

THE POLITICAL SUBLIME OF JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

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ABSTRACT. Matthew 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, with emphasis on Cicero, Tacitus and Longinus. He takes his argument into the 19th century. He is particularly interested in figures such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Emerson, but concentrates his defense of rhetoric on an analysis of Kant. As in Part I, Stolz argues 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, the rhetoric of the Romans, but he traces its living spirit as far as Nietzsche and into the 20th century through the writings of 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 Quincy Adams, politics, rhetoric

By Way of Introduction

In this paper I want to begin by connecting the conventions of the American sublime with the narrative of Adams's political career, in which his contemporaries did find the old President sublime and the theoretic imperatives that his sublime invoked. On the last matter I will play Adams's thought against the counter-sublime to be found in the political science of the Federalists as well as the new political science of Tocqueville. Also the difference between Adams's sublime and the modern tradition beginning with Kant requires definition and defense. We begin, however, with the re-assertion of the observation that Adams's *Lectures* and *Memoirs* access dimensions of political life in America long neglected or misunderstood. Few Americans have narrated with equal skill the intimate associations between

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the public world the appearance of the political actor, and “the disclosure of the agent in the act” (Arendt 1958:180)

Adams’s Political Sublime

John Quincy Adams challenged alienation from politics, sometimes confounding family and friends. While he was considering running for Congress, his son Charles Francis Adams bothered his father by insisting that the position was beneath the dignity of the former President. His wife desired that Adams retired, but perhaps captured the spirit of her husband when she observed that he had “insatiable passion” for political office and political strife, and could not “bring his mind to the calm of retirement... without risking a total extinction of life” (Richards 1986: 7). Late in his *Memoirs* Adams confirms this judgment when as a very old man, and after eighteen years of aggressive activity in the House, a friend advises him to retire and think about final things. Adams admits that his fiend might be correct, yet knows that after more “than sixty years on incessant intercourse with the world has made 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 the world” (CF Adams 1874: 451)

All the above invalidates Brooks Adams’s repudiation of Henry’s Adams’s assertion that “John Quincy Adams had been a political man, actuated by ordinary political feelings...” Instead Brooks insists that the old man had “been and idealistic philosopher...” (H. Adams 1910: 11). Rather with full appropriateness Adams suffers a stroke on the floor of the House and dies three days later in the chambers of Congress. His last political act a negative vote cast against the proposal to stroke and award medals to those who led the armies against Mexico: A war that Adams believed part of a conspiracy to expand the geography of slavery. Moreover, Adams’s feared that Congresses acceptance of Polk’s war message established the President’s unconstitutional precedent in war making. “It is now established”, Adams’s warns, “as an irreversible precedent that the President of the United States has but to declare that war exists, with any nation upon earth, and the war essentially declared” (Bemis 1949: 500). Adams’s experienced this moment as a deep personal and political defeat. And it remains difficult to strike a balance between Adams’s achievements, even in the House where he served with distinction. However, Americans of his generation easily gathered his achievements under the under the conventional, worldly concept of the sublime.

William Seward, Adams’s first biographer, records these estimations of Adams’s by his contemporaries. When Adams’s speaks before the Supreme

Court in order to defend the freedom of the Africans who had seized the slave ship *Amistad* Theodore Parker declares that “the sight was sublime” (Seward 1849: 307). His associates in the House react to Adams’s collapse and death in the Chambers of Congress as a sublime moment. “It was a sublime thought”, reflected Mr. Davis of Massachusetts, “that where he had toiled in the house of the nation, in the hours devoted to its service, the stroke of death should reach him, and there sever the ties of patriotism which bound him to the earth” (Seward 1849: 343). Many take it as sublime symbolism that the three days of his dying overlap Washington’s birthday. Then, at his entombment, the mayor of Boston exclaims that there “is something sublime in the scene that surrounds us... when again shall the tomb of a President of the United States open its doors to receive a son who has filled the same office” (Seward 1849: 354).

In a powerful eulogy, Senator Benton of Missouri proclaims Adams “punctual to every duty, death found him at the post of duty, and where else could it have found him at any stage in his career, over fifty years of illustrious public life?... leaving behind him... the example of a life, public and private, and which shall be the study and model of the generations of is countrymen” (Seward 1849: 345). To become an exemplar is a certain mark of the sublime. Nor does the memory of Adams’s sublime lapse with the passage of the years. Years after the old politician’s death Emerson recalls that, midst mediocrity and corruption, Adams exemplified the human sublime:

If we in America need presently to remove the capitol city to Harrisburg, or to Chicago, there is nothing of rich associations with Washington city to deter us. But excepting Webster’s early eloquence... John Quincy Adams’s sublime behavior in the House of Representatives, and the military energy of Jackson in the Presidency, I find little to remember. (Perry 1938: 288)

Let the city go. Only these three escape the smothering banalities that Emerson thinks the character of American politics. Of them only Adams behaves sublimely. Yet how best to understand the sublime when it becomes part of the conventional political? I believe that neither the American sublime of Emerson nor the modern sublime originating with Burke and Kant illuminate the republican sublime of Adams. However, Emerson’s intuitive grasp of the sublime allows him to correctly value Adams. Emerson, nonetheless, fails to comprehend that politics itself can pull the political actor to greatness. The political sublime is not the natural forces proclaimed by Emerson: “I know not what the word *sublime* means, if it be not the intimations of force” (Emerson 1904: 29), fact Emerson views politics with contempt: “What satire can equal the severity of censure conveyed in the word *politic*, which now for ages has signified *cunning*, intimating the State is a trick?”

(Emerson 1950: 427) George Kateb, who takes Emerson as providing the moral individualism required by American representative politics, misreads the poet on this matter. Not only is politics immoral, according to Emerson, its cunning can corrupt the strongest of characters. Webster stands as the exemplar of one yanked down by the corruptions of public life.

Adams shines against the political-moral reduction of Webster, yet the Massachusetts Senators fate fails to explain how and why Adams escapes from being diminished by American politics. The narrative that Emerson relates suggests the tragedy of Webster's public life as a low politics seduces him. Webster's case can be explained by the perfect fit between the Senator's ambitions and the negative gravity of American politics. Webster radiated, according to Emerson, power and ambition that indicated his natural genius, but he tailored them to the political requirements of the age. They were small and timid and shrank Webster to meet them. Webster aspired to be a famous lawyer an influential Senator, even President, but nothing higher that transcended the rules of Washington politics. Emerson finds little human grandeur in these rules or those who accommodate themselves to them. He cannot especially accept Webster's role in the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act.

That malignant act reveals to Emerson, and Webster's active role in it, the calamity of America and the depravity of Boston and New England. Webster has become representative and "truly represents the American people, just as they are, with their vast material interests, materialized intellect, and low morals" (Porte 1982: 426). Next Emerson argues that representative politics may constitute a source of reciprocal corruption. Once a politician such as Webster senses the movement of public opinion, he shapes his words and deeds to reflect back to the people a sharpened image of their own opinions. That can deepen the cycle of political corruption and irresponsibility: "But it is always a little difficult to decipher what this public sense is; and when a great man comes who knots up into himself the opinions and wishes of the people, it is so much easier to follow him as an exponent of all this. He too is responsible; they will not be. It will always suffice to say... followed him" (Porte 1982: 542-543).

Perhaps a fair judgment regarding the political skills of Adams and Webster must lead to the conclusion that the old president possessed less natural talent than did the ambitious Senator. He was certainly not a representative political person. Yet both played at representative politics so we are left with the question: Why did the system not swallow Adams as it did Webster? Emerson leads the reader to the puzzle, but cannot solve it. The political sublime, Adams's large republican moments, escapes explanation by both the modern sublime and Emerson's American variation. The American poet, as we have seen, reduces Adams's greatness to the force of the latter's

moral even natural constitution. Indeed Emerson's vision precludes the identification of the sublime with the political. As Harold Bloom notes, Emerson opens up the path to one aspect of the American sublime, but that way leads away from Adams, away from history and politics to nature and poetry. "Emerson", Bloom observes, "forgets English poetic tradition, in his most sublime prose passages, because his purpose is to present something else, an American individuality... Emerson therefore founds his sublime upon the refusal of history, particularly literary history" (Bloom 1976: 241).

Furthermore, the terms of Emerson's sublime disputes the role of the exemplar that as I have hinted, secures the imperatives of the Longinian sublime and its republican derivatives. The sublime education shaping Adams depends upon creative emulation. Emerson, to the contrary, condemns imitation and questions emulation:

Friends enough you shall find who will hold up to your emulation Wesleys and Oberlins, Saints and Prophets. Thank God for these good men, but say, "I also am a man." Imitation cannot go beyond its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity... he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another. (Emerson 2004, volume I)

Bloom posits *The Divinity School Address* as Emerson's "proof-text" of the "American sublime" "that is always best", preaches Emerson, "which gives me to myself. The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, Obey thyself... Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse good models... (Emerson 2004: 246; Emerson 1946: 81, 87). Bloom's radical reading of the Emersonian sublime has the poet forgetting the past, fracturing his ego into pieces so as to father a new self, speaking a natural, intuitive language. "When Emerson experiences and describes his influxes of the American Sublime, he is at work creating the great trope of the specifically American Unconscious, or what he in *Self Reliance* calls 'Spontaneity or Instinct'" (Emerson 1946: 241). Bloom suggests that the American poetical sublime emerges as an expression of Emerson's alienation from the world of American practice. His prophetic voice sounds is revulsion from an America fallen into economic depression and corrupted by slavery, by the war with Mexico.

It is noteworthy, and has been noted that Emerson's two great outbursts of prophetic vocation coincide with two national crisis, the Depression of 1837, and the Mexican War of 1846, which Emerson as Abolitionist bitterly opposed. The origins of the American Sublime are connected with the business collapse of 1837 (Emerson 1946: 236). Emerson welcomes the collapse of the nation's material prosperity hoping that the American soul will be liberated to find a spiritual vocation. "Behold", he rejoices, "the boasted world has come to nothing... Let me begin anew. Let me teach the infinite

to know its master. Let me ascend above my fate and look down upon the world” (Emerson 1946: 237). While looking down on the world the astral spectator need no longer care for it as does the political person with minimal virtue.

Emerson posits this new beginning as an Utopia of words; it fashions a sublime poetic fiction that seeks less to refashion America than to cast a parallel universe of words into which both poet and reader enter as flight from the world of practice into one of profound, transcendent beauty. Emerson formulates this severe vision of the American Sublime: “There may be two or three or four steps, according to the genius of each, but every seeing soul there are two absorbing facts—*I and the Abyss*, for ‘the Abyss’, we can read tradition, history, the other, while for ‘I’ we can read any American” (Emerson 1946: 255). After Emerson the American Sublime asserts an almost absolute divorce between politics and the sublime. Wallace Stevens, according to Helen Vendler, declares all sublime aspirations to the sublime false save that attendant to the poet’s heroic effort. “How he asked, in *the American Sublime*, was General Jackson to pose for his statue: how is an America sublime possible? How can General Jackson avoid being ridiculous? Is there a democratic hero? And what can be the response of the audience? Life demands some nobility, one cannot “go barefoot/Blinking and Blind... But how does one feel?/One grows used to the weather,/The landscape and that;/And the sublime comes down/To the spirit itself,/The spirit and the space,/The empty spirit/In the vacant space” (Vendler 1980: 1): I think, however, politics remains to the poet that empty, vacant space into which the spirit never descends.

The American sublime, akin to other aspects of the American tradition, gives us few clues to the appreciation of Adams’s sublime as it finds in politics nothing but the low, corrupt and perhaps above all the absurd. And, therefore, represses with great authority the political as a possible source if the sublime (JQ Adams 1914: 526). Emerson, and the advocates of the American sublime recognize greatness yet the claim that a sublime can emerge from the practice of politics must befuddle them. Indeed Adams’s *Memoirs* evidences a virulent hostility to Emerson’s example and, as we shall see later in Adams’s mirror-for—citizens, he rates very low in the worldly politicians estimation. Adams contends that America should take nothing from Emerson’s disruptive concoctions. Nevertheless, the strangeness of Adams’s sublime to the contemporary imagination is exaggerated by the triumph of the vision the sublime inaugurated by Burke and Kant. That construction blocks any easy appreciation of the political. Their sublime bypasses all inks between the worldly spaces of politics and rhetoric on the path to becoming a purely inner aesthetics. This marks the point where the modern sublime fuses with the American sublime of Emerson. Kant at-

tempts to reserve the ties between ethics and the sublime but the connection thins as his and Burke's sublime tap the inner sensibilities making, as Thomas Weiskel notes, "every man his own psychologist" (Weiskel 1986: 83).

For Burke and Kant the sublime erupts when the individual experiences a shock of humiliating terror. "Indeed", according to Burke, "terror in all cases whatsoever, is either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime" (Burke 1968: 58). Such an origin precludes any easy identification between the subject and the object of his emotion. Edward Gibbon recognized immediately, according to Weiskel, that Burke had broken with the traditional understandings of the sublime. He observes that to "Edward Gibbon, Burke's insistence on terror seems to work against the Longinian notion of proud identification: 'It is surprising how much Longinus and Mr. Burke differ as to their of the operations of the sublime on our minds. The one considers it as exalting us with a conscious pride and courage, and the other as astonishing every faculty, and depressing the soul with amazement and terror'" (Weiskel 1986: 69). The virtues attending the sublime of Longinus of are of course political and Adams returns us to them. Yet it remains strange that a most political man as Burke should imagine a sublime so foreign to anything political.

And yet this may not be entirely correct; his Burke's consideration of power as a source of terror has political measures, few if any of them republican in orientation. By finding identities between a sovereign God and a worldly sovereign monarch Burke writes of subjects who tremble before such authorities rather of citizens who fashion their own world through human action. The sublime rests upon fear, the threat of punishment from great powers, "but pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior... So that strength, violence, pain and terror, are ideas that rush upon the mind together" (Burke 1968: 65).

Burke doubts that the idea of the Deity can be comprehended without the signs of great power nor is that less true of royalty. "The power", he continues, "which arises from institutions in kings and commander, has the same connection with terror" (Burke 1968: 67). Not so with society for that is the place where beauty and pleasure reign. Burke works with a sophisticated liberal distinction between the institutions of power and those of civil society. He argues that the "strongest sensation relative to a *particular society*, are sensations of pleasure. Good company, lively conversations, and the endearments of friendship, fill the mind with great pleasure..." (Burke 1968: 43). Opposed to the pleasures of society is the terror of total solitude which, according to Burke, contradicts the felicities attendant to human nature. An "entire life of solitude", he continues, "contradicts the purposes of our being, since death itself is scarcely an idea of more terror" (Burke 1968: 43).

None of this refers to the pleasures of political life except in the most negative manner. As we shall see Burke's treatment of the sublime as terror before absolute radiates back the darkest fears that inform the republican tradition since the histories of Tacitus.

Moments of political troubles provoke the great virtues, but at least in these pages he reverses the sympathy nature to republicanism be appearing to prefer Caesar against Cato. Burke fails to describe the positive origins of the political sublime capturing only its negative foundations. Yet Adams might dispute him at his juncture in the argument. "The great virtues", Burke elucidates, "turn principally on dangers, punishments, and troubles, and are exercised rather in preventing the worst mischiefs, than in dispensing favors; and are therefore, not lovable, though highly venerable" (Burke 1968: 111). That comes close to describing the finest attributes of John Quincy Adams. What comes next, however, separates Burke from the republicanism of New England. Of Cato, Burke asserts "we have much to admire something to fear... we respect him at a distance. The former (Caesar) makes us familiar with him; we love him, and he leads us wither he pleases" (Burke 1968: 111). No republican can love Caesar but must fear and hate his example and achievements. Burke's definition of the sublime virtues and their sources-a time of troubles-implies that only on political event might inspire the sublime in his own imagination. That might have been the French Revolution. When he describes the passions that accompany the collapse of power, whether that of states or individuals, the language and sentiment of the sublime appears to be appropriate. But he does not take us to the political question; and it suffices to note that Burke's treatment of the sublime erects a powerful barrier to the appreciation of Adams's invocation of the sublime.

Kant adds nothing of political significance to the foundations of the modern sublime. Alienation from the world haunts his sublime rendering it a type of psychological playacting—"merely the subjective play of the mental powers" (Kant 1957: 107). The sublime, according to Kant, originates in the terror and fear aroused by the immensity and chaos of nature. To look suddenly into the Grand Canyon without a guardrail subjects us to fear and terror. The power of nature overwhelms our senses, possesses us and can even paralyze body and imagination. Fortunately, the human faculty of the sublime allows us to mentally tame the infinity of nature. The "sublime," Kant argues, "is not to be looked for in nature, but only in ideas" (Kant 1957: 97). The sublime may be described in this way: it is *and object* (of nature) *the representation of which determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a representation of ideas* (Kant 1957: 119).

However, the free play of ideas allows the imagination to reduce and limit the infinity of nature through ideas and representation. That affirms

our humanity but alienates the Kantian sublime from the external world of natural things. Delight “in the sublime in nature”, Kant continues, “is only *negative*” (Kant 1957: 120). Sublime feelings are only possible “when we are assured of safety”, when fear “is not actual fear” (Kant 1957: 121). Kant’s sublime needs guardrails: the Grand Canyon is only sublime when we are not tumbling into its depths. Politics, on the contrary, requires acting into a real world of conflict and violence and not a feigned one constructed by the free play of the mind. Courage to act into the world is the greatest of political virtues. Moreover, Kant appears to strip freedom from politics in order to deposit it in the world of aesthetics. “Aesthetic finality”, he argues, “is conformity to the law of judgment in its *freedom*” (Kant 1957: 122).

That freedom has meaning perhaps only to the poet but not the political actor. The Kantian sublime, and that modern concept that it shapes, negates the political passions and most aspects of the activity. Kant admits that the “idea of the good to which the affection is superadded is *enthusiasm*.” This state of mind “appears sublime: so much so that there is a common saying that nothing great can be achieved without it” (Kant 1957: 122). Nevertheless, while enthusiasm is a core part of the sublime Kant marks it as affection rather than a passion. Passions abide and are deliberate while affections lack responsibility and are impetuous. Moreover, affections such as the sublime shatter all reasoned connection between deliberation and the choice of ends. Yet, Kant insists that “the exercise of free deliberation upon fundamental principles” can be “called noble” (Kant 1957: 122). Still this line of thought allows Kant to disparage rhetoric and the political orator which ancient republicanism celebrated as the substance of political freedom.

As I. F. Stone noted there were “two ‘gods of the city’ peculiar to Athens. They are Peith, or persuasion, personified as a goddess, and the Zeus Agorarios, or the Zeus of the assembly, the tutelary divinity of free debate. They embodied the democratic institutions of Athens” (Stone 1988: 205). Cicero extends this vision of speech into the setting of the Roman Republic and, at the same times places the divine tribute at the foundations of all human societies: speech distinguishes the civilized from the barbarian:

Then take the gift of speech, the queen of the sciences... what a glorious, what a divine faculty it is! it is our instrument for exhortation and persuasion... it is this that has united us in the bonds of justice, law and civil order, this that has separated us from savagery and barbarism. (Wood 1988: 81)

Furthermore, while admitting that the critics of political speech often are correct in their assertions that the arts of rhetoric can be used in demagogic and destruction manner; Cicero insists that public oratory is one of the treasures of a free polity. In *De Oratore* Cicero has Cotta, one of the par-

ticipants in the dialogue, relate that “in every free nation, and most of all in communities which have attained the enjoyment of peace and tranquility, this one art has always flourished and ever reigned supreme” (Cicero 1976: 23). Rhetoric is the mark of a free and civilized social order in which friends and citizens converse one with the other and within the boundaries of public discussion freely to win over the wills of fellow citizens to one’s point of view.

Kant, however, treats the art of rhetoric as if it creates a verbal frame of tyranny. Certainly it allows no space for reasoned dialogue.

Rhetoric... the art of persuasion, *i.e.* the art of deluding by means of a fair semblance (as *ars oratoria*), and not merely excellence of speech (eloquence and style), is a dialectic that borrows from poetry only so much as to win over men’s minds to the side of the speaker before they have weighed the matter, and to rob their verdict of their freedom. Hence it can be recommended neither for the bar nor the pulpit. (Kant 1957: 192)

Here as elsewhere Kant accepts the philosopher’s traditional contempt for rhetoric as an invention of the Sophist’s art. He joins Socrates and Plato in their quarrel with the Sophists and, along with them, insists that legitimate speech “turns with lively sympathy to what is truly good” (Struever 1979: 193). But we may ask, does political speech play a role in his vision of the just city? Is not Plato’s city a silent republic in which the philosopher-kings speak only to themselves and give orders, elevated to the status of myth, to the rest. The philosophers imply that only Socrates many have practiced this philosophic craft of speech.

To be fair Kant allows that Cicero may have aspired to that ideal but the practice of politics subverted the purity of his intentions. Indeed, according to the philosopher, politics can never reach the sublime as depraved humanity composes its materials. Kant observes, “many insist” that a republic is difficult to establish, because “it would have to be a state of angels, because men with their selfish propensities are incapable of such a sublime constitution” (Kant 1942: 452). Kant’s remedy for the political management of malignant humanity recalls the political science of the Federalists. Politics, even a free politics, requires the imposition of a well-ordered constitution:

It does this by the selfish propensities themselves, so that it is only necessary to organized the states well (which is within the ability of man), and direct these forces against each other in such wise that one balances the other in its devastating effect, or even suspends it... Thus man though not morally good is compelled to be a good citizen. The problem of establishing a state is solvable even for a people of devils, if only they have intelligence enough, though this may sound harsh. (Kant 1942: 452-453)

Kant's rational appreciation of a well-ordered constitution that imposes external restraints on all of its citizens parallels his almost aesthetic distaste for political speech-rhetoric. Poetry delights Kant as a free expression of the imagination, while the reading political speeches, whether those of a "Roman forensic orator" or "a modern parliamentary debater" cause him "an unpleasant taste of disapproval, for they all practice an "insidious art" that moves "men like machines" (Kant 1957: 193, footnote 1). And, unlike the advocates of republicanism, Kant aligns the height of the speaking arts with the periods of advanced corruption in both Athens and Rome.

Besides, both at Athens and Rome, it only attained its greatest height at a time when the state was hastening to its decay, and when patriotic sentiment was a thing of the past (Kant 1957: 193). Nevertheless, the truth remains that Kant was a friend of freedom and constitutional order, as long as government was representative in nature. Among the philosophers of his generation Kant's position makes him unique especially considering his strong affirmation of the French Revolution.

In 1794 a friend reports the remark made by Kant, "All the terror which is happening in France is insignificant as compared to the continued evil of despotism which had previously existed in France... and was not swayed by the outburst of crimes that the representative system is the best form of government" (Kant 1942: xliv). Terror and revolution eschew persuasion, and representative government can survive without the citizen-orator. Kant and Burke, accordingly, have little to say regarding Adams's political vision except, perhaps, to deny its plausibility. I shall try to keep them aside so that Adams may be read on his own terms.

Hayden White illuminates the moment when the 18th century elaboration of the sublime is denigrated by the 19th century's celebration of the beautiful, thus obscuring the political sublime embraced by Adams. My aim, accordingly, seeks to retrieve Adams from the theoretical shadows in which he wrote and acted. White attends to the 18th century's toleration of different modes of theoretical and historical discourse.

The eighteenth-century historian's filed of phenomena was simply the "past", conceived as the source and repository of tradition, moral exemplars and admonitory lessons to be investigated by one of the modes of interpretation into which Aristotle had divided the kinds of rhetorical discourse: ceremonial, forensic and political... As for the uses to which historical reflection was to be put, this was as wide as rhetorical practice, political partisanship, and confessional variation admitted (White 1983: 127).

This use of the past wanes, according to White, at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the pursuit of a scientific history and the social sciences embedded themselves in the academic world. To claim the authori-

ty of science, to argue that history constituted a field of objective knowledge, the academic historian had to renounce the rhetorical questions that informed the activity throughout the previous century. The sublime antagonisms of history are replaced by the aesthetics of the progressive and the beautiful. White argues that when Hegel treated the “sublime both explicitly in his *Aesthetics* and implicitly in *The Philosophy of History* he subordinated it to the notion of the beautiful in the former and the notion of the latter” (White 1983: 133). These notions incline the historian to seek regular patterns in history for study rather than the antagonistic, sometimes tragic, conflict that often disrupts and tears out the foundations of the political order. The banishment of the sublime from philosophy and history diminishes the political content of these vocations.

“This aestheticism”, White observes, “permits the historian to see some beauty, if not good, in everything human and to assume an Olympian calm in the face of any current social situation, however, terrifying to anyone who lacks historical perspective” (White 1983: 133). Neither republican theory nor any consideration of the republican political sublime can be extracted from this “Olympian calm” before the political history of men and states, or the glory and decline of republics. History haunts the republican imagination in so far as the practical manifestations of power mutate between human freedom and slavery. That is true of John Quincy Adams, the Federalists, Machiavelli or Cicero. Cicero expressed the sublimity of the republican vision when he exclaimed “there is literally no life for a slave” (Cicero 1894: V.IV 164). The theme of power intrigues the republican theorists; for, on the one hand, power may belong to the despot and thus be the agency of abuse, while in the hands of the citizen power allows liberty to come alive.

The Sublime and Liberty

Accordingly, republican thought rests upon one practical, historical equation: a free person possess power, a powerless human is a slave. Because the dignity of public affairs resides in the free exercise of power, the vocation of politics rises to equality with that of the philosopher. Indeed, both the political theorists and the political actor dig into the realities of things in a manner perhaps denied to the philosopher. Machiavelli expresses the almost metaphysical contempt for the philosopher when he sets himself to “write something useful to anyone who understands” and, as a consequence, appropriate “to me to search after the effectual truth of the matter rather than an imagined one. And (does he have Plato in mind?) many writers have imagined for themselves republics and principalities that have never been seen nor known to exist in reality...” (Machiavelli 1979: 127). The lack of a political vision into the substance of political matters can, according to the Florentine, only bring ruin to princes and the citizens of republics.

This mistrust of the philosopher, when he meddles in politics, can be traced back to the foundations of republicanism whether one finds those origins in Polybius or even further back in the practical ruminations of Aristotle. As a politician and then historian Polybius casts aside all Platonic speculations and basis his arguments of the living practice of men and states. “Plato”, he notes, “says that ‘human affairs shall not go well until either philosophers become kings or kind become philosophers... So I should say that history will never be properly written, until either men of action undertake to write it... or historians become convinced that practical experience is of first importance for historical compositions” (Polybius 1962: 114). He expands his indictment of Plato by demanding that ideal states demonstrate their superiority over active constitutions:

Nor again would it be fair to introduce the Republic of Plato, which is also spoken of in high terms by some philosophers... we ought not to admit this Platonic constitution to the contest for the prize of merit unless it can point to some genuine and practical achievement... the comparison with of the lifeless with the living would naturally leave an impression off imperfection and incongruity upon the minds of the spectators. (Polybius 1962: 498)

Adams fits very easily into that tradition of unease when dismissing the political speculations of Plato: “His Laws might with more propriety have been called the Republic, than the work the bears the name... As a project of government, it is, if possible, more absurd and impractical than the Republic” (CF Adams 1874: II 324). Adams, as we shall see, finds two moments in the history of political liberty of particular importance, that of Athens and Rome. Nevertheless, the tragedy of Rome grasps the republican imagination with greater power than the story of Athens. Rome, as the history of liberty, set against the collapse of those freedoms is reflected in Adams’s classical passions. When President Adams decries the fact that he “cannot indulge myself the luxury of giving two hours a day to these writes, but to live without having a Cicero and a Tacitus at hand seems to me as if it were a privation of one of my limbs” (CF Adams 1874: IV 360).

The political actor and the political historian frame for Adams the active antagonisms that constitute the real history of republics, the agon between liberty and slavery. Adams worships Cicero, in part because of his mastery of the rhetorical arts, but mainly as Cicero’s sublime defense of Roman liberties presages his own struggles against the slave powers. Cicero practically informs Adams’s vision of the citizen-orator’s vocation in the orphic republic. Tacitus, on the other hand, completes the authority of the republican tradition in his portrait of Rome as haunted by Caesar’s subversion of its liberties. So a thousand years after his assassination Machiavelli hates Caesar because he mastered Rome rather than preserving its freedoms. He cannot

deny the virtuosity of Caesar's performance, only the worldly glory that many have attributed to the dictator. "If a prince truly seeks worldly glory, Machiavelli insists, he should hope to possess a corrupt city—not to run it completely as Caesar did but to reorganize it as Romulus did" (Machiavelli 1979: 206). As with Machiavelli, Caesar exists Adams's political thought as a counterpoint to Cicero's defense of Roman liberty. In his life time, Napoleon reenacts Caesar's assault upon human liberty while destroying the French Republic. Adams, accordingly, exalts in his ruin:

Napoleon has concentrated upon his individual person more of the hatred of mankind than any other living individual of his age. He has, perhaps, done more evil than any other man living. He attained greater power than any one has exercised since the days of Charlemagne, and his abuse of power was in proportion to its extent. His fall was as punishment to him the consummation of justice. No agony of sufferance can be too exquisite, no prolongation of torture too excruciating, for the depth of his offenses against his species. (CF Adams 1874: IV 383)

It is out of this mixture of political vision and historical practice informing the antagonism between liberty and slavery, the free citizen and the tyrant, that Americans and republican actor-theorists such as John and John Quincy Adams take their conception of the sublime as part of the conventions of American politics. When Adams delineates that sublime it belongs not to nature but to the historically sensitive teacher of the art and science of Rhetoric—Longinus. Even as the tragedy of Cicero and the despot's shadow informs Adams's republicanism the sublime of Longinus shines in the afterglow of Roman freedom. The rhetorician lived between 213 and 273 A.D., wrote in Greek and perhaps resided near the boundaries of the imperial order. Despite his distance from Rome, and the age of the Republic, Adams asserts that his "work... should be studied by every orator... it is a fragment from the table of the gods" (JQ Adams 1810: I 92).

As an American politician Adams may never fully escape the authority of Lockean liberalism, but the classical tradition counter-balances the politics of Locke and his use of the ancient teachers of rhetoric leads George Kennedy to note that among "American teaches of rhetoric, the strongest classical influence is seen in the lectures given in 1806 by John Quincy Adams" (Kennedy 1999). His reading of the classics allows Adams to retrieve an American political sublime that moves according to Longinian dynamics. And a job of retrieval is required for the simplified version of Longinus that informs 18th century speculation on the sublime has already lost most of its political content both in France and Great Britain. It had become a term of art for literary critics, or as an aspect of a philosopher's analytic of the connections between the sublime and human passions. "The sublime", observes

one critic, “therefore must be marvelous and surprising. It must strike vehemently upon the mind, and fill, and captivate it irresistibly” (Burke 1968: xlvii). Some champions of the modern sublime exalt its power to transcend the merely human. Others cite its authority in summing forth greatness; but that greatness remains politically empty:

The essential message of Longinus is that, in and through the personal rediscovery of the great, we find that we need not be the passive victims of what we deterministically call “circumstances” (social, cultural, or reductively psychological-personal)... with the great we can become freer—free to be ourselves not only by “imitating” them, in the best and most fruitful sense of the word, but also “joining them” (Weiskel 1986: 10-11)

Save for his invocation of the virtues of imitation Walter Bates returns us to the Emersonian sublime. Liberation from “circumstances” implies emancipation from the public world. How, therefore, do the principles of Longinus inspire Adams’s political thought and practice? First of all, the transcendent elements of his sublime cannot be ignored. The proponents of the modern sublime do capture selected elements from the sublime of Longinus: “Hence, when we speak of men of great genius in literature... all rise above the mortal... sublimity raises them almost to the intellectual greatness of God” (Longinus 1906: 66). He does identify verbal sublimity with techniques of rhetorical grandeur. Nevertheless, only the citizen-orator perfects the art and science of rhetoric. He returns his readers to the public stage of the free republic. The citizen-orator, according to Longinus, may shine in the illuminated spaces opened up by political liberty. Only the action of politics assures this as a human possibility. Because “on the prizes offered to competition in commonwealths, the intellectual gifts of orators are kept in exercise and whetted by use; the rub of politics, if I may use the word, kindles them to fire; they shine as the must, with the light of public freedom” (Longinus 1906: 78). Sharing that prejudice with Longinus, Adams urges his auditors to “shine in councils and in camp to dare” (CF Adams 1874: I 79).

The experience of standing in the shining, even burning light of a great orator appears less a metaphor than a quality projected by a sublime speaker onto members of his audience. Daniel Webster, despite all question concerning his moral corruption, affected his auditors in this manner. At the bicentennial of the Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Webster’s performance moved his friend, George Ticknor, to his own descriptive eloquence:

I was never so excited by public speaking before in my life... you must know that I am aware that it is no connected and compacted whole, but a collection of wonderful fragments of burning eloquence, to which his manner gave tenfold

force. When I came out, I was almost afraid to come near him. It seemed to me that he as like the mount that might not be touched and that burned with fire. (Bartlett 1978: 82; Tacitus 1942: 501ff; Tacitus 1904)

The summons to shine in the light of worldly glory takes on substance for Adams when wrestling with a sentence he finds in Tacitus. The connecting public sublime unites the republican tradition from beginning to the moment of its expiration. The phrase “*ut magnis inimicis*” bemuses him.

It is impossible to convey the meaning of Tacitus without circumlocution and paraphrase, and must necessarily lose its sententious brevity. I looked particularly on Arthur Murphy’s translation in *History* II. 53. Tacitus says that Lucinius Caecina, a new man, lately attacked by Epius Marcellus, “*ut magnis inimicis claresceret*”—which Murphy translates as saying Caecina “thought to rise by encountering powerful enmities.” Gordon has it “that he might, thus, by declaring enmity against men of great name, to signalize his own”... but neither of the translations marks the vivid force of the verb *claresceret*, or the full meaning of the words *magnis inimicis* “that he might brighten by great enmities” would be literal.

Perhaps this passage from Tacitus grasps Adams’s attention because recognizes much of his own political attitude in it. “My success”, he writes very early in his career”, has been more frequent in opposition than in carrying any proposition of my own; and I hope I have been instrumental in arresting many unadvised purposes and projects” (CF Adams 1874: I 471). Often the political sublime occupies the line of conflict between negation and positive achievement. As we shall see Adams most admired the orators Demosthenes and Cicero who achieved luster through their failed hostility towards the forces that destroyed the political liberty of their cities. Their words and deeds illustrate the web of meanings, even virtues, that Adams teased out in his careful reading of the verb “*claresceret*”. Indeed the qualities that distinguish republican politics are to be found in the aura of the word itself. It implies the unity of speech and appearance. *Claresco*, the root word, points to things that become clear and bright, but also sound or resound clearly. To appear brightly and to sound clearly is the necessary grounding, if not the complete substance, of the political sublime.

It is interesting to note how much of this parallels the speculations of Hannah Arendt, although she rarely cites the texts used by Adams. Later on I will follow the marked similarities of their work as they deal with the place of persuasion and violence in a free polity. Nevertheless, at this juncture in the argument it is sufficient to cite Arendt’s contention that for the ancients “great deeds are self-evident, shine by themselves” (Arendt 1968: 52). Dante believes that our very natures lead us to take pleasure in this personal revelation:

For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer... is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing... and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessary follow... (Arendt 1959: 155)

The political history of cities and states immortalize the deeds that shine forth whether those of Pericles or the action of Licinius Caecine who appears briefly in the pages of Tacitus. Adams cites Cicero on the matter: “The life of the dead consists in the memory of the living” (CF Adams 1874: VIII 123). Irony exists, however, in Tacitus’s example of Caecine as his situation teaches the cautious rather than the exuberant use of speech. Caecine, as a Senator, sought a public quarrel with Marcellus Eprius a notorious informer and friend of the despot who ruled Rome. His fearful colleagues would have none of it.

It took a brave, perhaps silly, person to publicly attack an ally of Caesar and Tacitus simply observes that the “moderation of wiser men put an end to the dispute” (Tacitus 1942: 508). In the imperial city only Caesar might shine without the danger of reprisal. The imperial master usurps the sublime and denies any, but the most fearless all participation in it, to his subjects. It is best, as in the case of Caecine, to be cautious. Without political liberty the subjects of power shrink into the smallness dictated by their slavery. That anxiety haunts Longinus, indeed it constitutes the dark side of the republican tradition as inherited by Adams. When addressing the sublime Longinus cannot escape the literary and political puzzles of greatness and its disappearance. He picks up on a theme developed by Tacitus, and to which I shall return. Although he may admire the solitary genius of a Caesar or an Alexander he decries the surrounding “bareness of literature” and the fact that “minds of a high order sublimity and greatness are no longer produced” (Longinus 1906: 78). The administrative competence and servile civility necessary to imperial authority provides poor soil for the cultivation of either literary genius or oratorical sublimity. Unlike the proponents of the modern or the American sublime of Emerson the treatment of the sublime by the ancient literary critic is at once poetical and political.

In order to broaden his argument Longinus takes passages for analysis from Homer, Demosthenes or even the Bible. Some of his examples are political others not; yet he begins his invocation of the sublime proclaiming its political value. Whatever its source sublimity, Longinus insists, “is always an eminence and excellence in language; and from this the greatest poets and writers of prose have attained the first place and have clothed their fame with immortality” (Longinus 1906: 2). At this point in his presentation he seems to confirm one of the grounds for Kant’s hostility towards rhetoric: its power subverts the freedom of the audience. To “be persuaded”, Longinus allows, “rests usually with ourselves, genius brings forth sovereign

and irresistible to bear upon every hearer, and takes its stand far above him” (Longinus 1906: 2). The genius of the speaker creates such amazement, an ecstasy in the audience, even an assembly equal citizens that they are carried away in a form of transcendence. He denies as well that rhetoric seeks to persuade yet the orator haunts his pages.

Thus “[s]ublimity we know”, Longinus continues, “brought out at the happy moment...” is “like a lightning flash” that “reveal sat a stroke and in its entirety, the power of the orator” (Longinus 1906: 2-3). Yet Longinus understands that the encounter with the sublime need not elicit merely passive admiration or subordination by awe and terror. Rather he seeks to illuminate the necessary interplay between the sublime and political freedom. First of all, Kant’s denigration of the individual would appear foreign to Longinus as he contends that the sublime exalts rather than humbles the human spirit: it “is a fact of nature that the soul is raised by true sublimity, it gains a proud step upwards, it is filled with joy and exaltation, as though itself had produced what it hears” (Longinus 1906: 11-12). Great persons and their words attract because “the truly great” are “hard, nay impossible to resist” (Longinus 1906: 11-12). Nevertheless, Longinus avers that the encounter with greatness pushes towards equality when it engenders an almost divine competition among individuals or the citizen-orator.

He asks his readers to imagine that they are composing a speech, before them lay the writings of Thucydides, Plato and Demosthenes. As exemplars each would have done with their themes as had Thucydides—they would have made it sublime” (Longinus 1906: 31). Without the need for explanation Longinus places the orator and the historian of politics on a par with the philosopher. Need any of them, however, be overwhelmed and humbled by the presence of previous greatness? Not at all! The sublime exemplars summon each one, indeed all, to greatness:

The figures of those great men will meet us on the way while we vie with them, they will stand out before our eyes, and lead our souls upwards towards the measure of the ideal we have conjured up. Still more if we add to our mental picture this; how would Homer, were he here, have listened to this phrase of mine? or Demosthenes? How would they have felt at this? Truly great is that competition, when we assume for our own words such as jury, such an audience, and pretend that before such judges and witnesses of that heroic build we undergo the scrutiny of what we write. (Longinus 1906: 31-32)

The sublime fashions a lineage of greatness across the generations and would be barren if the exemplars failed to inspire a passion for glory in the souls of their emulators. That, let me reiterate, is rejected by the greatest practitioners of the America sublime. “And now”, Whitman declaims, “at last the highest truth of this subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be

said... the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience” (Arensberg 1986: 56). Longinus’s contestants, on the contrary, enter into “the spirit of the lists”. He cites Hesiod that “good... is the strife of mortals. Yet, the contest for fame is fair, and its crown worthy of the winning wherein even to be defeated by or forerunners is not inglorious” (Arensberg 1986: 56). The greatest of fame, the true marker of sublime achievement is to be attended to by humanity in ages to come. When an orator enters he competes with those of his own generation but also with the greatest voices of past and future. Longinus embraces the agon that Nietzsche understood to be the presiding genius of Greek civilization and Adams and Arendt as a core aspect of ancient politics. “Struggle and the joy of victory”, Nietzsche insists, “were recognized... Eris (discord) as good—the one that, as jealousy, hatred and envy, spurs men to activity: not to the activity of fights of annihilation but to the activity of fights which are *contests*... (Nietzsche 1969: 35).

“The greater and more sublime a Greek is”, Nietzsche continues, “the brighter the flame of ambition flares out of him...” (Nietzsche 1969: 35). Great contests, even those that end in defeat, may produce sublime politicians and orators. The sublimity, according to Pericles, defines cities such as Athens who prevail in the great contest between cities. That constitutes his defense of Athenian imperialism:

For Athens is the only power now that is greater than her fame when it comes to the test. Only in the case of Athens can enemies never be upset over the quality of those who defeat them when they invade; only in our empire can subjects complain that their rulers are unworthy. (Thucydides 1993: 43)

Some may feel triumphant against time in their moments of glory but, according to Adams so may those who act to defend the public liberty of their cities in times of calamity. Adams speaks in the manner of Longinus when locating Demosthenes and Cicero in the pathos of their sublime moment. Call up, he exclaims, “the shades of Demosthenes and Cicero... point to their immortal works, and say, these are not only the sublimes strains of oratory, that ever issued from the uninspired lips of mortal men; they are at the same time the expiring accents of liberty in the nations, which have shed the brightest luster on the name of man” (JQ Adams 1810: I 72). Adams asks us to recall the remnants of republican glory that inform the morbid decline of political liberty. That theme, as we shall see, cannot be divorced from any consideration the political sublime.

Longinus considers the bitter consequences of a republic’s loss of political liberty, and the issue haunts Adams’s great exemplars—Cicero and Tacitus as well as Adams himself. Initially, however, the Greek’s treatment of Demosthenes and Cicero takes a narrow technical focus when evaluating

the differences between their reach towards sublimity. Cicero and Demosthenes differ in their grand passages, Demosthenes' strength is the sheer height of sublimity that of Cicero is in its diffusion. Our countryman because he ravages all his violence, swift, terrible may be compared to a lightning flash or a thunderbolt. Cicero, like a spreading conflagration, ranges and rolls over the whole field; the fire burns within him, plentiful and constant, distributed at his will now in one part, now in another, and fed with fuel in relays (Longinus 1906: 28).

Indeed, while Adams ranks the citizen-orator superior to the philosopher because of the public role occupied by the former Longinus give the priority to the orator because of the intensity of his voice, and only then appeals to the orator's political vocation. Yet, perhaps all rests on the orator's intimacy with the political.

When compared to the great orator's style Plato projects a magnificent dignity, and while not quite cold lacks intensity. That may reflect the necessary differences between the audience of the philosopher and the public man—an audience of students rather than of citizens. Longinus' treatment of Demosthenes' great speech *De Corona* highlights the brilliance of the orator as he fends for his own public career, while appealing to the political memories of Athenian citizens to console and inspire them in a moment of military disaster. Routed by the phalanxes of Phillip of Macedon at Chaeroneia they yet should take pride in their struggle for freedom. Demosthenes insists that he was not amiss when advising war against Phillip nor were his fellow citizens mistaken to follow his council. They have added to Athenian glory even as those did who died at Marathon and Salamis: "You made no mistake, men of Athens, when you took upon yourselves the struggle for the freedom of the Greeks: you have examples of this near home. For they also made no mistake who fought at Marathon, Salamis, at Plataea" (Longinus 1906: 38).

Demosthenes mixes the political with the aesthetic by affirming that the orators' effects were sublime while, at the same time, immortalizing all those who have entered the contest with Phillip. They had sworn an oath to emulate the dead at Marathon, and had kept it even in defeat. "In Demosthenes", Longinus affirms, "the oath had been framed to suit beaten men... and adds: "To all of whom the city gave public burial... not to those only who succeed" (Longinus 1906: 40). Both Demosthenes and Longinus acknowledge that the free man may achieve sublimity even at the moment when the tyrant crushes their last desperate defense of their liberties. Finally, however the loss of liberty trumps the sublime and Longinus, along with the republican tradition, fails to escape the bitterness that accompanies the death of public liberties. He reflects upon and then laments the fact that

without liberty “minds of a high order of sublimity and greatness are no longer produced” (Longinus 1906: 78).

Under despotism, the imperial authority of Rome in this situation, the voice of the flatterer and the whisper of the informer replace the riot of loud and free rhetorical contests. Perhaps with too obvious symbolism, the early Roman emperors took pleasure in keeping dwarfs—they caged them, as Rome became a servile playpen for its citizens. Indeed one might surmise that the dwarfs were one normal man and women whose captivity shriveled them, so one might show that all slavery, though it never be so dutiful, is a cage of the soul and a “public prison” (Longinus 1906: 79). Sublime oratory never emerges from a society of slaves; for the “sublime Orator must have no low ungenerous spirit, for it is not possible that they who think small thoughts, fit for slaves, practice them in their daily lives, should put out anything to deserve wonder and immortality... so it is on the lips of the men of the highest spirit that words of rare greatness are found” (Longinus 1906: 15).

Spiritedness, however, thrives within the active *agon* of freedom, within the play of political liberty. So the question:

Are we... indeed to believe the common voice that democracy is a good nurse of all that that is great; that with free government nearly all powerful orators attained their prime, and died with it? For Freedom, they say, has the power of breeding noble spirits; it gives them noble, and passes hand and hand with them through their eager mutual strife and their ambition to reach the first prize. Further (and I cite again), because of the prizes offered to competition in commonwealths, the intellectual gifts of orators are kept in exercise and whetted by use; the rub of politics... kindles them to fire, the shine, as they must, with the light of public freedom. (Longinus 1906: 78)

Now, while it is true that this affirmative grief regarding that loss of liberty manifests itself in a debate in which the figure of Longinus often appears to question the necessary ties between public freedom and the sublime the dialogue inclines heavily towards that conclusion.

Conclusions

The binary between public/private, freedom slavery that informs much of later republic thought energizes the core of Adams’s orphic American Republic and we will examine it in great detail in succeeding chapters. However, one last detail of Longinus’s thought requires to be emphasized: his contention that the retreat from public life is one morbid consequence of empire and the collapse of political freedom. Adams’s shares that fearful anticipation. He hates the new America dominated as it is by the pursuit of great fortunes. Longinus a feels like unease about his society and questions

whether the shrinking of public life is cause or consequence. Nevertheless, the love of money and the love of pleasures, appear to have become insatiable passions and enslave the individual to their continuous pursuit. He proclaims the “love of money, a disease which makes us little, the love of pleasure, which makes us ignoble” (Longinus 1906: 80). He describes this manner of as a descent into the self that is totally self-regarding and treats others only as means to private pleasures.

Longinus compares these persons to judges who accept bribes that corrupt their judgment, in all matters of justice. The bribe that the private citizen gives himself and seeks from others is wealth without measure. In such a world greatness of soul receives no emulation as wealth buys all it requires for the satisfaction of desire. Public and private ruin follow “when wealth opens the ways into cities and houses enters and settles therein” (Longinus 1906: 78). Perhaps, he muses, despotism fits such subjects as they have become unfit for self-government: “For men as we are, it may possible be better to be governed than to be free, since greed and grasping, if let loose together against our neighbors, beasts out of a den, would deluge the world with devils” (Longinus 1906: 81).

Those devils had already surfaced in the Rome portrayed by Cicero and Tacitus and twisted the sublime in bizarre forms. That, however, became part of Adams’s legacy as he attempted to envision and defend the American Orphic Republic.

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