). That reading of Adams prompts his grandson to find qualities in the old politician beyond the tragic or the ludicrous. As consequence of his combative nature, Adams now emerges as the Republic’s most important public figure in the fifty years before the Civil War. “No other man in our political history”, except John Randolph, the historian observes, “has approached him in the rough and tumble of savage prize-fighting. This was a field in which his temper stood him in good stead” (H Adams 1988: VI P. 239). Emerson and those politicians who suffer his public assaults are forced to agree with his grandson.

The negative ground of Adams’ effective action provides a clue to his mixed contemporary and historical reputation as it explains the source of both his failed presidency and the sublime qualities of his later public career. His might have had a stronger presidency had he adopted the style natural to him, that of apolitical fighter (other Presidents have done so to their advantage). But Adams, as we have seen, viewed the presidency as an office beyond politics and himself as man of the nation rather than a partisan. Adams refused to use the partisan, agonistic practices of the nation to help shape the political field that surrounded him. He remained uncharac-

teristically passive. “I have followed the convictions of my own mind with a single eye to the interests of the whole nation; and”, Adams adds almost with the shrug, “if I have no claim to the suffrages of the whole nation, I certainly have none to those of either party” (CF Adams 1874: VI 136). Indeed, as a minority President, Adams probably lacked the power to influence the political theatre in a satisfactory manner.

Other political offices, diplomatic missions as well as his congressional tenure, permitted him to adopt the agonistic aspects of politics. Both in thought and action Adams adopts the agon—the passion for self-disclosure—that Arendt argues dominated the Greek polis: “As such it became the prototype of action for Greek antiquity and influence, in the form of so-called the agonal spirit, the passionate drive to show one’s self in measuring up against others that underlies underlies the concept of politics prevalent in the city-states” (Arendt 1958: 194).

### **The Sublime and Republicanism**

Alone among American republican theorists Adams takes the Greek polis as the frame in which the political sublime appeared, although, and this perhaps is a contradiction, the Roman Republic provided his models of exemplary action. Adams was at his best (sometimes as a diplomat and then as a Congressman) when fashioning a political drama that joined what he perceived as the public good with the agonal conflict he projected between friend and foe. Then Adams could be fierce. When American Minister to Russia, one Englishman found him “a bull dog among spaniels” (Dangerfield 1952: 7). Once again the emphasis falls on Adams’ temperament rather than the political education that shaped it. Even Emerson, one of Adams’ fervent admirers, celebrates that aspect of his person when the old man is elected to the House:

Mr. Adams chose wisely and according to his constitution, when on leaving the Presidency, he went into Congress. He is no literary old gentleman, but a bruiser who loves the *melee*. When they talk his age and venerableness and nearness to the grave, he knows better, he is like one of those old cardinals, who quick as he is chosen Pope, throws away his crutches and crookedness, and is as straight as a boy. (Emerson 1958: 196)

Emerson congratulates Adams’ constituents for the wisdom of their votes. Instead of electing a party hack or even a great orator “they sent a man with a back, and he defied the whole Southern delegation when they attempted to smother him, and has conquered them” (Emerson 1958: 208).

That, of course, is the narrative I will relate, yet on terms more political than allowed by Emerson. For, however much his reverence for Adams, Emerson misreads the source misreads the source of Adams’ political sub-

lime, neglects its grounding in the republican political vision. He regards the sublime as apolitical—a measure of the natural power that resides in the will of the individual. “All great force”, Emerson asserts, “is real and elemental in nature. There is no manufacturing a strong will” (Emerson 2004: VI 28-29). The theoretical mind of John Quincy Adams little interests him: only the power of his actions. That disconnection is not unique. Whether treated as a success or a failure almost all perspectives on Adams neglect the place of theoretical vision in his life’s work.

Only one work deals with Adams’ political thought in a systematic manner, and the author reduces him to an epigoni of John Locke. “The Lockean quality of Adams’ thinking”, writes George Lipsky, “is immediately apparent when judged against the background of a summation of Locke’s thought. Like Locke Adams vigorously rejected Hobbes’ affirmation of political absolutism.” [Locke also advanced] “an egoistic natural law concept to which Adams subscribed, possessed basic individual rights to be safeguarded at all costs. The basic individual right of man in private property, the keystone of the system of rights, was inherent in Adams’ thinking as Locke’s” (Lipsky 1950: 328). All this may be so, but Lipsky’s affirmation of Lockean identities leaves him blind to Adams’ celebration of strong citizenship. Indeed, citizenship plays little or no role in Locke’s view of civil society. Locke combines the language of consent with that of force, yet in a manner uncongenial with Adams’ republicanism: “For that which acts any community, being only the consent of the individuals of it, and it being necessary to that which is one body to move one way; it is necessary that body should move the way whither the greater force carries, which is the *consent of the majority*” (Locke 1965: 375).

However, the role of the citizen especially the exemplary figure of Cicero haunt the pages of Adams’ *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*. Lipsky misses all of this: the pages of the *Lectures* go unread.

Yet, and this I hope to rectify, John Quincy Adams exists nowhere in the history of American political thought. Under the category of politic thought, Lipsky can only note Adams’ untimely advocacy of a positive role for the national government. “Adams”, he opines, “remains ahead of his time. He will perhaps come into his own in the understanding of Americans when they have accepted more fully and consciously the idea of a positive role for government as the chief instrument for serving the general welfare” (Lipsky 1950: 265). There can be no separation, however, between Adams’ affirmation of public life and his republicanism. And, his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* stand as the most systematic presentation of civic republicanism in American thought. How then to explain the failure of recognition of that fact? Perhaps Adams’ themes have become so foreign to our diminished sense of politics that his vision appears simultaneously unreal and boring.

Even Bemis, his great biographer reaches that conclusion: “Today nobody would read one of the volumes through at one sitting. Its passages are puffy with superfluous luxuriance, full of missed metaphors, pompous and stilted eloquence” (Bemis 1949: 133).

Nothing that Adams writes about political speech and principle, or the relationship between theory and practice, interests Bemis. Yet he does pick up on a clue on Adams’ fixation on rhetoric taken from the *Memoirs*. “Rhetoric alone”, he cites Adams, “cannot constitute an orator. No human art can be acquired by the mere knowledge of principles. But the artist who understands its principles, will exercise his art at highest perfection” (Bemis 1949: 134). Bemis allows that Adams became an orator when he entered into contest with the slave powers. The principles that make Adams an orator, nevertheless, are more than technical in nature rather they define the role of the citizen-orator necessary to a free society. No one defines that relationship more clearly than Adams. We return to the question: why does his book go unread? It cannot merely be a matter of style. After all the design of John Adams’ *Defense of the Constitutions* perhaps is more unwieldy. That, however, may well be the cut off point on any consideration of civic republicanism after the Revolution and the period of constitution making.

The language of republicanism may resonate in that period of great politics. John Adams can expect an audience when he compares the founders of the American political universe to great actors of antiquity:

You and, I my dear friend, have been sent into the world at a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to live... When before the present epoch, had three million people full power and a fair opportunity to form and establish the wisest and happiest governments that human wisdom can contrive... the formation of the happiest governments and the best character of a great people. (J Adams 2000: 293).

Perhaps, however, the subtitle to Adams’ *Thoughts on Government* gives the game away as to the future reception of republican principles: *Applicable to the Present State of the American Colonies* (J Adams 2000: 287). Adams political thought may well have been “the finest fruit of the American Enlightenment”, yet the political conditions that inspired it had ended, leaving his republicanism untimely and exhausted (Wood 1969: 568). Gordon Wood describes a paradigm shift in American politics that alienated the generation of 1787 from that of 1776. James Madison, as a representative of the younger generation, condemns Adams thought as foreign to the new American age. It may, in fact, constitute a dangerous element of subversion.

Some even in their admiration saw that the book was “rather an encomium on the British Constitution than a defense of the American systems.” “Men of learning”, said Madison, “find nothing new in it, men of taste many

things to criticize.” Instead of explaining the principles of the American constitutions, critics observed. Adams seems to be “insidiously, attempting, notwithstanding now and then a saving clause, to overturn our Constitution or at least to sow the seeds of dissent” (Wood 1969: 582).

Madison may clearly have understood the intellectual distance that separates his science from that of John and John Quincy Adams. The age of political greatness has ended and the Virginian wants the constitutional settlement of 1787 to take hold of the American public mind. He declares the age of political speculation to be at end. In response to Jefferson’s summons to new revolutions and new foundations, he tells his friend that the people only want quite and not the politics of new visions. Jefferson admonition that the earth belongs to the living may work in theory but, he informs, the “spirit of philosophical legislation has never reached some parts of the Union, and is by no means the fashion here... the evils suffered and feared from weakness in Government, and licentiousness in the people, have turned the attention more towards the means of strengthening the former than of narrowing its extent in the minds of the later.” Moreover, he adds, only time will permit “the sublime truths which are seen thro’ the medium of philosophy, [to] become visible to the naked eye of the ordinary politician” (Koch 1944: 449).

Madison declares the end of political philosophy and separates theory from the life of the politician, while Adams example suggests that theory and practice may be reconnected, at least in the figure of the citizen-orator. Adams uncovers a variety of politics that fill the field of American public life. Madison, on the other hand, praises the revolution for taking the Republic on a new constitutional path, but forbids any alternative or extraordinary politics out side of that predetermined track. At the most where flaws appear Americans must shoulder the practical task of reform:

They accomplished a revolution which has no parallel in the annals of human society. They formed the fabrics of governments which have no model on the face of the globe. They formed the design of a great confederacy, which it is incumbent on their successors to improve and perpetuate. (Kammen 1986: 157)

Madison submits that the flaws or few so the Constitution will rarely, if ever, require large reconstitution. During the period of his active sublime, Adams will declare the Constitution to have been corrupted almost beyond restitution.

At his best, however, Adams seems belated, a public man seeking to restore the political greatness of a generation past. One coherent appreciation of his political thought, although not a systematic one, connects Adams to a displaced Federalisms attempt to restore the classical tradition as part of an ideological attack on a triumphant Jeffersonian democracy. His *Lectures*,

according to Linder Kerber, marshals the classical tradition with its advocacy of a politically education elite against the leveling thrust of democratic culture. She cites an introduction Adams wrote as a preface to his translation of Juvenal's *Seventh Satire*: "Let us reflect that his neglect of literature and contempt of learned men, in Rome, spring up and grew, exactly at the same period, and in the same proportions as genuine Republican spirit and manners decayed and withered... That tyranny and ignorance advanced upon them hand in hand... It may be useful to many of our countrymen, to be reminded that the alliance between the love of learning and the love of genuine, freedom, is indissoluble (Kerber 1970: 131).

Kerber's insight joins Adams' love of the classics with his distrust of democracy, but her reading is more cultural than political and fails to consider Adams' acting out of the political imperatives of the classical tradition. Again, he partakes of a losing tradition that sinks under the authority of the new political culture of democracy. Perhaps Wood correctly assumes that, after the triumph of the new politics, no need exists to trace remnants of the old assumptions past the writings of John Adams. After the new political science of Madison and Hamilton had hardened into a consensus, Adams' republicanism becomes a family matter of more interest to the biographer than the student of American political thought. Universal assent meant the end of any great politics as the foundations of the Constitutional order appeared to have been completed and beyond debate. That would soon prove an illusion. Nevertheless, Henry Adams marked the moment of settlement about the year 1815: "The ideas of 1787 were antiquated by 1815... The subsidence of interest in political theories was a measure of the change, marking the general drift of society towards practical devices for popular use, within popular intelligence. The only work that could be said to represent a school of thought in politics was written by John Taylor of Caroline, and was probably never read... north of Baltimore by any but deep curious and somewhat deep students, although to them it had value" (H Adams 1967: 385).

Henry Adams defers here to the reader's knowledge that John Adams was that "curious" and "deep student". In 1814, Taylor had published an attack of Adams' *Defense* and the old President responded in a series of lethal letters to the *Virginian*. At issue were the merits of the old American republicanism that Adams would defend until his last day. As if to take the celebration of republicanism into a new age John Quincy had published his *Lectures* in 1810. Henry Adams implies that these debates occurred at the public boundaries of the Republic and only a few overheard them. Because the lines of political development have been closed compromise replaces principle, had not Jefferson already proclaimed that "every difference not a difference in principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists" (H

Adams 1967: 147). Accordingly, Henry Adams' *History* tells a story that begins with the end of principle.

Politics remains but has lost any aspects of greatness or sublimity. Hannah Arendt suggests one barrier between the present and the past is the loss of the political language demanded to understand the substance of a grand politics. Revolutionaries "on both sides of the Atlantic possessed a name for this treasure, a name long since forgotten and lost... The name in America was 'Public happiness'... with its overtones of 'virtue' and 'glory'... the difficulty for us is... the emphasis was on 'public'" (Arendt 1961: 5). More than a century earlier, Tocqueville had read American politics in much the same manner as Arendt. His *Democracy in America* plays many riffs on this theme. All grandeur in politics ended after 1787. "This is the age", Tocqueville observes, "intrigues and small parties... great political parties" are attuned to "principles", "generalities", and "ideas" and not to "consequences", "particular cases" or "men" (De Tocqueville 2000: 74). "Great parties", he continues, "turn society upside down, small ones agitate it, the first tear it apart, and the second corrupt it; the first sometimes save it by shaking it up, the second always trouble it without profit" (De Tocqueville 2000: 74). Tocqueville allows that America once had great parties, at the moment of the constitutional settlement, then the nation was divided between two great parties—the Federalists and the Republicans. The former wanted "to restrain the people's power" while the latter "claimed to be the exclusive lover of liberty" (De Tocqueville 2000: 75-76).

All previous greatness had vanished by 1830 when Tocqueville visited America. Adams and Tocqueville share a disdain for small party politics, yet Tocqueville takes comfort from the fact that it is one element in American political culture that secures the nation against the scourge of revolution. Moreover, the constant but minor activity that American democracy expects of its members assures they "not only seldom engage in meditation, but they naturally entertain very little esteem for it" (De Tocqueville 1945: 44). They are pragmatic practitioners of their politics not given to rethinking the foundations of their practice. On the other hand, the corruptions attendant to a small politics discomfort and often enrage Adams. While acting within the limits of a lesser politics Adams diaries reveal his dreams of a great, even revolutionary assault upon the slave powers. Tocqueville, after his journeys across the democracy and then dinner with Adams came to believe that slavery was not only a great evil but the probable causes of any future American Revolution: "If ever America undergoes great revolutions, they will be brought about by the presence of the black race on the soil of the United States; that is to say, they will owe their origin not to the equality, but to the inequality of condition" (De Tocqueville 1945: 270).

Adams will live out this dream in the sublime politics of his old age. The variety of historical perspectives on Adams may prohibit a definitive, persuasive judgment on the man that will satisfy all his critics. I will try to support the position that his thought and example can continue as an active presence in American political culture. If not, then Adams' politics yet opens up the question of what has been lost with the extinction of the republican political vision from our public world. The costs of a small, corrupt politics became clear to Adams' generation when they had to engage the issue of slavery. Another loss, and this in the long run, may have been of greater significance is the disappearance from the greater American political culture of the vision of an active citizenry. As Arendt notes the citizens of the Republic rarely speak or understand the rhetoric of republicanism.

Little more than a quarter century from the closure of the constitutional period Jefferson issues an early warning concerning American republicanism. Although he argues that the political education of every citizen requires acquaintance with the *Declaration* and *The Federalist Papers*, time shrinks his complacency regarding the effects of the governing constitutional order. They may bar the citizenry from an intelligent participation in the affairs of the commonwealth—the private citizen replaces the citizen-orator: “If, then, the control over the organs of government be the measure of its republicanism... it must be argued that our governments have much less republicanism than ought to have been expected, in other words that the people have less regular control over their agents, than their rights and interests require” (Jefferson 1944: 675).

Jefferson attributes this failure to “a submission of true principle to European authorities” whose fear of the people has been translated from the European situation and fixed in the American constitutions at both the State and Federal levels (Jefferson 1944: 672).

In consequence, Jefferson imagines a reconstitution of the Republic that would integrate a system of wards and town meetings into the machinery of the Constitutions. That would create public spaces in which each citizen might actively participate in the exercise of political power. Jefferson argues that such a politics necessarily fashions citizens with sublime, public souls. “Whenever man”, he argues, “is a sharer in the direction of his ward-republic... and feels that he is a participator in the government of affairs, not merely at one day in the year, but every day, when there shall be a man in the State who will not be a member of its councils... he will let the heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power be wrestled from him by a Caesar or a Bonaparte” (Jefferson 1944: 661). These recommendations bare, as shall see, a striking similarity to the well-ordered republic that Adams describes in his *Lectures*.

Jefferson fears, however, “that the golden moment for reforming these heresies is past” (Jefferson 1944: 672). Although he stands close to Revolution in historical time, Jefferson as does Adams and Arendt fears the loss of political memory. The moment may have when reformation can be secured the public spirit of the citizenry. “They will be forgotten, therefore, “and their rights disregarded. They will forget themselves but in the sole faculty of making money, and will never think of uniting to effect a due respect for their rights... till our rights shall revive or expire in a convulsion” (Jefferson 1944: 277). The acceptance of Adams’ sublime political imperatives seem finally to rest upon a public appeal to a corrupt citizenry.

However, with the decline of an active citizenry, unsecured by supporting institutions, might not the practice of republican politics be lost. That may be what both Jefferson and Adams understand as corruption. And will not that corruption lead the members of the polity to be indifferent to the republic sublime or merely to hold it in contempt? Adams’ politics may stumble against collective indifference and contempt. Perhaps, however, Woods is correct to insist that the triumph of the constitutional politics of 1787 has usurped the Field of American politics. The celebrated political rhetoric of the Federalist persuasion, has narrowed our shared political vocabulary and, consequently, reduced the larger range of political possibilities that should be legitimately open to the free citizens of a republic.

Everything, accordingly, may close the practical and theoretical path to an appreciation of John Quincy Adams’ political life and thought. Lacking the political names that key his invocation of an American political sublime. Adams’ speculations can only appear quaint if they have any meaning at all to those educated in the political science of Madison and Hamilton. Perhaps the political framed they have created cannot be subverted. “Hamilton, Madison and Jay”, Sheldon Wolin records, “invented a political theory of the Constitution, and they did much to establish an authoritative conceptual language for interpretation of its provisions” (Wolin 1989: 84). On the other hand, Pocock’s treatment of the Machiavellian moment, as it exhausts itself in America, opens a way back to Adams. No subsequent “generation... unanimously” abandoned republican concepts, rather, he argues, “the rhetoric of balance and the separation of powers operated to keep the language of republicanism alive” (Pocock 1975: 526). Furthermore, Pocock allows that, although disconnected from their theoretical foundations, two of Adams’ major themes (the dynamics of virtue and corruption) yet inform American politics. The “vocabulary of virtue and corruption persisted in American thought, not merely as a survival slowly dying as its tab root was cut, but with the reality and relevance to elements in the American experience that kept it alive with its partial abandonment in the fields of constitutional theory and rhetoric” (Pocock 1975: 526-527).

While enfeebled the language of republicanism continues to inform, if only in a minor way, American practice; however, after John Adams Pocock names no one who advances the tradition in a systematic manner. John Quincy Adams, I contend, does just that. Furthermore, an appreciation of the sublime words and deeds of Adams' republicanism may help us recover our political minds and public souls. We end this section with William Seward's evaluation the career of John Quincy Adams whom Seward insisted had been misread, and condemned but had surprised many with his political resurrection as a member of Congress. He retains the capacity to astound us:

Long as he had been before the public, the mass had thus far failed to read him aright. Hitherto circumstance had placed him in collision with aspiring men. He stood in their way to station and power. There was a reason to conceal his virtues and magnify his faults... Even his devoted friends did not fully appreciate these qualities in him. During his long public service, he had ever been the object of hatred and vituperation to a class of minds utterly incapable of estimating his talents or comprehending his high principles of action. Did he utter a patriotic sentiment... Did he do a noble deed... it was attributed to a wretched pandering for the emoluments of office... A majority countrymen have been deceived as to his principles and character, and sacrificed him politically on the altar of party spirit... It remained for another stage of his life to correct them of this error, and to vindicate his character... His new career was to furnish a luminous commentary on his past life, and to convince the most skeptical of the justice of his claim to rank among the highest and best of American patriots. (Seward 1849: 240-242)

### **Sublime and Politics in Adams' Life and Thought**

In this last section, I blended together many of the positive and negative elements that constitute Adams' mixed historical reputation. Now I want to begin to reconstruct a narrative of Adams' life and thought that might suggest the authority of his achievement and their pertinence to the ongoing practice of American politics. I will begin by connecting the conventions of the American sublime with his public sublime. For it is clear that his contemporaries did find the old President sublime, and understood the theoretical foundations of that judgment. On the last matter, I will play Adams' thought against the counter sublime to be found in the new political science of Federalists and that of Tocqueville. I will examine as well the differences between Adams' sublime and that modern tradition that commences with Burke and Kant. That requires a defense of the public sublime against later alternatives. My initial point, however, is a simple one: Adams plays upon the full range of American politics—both high and low. Above all, he pulls from within the American political tradition a sublime politics of virtue and glory. Many of his contemporaries, as we shall see, understood that fact.

Adams' sublime politics exists in a triangular relationship between his practice, the record that he compiles of that activity in his *Memoirs* and the theoretical grounding of his public life to be discovered in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*. His thought comprises a deeply repressed element of the American political mind, buried, as Wood correctly estimates, by the dominant tradition.

The repressive authority of the dominant mode fails to cancel those often hidden aspects of American politics that may be summoned into the space of politics through the action of a citizen or that of the association of citizens. The topology of the American political tradition may well be envisioned if we perceived it as Freud imagined Rome. He seeks to describe the living elements of the mind with the older components buried yet potent in its deepest foundations. Accordingly, Freud asks us as tourists of Rome to grasp the antiquity of the city by placing the foundations beneath a grand topography that sits the whole history of Rome upon those first ruins. All that constitutes historical Rome but the past is dead in relationship to the present city. Then he asks the student of the city to translate his archeological city into the activity of the mind:

Now let us make the fantastic supposition that Rome as not a human dwelling-place, but a mental entity with just as long and varied past history; that is, in which nothing once constructed had perished, and all the earlier stages of development had survived alongside the latest... And the observer would need merely to shift the focus of his eyes, perhaps, or change his position in order to call up view of either the one or the other. (Freud 1958: 8-9)

The American political tradition expresses itself in such a mode and we need only adjust our words and deeds to be the agent through the repressed elements are activated in the present. Adams recalls the repressed aspects of the American tradition, what he names as the orphic Republic, in the pages of his *Lectures* and *Memoirs*. He accesses dimensions of politics long neglected or misunderstood by Americans.

While Adams cannot use Freudian imagery, he often implies that there are depths and dimensions to American politics that can be explored through the action of its citizens. The political rhetoric through he defends his actions incorporates an American Republic grounded in a double foundation, a theme to which he returns across the sweep of his public life. "The merit of effecting the establishment of the Constitution of the United States belongs to the party called the Federalists—the party favorable to the consolidation of power in the federal head... the protection property, and thereby the Federalists became identified with the aristocratic part of the community... The anti-Federalists had always the advantage of *numbers*. Their principles, being those of democracy, were always favored by the ma-

jority of people; and their cause, being more congenial to that of our Revolution, gave them the opportunity of making their adversaries obnoxious as Tories” (Koch and Peden 1946: 325-326). Although politics may be only a human convention, Adams insists that even a democratic politics serves both high and low, both ordinary and extraordinary practices. More often than not Adams reads a sublime politics in the principles of the Declaration as opposed to an everyday politics of the Constitution. He endorses, accordingly, a patriotism of action:

In countries approaching so near a democracy as these United States, it must ever be the primary object of leaders to court the people. There are two modes of accomplishing this with success... In times of national difficulties distress, when the service of the people is a service of danger and toil, when deeds are the only test of attachment to the country, and mere words are estimated at their proper worth, the patriot of action generally obtains the ascendancy, but in days of peace and tranquility, when the duties of public life are little than routine, when honor without peril, and profit without sacrifice is the result of public employment, then the patriot of profession takes his turn, and often bears away the palm from his more reserved and unassuming competitor. (JQ Adams 1914: 526)

Adams’ contrast of these two political modalities parallels distinction between those who merely live off of politics and the few whose passion turns the practice into a vocation. He celebrates, as does Weber, the politician who really possesses the vocation of politics. “Only he, Weber asserts, has the calling for politics who is sure that he shall not crumble when from his point of view the world is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer. Only he who in the face of all this can say ‘In spite of all!’ has the calling for politics” (Weber 1946: 128). Not all, Adams will assert, with this passion rise to the sublime because they misread the informing principles of American politics. Nevertheless, Adams’ affirmation of public life, his refusal to follow despair into retirement sometimes confounds his family and friends. His father’s reentry into public life bothered Charles Francis Adams: it was beneath the dignity of a former President.

His wife desired that Adams retire, but perhaps captured the spirit of her husband when she observed that he had an “insatiable passion” for political office and public strife, and could not “bring his mind to the calm of retirement... without risking a total extinction of life” (Richards 1986: 7). In his letters, Adams put it both short and long. He protested that politics no longer welcome him still “he could not set it aside. “For myself, taught in the school of Cicero, I shall say: *Defendi republicam adolescens; non deseram senex*” (Bemis 1949: 210). Closer to his true sentiment was this confession made to a friend who advises him to retire and think about final things: Addams was very old and had eighteen years of aggressive activity in the

House. Adams admits that his friend might be correct, yet knows that after more “that sixty years off incessant intercourse with the world has make political movement to me as much a necessity of life as atmospheric air. This is a weakness of my nature, which I have the intellect to perceive but not the energy to control. And, while a remnant of physical power is left to me to write and speak, the world will retire from me before I retire from it” (CF Adams 1874: X 451).

The perception of Adams as constantly aching for activity puts in question Brooks Adams’ assertion that the old man had “been an idealistic philosopher who sought to put the Union upon a plane of civilization which would have averted the Civil War... who, failed as all men must fail who harbor such a purpose, and who almost with his last breath resigned himself and his ambitions to fate” (H Adams 1910: 11). That judgment captures an aspect of Adams’ vocation, yet requires this qualification by Henry Adams to approach the substance of accuracy: “John Quincy Adams had been a political man, actuated by ordinary political feelings” (H Adams 1910: 11). The death of Adams in the Chambers of Congress appears fully appropriate as it fuses the binary character of Adams into the citizen-orator of his sublime imagination. As his last political act, Adams casts a negative vote against the proposal to strike medals for those who had led the American forces against Mexico. A war that Adams’ contended was part of a conspiracy to extend the geography of slavery. His last words in the House an eloquent No, his last in this world: “This is the end of earth, but I am composed” (Bemis 1949: 536). Ready for death, Adams remained dissatisfied with the world, with America. Adams feared that Congress’s acceptance of Polk’s war message established an unconstitutional precedent in the power to make war. “It is now established”, Adams warns the Republic, “as an irreversible precedent that the President of the United States has but to declare that war exists, with any nation upon earth, by the act of the nation’s government, and the war is essentially declared” (Bemis 1949: 5000). That might prove fatal to the liberties of the nation. Adams experienced this moment as a deep personal and political defeat. Even given his great achievements in the House it remains difficult to balance success with humiliating defeat. However, Americans of his generation easily gathered his deeds under the conventional, worldly concept of the sublime.

That treasure, according to Adams, has never been lost but continues as both a mythic and political reality. The myth of Orpheus fascinates Adams and he plays with designing a new seal for the United States. He takes this allegory from Horaces’ *Ars Poetica* as appropriate to the founding of political communities: “Orpheus of old, Heaven’s prophet and high priest/Drew from their butcherous coil and wild wood feast/Barbarian hordes... Amphion, too, who reared the Theban towers,/Was said by his soft persuasive

powers/To winch the stones at pleasure to their place./For in those olden times the sage's art/Was but to circumscribe men's rights, and part/ Public from private, sacred from profane./... Build rampired towns. Engrave their laws on wood./And knit the bonds of social brotherhood" (Godolphin 1949: 324).

Adams takes elements of this allegory and uses them to capture what he takes to be the lasting substance of the association "of American states". The meaning of the allegory is explained by Horace (see *Ars Poetica* 1929: v. 390). Orpheus was a legislator whose eloquence charmed the rude savage men of his age to associate together in the law of civil society, to submit to the salutary restraints of law, to submit to the worship of their Creator. "It was the lyre of Orpheus that civilized savage man. It was only in harmony that the first political institutions could be founded... The moral application of the emblem is, that the institution of civil government to regulate the association of individual men, now presides the federal association of the America States; that harmony is the soul of their combination... It is the lyre of Orpheus that now leads the stars, as it originally drew after it the rocks and the trees. It is the harmony that now binds in its influence the American States, as it originally drew individual men from the solitude of nature to the assemblages which form states and nations. The lesson the emblem Union" (CF Adams 1874: III 441).

Adams will insist in his *Lectures* that only the lyric harmonies of persuasion can secure the order that binds the Union together in lawful freedom. He will establish that consent (the politics of speech and persuasion) is the legitimate foundations of free polity. The Declaration of Independence, according to Adams, asserts "an exalted and sublime ideal of the character of man" (Koch and Peden 1946: 398). In Adams' political universe the politics of persuasion opposes that of force and violence, but when they contends with one another, as slavery does with the principles of the Declaration Adams predicts the eruption of "terrible sublime", the experience of an extraordinary disruption of the polity. That vision of the sublime allows Adams to accept the redemptive political violence that foreshadows the American Civil War. From that perspective Lincoln inherits the American sublime as imagined by Adams.

Nevertheless, the major purpose of Adams' *Lectures* elucidates the persuasive practices that constitute the Orphic Republic. Adams summons all citizens to participate in the political assemblies that form the public spaces of the confederated union of the United States. Here I will demonstrate marked parallels between his thought and that of Jefferson and Arendt. Accordingly, the claims I will make as to the authority of Adams' words and deeds are large ones. Let me, accordingly, preview the argument of the following chapters. Firstly, more than Jefferson does, Adams illuminates the

attractions of a sublime politics and locates it as a permanent possible of American public life. Secondly, his political thought approaches that of Arendt in its power to elucidate the politics of speech and the institutions that speech both creates and needs. Finally, Adams introduces his readers to a topology of American politics deeply layered and three dimensional in dynamics. At the active foundations are the sublime principles of the Declaration of Independence. From these principles emerge the normal politics of the Federal Constitution magnificent at moments, yet flawed by both necessary and unnecessary compromises. On the surface Adams locates the everyday politics that work within the frame of both the Declaration and the Constitution but always threatened, from Adams' perspective, by the corruptions of self-interest, party and the over reaching ambition of the slave oligarchy.

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